



# WLA Newsletter

. . . writing as a liberating activity. . .

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FINDLAY COLLEGE

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## Thinking it Right--Writing it Wrong

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Ever complain that a student regularly makes the same writing mistakes? If you cannot see why your lament is illogical, you had better read David Bartholomae's "The Study of Error," (College Composition and Communication, Oct. 1980). Using students' own readings of their essays, he shows how to filter out transcription errors. The unperceived errors which remain are systematic, even if the systems are unique to the student.

Bartholomae builds on Mina Shaughnessy's observations of how basic writers write. I gave his theories an acid test--the very tortured prose of a student who, barely able to read, slipped past the college admission barricades one sleepy summer. Instead of querying mistakes already labeled "awk" or "careless," I had her slowly read her uncorrected text. Even her essays, riddled with error, were easier to deal with after she found many of her own pen slips. Most errors she failed to catch were "intentional." For example, she capitalized "walruses" because she found in her reading a sentence which began with that word. Seemingly erratic, her writing was rule based, what Bartholomae sees as an intermediate system in the mastery of academic prose. Not only does Bartholomae help categorize error, the student shares the process and learns, with relief, that his/her multitudinous errors stem from just a few idiosyncratic rules.

To get at those rules, Bartholomae suggests a one-on-one student-teacher dialogue. But office hours, I have found, do not suffice. For a laboratory setting in which the system underlying the student's errors is exposed, I convert at least some classes to the conferences promoted by Roger Garrison.<sup>1</sup> While the rest of the class is writing, students and teacher huddle over a "finished" essay. For example:

Me: "Just read the essay slowly and stop when you come to a mistake."

Student: Gets to ". . . where I had lasted work." (no pause)

Me: "Just read what you wrote. Try that again." (The student again reads "lasted" as one syllable.)

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Me: "No, don't change anything. Just read what you wrote, not what you meant to write."

Student: Still reads as above.

Me: With exasperation, "Here, try this word: 'blasted.' How would you pronounce it?"

Student: "The same way."

Basic writers often, Bartholomae notes, bypass the "lower level" of phonetic translation to retrieve lexical items directly. Through phonetics the teacher knows the word "writing" should not have two t's; to the not-so-equipped student, the error is not obvious.

Here are some idiosyncratic systems I found in one semester's conferences:

Creative Caps A student whose sister died of cancer is not perverse for putting that disease ("The Big C?") in upper case. For reborn Christians church and pastor also loom large. And nothing will sway Selma Goldberg to replace the asterisk in G\*d. At least I no longer suspect her typewriter is defective.

Spaced out Starters This orthodoxy is spatial. Some students, you probably know, begin all sentences on a new line. Through conferencing I found that a student I chided for erratic paragraphing was merely indenting the start of every new page.

Wrenched Rules Because s plus a noun creates most plural nouns, some writers leap to "verb plus s equals a plural." Students who seriously ask how many semicolons are allowed per paragraph are searching for more order than even the high priests of grammar--e.g., In a title, words shorter than four letters are never capitalized. (war and Peace?)

To map each writer's systems of error is to explore the largely uncharted. By passing much traditional error analysis, Bartholomae makes the territory of error a more manageable terrain. One student I thought would carry comma splices to his tombstone was cured via conferencing, one I found he started to punctuate only after the entire essay was composed. Listening while a student reads aloud is painstaking and time consuming. But I no longer waste time on useless rhetorical questions, e.g. "Why the carelessness?" Now, question I ask are real. What's more, thanks to classroom conferences and "The Study of Error," I (and my students) often get answers.

<sup>1</sup>See Thomas Carcinelli, "The Writing Conference," in Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition (Urbana: NCTE, 1980), pp. 101-132.

#### KEY EDITORIAL CONCERNS OF WLA NEWSLETTER

- The fundamental compatibility of creativity and discipline in good writing and in effective writing instruction
- The role of writing classes in freeing student imagination and creativity.
- Ways that teachers can expand the range of instructional options open to them.

#### ARTICLES WELCOME

WLA Newsletter welcomes very brief pieces that relate to the Key Editorial Concerns and grow out of practical teaching experiences. Irregular WLA departments are: Teaching Tips, Reading Lists, Student Perspectives, and Interconnections (among different levels of writing instruction.)

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## Using the Right Brain

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### Summary of Benjamin Glassner, "Hemispheric Relationships in Composing"

The brain consists in part of left and right hemispheres. The left hemisphere (LH) processes information sequentially and dominates when a problem requires solutions that are analytic, temporal, linear, logical, or rational. The right hemisphere (RH) processes information globally and solves problems requiring solutions that are synthetic, non-temporal, spatial, intuitive, or non-rational. Extensive composing, focused more on communicating than discovering, is primarily an LH activity; reflexive composing, which often translates images and feelings into language, is chiefly an RH activity. "It is only the more conscious, left-brained, stages of the composing process that writing instruction has traditionally addressed . . . the language of reporting, not that of discovery or of learning" (p. 91).

### Classroom Practices

Because many of us agree with James Britton that a writer must get the subject of her essay "right with the self" before communicating it to others, we often begin the composition course with personal experience writing, like the autobiographical narrative, requiring students to discover and reflect upon a significant event. Yet many students--and probably most males (see Glassner, pp. 80 & 82)--are reticent about relating closely-felt experiences, possibly because they find it difficult to tap their RH.

I attempt to translate the theories of brain research into practice by adopting a classroom technique which, theoretically, should help students use their RH more often. On the first day of class after one or two five-minute free writings, I have students sketch a portrait of a good friend to whom they would like to write a letter. Because the RH perceives overall patterns and structures and is thus responsible for recognizing faces, having students sketch a portrait causes a shift to that hemisphere most important in reflexive composing. This activity, of course, also allows students to visualize a non-threatening audience and thus helps to remove writing blocks occurring when writers have a vague conception of audience or perceive the audience as threatening. After sketching the portrait, the students compose in a 10-15 minute free writing, during which they look frequently at the sketch, a letter to their friend in which they narrate an important event in their lives. This narrative will usually become the first draft ( or "zero-degree draft") of their essay.

The teacher can reinforce other activities that stimulate the RH. Some evidence, for example, indicates that doodling and listening to music are right brain functions. My own experience might confirm this evidence. After writing for awhile and "running dry," I often find myself staring blankly and doodling. Or I get up, walk around, and sometimes notice that I'm humming a tune. These are indications that my RH is actively solving rhetorical problems while I seem to be thinking about something else or about nothing at all. I'm not suggesting

that we give over classroom time to group humming or doodling! But we could make our students aware that what they perhaps believe to be wasteful activities like humming or doodling might in fact be purposeful stages in their composing processes.

Resources:

- Benjamin Glassner, "Preliminary Report: Hemispheric Relationships in Composing," Journal of Education, 162(1980), pp. 74-95).
- W. Ross Winterowd, "Brain, Rhetoric, and Style," Language and Style, 13 (1980), pp. 151-81).
- Betty Edwards, Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1979).

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A Call for Articles

HOW DO YOU "TRANSLATE" RESEARCH ON COMPOSING  
INTO CLASSROOM STRATEGIES?

This is a good time for writing teachers who share Richard Young's skepticism about the "current-traditional paradigm" with its tendency "to become a critical study of the products of composing," and Mina Shaughnessy's belief that "the composition course should be the place where the writer not only writes but experiences . . . the stages of the composing process itself" ("Paradigms and Problems," Research on Composing, NCTE, 1978, p. 31; Errors and Expectations, Oxford, 1977, p.81). Interesting articles on writing processes arrive with nearly every issue of College Composition and Communication, Research in the Teaching of English, Freshman English News, and other publications. And it seems certain that the flow of articles growing out of composition research will continue for quite some time.

This wealth of insights into composing, though, poses a problem: how to move promising insights into college and high school writing classes without drowning students in subtleties of theory or complexities of research studies?

WLA would like to see compact pieces addressing that question for an upcoming feature on "Translating Writing Research into Writing Instruction." Pieces should be short--ideally, under two double-spaced pages. They should follow this format:

1. Give a bibliographic entry on an article or study (MLA form).
2. Write a brief summary of one idea or conclusion from the study (or possibly a couple of very connected ideas).
3. Describe compactly how you "translate" the idea into your teaching. You could deal with class presentations, assignments, activities, materials, etc.

To be considered for the Fall 1981 issue, articles should arrive by mid-October. Contact: Richard Gebhardt, English Department, Findlay College, Findlay, OH 45840.

RESEARCH ON THE WRITING PROCESS:  
SIX KEY CONCEPTS FOR CLASSROOM TEACHERS

Richard Gebhardt  
Findlay College

Three facts stand behind this little article. First, there is a large and growing amount of research on the processes of writing. Second, classroom teachers of college and high school writing often are unaware of this research and its potential for their work. As Richard Van De Weghe puts it in an article on "Research in Composition and the Design of Writing Programs":

Despite nearly a century of empirical research in composition, most writing teachers and many directors of writing programs either ignore the findings or do not even know they exist. Teachers continue to teach, directors to direct, and writing programs to change--with little or no attention given to the wealth of information readily available in composition research.

The third fact--or perhaps I should say, assumption--is that much composition research is useful, on a day-to-day basis, to active classroom teachers.

What I plan to do here is sketch some insights from composition research that I think are useful to writing teachers. To do this, I will state six ideas, and follow each with some brief remarks on teaching implications, as well as a few items you can read to check just how outrageously I have summarized and editorialized.

1. The processes of writing are more complex and individualized than the neat formulations of most composition texts suggest.

Janet Emig, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (NCTE, 1971).  
James Britton and others, *The Development of Writing Abilities* (dist. by NCTE).  
Anthony Petrosky and James Brozick, "A Model for Teaching Writing Based Upon Current Knowledge of the Composing Process," *English Journal* (Jan. 1979).

Teaching Implications: Teachers should be skeptical about textbook pronouncements and sympathetic toward students who have trouble following them successfully. They should be flexible enough to adapt to individual writing approaches.

2. Writing is a complex collaboration of hand, eye, and brain to create meaning.

Janet Emig, "Hand, Eye, and Brain," in *Research on Composing*, Charles Cooper and Lee Odell, eds. (NCTE, 1979).  
Janet Emig, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," *College Composition and Communication* (May 1977); rpt. *Composition and Its Teaching*, ed. Richard Gebhardt (dist. NCTE).  
James Britton, *A Shaping at the Point of Utterance*, "Reinventing the Rhetorical Tradition", ed. Anna Freeman and Ian Pringle (Canadian Council of Teachers of English/L&S Books, 1980), pp. 61-65.

Teaching Implications: Stressing mental behavior--think it out and then write it down--will frustrate many student efforts to write well; "free writing" and other physical approaches may help hand, eye, and brain collaborate better. Since writing really does help people learn, it has a place in any course--especially ones involving abstract material or the drawing of conclusions.

3. Many high school and college students have an inadequate idea of what writing is, and so they try to apply as they draft formal constraints important in completed papers. The result often is frustration, halting writing, "thin" papers.

Sondra Perl and Arthur Egendorf, "The Process of Creative Discovery," in *Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition*, ed. Donald McQuade (Akron University English Department, 1979).

Mina Shaughnessy, "The Causes and Cures of Syntactic Errors," a part of chapter 3 in *Errors and Expectations* (Oxford, 1977).

Nancy Sommers (see item in section 4).

Teaching Implications: Students should see how unlike the finished products early drafts of prose--including writing by their teachers--and literary works can be. Class activities should encourage fairly copious production of fairly flawed prose--very rough zero-drafts--that later are re-written and re-re-written.

4. As they work, writers sense disparity between their intentions and the way their prose is growing on paper, and they work to reduce the disparity--they revise. Experienced writers sense inadequacies and make changes in sentences and longer blocks, as well as in phrases and words. But many high school and college writers concentrate on words and phrases, cutting and changing but seldom reorganizing.

Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Writers," *English Language Arts Bulletin* (Winter/Spring 1980). She has published related articles in *College Composition and Communication* for Feb. 1979, and Dec. 1980 CCC.

Teaching Implications: Exercises should help students focus on, and make changes in, longer units of writing than the word, and help them reorder ideas as well as cut and add words. Literature assignments could illustrate the kinds of changes novels and poems went through before publication.

5. Recognizing and resolving disparity between intention and draft (section 4) does not occur only at the end of a writing project. It happens whenever hand, eye, and brain coordinate to produce changes, and pauses and rescannings of completed parts of the text are important to this process. Experienced writers pause more than most students to orient themselves to what they have just written so that they can move ahead. Many high school and college writers pause less, and they waste more of their pauses by glancing around the room and daydreaming.

