



# Putting—and Keeping—the Cornell Writing Program in Its Place: Writing in the Disciplines

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And nothing is more essential to academic life than the use of written language, as a means to the ends of communication and the construction of knowledge. What we [teachers of writing] teach, therefore, is fundamentally powerful and important, even if we are not. Within our institutions, writing teachers and their courses might be subordinated to all other kinds of instruction, but written language is not subordinate to anything. (Hjortshoj 499)

Faculty at Cornell University early harbored the belief that the teaching of writing should be firmly embedded in the study of material about which both faculty and students were (or were becoming) knowledgeable. Reacting to Harvard University's famous "theme a day on any subject" approach which some considered to favor form over substance, Professor Lane Cooper (Department of English) in 1910 enjoined:

Let the teacher of writers, as well as the writer, observe the caution of Horace, and choose well his proper field. Some portion, or phase, of this subject which he loves is the thing about which he may ask his students to write; and not in helter-skelter fashion, as if it made no difference where one began, what one observed next, and so on, save as a question of formal order; but progressively, on the supposition that in the advance toward knowledge and understanding certain things, not formal, but substantial, necessarily precede others. (rpt. in Brereton 257)

Cooper's colleague, Professor James Morgan Hart, likewise was noted in his day as emphasizing content over form and grammar: "Our Cornell experience is that the most difficult thing to overcome is the lack of thought. Most of our freshmen seem to believe that anything patched up in grammatical shape will pass for writing . . ." (qtd. William Lyon Phelps in 1912; Brereton 289-90).

Remarkably, most changes in the place of writing at Cornell appear to have come about in association with the tenacious belief that studying writing means not simply the study of form and grammar but the development of ideas and inquiry through writing. The principle remains a crucial one today. Where

many colleges and universities continue to struggle over whether or not literature should be taught in composition courses, or whether the English Department makes the best home for the writing program, where they are scrambling to develop support for the teaching of writing, Cornell has established a far-reaching and extensive program of first-year writing classes taught in the disciplines. Each semester, the independently funded and situated John S. Knight Writing Program coordinates a program of writing seminars offered by over thirty departments and programs (e.g., Anthropology, Classics, Ecology and Systematics, English, History); students may choose from over 100 subjects such as “Death and Dying in Anthropological Perspective,” “Socrates the Athenian,” “Finding Meaning in Nature,” “Shakespeare,” or “Local History: Cornell University.” The program is taken for granted by the institution, but outside observers find startling the depth of support it receives from the university and the range of its work.

The history of the creation of such a program, the one academic experience virtually all Cornell undergraduates share,<sup>1</sup> warrants analysis and explanation; the future of the program depends on understanding the foundations of its past successes, crises, and reformulations and using that understanding to shape the program’s development. Among those understandings surely must be the realization that a writing program must work for, with, and in the interests of the disciplines, the sites in which language is embedded; it cannot be isolated administratively or in any other way if it is to operate successfully, if it is best to assist students and faculty. At the same time, it also appears that writing programs—perhaps any university-wide program—may necessarily have to undergo regular cycles of institutional doubt and re-evaluation given certain recurring tendencies and the difficulties of thoroughly integrating writing experiences into students’ academic work throughout the curriculum.

## **A Brief History of Writing Programs at Cornell**

### *Freshman English: Teaching Writing as Teaching English*

At Cornell, founded in 1865, courses in writing were well enough established by 1891 that James Morgan Hart had published an article entitled “Cornell Course in Rhetoric and English Philology,” following that in 1895 with *A Handbook of English Composition* (cited Brereton). While the Public Speaking Department’s “Cornell School of Rhetoric” flourished in the 1920s,<sup>2</sup> and offered such courses as “Argument and Debate” taught by Everett Lee Hunt, who believed that “one could not separate ideas from techniques, content from form” (Theodore Windt, qtd. Corbett 6), writing for the university’s students was taught in the Department of English in courses firmly rooted in the study of literature: an early, basic first-year course was long called simply “Introductory Course,” in that it introduced students to literature and writing. The program has some claim to fame through association with William Strunk, who in 1918 wrote a handy little book, *The Elements of Composition*, for use in

his classes.<sup>3</sup> Possibly produced, John Brereton suggests, in reaction to the over-inclusiveness of one particularly hefty tome (359), the little book became a classic and remains, as revised by E. B. White, popular at Cornell and elsewhere.

One has to keep in mind, however, that Freshman English, offered and taught by the English Department, located in the College of Arts and Sciences, was serving students in all seven of Cornell's colleges.<sup>4</sup> Unrest was bound to develop, and Freshman English as taught by the Department of English did not remain popular. According to faculty who taught in the 1950s and '60s, Freshman English when led by William Sale required that—on the model of a course at his alma mater, Yale—a paper be written for each of the three weekly class meetings. In the fall semester, all instructors taught from the same volume of essays picked by a committee, the chair of which, according to one contemporary, did all the work; in the spring they had more leeway to shape the course to their tastes. Professor Emeritus Scott Elledge recalls that the course was taught by people who cared about *how* things were written but also mentions the frequently voiced concern over whether the course was *about* anything.

Outside the Department of English others evidently were concerned that emphasis was being placed on writing *skills*—students, they believed, needed to concentrate on writing that emphasized reading and thinking. Dissatisfaction with Freshman English began to arise from a number of quarters. Edgar Rosenberg, then associate professor in the English Department, outlined in a 1966 speech for Cornell's trustees the weaknesses in Freshman English which ultimately led to its dismantling. Looming large among those weaknesses was the boredom shared by students and instructors. Rosenberg described the "sense of anonymity which easily attaches to large numbers of anything" taken by 2000 students: a student is "apt to feel . . . that a course addressed to nineteen hundred and ninety-nine others is not going to respect (or indulge him in) his own individual tastes and proclivities." The students disliked the lack of choice, and the instructors, often poorly qualified, were themselves antagonistic toward the job ("I'd rather teach cooking," Rosenberg reports one instructor as saying). Not mentioned directly in his comments is the prevalent concern that in order to staff the courses, the English Department was hiring many adjunct and junior faculty who had no hope of being hired permanently (a concern I wish were prevalent in universities across the country today).

