

"That Has Made All The Difference":
Frost and The Teaching Of Composition

Rodney D. Keller

Writing is painful. I'm constantly plagued with the desire to make writing as painless as possible. I recognize that writing is thinking, which is hard work, but somewhere there is a point where that pain becomes worthwhile, and that point must be experienced to excite or at least to slightly motivate students to pick up the pen and write--perhaps not even logically or legibly, just as long as they write. As a freshman composition instructor, I know that Friday night dates and Saturday skiing win the daily attentions of my students, so I need to somehow steer their thoughts toward English for a couple of hours (if I'm lucky) each day and disguise the pain as much as possible. I thought I would try out an idea using Robert Frost's poetry. Since Frost's poetry can easily be read on numerous levels, and most students have read Frost (even if they can't remember the names of the poems), I decided to use Frost poems as examples and springboards for each rhetorical mode that I would teach. The experience has been successful.

I begin teaching my freshman English class with narration/description, assuming that all students can relate an event and perhaps even be a little descriptive. Surprisingly enough, my assumptions are ill-founded, and I find the students need numerous examples of what narration and description really are. After a general discussion, it's time for Frost. Most of his poems will serve the purpose, but I pick "The Woodpile" because of its visual images of frozen swamps on gray days, of the hard snow holding a man "save where now and then/ One foot [goes] through," and of a "somewhat sunken woodpile" whose "wood [is] gray and the bark warping off it." The students can actually "see" or envision these images. We read the poem aloud, and I ask several students to explain what is happening in the poem so everyone understands the basics, and we reread it. For the next twenty minutes the students are to write rapidly the images which come to mind, paying particular attention to detail so their readers can "see" the same image that the writers describe.

This rapid free writing on "The Woodpile" reveals some interesting writing behaviors of the students. Since it is the first writing they do for me, and since it is a group-shared experience, I get standard responses--responses they think I want. Most of them relate the superficial plot of a man who sees a bird and a pile of wood while he's on a walk in a snowy forest. At this point I'm a little discouraged because they've done the obvious which hasn't

required any thinking. But occasionally a brave student gingerly leaves the poem and goes into a personal experience that he suddenly remembers and thinking begins. These few students write of fields they've seen where someone has built a log fence that is beginning to rot, of roaming the glade with a childhood dog, of duck hunting at Powell's slough, of the recent seven weeks of dense fog, and of being lost in a forest of skeletal trees. They use the poem as a starting point, and good writing begins.

I use this again when I begin to teach the process paper. I couldn't find a Frost poem that actually describes a process, but his "The Vantage Point" tells what the persona does to relax. After reading the poem, my students are to write for twenty minutes on the process they each use to relax when they are discouraged and even enraged with school and life. Suddenly, they have something to write about, and twenty minutes hurries by. Each paper is different, and each paper is better than the first, and each paper describes a process with surprising detail. Their processes range from how to camp, to how to clean house, from how to take a walk, to how to properly nap, and from how to tell a ghost story, to how to tell the muscles to relax. They have all had experiences with relaxing, and they all know how to do it, so it isn't hard for them to write. The whole class is able to experience Frost as a stimulus to better writing.

With this minor success, I'm ready to go on to the more difficult comparison/contrast paper. This paper requires a little more preparation so that they know what comparison/contrast means. I find that my running shoe and my dress shoe serve this purpose well as the students list the shoes' similarities and differences. This simple shoe exercise forces the students to overlook the obvious differences and similarities in color, in material, and in purpose of the shoes, and they concentrate on items they haven't noticed before like stitching, eye-lets, and seams. They're learning that subtle differences are important. Now the class is ready again for Frost. For this paper I select Frost's "Design" and its earlier unpublished version "In White." We read both in class but don't comment on them. They are to write a short, yet well-organized essay discussing the poems' similarities and differences. The next day the students begin to talk about such abstract elements as style, unity, flow, diction, ambiguities, theme, structure, and control. The perceptions of the poems range from a nurse (the "heal-all") throwing out a moth to some very insightful comments on death and determinism, for which they provide examples from the poems. Without exception, each student claims that "Design" is a better poem. For example, in "Design" they focus on the "dimpled spider" and "snow-drop spider" rather than the "dented spider" and "beady spider" of "In White." They also notice the difference in the concluding couplets mentioning the bleaker, more fateful ending of "Design" as a realization and finality rather than a mere rhetorical question. They recognize the two differing rhyme schemes and structures of the poems which accent the terseness of "Design." They're beginning to see connections.

