

REVIEW

A Host at the Parlor: a Review of
Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts

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Joseph Harris. *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*.
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I IMAGINE MANY of the readers of *The WAC Journal* are familiar with the oft-quoted “unending conversation,” or what is often called the Burkean Parlor:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (110–111)

What is missing from Burke's description and what universities often fail to do is provide guidance for novice writers to enter the parlor conversation. To enter the conversation, one must speak what Richard Rorty termed “normal discourse,” and part of normal discourse entails following academic discourse conventions. Given

that text is the primary way that academics communicate, it is surprising that most writing textbooks fail to address some fairly typical rhetorical conventions of academic writing.

Certainly there are texts directed at future or novice scholars—there are enough handbooks to fill an aisle of bookshelves at Borders, ranging from Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* to Booth, Colomb, and Williams' *The Craft of Revision*. To varying degrees, all of the handbooks and rhetorics describe how to develop research questions, do research, create claims, and support the evidence; they all have fairly standard approaches and very practical advice. These books reify the research essay. Of course they describe how to use source material and to consider points of agreement and disagreement with literature, but none of them that I know really tackles the issue of making the kinds of rhetorical moves that academics make to participate in the parlor conversation.

In chapter two of *Rewriting*, Harris quotes Burke's unending conversation, and I couldn't help but imagine Harris serving as a guide or host for aspiring academics in ways that preceding textbooks have not. Harris does not intend his book to compete with books like *Craft*. Instead he sees it as a means to introduce readers to the kinds of moves academic writers make, primarily in relation to each other, thus his title *Rewriting*. Harris writes, "The reason I call this *rewriting* is to point to a generative paradox of academic work: like all writers, intellectuals need to say something new and say it well. But unlike many other writers, what intellectuals have to say is bound up inextricably with books we are reading . . . and the ideas of the people we are talking with" (2). This, then, strikes me as the heart of the book. The rest of Harris' text is built upon this philosophy.

The book contains five chapters, all but the last directed at the rhetorical moves academic writers make in the academic conversation: coming to terms, forwarding, countering, taking an approach, and revising. Each chapter describes how a writer may build upon what has come before, and even in the introduction we see Harris modeling what he advises by providing "Intertexts" or references in grey boxes that provide citation information and occasionally a short annotation from a work referenced within the text. These striking visual representations model what he advocates throughout the book, and they demonstrate an admirable breadth of knowledge as he draws on authors from Aristotle to Carol Gilligan to Aretha Franklin.

Harris' clear prose cuts through the complexity of discerning the subtle moves writers make. In chapter 1, "Coming to Terms," Harris suggests how readers might enter the parlor conversation by taking the works of predecessors and making them their

own. His advice ranges from defining a project based on another to suggestions for using quotations. For the latter, his description moves beyond a simple exhortation for supporting claims with evidence: “you can see quotations as *flashpoints* in a text, moments given a special intensity, made to stand for key concepts or issues” (22). Again, Harris sees the interplay of texts integral to the work of the academic.

The beginning of chapter 2 is where Harris draws on Burke and the parlor metaphor. It sets the stage nicely for the next two chapters, “Forwarding” and “Countering,” because they represent many of the most common rhetorical moves writers make. “In forwarding a text, you extend its uses; in countering a text, you note its *limits*” (38). From here, he details how one might forward an argument by “*illustrating, authorizing, borrowing, and extending*” (49)—all very positive acts, supportive of the texts from which ideas are drawn.

Countering, on the other hand, is the place at which an author pursues a disagreement. It serves to “open up new lines of inquiry” by “arguing the other side, uncovering values, and dissenting” (57). Harris artfully explains that the job of countering is not attacking an author, especially with ad hominem attacks. Instead, Harris writes, “Your job is not to correct the infelicities of a text but to respond to and rework the position it puts forward” (68). Ultimately, according to Harris, the purpose of countering is to construct one’s own position in response. Academic arguments aren’t for tearing down another author; instead they are for advancing knowledge through dialogue.

In both chapters 2 and 3, as with the entire book, Harris provides detailed examples for each component of forwarding and countering. Because the rhetorical strategies are not simple or easily self-contained, Harris’ examples often run for a page or more, but each is engaging and illustrative of the point. And because of their poignancy, Harris does not need to belabor the point. Harris also offers exercises he calls Projects. In many cases these are simply questions for consideration, but some also provide windows into any texts one reads by asking readers to record the rhetorical moves present in a text, including *Rewriting*.

In the final chapter on building an argument, entitled “Taking an Approach,” Harris describes how an author can carve a space for her ideas through acknowledging influences, turning an approach on itself, and reflexivity (79). This chapter does not describe how an author might advance an argument, rather it explains how to shape an approach to making one. Returning to the title of the book, *Rewriting*, Harris’ text helps writers see how academics are constantly rewriting the ideas of others to forward, counter, and build their own arguments through the acknowledgement of what has come before. Harris shows beautifully the interconnectivity of academic conversations.

“Revising,” the final chapter, was the least successful chapter for me of a very insightful book. In it, Harris explains that revision, not simply editing or proofreading, is key to successful writing. Though I emphatically agree with him, the chapter seemed more a sophisticated pep talk, not quite on par with the insightful examination of academic writing conventions that comprises the earlier chapters of the book. Midway through the chapter, Harris does provide some practical advice for writers, such as writing an abstract of one’s text or coding language with straight underlines to denote strengths or wavy underlines to mark questions. Though these techniques may be successful, they do not match the insight of the earlier work.

Harris includes an afterward in *Rewriting*: “Teaching Rewriting.” In this final section Harris encourages faculty to teach attentiveness and intention to writing, not only rewriting, “A good writing course teaches both a practice and a habit of mind—a way of doing things and a way of thinking about things” (125). For example, Harris suggests writing students should not only rewrite, but they should also explain the rhetorical decisions they have made in their writing, asking for a kind of attention to process as well as product.

On the back of the book, Tom Deans offers advance praise, claiming *Rewriting* “fills a gap between bulky readers/rhetorics and dutiful style handbooks,” but this book is more than that. Whereas most rhetorics and handbooks offer guidance on mechanical practices or abstract components of writing, Harris’ text serves as a host to Burke’s parlor, carefully introducing future academics to the rhetorical moves scholars make in relation to each other, thus warmly welcoming them into the conversation.

Works Cited

- Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.
Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979.