
College Composition Revisited

The Right Type of Write Hype

By Gerald F. Colvin



There's no doubt about it any longer," university teacher Phyllis Zagano declared almost a decade ago. "The art of writing in America has declined precipitously in the past 15 years." And, she went on, the alarming point about this deterioration is not so much the impoverished grammar, spelling, punctuation, and diction lying everywhere in ruins, as it is the amazing inability of college students to shape even one coherent paragraph!

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A chorus of similar condemnations had already captured the public eye in a 1975 *Newsweek* cover story: "If your children are attending college, the chances are that when they graduate they will be unable to write ordinary, expository English with any real degree of structure and lucidity." Another critic grumbled that the "officials at graduate schools of law, business and journalism report gloomily that the products of even the best colleges have failed to master the skills of effective written communication so crucial to their fields."²

In 1982 Middleton surmised that the "writing" problem started, at

least in part, with the great interest in linguistics. Linguistics deals primarily with the spoken word, as opposed to the written word. "Unfortunately, some linguists went overboard and made the outrageous claim that written language isn't language. Only spoken language counts." And the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), observed Middleton, quickly promoted the assumptions that:

1. Language changes constantly.
2. Change is normal.
3. Spoken language is the language.
4. Correctness rests upon usage.
5. All usage is relative.

Well! Since language changes and the written language isn't really *the* language, the upper echelons of NCTE cried Eureka! the study of English as a discipline isn't really necessary. In fact, such study cripples creativity. And worse yet, it's *elitist!* "The conspicuously predictable result has been millions of young Americans who can't write," complained Middleton. "Since they can't 'put it in writing,' they know only vaguely what they think, and their thinking is limited largely to feeling, scheming, and remembering what's been 'coming down' lately."³

A more current note in *Today's Education* reminds us that college programs for teaching writing are only as good as their teachers. "Unfortunately, few colleges focus adequately on the ins and outs of teaching writing. Teachers—particularly elementary teachers—need a stronger grounding in language and literature."⁴ A recent survey reveals that undergraduate offerings in English are comprised of a meager 16.9 percent writing courses, 5.3 percent language studies, and a whopping 77.8 percent literature courses.⁵

What Does a Degree Mean, Anyway?

The professional literature of the 1960s clearly forecast the decline in college performance. Dressel bitterly raised a triad of complaints against American colleges and universities: (1) The only thing a student gets out of college for certain is himself. (2) One can be sure a person has had a college education only by examining his certified transcript. And (3), a baccalaureate degree merely indicates that the person has "put in time" on a college or university campus. He recalled John Gardner's biting observation that "the extensive statements of objectives in college catalogs have had . . . as little impact on the achievements of most colleges and universities as the chaplain's prayers have on the conduct of business in the United States Senate."⁶

At the same time, Glaser was arguing that college grades were not really clear evidence of what a student knew or could do.⁷ Too many teachers, he said, graded on the curve, which merely described the relative ordering of students with respect to a given class performance. Such grading procedures provided little or no guidance as to the *degree of proficiency* in terms of exactly what students could do. Glaser urged the development and use of criterion-referenced grading methods depending on an *established standard* of subject-matter competence. Only then could educators talk meaningfully regarding the competence of an individual student.

Why the Decline in Writing Skills?

Numerous explanations have been put forward for the sorry state of writing among college students. Ralph Tyler scored the

widespread use of the telephone and the great amount of time spent viewing television.⁸ Alston Chase blamed it on modern relativism.⁹ Like Middleton after him, Sheils named "structural linguistics" and an excessive emphasis on oral communication as the primary villains.¹⁰ Zagano, on the other hand, assigned causation to as many as six different factors: society, technology, parenting, schools, colleges, and tests.¹¹

A preponderance of the published blame, however, was leveled at college teachers of English, and much of this by English teachers *themselves!* Lyons, who had taught university English in three different states, noted, "American students are not learning to write because nobody bothers to teach them how."