These connections soon lead to their cause and effect paper. To prepare them for this exercise, I draw on the chalkboard a stick figure of a woman in jail. I ask them why she's in jail, and they respond that she had killed someone, and I ask why she killed someone, and they retort that the victim had eaten her porridge; we continue this until we quickly fill the board with a chain of non-sensical and amusing cause and effect relationships. Cause and effect begin to sink in. I select Frost's "Mending Wall" for the next assignment and the students are to return with their essays describing the

cause and effect relationships in the poem. They all mention the obvious examples of the "frozen ground-swell," the hunters, and dogs unknowingly knocking down the wall, or the fallen wall bringing the neighbors out to mend it, or "good fences [making] good neighbors." Only a few get below the surface and treat the less obvious cause and effect patterns of emotional barriers, possessions, traditions, privacy, friendship, civilization, and of good fences not making good neighbors. These few students begin to sense that poetry and writing involve human experiences and that they can vicariously share these experiences. Poetry and writing begin to have a purpose for the students.

The next rhetorical mode is the con/pro paper, but I need to remember that the students are still having a difficult time analyzing the deeper meanings of the poetry. From previous discussions, I know that "Home-Burial" can often be a controversial poem as students begin to take either the side of the husband or of the wife. There is an argument going on in the poem and the students can easily enter this emotional contest. [At times when I don't want the students to be scared by the poetic form, I type the poem in prose and they think it is a short-story; their greater familiarity with short-stories encourages more discussion. They later read the poem and are amazed at how easy it is to comprehend on the surface level. The students can then do a con/pro analysis of the poetic or prosaic forms.] The students are to select one side, either the man's or the woman's, and give all of their reasons for choosing that side. They are to be convincing in their argument. Even though I emphasize that they stick to one side, only a few follow my instructions, whereas the rest present convincing arguments for and against both sides; they can't decide. At first I wonder why they don't follow instructions, but I slowly admit that they have done more than I've wanted them to. They have gone beyond the assignment of listing the pro or the con aspects of one character to listing both the con and pro qualities of each character. They begin to think and to analyze more significant conflicts such as internal gnawings, communication barriers, insensitivities, misinterpretations, expectations, mental and emotional exhaustions and loneliness. They notice the relationship between poetry and life.

With this newly discovered relationship and with these new skills of reading between the lines and finding subtle meanings, they are unknowingly prepared to work on their persuasion paper. I comfort their fears by telling them that this paper will probably be the easiest because they've spent their entire lives persuading people to do things for them. We use examples of asking parents for money, asking roommates for peanut-butter, and asking composition teachers for more time before their next paper is due. They're masters. After the students know they're good at persuading others, it's again time for Frost. We read "The Pasture," and I tell them that Frost insists that this poem preface each book of his poetry. He wants to persuade us as readers to do something--what is it? They have overnight to think about it and to write about it. I'm surprised to read the next day that many of my students who haven't been able to understand the meaningful aspects of the poems on their own suddenly dazzle me with their comments that the poem is saying more than "Come with me to the pasture." Some aren't able to verbalize what they think is in there, but they know there's something beneath the surface. They now sense that Frost is talking directly to them and is wanting them to share this poetic experience with him. Frost slowly starts to persuade them.

