Composition Theory
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About two years ago, the English Department at Arizona State University approved a Ph.D. program in English with an emphasis in rhetoric and composition as an alternative to the existing program in literature. I have been developing a number of new courses for the program, among them a course in composition theory, which I would like to describe here.

Because we already had a related course in the teaching of composition, which is required of all new teaching assistants, I wanted to develop a slightly different course. The biggest difference is that the course in the teaching of composition is more of a practicum, whereas the course in composition theory emphasizes conceptual frameworks. Not that the new course neglects the teaching of composition. In fact, in setting up the course, I asked myself the following question: what is the role of theory in the teaching of composition?

Teachers of writing are constantly faced with the problem of what to teach and how to teach it. When they seek guidance about such matters, where will they get it? From trial and error? Intuition? Other teachers? Textbooks? If they get guidance from textbooks, they may find that their teaching is based on outworn compositional principles derived from the 19th century. The teaching of composition ought to be organized around the most significant principles and concepts of a discipline. There is a need to identify the primary structural elements of a discipline. As Jerome Bruner puts it in The Process of Education, "grasping the structure of a subject is understanding it in a way that permits many other things to be related to it." The role of theory in the teaching of writing is to enable teachers and students to be able to place the bits and pieces of their knowledge about writing into a structured pattern for better understanding and for transfer of training.
The emphasis in this course, then, is on "structured patterns," on the kinds of conceptual frameworks that underlie the teaching of composition. The course is divided into eight units: contexts for composition; aims, modes, and forms of discourse; invention and the composing process; arrangement; discourse processing and comprehension; style; revising and editing; and evaluating writing.


**Contexts for Composition**

In this section of the course, the emphasis is on the rhetorical situation and on audience. Readings include Lloyd Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric,* 1 (Winter, 1968), 1-14 and Richard Vatz's "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric,* 6 (Summer, 1973), 154-161. At issue is whether the situation controls the rhetorical response, or whether the rhetoric controls the situational response. Wayne Booth's article "The Rhetorical Stance," *CCC,* 16 (October, 1963), 139-145, with its emphasis on maintaining a proper balance among the available arguments, the audience, and voice in any writing situation, complements the articles by Bitzer and Vatz nicely.


**Aims, Modes, and Forms of Discourse**


**Invention and the Composing Process**

As the readings for this section of the course indicate, more time is spent on invention and the composing process than on any other material. The readings for the unit on invention are reprinted in Winterowd's *Contemporary Rhetoric.* These include Richard Larson's "Discovery through Questioning," Richard Young's "Tagnemic Invention," and Kenneth Burke's "The Five Key Terms of Dramatism." Brewster Ghiselin's *The Creative Process* (N.Y.: The New American Library, 1952) and Janet Emig's *The Composing Process: Review of the Literature,* *Contemporary Rhetoric,* pp. 49-70 provide an excellent background for a discussion


Arrangement


Discourse Processing and Comprehension

The emphasis in this unit is on schema theory as it relates to writing, to reading comprehension, and to the acquisition of knowledge. The field of discourse processing and comprehension is vast, but the texts I have found useful for my particular purposes are the following: Richard C. Anderson and others, eds., Schooling and the Acquisition of Knowledge (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977); Charles Cofer, ed., The Structure of Human Memory (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1976); Walter Kintsch, The Representation of Meaning in Memory (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1974); Walter Kintsch and T.A. Van Dijk, Toward a Model of Text Comprehension and Production," Psychological Review, 85 (1978), 363-396; Bonnie Meyer, "What Is Remembered from prose: A Function of Passage Structure," in Discourse Production and Comprehension, ed. Roy O. Freedle (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1977), pp. 307-336; Bonnie Meyer, "Reading Research and the Composition Teacher: The
Importance of Plans," CCC, 33 (February, 1982), 37-49; George A. Miller and others, Plans and Structure of Behavior (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960); Ulric Neisser, Cognition and Reality (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Co., 1976); Stephen F. Witte and Lester Faigley, "Coherence, Cohesion, and Writing Quality," CCC, 32 (May, 1981), 189-205. This is a specialized area, but one that is on the growing edges of composition theory and practice. I handle the material partly by lecture and partly by oral reports.

Style

This part of the course is divided into three units: classical rhetoric and style, linguistics and style, and readability. Because we have a specialized graduate course in style and stylistics, I can follow my own inclinations. The segment devoted to classical rhetoric and style includes a look at the three kinds of style, the schemes and tropes, and classical imitation. The segment dealing with linguistics and style emphasizes Francis Christensen's "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence" (Contemporary Rhetoric) and transformational sentence combining, as exemplified in Donald Daiker and others, Sentence Combining and the Teaching of Writing (Conway, Ark.: L & S Books, 1979). There is also a unit on linguistics and usage, based on Martin Joos' The Five Clocks (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967). The last segment covers the concept of readability. Readings include E.D. Hirsch's The Philosophy of Composition, Rudolf Flesch's The Art of Readable Writing, and state and government directives related to the "plain English movement."

Revising and Editing

I am not satisfied with most of the material available for this section of the course, but the NCTE is publishing a collection of articles on revision which will be available soon. I have profited, however, by the following articles: Richard Beach, "Self-Evaluation Strategies of Extensive Revisers and Non-Revisers," CCC, 27 (May, 1967), 160-164; Daniel Dieterich, "Response to Richard Beach, 'Self-Evaluation Strategies of Extensive Revisers and Nonrevisers,'" CCC, 27 (October, 1976), 301-302; Michael C. Flanigan and Diane S. Menendez, "Perception and Change: Teaching Revision," CE, 42 (November, 1980), 256-266; Donald M. Murray, "Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery," in Research on Composing, ed. Charles Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1978), pp. 85-103; Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," CCC, 31 (December, 1980), 378-388.

Evaluating Writing

I present the material for this course in composition theory by means of lecture, class discussion, and oral reports. Depending on how quickly we cover the material, I may give one or two exams, an annotated bibliography, an oral report, and a term paper. The oral report is an informal presentation based on the annotated bibliography. The term paper may be a paper describing and summarizing the major approaches to one aspect of composition theory or teaching, or it may involve a research problem of some kind (e.g., error analysis, the composing process, historical research, etc.). Topics include readability, protocol analysis, writing across the curriculum, group inquiry techniques, writing labs, basic writing, audience, and problem solving.

I have taught this course for two years. Each time I teach the course, I add new material, but there is a limit as to what can be taught in one semester. A tentative solution may be to focus on the "basic readings" in the field in class, and to handle new material by means of oral reports and research papers. For more specialized purposes, there is enough additional material so that any of the units I have described (e.g., discourse processing and comprehension) can be the basis of a separate course or a seminar.

Arizona State University

English 5060: Teaching College Composition

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Context

Teaching College Composition is one part of a multi-faceted apprenticeship program for freshman English teachers at Virginia Tech. The course itself is taught seminar-style for three hours, one afternoon a week during the fall quarter. It offers three graduate credits toward the M.A. in English and is required of all new Graduate Teaching Assistants. New and old faculty are invited to attend the seminar presentations, since virtually every faculty member in our department teaches composition.

The GTAs who enroll in the course do not come to it cold. They first attend a two-week conference before the beginning of the Fall Quarter, during which we introduce all the new GTAs (together with new faculty) to certain concepts and techniques that will help them plan their courses and work through the first few weeks of classes. This non-credit, two-week orientation is meant as a prelude to the course in Teaching College Composition, and it covers the following topics: