



WLA Newsletter

. . . writing as a liberating activity. . .

ISSUE TWENTY-ONE Spring 1984 FINDLAY COLLEGE

"COMPUTER WRITING"

THEME OF SPECIAL ISSUE

WLA Newsletter hopes to publish a special Fall issue in which writers and teachers discuss how word processing is changing the way they write, the way they think about writing, or the way they teach writing.

What WLA needs are lively pieces reflecting the discoveries human beings are making as they use "computer writing" on their own projects or in their classes. Humor, pitfalls to avoid, and insights growing from personal experiences would be appropriate. So would brief discussions of the relationship of word processing to a specific feature of composition theory. So would compact how-to pieces.

Articles should be under 5 pages, with documentation included within the text.

Deadline: 15 September 1984.

THE DOUBLE STANDARD

AMONG WRITING TEACHERS

Bill Bernhardt
College of Staten Island

I seriously doubt that any experienced reader of literature would quarrel with these principles of criticism and scholarship:

-Every author should be approached without preconceptions and prejudices.

-The first duty of a reader is to try to comprehend what the author is trying to say, regardless of stylistic obscurity, unfamiliar subject matter, and other impediments.

- A full understanding of any author generally requires that the reader consult other evidence than the work itself, e.g., writer's intentions, drafts, habits of composing, interviews with the author.

-Assessment of growth should be based on comparison of successive stages in the author's career, rather than in relation to an external standard.

I am convinced that few writing teachers actually observe any of these conventions in approaching their students' writing. Indeed, students are not considered to be "writers," even though most teachers of composition spend far more time reading student papers than they devote to any other species of literature!

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Examples of prejudice and misconception in approaching student writing are easily found. Many instructors, for instance, readily assume that the presence of certain spelling irregularities in the writing of Black students (e.g., omission of -ed and -s endings) indicates confusion concerning the verb system of "standard" English. Do they know this to be true in the specific instances? Or are they operating on the basis of a preconception. Can they possibly tell, without confirming evidence, that the writers are speakers of any particular dialect of English? Or that command of one dialect prevents an individual from knowing other dialects? And why do they so often attribute such errors to socio-cultural causes when the writer is Black, and assume that they result from "carelessness" when the writer is white? It might seem that errors of this kind are sufficiently common among all beginning writers to make teachers cautious in assigning causes, but such is not the case.

The previous example should also show that teachers are not in the habit of reading student compositions with comprehension of the content as their first aim. On the contrary, their primary reason for reading is to detect and categorize errors, whether they penalize their students for them or not. Is it any wonder that so many student writers never gain a sense that writing is for expression when their only reader is someone who always notices and responds (however sympathetically) to mistakes, seldom to the ideas, perceptions, or opinions of the writer? This state of affairs is all the more ludicrous when one recognizes that the instructor who is willing to tolerate ever so many obscurities or idiosyncrasies in a published text protests that he "can't read" a student composition containing a few, easily deciphered, departures from orthodox spelling, sentence structure, or logical arrangement.

The most flagrant violation of responsible reading in response to student writing is found in the practice of requiring students to do all their writing at home. Thus the teachers never see students at work for the purpose of collecting evidence which might illuminate their written products. After months of daily "contact" with students, teachers still do not know, for example, whether an individual writes with facility or has trouble getting started; whether the finished sentences have been composed at almost the speed of speech or with so many false starts and interruptions that the original impulse was lost or muddled.

It is hard to conceive of a critic or scholar who would deliberately reject an opportunity to interview a writer whom he or she was in the process of reading. Still, it is the rare teacher who takes the time and trouble to ask student writers detailed questions about their experience of composing, editing, and proof-reading so that it can be known whether the work produced is the result of conscious deliberation or unexamined habits. It is so much easier for the teacher to tell the students which procedures they should adopt than to find out what they think they are doing, and to study the relation between their notions of composition and the results which are obtained.