Their next and final paper is an interpretation/evaluation exercise. They can handle Frost now on this advanced scale. I find this to be a

difficult concept to teach, but they're ready for it. I'm sure most of the difficulty results from having to think and to analyze at various levels. I show how something can be interpreted on different levels by using a handout I received as an undergraduate from my composition teacher. The handout has three different levels of interpretation of Frost's "Love and a Question": the literal, somewhat figurative, and more figurative levels. The interpretations are as follows:

Literal

A wanderer was seeking shelter for the night, with not many more possessions than a green and white stick. He apparently approached the house of a newly wed couple to ask for shelter. He looked very lonely and pitiful, like a dog in the rain. The bridegroom obviously didn't want to let him in, it being his wedding night, so he stepped out to see how the weather was, to see if perhaps the man could sleep outside. He sees that it is a cold fall evening and has a dilemma. He feels obligated to let the man in but doesn't really want to. He looks at his bride, and again he obviously wants to be alone with her. He looks at the road, but still all he sees is her. The desire to be alone with his bride begins to win out, and he thinks of giving the man some food and money.

Somewhat Figurative

A stranger comes to the newlywed's house and asks for lodging for the night. The night was dark and evidently there were no other houses along the road where they lived, and the night was cold with the beginning of winter. The bridegroom saw only his bride inside near the fire, and he really thought that it would be too much to ask for the man to spend the night. Yet at the end of the poem, he was still unsure what would be right to do. This same situation can be applied to any instance when we find a conflict between doing what we want to do or doing what we know we should do. The stranger can symbolize any such obstacle that makes us decide whether to satisfy our wants or to do an often greater good by helping others.

More Figurative

The man and woman described in the poem are called bride and bridegroom although they have not just recently been married. Their marriage is perhaps a few months old. The stranger represents jealousy. His green-white walking stick and "asked with the eyes" bring this idea to mind. The bridegroom is wondering if he has cause to be jealous. He is not actually saying to himself, "Should I be jealous?" This, however, is what is happening by other thoughts. He wonders if he should confront his wife and ask for an explanation of some incident he saw. Perhaps he overheard something that caused him to question her fidelity. He wishes he could lock up her heart so that no one else could get to it. He knows that it will bring woe to their home if he is suspicious and jealous. But he can't decide if her action, whatever it was, was innocent or if she is interested in someone else. By confronting her he may mar their love by his accusations. His indecision is the theme of the poem.

As a class, the students evaluate each of the interpretations and discuss whether the interpretation can be supported from the evidence in the poem or whether the writer has misread the poem. (I encourage my students to develop their own ideas; some may misread the poem in parts, but generally, their interpretations are valid if they are well-supported.) The first example, the literal level, my students note, really isn't an interpretation because no evaluation takes place; it is a paraphrase or a mere retelling of the story in their own words. The second example contains some interpretation because it suggests a possible meaning of the poem that can pertain to their lives. The students begin to recognize that interpretation is more than explication--it is an expanding of the poem's meaning. And finally, the last interpretation is the best of the three because it carefully uses the poem to support the possible meanings of the poem. This paragraph contains elements from the previous two examples (paraphrase and explication), but it also proposes an insightful new idea that can stimulate more thinking and interpretation. The students are gradually learning to read between the lines and to think on various levels. They're ready to go on their own.

I assign them to read Frost's "Birches," "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening," and "After Apple-Picking." I tell them that they are to select any one of the three, and after careful readings and thinking, interpret and evaluate the poem--respond to it. These papers demonstrate some of their best writings. Their interpretations aren't mere plot summaries; they're not critically profound, but they're insightful; they say something. For example, in "Birches" one student responds that the climbing of the young birch only to sway back down is a paradox illustrating his desires to improve himself, yet he meets self-defeating behaviors that pull him down, the futility of the climb. In "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening," a student describes her continuous plodding through life with all of its obligations and expectations, yet that journey contains numerous moments in time when her "horse" will stop, unwillingly at first, "to watch the woods fill up with snow," and she gains the strength to continue on. And in "After Apple-Picking" a bulky football linebacker centers his interpretation on the line "As of no worth" stating that Frost uses the word "as" simply to suggest that the fallen apples may appear to have no apparent worth, yet they are of great worth as cider, juice, sauce, and jelly, all preserving the taste of the apple for a greater length of time than those that don't fall. He then gives personal examples applying his insightful observation to his life. These are just three examples, but most of the other students sense that they also have something to say, and they try to convince me that their interpretations are as valid as anyone else's through their good writing, through well-organized thinking, and through concrete examples. They have something to prove, and they do it.