Not surprisingly, the suggestion arose that the writing program be re-structured. In line with the national unrest of the times, in 1964-65 the Cornell faculty re-examined undergraduate education and in 1965 issued "The Report of the Faculty Committee on the Quality of Undergraduate Instruction," referred to as the Kahn/Bowers Report after the chair, Alfred Kahn, the distinguished economist who while in D.C. tried to clean up bureaucratic writing and the airlines, and after the vice-chair, physicist Raymond Bowers.<sup>5</sup> This report agreed with the conclusions of a preliminary "Humanities Report" issued by the Guerlac Commission which had recommended that writing seminars be-

come the responsibility of many departments, not just of English. The proposal received enthusiastic support from departments such as History of Art and Philosophy; these departments saw writing as integral parts of their own disciplines, and they also saw writing seminars as excellent forums in which to target students for recruitment to the major. They believed they could take the burden off English (a process that would advantageously include increasing their own number of TAs) while revitalizing the content of the seminars and providing additional faculty taught and supervised courses.

*Freshman Humanities: Teaching Writing in the Disciplines*

In 1966, therefore, the new Freshman Humanities Program began, with seminars in thirty subjects offered by nine departments: Comparative Literature, English, German Studies, Government, History, History of Art, Philosophy, Romance Studies, and Speech and Drama. The new program by its very structure firmly asserted that writing courses need substantive matters about which to write and that literature, while an appropriate topic for a writing course, is only one of many appropriate topics. The brochure introducing the new humanities seminars included the following statement, written by the new director of the program, Edgar Rosenberg; it sums up the (publicly acknowledged) reasons for change:

Where the old Freshman English program was conducted in 110 uniform sections, the new courses will be taught in units of approximately four sections each, with the result that the staff of each course will be working in close rapport. . . . Since each of the colloquia reflects . . . the instructor's particular field of interest and expertise, we may expect the calibre of the instruction to be uncommonly high. Instead of being staffed chiefly by teaching assistants . . . the Cornell freshmen colloquia will be taught largely by faculty members and only the very ablest assistants. But the essential aim of the program (and the most urgent reason for its institution) is to respect, as nearly as possible, the intellectual proclivities which the freshman brings with him to Cornell, and to give him a reasonably wide choice of courses from the start.

At the same time, . . . each of the courses admitted to the program is emphatically designed to be a composition course. In abolishing Freshman English . . . the faculty had no intention whatever of diminishing the practice of writing. On the contrary, it intended to encourage the stimulus to composition by providing the freshmen with stimulating subjects to write about. You may assume that each course . . . requires approximately a paper a week. . . . (Fall 1966, Freshman Humanities Courses brochure)

Aside from the shock that instructors in departments such as History of Art experienced when they first read essays written by students who didn't intend to major in their fields, who were even intending to be engineers, things seem to have gone smoothly for awhile. The English Department invented new courses such as "Writing from Experience," which remained for some decades a popular writing seminar, and later, to take the pressure off the latter course, "Practical Prose," currently "The Practice of Prose"; TAs, at least in some departments such as English, benefited from working closely with faculty. New programs began: in 1972 a small bequest helped to establish a tutorial service which Nancy Kaplan would later develop into a special tutorial writing course and a writing center, now the Writing Workshop; and in the spring of 1975 the English Department's Robert Farrell developed a voluntary summer training and apprenticeship program for TAs called Emphasis on Writing, or EOW. Students and instructors alike appreciated the choices available and the intellectual stimulation of working within their chosen fields. Of the complaints recorded by Rosenberg in 1967 on the then nine-months old program, one is, interestingly, that the engineering students and faculty would like to see still *more* choice of courses, preferably in fields such as government. He mentions no dissatisfaction over the loss of the English literature or "pure composition" course. Rosenberg does report that one chairman "who expresses . . . complete satisfaction with the program nevertheless subjoins her fear 'that over the years the concerns of exposition will disappear altogether in favor of a completely literary (or, say, historical, anyhow professional) approach.'"

The chair's fear anticipated some of the problems soon to develop. According to a 1976 report by Helen Elias, acting as a research aide in the Office of Special Programs, by 1972 the courses were arousing a variety of anxieties, including concern that little attention was given to teaching writing (1). When in 1974 David Connor took over the directorship of the program, now called the Freshman Seminar Program (FSP), he acted to intensify attention to writing; a slim handbook he wrote for the use of instructors remains in the Program's files. Nevertheless, the Elias report indicates that in 1976 the crisis was growing, although the cause could not have been just the perception that the courses had become humanities courses with little emphasis on writing. (At a minimum, according to a 1977 student survey, most seminars at least required seven to nine essays.) Rather, there seems also to have been a growing hostility emanating toward and from the Seminar Program. Why?

### *Problems with Administration: The Need for a Decentralized Center*<sup>6</sup>

A major source of aggravation seems to have been insufficient consideration of how the Freshman Humanities/Seminar Program might best be administered, especially in light of the complex new problems that would probably arise and require close, full-time administrative attention. The seminars historically had been both taught and administered within one and the same depart-

ment, English. Now English, with many departments involved, was still in charge of the new program, by means of a rotating part-time directorship. An experienced writing program administrator at another university, David E. Schwalm, recently commented tellingly on his early tenure as a director:

as a regular faculty member I had absolutely no concept of my university beyond my department. I could not have told you who was dean or provost or chancellor and I didn't really care much. I knew very few faculty outside of my department . . . . The very idea of taking an institutional perspective never even occurred to me. . . . The nearly catastrophic mistakes I made as a WPA [writing program administrator] happened early in my WPA career and mostly were a result of not yet having developed an institutional perspective that allowed me to locate the writing program in the overall institutional picture. Does this resemble the experience of others . . . ? (e-mail post)

Yes, and the need for perspective ranges from awareness of university-wide politics and pragmatics to, even more seriously, awareness of the role of writing as it is situated throughout the university. The first director of the new Humanities Seminars, Edgar Rosenberg, admitted to inexperience that had led to mis-steps: "The truth of the matter is that when I was asked to take on this term-appointment as freshman impresario a mere three months after I joined the Cornell faculty, I had only the dimmest awareness of anything beyond Goldwin Smith [Hall]" (Report 5). From this inauspicious start he had to begin extensive excursions to other colleges to illuminate them about the new program and to bargain with departments recalcitrant about offering seminars to the new program. Given the relatively casual and departmentally bound administrative structure, nevertheless, a similarly dim awareness of life outside the College of Arts and Sciences or even the English Department was bound to persist with new directors, permitting insufficient or belated attention to the needs of the many newly participating departments and of the six other client colleges and their students. Communication and cooperation were faulty in many areas.

