

Gene Hammond

As Director of Freshman English at the University of Maryland, I teach "Approaches to College Composition" (English 611) each fall semester. At first, the entire class consisted of new Teaching Fellows in our program (about 20 per year), but now that group is supplemented each year by 4 or 5 teachers from nearby community colleges, high schools, speech departments, and writing centers. I like this new mix, because it keeps us from discussing questions of local policy in class, and it helps us all question our local assumptions. My aim in English 611 is to help my students realize what their students are going through when they tackle assignments, and to introduce my students to the sources (books and journals) where they are likely to find the best ideas for continued improvement of their teaching.

Choosing texts is my most difficult task since there are so many good ones and they are so expensive. I currently ask students to buy:

Zinsser, William, On Writing Well (Harper and Row)
Stanford, Gene, ed., How to Handle the Paper Load (NCTE)
Shaughnessy, Mina, Errors and Expectations (Oxford)
Strunk, William, and E.B. White, Elements of Style (Macmillan)
McPhee, John, The Pine Barrens (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux)
Plato, The Phaedrus (Penguin)
Aristotle, Rhetoric (Appleton, Century, Crofts)

That list comes to \$40.00, which is as much as I feel I can ask students to spend. I choose Zinsser's book because his attitude toward writing is the best I've come across--he's professional and practical, he values craft because he respects readers, he sees writing not as a technical but as a human problem, and (best of all) he clearly enjoys writing himself. Any teacher who's read Zinsser will not stand for a voiceless, humorless textbook as a guide for her class.

As valuable as I find Zinsser, if I could only order one book for 611 it would be How to Handle the Paper Load from NCTE. This book is full of outstanding ideas which not only save time but help us teach much, much better. The ideas in the book are so specific and practical that they can either be used immediately or easily adapted to a teacher's particular needs. No editor has ever been as skillful (or lucky) as Gene Stanford in soliciting essays for a volume.

Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations is another attitude changer. A teacher who's read that book knows (often for the first time) why students make the errors they do and what we can do to help them. Errors and Expectations to my mind is the most important among several pivotal 1970s books (Macrorrie's Telling Writing and Anne Berthoff's Forming/Thinking/Writing are others) which will mark the turning point toward more effective teaching of writing in this country.

Finally, I use Plato and Aristotle to give the students some historical perspective on the field of rhetoric. I use Strunk and White to show that a handbook needn't be expensive, voluminous, or voiceless. And I use John McPhee's The Pine Barrens to show how we can teach non-fiction writing and reading more effectively with trade books than with college-market "Readers."

We have 15 two-hour sessions together in the class, and I try in each class to do four or five different things, at least half of which require active participation by the students. At the beginning of the semester, I attack our #1 enemy, "Engfish" or "Themewriting," after reading (on reserve) the first 5 chapters of Macrorie's Telling Writing, the first 30 pages of William Coles' The Pluaral I, and Wayne Booth's article, "The Rhetorical Stance." Next I try to teach my students how best to teach the fundamentals of writing--telling details (using Macrorie's methods for teaching "telling facts"), and thoughtful inferences (using the National Enquirer and trying to draw inferences about its intended audience). Then I have the students write out and study each other's composing processes as practice for doing the same for their students. As the semester proceeds, the students practice sentence combining and Francis Christensen's sentence imitations. They compare what they value in writing by voting on their priorities. They consider dialect interference by taking a survey about their attitudes toward Black English. They do exercises themselves which they can later use to help teach observation, note-taking, tightening, coherence, organization, specificity, and voice. They read failing student papers and compare notes on how they would try to teach those students to improve. They read not only the texts they've bought, but several articles and excerpts on reserve:

- Daiker, Donald, The Writer's Options (Harper and Row).
Trimble, John, Writing With Style (Prentice-Hall).
Christensen, Francis, Notes Toward A New Rhetoric (Harper and Row).
Fromkin, Victoria, An Introduction to Language (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston).
Neel, Jasper, ed., Options for the Teaching of English (Modern Language Association).
Allen, Walter, "Using Groups in Correcting Compositions," CCC 1975, pp. 379-88.
Carkeet, David, "How Critics Write and How Students Write," CE, Feb 76, pp. 599-604.
Murray, Donald, "The Listening Eye," CE, Sep 79, pp. 16-18.
Gliserman, Martin, "An Act of Theft: Teaching Grammar," CE, Mar 78, pp. 791-799.
Lunsford, Andrea, "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer," CE, Sep 79, pp. 38-46.
Meade, Richard A., "Paragraph Development in the Modern Age of Rhetoric," EJ, 59 (1970), 219-226.
Fish, Stanley, "How Ordinary is Ordinary Language," NLH, 5 (1973-74), 42-54.
Braddock, Richard, "The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Expository Prose," RTE 1974, pp. 287-302.
Rose, Mike, "A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer's Block," CCC Dec 1980, pp. 389-399.
Sommers, Nancy, "Revision Strategies," CCC Dec 1980, pp. 378-388.

Twice during the semester, I ask the class to write down the most persistent problem they currently face in the classroom, and we look for solutions as a group. Often these are problems of discipline; an often neglected part of learning how to teach is learning how and when to exert your will.

Throughout the semester, I find myself fighting to break down the students' prejudice that "ordinary language" is far down some ladder of values of which "literature" is the top rung. I remind students that it

is their writing experience, not their previous study of literature, that qualifies them to teach writing and that will help them most in teaching it. I also try to use in class as many teaching methods as possible (group work, editing sessions, 5-minute writings before discussion) which can also be used in teaching freshmen.

During the course, the students hand in the following written work:

1. The exercises in a very brief grammar review workbook that we publish locally (students don't need to know grammatical terms but teachers do).
2. A description of their writing process the last time they wrote something they were proud of.
3. A 3-4 page essay (exactly like one we assign freshmen) based on a New York Times story from the day they were born.
4. A critical review of 10 articles in the teaching-of-writing field, using (for a start) College Composition and Communication, College English, The English Journal, Research in the Teaching of English, and Composition and Teaching. Those in special fields (like ESL) may consult more specialized journals.
5. A syllabus rationale for the course they currently teach (which they may want to use when they look for a job).
6. A description of their own best teaching device, dittoed off for the rest of the class.
7. A 3-4 page critical evaluation of a textbook (not their own). By the end of the class they have all the tools to do this well.

Once the course is over, the students have finished a crash course in what I see as the most important books and articles about teaching composition. But if the course is really successful, they also leave with the disposition to learn more and with the knowledge of where they'll find that more.