When I assign this last paper, I realize that I hear no moans even though I know this is a writing assignment. Of course they wouldn't mind doing something else, but they recognize that the pain of this assignment will also have its own rewards. In fact, the students evaluate this Frost project, and one girl who sits quietly in the back and who seldom if ever looks up writes, "I hate writing, and I hate poetry, but I like Robert Frost because he makes me think about everyday things, and I can see they are very important. And now, I can write about the common things in my life because they are important. I guess I don't hate writing and poetry after all."

This girl and my other students have progressed significantly from their first in-class assignment, and I'm certain they also sense their own progress. They are slowly yet continually becoming better writers, and Frost must receive credit; after all, he has made all the difference.

Brigham Young University

BOOK REVIEWS

Richard A. Lanham. Revising Business Prose. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1981. 98 pages, including appendix. \$3.95 in paperback; \$9.95 in cloth.

Richard Lanham's Revising Business Prose offers "emergency therapy" to "system-sick" writers of business prose. Lanham calls his book a "quick, self-teaching method of revision for people who want to translate bureaucratic prose, their own or someone else's, into plain English." Therefore, do not expect a full treatment of prose style problems. Such treatment exceeds the scope of this 98 page "first aid kit," to borrow one of Lanham's medical metaphors. Revising Business Prose provides instead what Lanham calls the Paramedic Method of treatment, a simple eight-step procedure for revising prose written in The Official Style. Known also as Bureaucratese, Federalese, Sociologese, and Educationese, The Official Style consists of a noun-dominated string of weak verbs and prepositional phrases.

Using real-life examples of The Official Style, Lanham demonstrates how to apply the Paramedic Method to increasingly difficult problems. The writer follows this sequence of steps:

1. Circle the prepositions.
2. Circle the "is" forms.
3. Ask "Who is kicking Who?" (Lanham considers "whom" stilted)
4. Put this "kicking" action in a simple (not compound) active verb.
5. Start fast--no mindless introductions.
6. Write out each sentence on a blank sheet of paper and mark off its basic rhythmic units with a "/".
7. Read the passage aloud with emphasis and feeling.
8. Mark off sentence lengths in the passage with a "/".

Through steps three and four the writer discovers the core of the sentence. That core becomes the basis of the revision. In one example after another, Lanham leads us through his procedure and leaves behind the scratched-out

lines of the original material, the penciled-in revisions, and the arrows which indicate new locations for material originally positioned elsewhere. This technique of presentation makes the revision process a concrete and systematic operation.

Moreover, Lanham introduces a readability tool which he calls the "lard factor." One objective of revision is to reduce the lard (i.e., verbiage) in our sentences. He tells us to "think of a lard factor (LF) of 1/3 to 1/2 as normal and don't stop revising until you've removed it." The writer finds the lard factor by dividing the difference between the number of words in the original passage and the revision by the number of words in the original. The result is the percentage of "lard" removed from the original draft. For example:

Original:	11 words		
		4 divided by 11 = 0.36	
Revision:	7 words	or	36%

However, Lanham recognizes that many factors in addition to sentence length affect readability. He discusses how rhythm and sound can affect focus at the paragraph level. He shows how to use the "slash" method to isolate individual units of rhythm within sentences. He uses vertical diagrams (actually a kind of listing) to diagnose problem sentences. His "X" pattern illustrates how to focus contrasting ideas.