### *Questions of Ownership: Faculty and Departments*

With the directorship of the Writing Program obviously located in the Department of English, questions of ownership and control began to arise among the many other concerned departments. One difficulty, typical of the pragmatic frustrations that can aggravate all concerned in a writing program, was linked to ownership of writing as well as to the suspicions of exclusion a "gate-keeper" course can create: Registration into the seminars became much more problematic in the 1970s than in the old one-course, one-subject days. Departments wanted big enrollments in seminars they offered. Departments other than English that offered the humanities/freshman seminars were indignant when their courses received low enrollments while English department

courses overflowed into new sections. They observed that new sections of courses such as the much-requested “Writing from Experience” were opened up when students could have been encouraged to enroll in courses such as German Studies’ “Fairy Tales.” Students, they pointed out, equated writing with “English”: did the Writing Program sufficiently encourage students to broaden their views? Despite some efforts by the program’s directors to inform students that all the seminars, not just those offered by English, taught writing, the message did not get across: fully 40% of students one year asked for “Writing from Experience” or “Practical Prose Composition.”

In 1977 a report written by a staff member of the Freshman Seminar Program to sum up a student survey further hints at hostilities involving ownership and control between those running the Freshman Seminar Program and participating departments, even though its findings in regard to the teaching of writing are generally positive. In this lengthy and publicly circulated report, the writer began her concluding remarks with: “What I regret is that a few instructors, including all those in the German department, refused to have anything to do with the questionnaire. . . .” The observation is surely an odd one to select for the conclusion. In an earlier passage the writer notes that she had, in composing one survey question, used “more than a touch of that wryness for which those who have taught college composition for many years are noted—and sometimes criticized.” The language indicates that participants in the Seminar Program had assumed the role of a beleaguered “in” group. The then director of the Seminar Program, Robert Farrell, had been made a Dean of Writing by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Harry Levin, but creating a Dean of Writing (according to some observers) may actually have been a source of increased friction with departments, who felt the loss of control over courses and a program they considered to be theirs, and who questioned the missives arriving from the Seminar Program office, which was trying to give more direction to the teaching of writing. Friction with the Department of History reached such a state that national publicity resulted, a burden the Seminar Program hardly needed.

### *Questions of Exclusion: The Colleges*

Registration difficulties also acted as a litmus paper for dissatisfaction in the colleges being served by the Writing Program. Because students wanted fair and optimal placement into favorite courses, quotas had been set up to save places in each seminar for students from each of the seven colleges. Unfortunately, these quotas seem instead to have created, or more likely fortified, the notion that students from the College of Arts and Sciences were favored and that students from colleges such as Agriculture and Life Sciences and Engineering were discriminated against (by teachers as well as by the registration process). Even though in March, 1979, *The Cornell Sun* published an article called “Students, Profs Laud University Writing Efforts,” not everything was being lauded everywhere. In this same year the College of

Agriculture and Life Sciences decided to run its own survey of Freshman Writing Seminars. Interestingly, the responses seem to indicate that the students on the whole felt they were being well served: 72% believed their writing “improved some or substantially” while “the mean response . . . seemed to be that the seminars were somewhat helpful.” That the College felt itself to be poorly served, however, is evident in the survey’s construction, which includes a section on “Comparisons between Courses with High and Low Proportions of Agriculture Students.” Occasional survey questions suggest failures in communication about the purposes of the program. For instance, one “highlight” reports that “Most of the required writing seemed to be expository or creative, only 15 percent did any scientific writing at all.” The Freshman Seminars were not, of course, designed to teach “scientific,” meaning technical scientific writing. (Today’s Freshman Writing Seminars include a number drawn from the sciences, a happy situation that we hope to encourage, but not because they offer technical writing. They do not: they offer topics in the sciences susceptible to the same kinds of thought and attention to language as seminars offered in the humanities.) According to the 1979 survey, 80% of CALS students took their first choice seminars, and the survey concludes that “generally, there was no favoritism of Arts students over Ag students in attention or grading. Some Ag students, however, seem to feel that Arts students had better access to their first choice seminars.” Dissatisfaction, then, was deeply entrenched, dissatisfaction which culminated in the Ag College’s 1981 submission of a “Resolution on Writing Skills” to the provost of the university which asked for improved attention to writing. The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences was not alone in its discontent. In May 1978, the Hotel School had withdrawn from the Seminar Program and established its own writing faculty, and “in June 1980 the committee evaluating the Core Curriculum of the College of Engineering expressed reservations about the quality of writing instruction offered in the FSP” (Provost’s Report 9).

### **The Holmes and Sturgeon Reports: Sorting out Problems of Substance and Administration**

In late 1980, therefore, and explicitly because of the concerns of the faculties of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and of the College of Human Ecology (Holmes Report 5), University Provost Keith Kennedy established a Commission on Writing composed of fourteen faculty members drawn from across the university. By November of 1980 the Provost’s Commission on Writing had begun meeting; it continued intensive work for nearly a year. Its year of investigations along with a 1981 large-scale survey administered to faculty, seminar faculty, and students provided the Commission with observations that led to large-scale suggestions for changes in the University’s approach to teaching writing. These recommendations were presented in October 1981 in a “Report of The Provost’s Commission on Writing,” commonly

known as the Holmes Report after its chair, Professor Clive Holmes, Department of History.

The university's Holmes Report, along with the College of Arts and Sciences' response ("Report of The College Writing Committee" May, 1982), are important documents in the history of the teaching of writing at Cornell; they voice perceptions which are as valuable today as they were in 1981. Significantly, the Holmes Report did not focus only on the teaching of Freshman Writing Seminars. Given the perceived insufficiency of one early year of instruction, many of its conclusions and recommendations address the need for continued attention to writing after the freshman year; in terms of the first year writing program, it criticizes less its substance than its administration:

The Freshman Seminar Program (FSP) is well thought of by students, but, as the one University-wide program which explicitly purports to develop students' writing skills, it has borne the brunt of the criticism of a faculty troubled by undergraduates' writing deficiencies. Some of the criticism seems misplaced. It is based on the misapprehension we have already remarked: the comfortable assumption that the freshman writing program is uniquely responsible for students' writing skills. Other criticisms are concerned less with the substance of the program than with poor communications between the 'consumer' colleges and the Director of the FSP. Mechanisms through which the former could express their concerns over, for example, placement procedures, have been virtually nonexistent, and minor issues have festered. (25)

All those communication problems, these failures in administration that could be expected in a huge program run by a part-time English department faculty director, had become fully evident. Communication and collaboration were demonstrably lacking among teachers, administrators, and colleges. The commission discovered, for instance, that ". . . there has been virtually no coordination between the Directors of the FSP and of EOW [the summer program of freshman writing seminars that included internship and training of TAs] . . . [and that] faculty actively involved both as teachers and administrators in the FSP had 'only vague knowledge' about the activities of EOW" (28). It found also that no attempt had been made to ensure training of TAs (29); and that some were trained who never teach (29)—more failure in coordination. It found a ". . . complete absence of dialogue among those concerned with the Writing Workshop, the FSP, or the English Department" (31). The writing assessment program and the College of Engineering saw English 135, Writing from Experience, and English 136, The Practice of Prose, as the place for "marginal" students; faculty leaders of these courses did not agree (32). Most damagingly, in terms of administration, the Commission concluded that "The current [title of] 'Director' seems a misnomer: he directs very little. The director is scarcely involved in the activities of the EOW program or of the Writing

Workshop: both are, in effect, independent agencies. The director is hostage to the department for the provision of seminars: who teaches and what is taught are matters about which he can do essentially nothing" (37).

These were the administrative problems of a too isolated center, as was even the much-noted failure of a substantial number of the writing seminars to follow the guidelines of the program in regard to teaching writing: The chair of the Holmes Commission reported in an Arts College faculty meeting that "students are sometimes asked for only three or four large papers; they are seldom given the opportunity to rewrite their papers, and grading is often inadequate or untimely. These conditions are the result of administrative weakness, due to the departments' independence and the lack of supervision of the graduate students teaching the courses" (3 November 1981 minutes). In a move that still bears notice, however, the Commission among other recommendations nevertheless had proposed large-scale modification of the substance and methodology of first-year writing courses, retreating in a familiar move to a "back to basics," writing skills approach: "These courses would concentrate on principles of sentence and paragraph structure" (39) for the first semester with courses that would be taught predominantly by English; the writing of "substantial expository essays" (14) based on subjects in the expressive arts, humanities, or social sciences (39) could return in the second semester.

But as Jonathan Bishop, Professor of English and then director of the Freshman Seminar Program had noted in the November 3, 1981 faculty meeting, to rely on courses and administration in the Department of English would be to perpetuate the writing program's problems:

As the [Holmes Report] recommendations acknowledge, the Director of the program has been a servant of the departments, lacking much authority, and that is one reason why there has not been an adequate training program. But the recommendation that the program be moved back to one department seems to be in conflict with the desire for strong administration. To fulfill that aim, an independent program, separately funded, answerable to the Provost, would be indicated; instead, the [present] proposal would reinforce the director's role as a servant of the English department, and at the same time do away with a program that has been moderately successful. (3 November 1981 minutes)

Ultimately, therefore, the College of Arts and Sciences responded, after well attended, passionately argued faculty meetings, by approving the follow-up "Report of The College Writing Committee" (known as the "Sturgeon Report" after its chair, Nicholas Sturgeon, Department of Philosophy), a report which pointed out that "the Commission's report nowhere explicitly addresses the crucial question of whether writing has been taught well in courses which do adhere to the current guidelines" (6) and successfully argued that instead new procedures for ensuring good teaching and good administration be instituted.

The recommendations of the College Writing Committee's Sturgeon Report accordingly became the primary basis of the current Writing Program.

Fortunately, both the Provost's Commission and the College of Arts and Sciences' Committee agreed that the teaching of first-year writing for the entire university should be coordinated by one full-time director in a well-funded program. When commenting on the Hotel School's decentralized writing program, the Holmes Report had argued, for reasons also argued by today's faculty and administration, that decentralization into a number of separate writing programs was a bad idea, economically and educationally:

Any attempt [by individual colleges] to institute properly funded and staffed programs would present many practical difficulties, and would entail expensive duplication within the University. However, these pragmatic concerns weighed less in our rejection of decentralization than did our sense, shared by the Deans of Instruction of the various colleges, that any move to isolate students within their particular colleges is to be resisted. Our students benefit from working with their peers in different colleges, and we were reluctant to sacrifice the common FSP learning experience which, for many students outside the Arts College, also provides their only exposure to the humanities. (44)

Ultimately, the solution to making sure that seminars were better taught, that they taught writing, and that lines of communication and cooperation were working between administrators, faculty, and colleges, lay in "decentralized centralization": contributing departments continued their financial and professorial commitments to the program (i.e., funding graduate student and faculty taught seminars, maintaining faculty mentorship of graduate students, designing seminars) while the Writing Program gained authority and perspective as it became disengaged from allegiance to one department or course(s) in an independently situated program that reported not to a department but to the dean of the college and consulted regularly with a university-wide committee. It also was given its own substantial financial base (which has since been improved with endowments) from which to undertake essential processes such as providing additional funding to participating departments for TA taught seminars and for developing programs such as TA training.

### **The John S. Knight Writing Program: Creating a Decentralized Interdisciplinary Center**

The new Writing Program (now the John S. Knight Writing Program) began, then, in 1982. Its first director, a new appointment from outside, was Fredric V. Bogel; I began my association with the Program at the same time as the associate director. As has been clear from this history, much of the future success of the writing program would depend on the institutional involvement

of the directorship, and so while both Rick Bogel and I were members of the Department of English, future directors could be drawn from other participating departments. In fact, the Knight Writing Program's current director, Jonathan Monroe, is a member of the Department of Comparative Literature, an appropriate choice for an interdisciplinary writing program; Monroe is indeed developing still further its interdisciplinary nature and activities. Of course, wisdom comes slowly: like Professor Rosenberg in 1965, Rick Bogel and I were new to the university and had quickly to enlarge the scope of our vision; I have, however, remained with the Writing Program for fourteen years, ample time in which to become appreciative of its institutional situation. Furthermore, working with the enriched vision of writing as embedded throughout the university, the two subsequent Knight Writing Program directors have chosen to stay on for repeat terms to use their growing insights and achieve their goals: Harry Shaw, who followed Professor Bogel, directed for seven years, and Jonathan Monroe is now beginning his second term in order to continue the new directions he envisions, being primarily concerned with writing in the disciplines at all levels of the curriculum, including especially further development in upper-division courses. Such involvement of faculty throughout the disciplines is crucial to the essence of the Writing Program as a university-wide project and remains a major reason for drawing its directors from the faculty of participating departments.