Teaching students to read, write, and think, he added, is just not what American higher education is all about today. He argued that English professors have paid almost no attention at all to the need for literate writing. In fact, only against their will can they be made to teach freshman composition. "The business of the American English department is not the teaching of literacy," he stated, "it is the worship of literature." And the "higher" up the academic ladder the English teacher goes, said Lyons, the more likely it is that any interest he or she may express in teaching a writing course, especially to freshmen, will be interpreted as a sign of intellectual inferiority. "The teachers who count themselves among the company of the very elect look with condescension upon lowly teachers of basic writing skills."¹²

The Educational Testing Service (ETS) issued a report focusing not just on the writing crisis, but on the *roots* of that crisis. One of the major obstacles to effective writing

programs, ETS concluded, was the fact that

many English teachers are ill-equipped to teach writing and feel uncomfortable doing so. Many programs that prepare English teachers concentrate heavily on literature and give short shrift to writing. There is even less emphasis on the teaching of writing, a skill that—like writing itself—can be learned only through practice.¹³

The Response of the English Professionals

All of this criticism was not lost on the NCTE, and in 1979 it published a set of revised standards that defined writing as “the process of selecting, combining, arranging, and developing ideas in effective sentences, paragraphs, and, often, longer units of discourse.” The most pertinent ingredients of effective writing were identified as: method of development, tone, form, purpose, and audience. “Learning to write and to write increasingly well,” NCTE continued, “involves developing increasing skill and sensitivity in selecting from and combining these variables to shape particular messages. It also involves learning to conform to conventions of the printed language appropriate to the age of the writer and to the form, purpose, and tone of the message.” The council proclaimed that:

1. Writing instruction should be a substantial and clearly identified part of an integrated English language arts curriculum.

2. Students should be provided writing experience in many forms (e.g., essays, notes, summaries, poems, letters, stories, reports, scripts, journals).

3. Students should practice writing for a variety of audiences in order to learn that their approaches must vary, depending on their audiences.

4. Class time should be devoted to all aspects of the writing proc-

ess: generating ideas, drafting, revising, and editing.

5. All students should receive instruction in both (a) developing and expressing ideas and (b) using the conventions of edited American English.

6. The supporting skills of edited American English (such as spelling, handwriting, punctuation, and grammatical usage) should be developed primarily through writing experience rather than through related exercises.

7. The evaluation of an individual student’s growth in writing should (a) be based on complete pieces of writing; (b) reflect not only emphasis on conventional usage, mechanics, and spelling, but also informed judgments about clarity and content; and (c) include regular responses to individual pieces of student writing and periodic assignments that chart growth over time.¹⁴

What Have Been the Results?

Those were bracing, meaty proclamations from NCTE in 1979. Did they set in motion a revolution in English content and methodology across American collegedom?

A 1983 survey of 45 college departments throughout the U.S.A. and Canada asked what specific courses should be required of future writing teachers.¹⁵ The faculty selected, in order, “Classical Rhetoric” (81 percent), “General Linguistics” (73 percent), and “Theoretical Analysis of Written Discourse” (57.5 percent). *Not one writing course was among the 13 selections, and certainly no significant number of faculty wrote one in.* “The underlying assumption of both the survey and the respondents seems clear,” observes Kearns, “—one can teach writing without taking a course in writing.”¹⁶

In fact, a review of 263 college and university catalogs by Burhans reveals that the traditional freshman composition course in basically all the writing that most students must take. A full 20 percent of the undergraduate institutions required no writing courses whatever, and 54 percent offered students a variety of ways to get credit for required writing courses by other means, i.e., proficiency, CEEB, CLEP, and challenge tests. Even for English majors, English education majors, and other education majors, only 15 percent, 30 percent, and 6 percent of schools, respectively, required extra or advanced writing courses. Burhans explains that

most English departments pride themselves on their large percentage of PhDs, and English PhDs are mainly degrees in literary criticism and scholarship, with miniscule attention to writing or the teaching of writing and even less to reading.¹⁷

The conclusion here is obvious: College writing courses, programs, and descriptions are usually defined and approved by people with the barest of professional training—or experience—in the subject of writing!

Where to Now?

Students learn to paint by actually using paint and brushes; to play musical instruments by practicing, to dance through exercising and practicing, to act by performing, and to improve their hitting by engaging in batting practice. In the performance disciplines, theory, criticism, and stylistic history are learned first *by doing*. Students are not required merely to recall what they know *about* perspective, rhythm, dance, inflections, or bunting. In the performance disciplines—and English is one of them—performing is the most essential way of knowing. We

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should not, *dare not*, ask our students to understand literary *products* while remaining ignorant of the *process* through which they were created.