While Revising Business Prose is principally a practical "how to" book, it does offer a brief explanation of how The Official Style originated, what it seeks to achieve, and what it says about our society. Lanham calls The Official Style a "genuine style" because it reflects the "bureaucratization of American life." The Official Style does not try to be clear. Indeed, it can be the language of coverups. It is often the language of the status quo, an appropriate function for a style of language so lacking in action verbs. It is often the style of those who "must seem in control of everything but responsible for nothing." Lanham's premise is that we need to see what The Official Style is trying to do so that we can understand it and translate it. Since the goal of The Official Style is not clarity but instead protection from responsibility, society pays the price in misunderstandings and mistakes. Translating The Official Style into plain English can save organizations money because efficient communication is cost-effective. It improves thinking. To do nothing about The Official Style can be dangerous, for at its worst this language of bureaucracy "denatures human relations," says Lanham. We may play games with it, but "don't get fooled by it," he warns.

Revising Business Prose does what it sets out to do: it shows us how to translate the language of bureaucracy into plain English. Lanham explains his Paramedic Method without getting bogged down in technical terms. A brief appendix at the end of the book defines important grammar terms and explains basic concepts through simple examples. Lanham's own writing style is lively and conversational. Revising Business Prose could work well as a supplemental text in a business communications or technical writing course in the two-year or the four-year college. The book could also be used as the principal text in a brief in-house writing skills workshop.

Terry Skelton, University of Delaware

"Logic, Writing and the Media": A Review of Monroe Beardsley's Thinking Straight, 4th ed. (Prentice-Hall, 1975), 256 pages, paper, \$8.95; Monroe Beardsley's Writing With Reason (Prentice-Hall, 1976), 157 pages, paper \$6.95; Ray Kytle's Clear Thinking for Composition (with instructor's manual), 3rd ed. (Random House, 1977), 130 pages, paper \$4.95; Howard Kahane's Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric, 3rd ed. (Wadsworth, Inc., 1980), 280 pages, paper \$9.95.

Since Plato drove rhetoric out of the realm of being and truth, many philosophers have denied that logic has any, impure, rhetorical significance. To them, logic requires us to manipulate mathematical symbols or to reason in scientific ways but not to show rhetorical eloquence.

In the last forty years, however, the emergence of ordinary language philosophy from the impasses of Anglo-American logical positivism has meant a reexamination of the relationships between language and logic or writing and reasoning. The books I am reviewing map out this relatively new ground: they relate logic and rhetoric not by a return to the Aristotelian subordination of logic to rhetoric but by an attack on the non-think, doublespeak, or manipulative techniques of the media, which stands for bad writing conceived as bad thinking. Of course one can think well or logically but still write badly, but these books neglect that possibility in order to critique the media, including newspapers, magazines, television, textbooks, and political speeches. Making the media the paradigm of the bad thinking that one finds in bad writing, these books examine the forms, devices, procedures, faults and techniques of this bad or non-think.

One way to expose the forms of the media's non-think is to teach the student what good thinking is and to contrast the non-think with the good. Monroe Beardsley's Thinking Straight goes the farthest in this technical direction: it explains the form of an argument, the difference between induction and deduction, the criteria for good induction, the classical notion of the syllogism, the modern critique of the classical existence assumption, the classical account of the relationships of propositions, including the contrary, the contradictory, the converse, the obverse and the inverse, as well as the modern deductive forms of argument, like conjunction, alteration and modus ponens. Unfortunately, this discussion of good reasoning is quite technical and goes beyond the limits of a writing course. Beardsley's Writing With Reason is a less technical and less comprehensive discussion of good reasoning but it lacks the former's vast body of exciting examples and its insightful discussion of verbal fallacies, including ambiguity, vagueness, metaphoric polysemy, jargon, distortion, omission and presupposition. Also in the third edition of Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric, by Howard Kahane, there is an account of good reasoning, an account which is less technical than Thinking Straight's. However, sometimes it substitutes for Beardsley's expert analysis a directive or injunction, like "read between the lines" or "consider the strongest version of an argument"; these sound too much like "think well!" And it does not avoid a problem I have had with such accounts of good reasoning: the student falls too easily into the mechanical analysis of premises and conclusions and forgets that the aim is to critique the argument.