What, in 1982, did the new Writing Program under its new administrative structure do in areas that had become problematic and to make possible an improved situation?

### **TA and Faculty Training as Interdisciplinary Involvement**

The Writing Program with its new full-time administration and substantial funding could and continues to take seriously, and act on, its responsibility to make sure that writing be taught and taught well, and that TAs be carefully selected and systematically trained, lapses in such training having been noted and commented on as a major source of weak teaching in the Holmes Report. As I have written elsewhere,

In Cornell's writing program, newly reorganized and reestablished in 1982, we could attend to the charges the university's task force had agreed on: we established guidelines for the teaching of writing in all seminars and monitored their observance; we set up training programs and faculty incentives; we wrote and published a handbook, *Teaching Prose*. We added Writing to the title Freshman Seminars. With every step we concentrated on eliminating merely "additive" writing, so that the seminars would truly offer writing in the university, or writing across the curriculum in both senses: "cognitively based (on the idea of writing as a mode of learning) or rhetorically

based (on the idea of introducing students to the discourse communities of various disciplines)” (McLeod 342). (Gottschalk 2)

Concentrating on the training of TAs clearly provided one of the best ways to work with departments, and the training programs for graduate students at once became mandatory and extensive. “At once” is perhaps the wrong phrase: administrators soon learn that change happens gradually, that one achieves best success through constantly and considerably (but one hopes irresistibly) applied pressure. It’s generally fatal to tell people what to do, but most don’t mind being encouraged to do what they believe (or come to believe) in. Thus, converting resistance to required participation in training programs into normal expectation has been a matter of working steadily over years to insist on the value of training, to gradually develop ideas about how TAs and faculty may be involved in training, and to ensure that the training and teaching support are in fact the best that can be provided. And, of course, no amount of insistence on training would work if departments did not find participation to be in their own best interests, both because graduate students benefit from learning how to teach and from developing their own courses, and because the Writing Program offers considerable additional financial support to TAs for their training and teaching.

All three directors of the Knight Writing Program and I, with the invaluable assistance of James Slevin (Department of English, Georgetown), have devoted maximum attention to developing, regularly modifying, and—we believe—improving a six-week required course, “Teaching Writing,” which is taken by about eighty new TAs each year in either the summer or the fall. In a regularization and expansion of the former summer Emphasis on Writing program, thirty of these new TAs also work as interns with a faculty mentor in a six-week summer session writing course; the summer stipend provided through the Writing Program for this internship is much appreciated. In the training course the TAs read in the field and benefit from speakers ranging from experienced TAs and faculty throughout the disciplines to guest lecturers such as David Bartholomae and Nancy Sommers, all in order to provide varied perspectives and to indicate the seriousness with which attention to writing is regarded throughout Cornell and at other institutions. TAs also receive detailed responses to their proposed assignments and syllabi. During the year, in a continuation of the effort to elicit collaborative attention to teaching and writing, TAs work with faculty mentors in their department, an arrangement insisted upon by the university at the founding of the new Writing Program. The mentorship works only as well as the faculty make it work, but in many departments that is very well indeed. In some it works less well, and we regularly seek ways to improve the assistance TAs receive from faculty other than Writing Program administrators. A recent, and very successful, optional peer collaboration program developed by Jonathan Monroe encourages TAs, in return for a token stipend, to develop projects for consulting and working with each other. Another optional program allows TAs to consult about how to respond

to student essays with experienced Writing Workshop tutors, usually undergraduates who have themselves taken seminars and who have seen many essays on which instructors have commented (not always well). In other words, with a wider vision, the Writing Program administration coordinates, make use of, and takes part in the previously more isolated efforts of the summer programs and the Writing Workshop; it allows for and encourages regular development of new learning opportunities. My own interests as Director of Freshman Writing Seminars have been expanding to include the professional development of TAs as future professors, thanks in part to the incentive of a local five-university Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) project.

For faculty, the second director of the Writing Program, Harry Shaw, along with James Slevin, developed the Faculty Seminar in Writing Instruction, a summer-long workshop for a small number of faculty members. The Writing Program consistently works to encourage faculty to enrich their work as mentors, to assist with Teaching Writing, to return as alums to the Faculty Seminar—in other words, it attends daily to the interaction of faculty with TAs as teaching mentors and to the development of faculty as teachers themselves. Constant attention to TA and faculty training is essential to providing well-taught writing seminars, and to helping graduate students and faculty alike to reflect on the place of language in their disciplines and the place of writing in teaching and learning—that focus on the inextricably intertwined nature of writing and content that has for so long been so central to the university's vision. The ultimate goal, of course, is that undergraduates throughout the university's curriculum should experience writing as a vital part of their learning experience, their way of knowing and being part of the world.

### **Working with Clientele from the Colleges**

An aspect of the program that touched all colleges and participating departments and that had been a source of continuing and immediate aggravation has already been described: registration into seminars. Part of the current ease and satisfaction with that process is due to the marvels computerization can perform: we developed a customized computer program that gives all students optimal placement in seminars. But in addition, given our independent, centralized position, we want all seminars to fill equally and we work to be sure they do—it is to everyone's benefit to ensure that all sections fill with equal numbers of students, to ensure we aren't financing courses in which lamentably few students can be interested, to ensure that students are attracted to courses in a range of subjects. We work to help students realize that learning to write doesn't mean learning "English." Rather than opening up new sections of popular courses, then, we now encourage and enable students to register for alternate choices. In a lightbulb moment, we decided to abandon quotas for each college in each seminar: they were a headache for everyone involved and prevented students from getting courses they wanted.

Encouragingly, most seminars do attract students from every college. Because the Writing Program, along with the chair of each participating department, reviews all proposed Freshman Writing Seminars and staff, the Writing Program can try to meet the interests of various constituencies and offer students a wide variety of topics from which to choose, at the same time giving able instructors the opportunity to teach writing in subjects genuinely significant to them and to their students.