To take an example, a particular student writer may be under the impression that it is impossible to begin an essay without first composing an outline. So much time is consumed in pursuing this task before the writer is aware that he or she has something to say, however, that the resulting essay is shallow and slight. A far better essay might have resulted if the same person simply had brainstormed a first draft before attempting an outline, or forgotten about outlines altogether. But this discovery was never made because the teacher knew nothing of the particular individual's habits of work and provided general advice rather than suggestions tailored to the student's specific needs.

Once an instructor has begun to study a particular student, and has become informed about that individual's behaviors and awarenesses as a writer, it is possible to assess progress--but only then. For example, if one knows that a

KEEPING A POCKET NOTEBOOK

Steve Glassman
University of Texas, Austin

The three-by-five inch, spiral-bound pocket notebook can be an effective supplement in rhetoric classes to sharpen student skills in notetaking, proper documentation, word usage, and colloquial observation.

In the first period of composition classes I ask all students to purchase a memo book and a cheap but durable pen. I caution them that they will be asked to carry these items with them at all times during the semester, so they should take care in choosing items that will fit with their clothing and lifestyles. At the second period, I ask the students to give themselves a plus one as their answer to the last question of the daily quiz if they have a notebook. I then tell them that one question on the daily quiz will be reserved for the entries from their pocket notebooks throughout the semester.

Now they are more or less prepared to set out as lexical lepidopteranists. The idea is to take down interesting words and/or phrases, immediately and wherever encountered. A well-turned phrase poorly transcribed is proof positive for the need in digital training to narrow the gap between what is heard and what is written, and sometimes between what was said and what was heard. It also serves to strike home the ineffable magic engendered by words strung together in certain ways--and the duds produced by other constructions. The idea of documenting the source of the word or phrase is also introduced here, although I usually do not insist on the source until later in the term.

Potential sources for notebook entries are practically endless, and I put no strictures on items the students may collect. Entries may be quotations, aphorisms, eavesdroppings, jokes, vocabulary items, folk etymologies, unusual or interesting names, graffiti, ad infinitum. Here are some recent examples.

Overheard in the student union: "If she pulls any more of that on me, I'm going to put her Tupperware in the oven."

Folk saying: "Just another onion in a bagful."

Elderly lady: "Amyx wouldn't prune his trees. I'd say, 'Amyx, have you pruned them trees?'" He'd say, "Yeah," but he hadn't. He felt sorry for them trees so he wouldn't prune them. You can throw a bale of hay between the limbs of a well-pruned fruit tree."

Aunt Mary: "Procrastination is the thief of time." Uncle Hugh: "I thought is was the feather mattress."

Jazz title: "Meat and No Potatoes."

Miami Herald: "'In the final analysis,' said one observer who wrote a Master's thesis on Mexican peasants, the poor farmer 'smiles at anyone with a gun.'"

Thomas Jefferson: "I have nothing but contempt for anyone who can spell a word one way."

John Ciardi: "A 1901 cartoon by Tad Dorgan featured a dachshund in a bun, ergo the term 'hot dog.'"

Louis Pasteur: "Chance favors the prepared man."

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Overheard on a campus sidewalk: "You got a cerebral parasite in your brain. You'll die within a week."

French-speaking student: "Modern jacket known as a blazer comes from the French word blazon meaning coat of arms for the heraldic patch often worn on the pocket."

Rest room wall: "This orange juice tastes terrible good."

At least once a week I read all entries from that day's quizzes to the class. In some classes a healthy competition is sparked, and students can be counted on to turn up many interesting items each session. To date, none of my notebook-packers have become professional poets. But a goodly number have become more aware of words and their power. That, after all, is the idea.

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/From p.2/

person has habitually submitted very brief, "correct" papers because most of his or her composing time is spent in rejecting whatever comes to mind, the greatest sign of growth may be a longer, more ragged composition. Such signs of visible growth are often ignored, however, because the student's teacher is committed to his or her image of "a respectable paper" rather than to study of the student's career as a writer.

Many more, perhaps better, examples might be provided to support my thesis that there exists a double standard among teachers of writing. As readers of literature, we make many concessions to the authors we meet--concessions which we, as teachers, are unwilling to make to the authors in our own classes.

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WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

You are cordially invited to attend the Sixth Annual Conference of the Writing Centers Association: East Central, to be held on May 4 - 5, 1984, at the Raymond Walters General and Technical College of the University of Cincinnati.