In order for English teachers to manage effective reform, states Kearns, himself an English teacher, they need to make a three-fold commitment: to graduate good writers, to develop performance-centered curricula, and to practice what they teach. To achieve these objectives English teachers must be willing to eliminate tests in which teachers do the writing and students fill in the blanks. They must combat the impression that good form is independent of good content.

And finally, warns Kearns, English faculty "must forgo the comforts of specialization—of teaching and evaluating only scholarly or informational prose. Writing poetry enhances scholarly understanding and critical judgment; exercising our scholarly and critical faculties makes us better poets."¹⁸ There is absolutely no better way for college students to assess the originality and worth of their own literary creations!

A Parting Caution

Writing as *process*, however, is not the be-all-and-end-all of composition theory and practice. In many quarters it has too often been codified and oversimplified into a set of laws and prescriptions, with any variation considered gross heresy. In other quarters it has been reduced to unsystematic, open-ended writing directions to "let the writer write." Consequently, in too many classrooms, English professors have avoided skills training like the plague. "Not only did some drop teaching any usage but they refused to teach punctuation, capitalization, [and] spelling as well," laments Rodrigues.

At their worst, writing process converts accepted the process at its most shallow level and believed that all we had to do was

encourage students to write and they would automatically improve. Thoroughly considered concepts, such as peer review and journal writing, soon became catchwords, part of the apostolic creed of *the process*.

The latest research does not indicate that we should throw out the teaching of writing as a process. Rather, it indicates that we should temper the free-wheeling writing process with structure, purpose, and the recognition that students need to experience a wide variety of writing tasks—and where appropriate, receive clearly identified skills training! Process approaches to writing should continue to be taught, but integrated into those approaches should be other techniques such as models, simulations, and inquiry. Rodrigues concludes:

The unfettered writing process approach has been just as artificial as the traditional

high school research paper. Writing without structure accomplished as little as writing a mock structure. What the newest research is telling us to do is first to pay attention to the ways that a variety of writers do write but then to realize that their students are not mature, professional writers. They need structure, they need models to practice, they need to improve even mechanical skills, and they still need time to think through their ideas, to revise them, and to write for real audiences and real purposes. Writers may improve by just writing. . . . But when teachers create meaningful and structured contexts for writing, students respond.¹

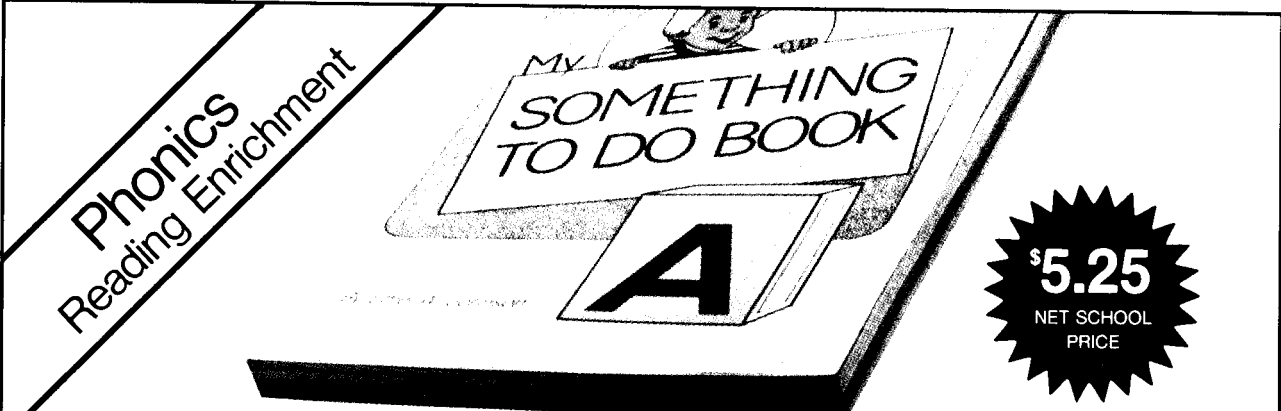
Has college composition come a long way in the past decade? Yes and no. It depends partly on each college's policies, but most of all, it depends on the individual English teacher. □

FOOTNOTES

¹ Phyllis Zagano, "The Great American Writing Crisis," *Education Digest*, 43:2 (1977), p. 56.

² Merrill Sheils, "Why Johnny Can't Write," *Newsweek* (December 8, 1975), p. 58.

³ Thomas H. Middleton, "The Same Old



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