### **Quality Control: Interdisciplinary Finances and Incentives**

What else do we watch for, that could not be attended to in the previous system? Because we must be concerned about the quality of TAs being proposed by departments, and because we must, with writing-in-the-discipline seminars, constantly ensure that writing is actually being taught, and being taught well, it is not wise to provide additional TAs to departments where the teaching of writing and concern for teaching seem neglected. (We review the evaluations, which the Program developed and provides, that come in from all instructors at the end of each semester; faculty mentors and departmental administrators should be alerted both when TAs have not taught well and when they teach exceptionally well.) Our financial support for TAs should be decreased if TAs receive inadequate faculty mentorship or if departments decrease their contribution of faculty-taught (and TA taught) seminars. The Program cannot afford to do otherwise in a program in which all are interdependent: the university's faculty members committed themselves to teaching seminars and to assisting graduate students; faculty participation is crucial to the health of a program based on faculty understanding of writing as embedded in the disciplines. Faculty participation is crucial to the health of undergraduate education, and, of course, to the development of graduate students as teachers, who look to faculty as models of what is important in academic life and for support in their work.

In many areas, then, the problems that triggered a review of the teaching of first-year writing in the early 1980's have been solved or at least systematically addressed in an on-going and constantly mentored process made possible because the program is run by administrators who do not report to one participating department, who are interested in and support the diverse views and methods of the participating departments, who view the whole on-going process of integrating writing into teaching and into the disciplines. Consistency and patience are crucial, given that many changes can be accomplished only over a long period of time. We must try to be sure that participating departments work with and as the Writing Program, not for or against it, because this is the only way in which the Writing Program actually exists. We must try to attend to perceptions and needs in all six colleges—not an easy process, as many readers well understand. Rumors still surface that students in some colleges believe they are treated differently from those in the College of Arts and Sciences, but we try to keep in touch with those rumors and to take

steps to dispel them: for instance, we systematically publicize the methods for enrolling students in seminars—the random method and the high success rate (90% get one of their first three choices, about 60% get their first choice). Basically, a writing program can never take for granted that the program is working and that it has “got it right.” A writing program is, ultimately, its instructors and its students, not its administrators.

### **The Imperilment of Writing Programs—Two Recurrent Problems**

This seems an appropriate moment to speculate that Cornell’s Writing Program, and probably any university-wide writing program, no matter how secure and successful, may well have to undergo cyclical evaluation and revision similar to that of the two occasions I’ve already described. I can explain this speculative conclusion by looking at two problems that surfaced with the Holmes and Sturgeon Reports. These problems can regularly be suppressed but I believe they inevitably re-emerge and cause fresh, though not new, distress with a writing program. One problem is the tendency, despite one’s best intentions and beliefs, to relapse into the position that students’ writing problems would be pretty much solved if students could just take a good basic writing course, meaning one in which form and grammar dominate; another is the impulse to seek one solution for a learning process which must take place over time and which is actually everybody’s responsibility throughout the four years students spend in college.

#### *Tendency 1. The Rules Course as Solution Versus the Writing Course as Preparation*

Examine Cornell’s own process in 1981. The Sturgeon Report pointed out that the university’s Holmes Report had not in fact found anything wrong with the Freshman Seminars when they were well taught in what we now call a “writing across the curriculum” system; in fact, the Holmes Report itself had explicitly confirmed its belief that “exposition cannot be taught . . . without instruction in reading and without asking analytical questions challenging enough to make students struggle as they work their way to understanding—an understanding arrived at in part through the process of writing” (39). Nevertheless, the Holmes Report suggested that the first semester of composition ought to be taught as composition skills, in the English department, abandoning the “writing in the humanities” approach. The Sturgeon Report appropriately pointed out the inconsistency and added that “To be sure, these students need continuing instruction and practice in constructing sentences and paragraphs; but that would be an essential part of all the courses we propose here. What such students most conspicuously lack, and need lots of practice to acquire, is skill in conceiving and organizing arguments of some sophistication about a complex subject matter” (9). Professor James Morgan Hart had said as much in 1912, the Cornell faculty again in 1965.

Despite this understanding of writing taught in disciplines, faculty who have never themselves taught a seminar, or who are struggling with the term papers submitted in their courses, sometimes wonder if a seminar offered by the Department of Government called something like “Gender and Politics in Latin America” really teaches writing “skills” appropriate for their own classes. When students arrive in their upper-level courses not knowing how to write the required research paper, faculty may conclude that the nature of the writing classes is at fault, rather than simply blaming, as they might otherwise, a particular teacher of Composition 101. Faculty faced with failed writing assignments in their courses tend to focus on the most easily identified surface errors—the misspelled words and the punctuation errors—and to believe that if enough rules had been taught, the student would have been prepared to write their particular papers. They may narrow the idea further and believe that if the student took a first-year course explicitly dedicated to “rules for writing essays in economics,” future teachers of that student would have no further need to worry about his or her writing.

Of course, neither the teacher of Composition 101 nor the teacher of “Gender and Politics in Latin America” can actually succeed in preparing every student to write every kind of paper required in other disciplines, or to avoid all errors in spelling and mechanics. Research, as teachers of writing know, has pointed “to a relationship between grammatical competence and a writer’s control over the ideas being expressed. Since each new course immerses students in new, unfamiliar ideas, the quality of students’ writing, predictably, degenerates,” a process remedied only by having the student work through multiple writing tasks or drafts (Bean 64). Writing, in other words, tends to fall apart when a student encounters new ways of thinking, new ways of asking questions, new terminology. The student who wrote very well in one course may write quite badly in another until through the very act of using, in writing, the new concepts, the new methods, and the new vocabulary, she or he gains control over this new field. Until then the student may even blunder into new surface errors that did not exist in the arena in which he or she previously had written comfortably and clearly. Furthermore, as Keith Hjortshoj, Director of Writing in the Majors at Cornell, likes to point out, the student papers we don’t like will almost always still be poor papers even with the surface mechanics tidied up. The real writing problems lie in the student’s ability to handle the deeper issues, questions, and methods of a subject. Teachers of any kind of writing class know that students must practice writing in every course, every discipline, and that if a student has not been shown examples of what is expected, has not learned and written often enough about a subject, has not been given an opportunity for repeated and increasingly complex practice, he or she may well write a poor paper, no matter what excellent teaching of rules for writing in a discipline preceded his or her taking the course. A writing course can, however, provide preparation: it can help students to realize how integral writing is to learning; it can make them aware that they need to examine conventions and methods, to examine the requirements of occasion, of audi-

ence, subject, and voice, each time they begin a writing task. The preparation may be, in other words, teaching students to anticipate and inquire into all the complicated issues that will continue to enter into writing well. Paradoxically, then, the transferable lesson of introductory writing courses may be that not everything is transferable. New situations will demand new kinds of “good writing” and that the writer who has risen to sophisticated levels in one field may well fall back into novice habits in a new one. No one “rules” course can provide final instruction; no one writing course of any kind, in fact, can provide final instruction, which leads us to the next subject—