Despite these problems, the contrast of good and bad reasoning is a good way to introduce a critique of the media's non-think. However, for those who

would rather teach poetry than logic, there is, fortunately, another way to introduce this critique: one classifies and describes widespread types of erroneous reasoning or fallacies, such as false cause (post hoc, propter hoc), slippery slope (It is only one step from this ... to disaster), appeals to fear (of mass murders, personal defeats or failures, or national catastrophes), personal pity, racial hatred, national or sexist pride, or illegitimate authority (Eric Leinsdorf drinks orange juice in the afternoons). This approach has a terrific appeal because the examples are endless and very accessible: Time, Newsweek, Reader's Digest, newspaper editorials, popular fiction and non-fiction can all provide timely materials for analysis and criticism.

Kahane's Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric gives the best listing of fallacies but puts the greatest burden on the teacher. This book lists statistical and logical fallacies as well as verbal and pictorial techniques of manipulation. Its third edition has a good discussion of sexism and jargon in our language even though it leaves the impression that plain, simple words are all that are necessary. Moreover, it explains the causes of the media's fallacies by analyzing insightfully the influence of the advertisers and the sources of information. However, since it says the least about the technicalities of logic or its relationship with rhetoric, this book puts the greatest burden on the teacher, who must work the book into a writing course and explain why the fallacies are fallacious.

Ray Kytile's Clear Thinking for Composition is another example of a non-technical approach to the media's non-think, which this book turns into mental blocks, stereotypes, reaction formations, culturally conditioned attitudes, feelings of certitude, or some other psychological state. Although this psychologizing gives the book a certain profundity, the student can too easily substitute for a careful analysis a heavy-handed labelling, such as "either-or thinking! oversimplification!" And unlike Kahane's book, which is so deeply involved in the media that it blocks off in large rectangles interesting examples and facts, this one turns for its examples to extended dialogs (Random House promises, by the way, that the new fourth edition will have no sexism in its dialogs). Dialogs are more dramatic than samples of the media but they are less obviously manipulative than the media's forms; everyone distrusts an ad right off but few people distrust a conversation so readily.

What distinguishes Kytile's book is not its dialogs or its psychologizing but its ties between reasoning and writing. The other books assume that reasoning and writing are related but Kytile works out the ties between the two. Thus he urges the student to do an analysis of a subject, an analysis which, to avoid oversimplification, breaks a topic into points of view and classifies them, builds an outline on the basis of this classification, and states a properly shaped thesis sentence unifying the outline. In effect, his procedure makes the student aware of the great labor of thinking which should proceed the writing of a paper but usually doesn't. While Kytile's book is not, then, as technical or analytical account of bad reasoning as Kahane's or Beardsley's, it ties together thinking and writing more fully than they do.

In sum, the logician's critique of the media can take two routes: an exposition of the good reasoning by contrast with which the media's non-think is fallacious, or a classification of types or typical fallacies. One can and obviously should follow both routes, but that sequence can easily get beyond the aims of a composition course. And assuming one does take both routes, one faces the following difficulty (despite our authors' disclaimers): good reasoning is reasoning with propositions, whereas the use of words

outside a proposition becomes emotive, manipulative non-think, not to say, non-sense. To a lover of poetry such a result is objectionable, so he may want to supplement the logician's critique with an analysis of rhetorical forms or figures as modes of thinking. In any event, the logician's critique has the virtue that it opens up the media to attack for its bad thinking. The student's familiarity with the media makes that virtue a real one.

Philip Goldstein, University of Delaware