The theme of the conference is "Writing, 1984." The conference will include panels and workshops on such topics as using computers and writing across the curriculum, with an emphasis on discussion and participation among those attending the conference. Mary Croft, from the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point is the featured speaker. There will also be a materials exchange table.

For further information, please contact:

Phyllis A. Sherwood
Raymond Walters College
9555 Plainfield Road
Cincinnati, Ohio 45236

THE CLASSROOM PRESS CONFERENCE:

A LESSON IN LISTENING, SPEAKING, AND WRITING

Paul J. Beauvais
Findlay College

The classroom press conference is an interviewing and newswriting exercise that is appropriate for use with high school students and college freshmen. Students receive instruction in the basic skills of reporting; they then use these skills to gather information in a simulated press conference and write a brief news story.

OBJECTIVES

1. To teach inquiry skills. Students learn how to listen and ask questions to acquire information.
2. To teach evaluative skills. The press conference usually produces superfluous information; students must discern which information is important to include in the news story.
3. To teach organizing skills. Students learn to assemble facts within a flexible format which the teacher provides.

PREPARATION

First, introduce two conventions of newswriting:

1. The five "W" questions. Most news stories will answer the questions "Who, What, When, Where, and Why."
2. The inverted pyramid. Most news stories contain a synopsis of essential information in the opening sentences. The remainder of the text provides more detailed information regarding the topic.

After briefly explaining these two conventions, read several news stories and ask the class to identify the general opening statements. Next, ask students to find where each of the five "W" questions is answered and to try to guess exactly what questions the reporter asked to solicit the information.

PROCEDURES

Ask the students to imagine that they are reporters for a local newspaper. They are attending a press conference and will be expected to write a 100 word news story based on the information they obtain. Although they may ask as many questions as they wish, they are facing a fifty minute deadline and must have their stories completed in that time. Next, read the following prepared statement:

I'm Captain Newson of the Fire Investigations Office, and I'm here to report that last night a two-alarm residential fire claimed the life of Cathy Lewis, 32, of 3763 Alpine Hill Road. I will answer any questions you have concerning the accident.

Answer all questions but do not volunteer any unsolicited information. Attempt to close the press conference after fifteen minutes, and do not answer any questions after the official closing. Collect the papers when the allotted time has elapsed.

EVALUATION

Evaluate the students on their skill in obtaining information and the quality of their written stories. Criteria for evaluation can include the following:

1. Which students are most active in asking questions?
2. Which students phrase their questions well?
3. Which questions elicit useful information?
4. Which students attempt to pursue potentially interesting aspects of the story that weren't apparent in the prepared statement?

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5. Which questions require you to repeat information that you already had given in response to an earlier question?
6. Is the information contained in the story correct?
7. Does the story contain all the essential information?
8. Does the story contain an appropriate opening statement?
9. Is the information well-organized?
10. Is the length appropriate?

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WRITING POSITIONS AVAILABLE AT FINDLAY COLLEGE

The Findlay College English Department is looking for one--and possibly two--teachers. These are new positions, not replacements. All the department's faculty teach writing. So any candidate should have a strong background in composition and a commitment to the value of writing in a college education.

Position One: Instructor

The minimum requirements are an M.A. and training and experience in the teaching of writing. Work in ESL or reading would be highly desirable. The teaching load of 12 hours per semester will emphasize writing, and probably will include work in the Weekend College program.

Position Two: Instructor

The minimum requirements are an M.A., training in the teaching of writing, and experience teaching in a prison. The teaching load of 12 hours per semester would emphasize writing and would include work in a prison program. (This is a tentative position, for which plans should become firmer as Spring progresses.)

If you would like more information and an application form, write:
Richard Gebhardt, Humanities Chairperson, Findlay College, Findlay, OH
45840

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KEY EDITORIAL CONCERNS OF WLA NEWSLETTER

- *The fundamental compatibility of craft and creativity 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.