### *Tendency 2. One-Time Solutions Versus an Ongoing Learning Process*

It’s natural enough to hope to make someone else responsible for unpleasant, messy difficulties that we are not certain how to clean up. Teachers look to first-year writing courses when their students need help with writing—which leads to the other problem that regularly resurfaces, namely relegating responsibility for student writing to one program. “Lots of practice” is what students need *throughout* the four years of their college education. The Holmes Report had concluded that

it is important to emphasize this *general* responsibility for the quality of student writing skills. The notion that the development of writing skills can be delegated to a particular course, program, or department which can then be held responsible for students’ writing deficiencies, has some purchase at Cornell: but it is a myth. The Commission insists that writing is not just a problem to be addressed in a special sequence of courses, or just in the freshman year. Good writing is always intimately related to a good command of the substantive content of a subject. Good writing requires continuous reinforcement by frequent exercises which receive detailed critical commentary at all levels of instruction. (20)

According to the Commission’s survey, after the first year students were asked for little writing: 43% of courses after the freshman year required no expository, technical/ scientific/ laboratory, or creative writing pieces (7); when students did write they got little guidance (8). Because of these figures and conclusions, the first of the Holmes Report’s recommendations to the provost was “That you exhort the faculty to recognize its general responsibility to foster good writing” and the second was “That you move the colleges to mandate a writing requirement for all their students” so that “Every student graduating from Cornell should take two courses in the Freshman Composition Curriculum . . . , and at least two upper-level courses containing a substantial amount of—as well as instruction in—writing” (11). To that end the fifth recommendation was “That you establish and fund a University Bureau for Professional Writing” (16) specifically designed to address development of

upper-level writing courses, to address technical and business writing needs (23), and to help faculty develop ways to include and work on writing (20).

Despite these recommendations, Freshman Writing Seminars have remained officially and primarily responsible for the quality of student writing skills. The idea of a "University Bureau for Professional Writing" died, I believe, immediately, since the College of Arts and Sciences specifically did not take up responsibility for anything but the first-year courses when it addressed the Holmes Report's proposals. Two colleges did, however, take up the challenge to improve the teaching of writing throughout their students' careers: in 1984 the College of Industrial and Labor Relations added a requirement that students take an upper-level writing course (a special ILR writing-intensive course or Expository Writing, a 200-level English department course). The College of Engineering began its own communications program in 1987 with a full-time director, Steve Youra, and (currently) three full-time teachers of writing; in 1990 it voted in the requirement that all its students in addition to two Freshman Writing Seminars must take a writing intensive engineering class or an upper-level stand-alone writing course offered by its Communications Program. The Engineering Communications Program offers excellent upper-level courses in technical writing in addition to working with TAs and faculty to develop writing intensive versions of their courses. In the College of Arts and Sciences, the new Writing Program, because of excellent directorship and the genuine support and understanding of the University's administration, from deans through the president, was able to take a major step on its own in 1988 toward developing writing efforts in the college after the first year: Writing in the Majors was begun on the initiative of the Writing Program's second director, Harry Shaw, through an award from then President Rhodes's fund for educational initiatives. While yet limited in scope, and while the college has not instituted required upper-level writing work, Writing in the Majors reaches many students (about 730 a year), TAs, and faculty, and the program should grow. The College of Human Ecology by formal vote on March 12, 1981, had gone on record as "recognizing the faculty's 'fundamental responsibility . . . to require a high level of exposition, either written or oral, in every course'" (Holmes Report 10), but it has not added requirements for upper-level writing courses; nor has the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences developed such requirements, although many of its faculty work on the integration of writing into their upper-level courses, and its Department of Communications offers upper-level writing courses.

The need for continued attention to writing by faculty "in the majors" has, of course, far from disappeared since 1981. I would not be surprised if a new study showed that many students continue to write few papers after the first year and receive little commentary on their writing when they do. Further, the situation persists at Cornell as at most places that when faculty do have students write papers, they feel frustrated because students need more help than they expected would be the case, or they find that the assignments did not go well: no University Bureau of Professional Writing, as proposed by the Holmes

Report, has been developed to help faculty in the disciplines understand how writing and learning develop hand in hand, or how to work on writing assignments. It also continues to be true that faculty members quite rightly believe that students need to learn to write in their disciplines. I worry about what may be an inevitable, and cyclical reaction—the impulse to place responsibility on Freshman Writing Seminars as the one arena in which needed skills should be taught, and the impulse to solve writing problems by “getting back to basics.” I worry about a possible reactionary return to the (already discredited) idea of decentralization—put students into specialized first-year “writing for engineers/ science/ statistics, etc.” courses from the start; link a “writing section” to a required first-year survey course, thus “killing” (indeed) two birds with one stone. The insights and carefully wrought recommendations of the earlier two processes that each time sought to situate the writing program thoroughly *in* the university might thus come to naught.

Students at Cornell, students anywhere, do not benefit from repeated tampering with first-year writing courses, making them more field specific or more skills-oriented, more literature, less literature. Students benefit most from the university’s providing a wide variety of experiences with writing; they benefit most from continued attention to writing provided by faculty in the disciplines throughout all four years of their academic experience. As they take courses on subjects of increasing sophistication, it becomes increasingly important that they be given writing to which faculty thoughtfully respond. No first year course can prepare students to write in their fourth year at the level of complexity which is then expected. Preparation starts in the first year; it must continue in each year after that as the student matures and learns.