James Britton and others, "The Process of Writing" (see section 1).

Sharon Pianko, "Reflection: A Critical Component of the Composing Process," *College Composition and Communication* (Oct. 1979).

Teaching Implications: Teachers can observe students writing--especially the places where pen stops, eyes glance back, the student seems to be thinking-- in order to locate unreflective composing strategies that may cause vague, overly-brief, awkward writing. Follow-up conversations can probe what was going on during the pauses.

6. Experienced writers are more likely than students to write for an audience. But many high school and college students produce "writer based prose"--with private code words, associative links between ideas, few transitions, etc.--that is less coherent and effective than writing that tries to address the needs of readers.

Linda Flower, "Writer-Based Prose," College English (Sept. 1979).

Linda Flower and John Hayes, "The Cognition of Discovery," College Composition and Communication (Feb. 1980).

Teaching Implications: Writing assignments should place greater emphasis on writing for real audiences, including other students. Class activities and small-group discussions should help students develop a fuller sense of the people who will read their papers, and of how they need to work to make their ideas clear to those readers.

Using Research on the Writing Process in the Classroom: Some Overviews and Summaries

Lisa Ede, "The Composing Process: What We Know/What We Tell Our Students," Freshman English News (Spring, 1980).

\_\_\_\_\_, "On Audience and Composition," College Composition and Communication (Oct. 1979).

Richard Gebhardt, "Writing Process: Core of the Writing Program," Freshman English News (Spring 1980).

Elizabeth Haynes, "Using Research in Preparing to Teach Writing," English Journal (Jan. 1978).

Lee Odell, "Teachers of Composition and Needed Research in Discourse Theory," College Composition and Communication (Feb. 1979); rpt. Composition and Its Teaching, ed. Richard Gebhardt (1979; distributed by NCTE).

Richard VanDeWeghe, "Research in Composition and the Design of Writing Programs," ADE Bulletin, No. 61, May 1979; rpt. English Language Arts Bulletin (Winter/Spring 1980)--a special issue on "From Theory to Practice in Writing."

Many of the articles mentioned in the other sections of this sheet also offer useful information about classroom applications.

Call for CCCC Program Proposals

Donald C. Stewart, Assistant Chair, Conference on College Composition and Communication, has issued a Call for Program Proposals for CCCC's Thirty-Third Annual Meeting.

Theme of the Conference: Serving Our Students, Our Public, Our Profession.

Place: San Francisco; Hyatt Regency Hotel, Embarcadero.

Dates: 18-20 March 1982.

Proposal forms can be obtained at CCCC's 1981 Convention in Dallas, and from CCCC Information Service, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801.

Deadline for proposals: 20 June 1981.

GETTING FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE IN WRITING

Winter/Spring 1980 Issue of

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS BULLETIN

(A Special Double Issue)

Teaching Style and Argument	Elizabeth Penfield (Univ. of New Orleans)
Britton and the Importance of Audience	Randall Freisinger (Michigan Tech. Univ.)
Revision Strategies of Writers	Nancy I. Sommers (Univ. of Oklahoma)
Revision and Evaluation	Charles Duke (Murray State University)
Holistic Evaluation in High School	Barbara Bulthaup (Westerville High School)
Reading Research and Writing Instruction	William Wresch (Univ. of Wisconsin Center)
Elementary School Writing Programs	Gail Tompkins (Miami University)
Intellectual Content of Freshman English	Tim D.P. Lally (Bowling Green State Univ.)
Research and Writing Program Design	Richard Van De Weghe (New Mexico State U.)
Review of <u>What Did I Write</u> by Marie Clay	Debra Jacobson and Yetta Goodman (Univ. of Arizona)
Review of <u>Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition</u>	Sam Watson (Univ. of North Carolina)
Theories That Should Be Put Into Practice	An <u>ELAB</u> Reading List by Ohio Teachers

To order Theory to Practice in Writing, send a self-addressed 9x12 envelope and a \$2.50 check made out to the Ohio Council of Teachers of English. Mail orders to: Richard Gebhardt, ELAB Editor, Findlay College, Findlay, OH 45840.

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