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WLA Newsletter
Richard Gebhardt, Editor
Findlay College
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ARTICLES WELCOME

WLA welcomes brief articles that relate to the Key Editorial Concerns and grow out of practical experiences in writing classes. More-or-less regular WLA Departments:
Teaching Tips--2-3 page outlines of a unit or an approach to a specific teaching task.
Interconnections--Examinations of approaches or materials of one level of writing class (e.g., college, high school, middle grade) from the perspective of a different level.
Reading Lists--Recommendations, preferably annotated, of useful or stimulating reading.
Student Perspectives.

CRITICAL READING QUESTIONS:

A WRITING ACTIVITY THAT TEACHES READING

Richard Gebhardt

From the middle-grades through college, English teachers ask students to write book reports, to summarize and react to pieces of writing, to compare the positions of authors writing on the same topic, to analyze the content and effectiveness of writing. All such assignments, of course, hinge on the writer's understanding of written material--on the student's ability to read. Often, however, teachers assume that students can read critically and with understanding. They make assignments based on writing without helping students work through the sort of generating and focusing strategies they would never omit when making other kinds of assignments. And then they are disappointed when students miss the central point of an article but detail an extraneous side-issue, or when they turn in a plodding plot-summary instead of a critical analysis.

To approach this problem, English teachers should recognize that, even though we may not have much formal training in the teaching of reading, we can help students understand reading assignments by the kind of generating and focusing strategies we employ in our writing classes. Perhaps the most flexible and useful of these activities are critical reading questions that ask students to preview a piece of writing and form initial predictions about it; to study the writing for its main points, its organization, and its supporting material; and to ask evaluative questions about the writing.

Here, for instance, are a few questions I often assign as a prelude to writing assignments based on non-fiction prose. I ask students to familiarize themselves with the questions; to mark-up the writing as they read; to jot down answers to the questions as they study the article. And I structure student use of the questions into two sections--assigning a-f to explore what a piece of writing has to say, and later g-m to help students form judgments about the writing--each of which ends with a short writing task that gives students a chance to crystalize ideas and me a chance to check on student comprehension.

- a. What are the main parts of the piece? Note the key sentences--ones that make assertions that form the skeleton of the piece.
- b. How does the author blend assertion and supporting specifics? Which key sentences have the most support? the least?
- c. Are there places that the writer may not be making literally true statements? Note places that involve sarcasm, exaggeration for humor, figures of speech, etc.
- d. Considering what you have seen in dealing with a, b, and c, which parts of the piece are of major and minor significance?
- e. Can you outline the main skeleton of the piece so as to show the main emphasis and the relative importance of key sentences?
- f. Do there seem to be factual errors, or opinions asserted as if they were facts, that seemed to be twisted to fit into the assumptions behind the piece?
- g. Are there inconsistencies--places in the piece which seem to contradict or call into question other statements?
- h. Does the piece try to manipulate you unfairly by using propaganda techniques or emotionally charged language?
- i. Write a paragraph (or more) that makes clear the main point(s) or conclusion(s) of the piece as you now understand them, and that shows whether the conclusions are justified by the piece itself rather than by your own agreement or disagreement with underlying assumptions in the piece.

WRITING PROCESS AND WORD PROCESSING

Sixth Summer Workshop for English Teachers

Findlay College
16-20 July 1984

PROCESSES OF WRITING: KEY LESSONS FROM RECENT RESEARCH IN WRITING

GROWTH-THROUGH-CHANGE: THE ROLE OF "REVISION" DURING DRAFTING

INITIAL PLANS AND SPONTANEOUS COMPOSITION IN THE WRITING PROCESS

HOW WORD PROCESSING CAN HELP US UNDERSTAND THE WRITING PROCESS

Findlay College's workshop for English teachers will focus on recent information about the processes of writing and how high school and junior high school teachers can use it to improve the writing of their students. Since "computer writing" can offer special insights into the writing process, the course will include orientation sessions with Apple IIe microcomputers. The four semester hour course will involve pre-workshop reading and a post-workshop paper. Senior and junior high school teachers are eligible for a substantial "professional advancement" scholarship.

For additional information, contact the workshop leader: Richard Gebhardt, English Department, Findlay College, Findlay, OH 45840

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