### **The Proper Arena for Writing and a Writing Program?**

Just as important as a writing program’s efforts, then, are those of a university itself to find lasting ways in which to avoid targeting first-year writing courses as the culprit and cure for inevitable writing problems. The appropriate arena for attention is upper-level courses. Cornell has not yet provided what it gave first-year writing: a decentralized but central, independent administration that with an equitable eye might encourage, supervise, and maintain attention to and development of upper-level writing in the disciplines. Possibly it is time for us to undertake something in the line of what the Holmes Report originally proposed, namely the University Bureau for Professional Writing, which was given two functions:

1. To initiate and foster ways to involve the whole University in improving the quality of writing at Cornell.
  - a. To cooperate with the faculty in establishing and strengthening subject-matter courses that will provide upper-classmen and graduate students with increased opportunities to improve their writing skills.

- b. To assist faculty members who seek to enhance the writing component in their courses or to improve their skills in the evaluation and instruction of writing.
  - c. To train TAs who grade papers.
2. To promote, develop, and implement upper-level course formats appropriate to students' postgraduate writing needs.

Currently, these two functions of the proposed Professional Writing Bureau are addressed piecemeal, an approach that actually can work if all colleges contribute their pieces and if these are collaboratively coordinated. In the College of Arts and Sciences, Writing in the Majors has many good effects; it is a widely admired initiative and one the college intends to develop as much as possible. In the College of Agriculture and Life Science, there is much interest in teaching. As the Writing Program's Director of Freshman Writing Seminars I regularly address TAs, at the College's invitation, on how to assign and respond to writing, and consult occasionally with some faculty; this year the college is opening up discussion with the director of the Knight Writing Program about writing in the discipline efforts. The most officially integrated effort is probably that of the College of Engineering, whose centralized upper-level communications program has already been described. Perhaps a successful alternative to establishing a university "Professional Writing Bureau" might be to provide all colleges with the mandate, and funding, to set up and maintain upper-level communications programs that will reach all their students, such as Engineering's or the College of Arts and Science's Writing in the Majors. Unfortunately, these days of reduced funding make such an university-wide, costly, initiative unlikely.

### **Looking Ahead**

No writing program can afford to view its situation as secure and its problems as solved, no writing program will be able to consider doing so, until the utopian day when all faculty across the curriculum are willing to *be* the writing program—to be “vitaly concerned with language acquisition, with learning processes, with pedagogy, and with practice . . . with the disorder and confusion from which forms of knowledge, texts, and meanings eventually emerge” (Hjortshoj 503). With limited attention to the development of upper-level writing practices, practices which involve and educate faculty, TAs, and students alike, first-year writing at Cornell and at any institution will probably receive repeated and critical attention from client colleges and faculty. It therefore behooves a writing program that concentrates primarily on first-year courses to take steps in its own interest and in the interest of students as writers to help faculty throughout the institution to consider and integrate the uses of language in upper-level courses. Cornell's Writing Program has begun to do so with the growing Writing in the Majors program, finding that faculty can be enthusiastically engaged in examining new and more successful ways

to teach their courses through increased attention to language. Perhaps the time has come for the Program in its usual mode as decentralized center to expand its purview and to work with other colleges that are not yet satisfied with their efforts to keep attention successfully focused on the writing development of students after the first year. If, as Cornell has acknowledged throughout its long history, and as Keith Hjortshoj, the director of Writing in the Majors, has written out of his experience here with teachers across the curriculum, “nothing is more essential to academic life than the use of written language, as a means to the ends of communication and the construction of knowledge” (499), we must make this effort.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Students in the Hotel School do not take Freshman Writing Seminars, but they must take writing courses offered by their own school.

<sup>2</sup>Edward Corbett has described the Cornell School of Rhetoric at length in “The Cornell School of Rhetoric.” The School of Rhetoric is an informal designation given to a program that was located in the Department of Public Speaking, usually referred to by Corbett as the Department of Speech and Drama, a later name. A bit of history: According to the university catalogues, the Department of Public Speaking was originally located in English as “Oratory”; in 1903/04 “Oratory” became a separate department; and in 1914-15 “Oratory” became the Department of Public Speaking. Throughout the late 1920s and 1930s, the department offered courses in drama in increasing numbers, with the result that it was finally renamed “Speech and Drama.” According to Corbett, “sometime in 1964 the speech part of the Cornell department (but not the drama part) was voted out of existence by action of the College of Arts and Sciences” (12). The university’s catalogues first used the new name, Theatre Arts, however, in 1967-68. Reflecting still further evolution the department will be called the Department of Theatre, Film, and Dance beginning 1997/98.

<sup>3</sup>In 1915-16 Professor Strunk began teaching an advanced course called “English Usage and Style” that continued for many years. Presumably he found his little handbook useful for that course.

<sup>4</sup>The seven colleges/schools are the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences; the College of Art, Architecture, and Planning; the College of Engineering; the School of Hotel Administration; the College of Human Ecology; the School of Industrial and Labor Relations; and the College of Arts and Sciences.

<sup>5</sup>Physicists at Cornell have displayed a long-standing and continuing interest in writing, as witness David Mermin who has regularly critiqued scientific writing; and as witness the outstanding involvement of physics in Cornell’s Writing in the Majors program.

<sup>6</sup>The phrase, “decentralized center,” was coined by the current Writing Program director, Jonathan Monroe, as the name of a talk he gave at the Writ-

ing Across the Curriculum Second National Conference in Charleston, S.C., February 2, 1995.

<sup>7</sup>The Writing Program became the John S. Knight Writing Program in 1986 when the first director, Fredric V. Bogel, successfully helped the program to receive a major endowment from the Knight Foundation.

<sup>8</sup>I have since become Director of Freshman Seminars, a distinct position that allows the Director of the Writing Program to concentrate on the integration of writing into the university at all levels, especially with Writing in the Majors, and to concentrate on financial aspects of the Writing Program.

<sup>9</sup>See Gottschalk's "Training TAs Across the Curriculum to Teach Writing: Embracing Diversity" for a fuller description of some aspects of TA training for Freshman Writing Seminars at Cornell.

<sup>10</sup>Professor Monroe initially developed the project as a means of improving the teaching of teaching assistants whom he was supervising in the Department of Comparative Literature. When he became director of the Writing Program, he was able to implement it on a program-wide level.

<sup>11</sup>As part of a five-university FIPSE project on Preparing Future Professors (PFP), I and graduate students who have taught Freshman Writing Seminars have been working with the departments of English, history, and government on kinds of professional support their TAs might appreciate.

<sup>12</sup>And if the composition courses have been skills oriented, the faculty wonder if perhaps they need specific contents—see the 1965-66 discussion.

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