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Writing and Learning to Write: A Modest Bit of History and Theory for Writing Students

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Although Doug Hesse ostensibly reflects on teaching composition at a particular kind of institution, he actually brings a special perspective to this historical/theoretical overview of work in the composition classrooms. He knows the field from a national perspective that few are privileged to have because he has served as editor of Writing Program Administration; *he also has served as president of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA). His essay provides newcomers to the field with a history of major developments in writing pedagogy.*

We cannot promise a single, correct formula for writing, an algorithm guaranteed to produce success. There is none. There are

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many different strategies for various writing situations, and writers differ, too, in terms of the composing techniques that work for them. Learning to write better involves seriously trying a variety of processes and strategies in the context of specific writing tasks. Much that can be said about writing is very general: be well organized, analyze your audience's knowledge and beliefs, write prose that conforms to standards of correctness and clarity. All of this advice is true but helpful in only a limited sense. The real proof and practice come only when one engages specific strategies for, say, analyzing an audience, and only when one applies those strategies to specific writing situations.

Present-day writing courses have their roots in classical rhetoric. For several hundred years before Christ, students in Athens, Rome, and other centers of ancient civilization met with teachers to learn the arts of public discourse, primarily how to argue persuasively on matters under public deliberation. Aristotle, Isocrates, Quintilian, Cicero, and others all produced rhetorics, books of advice and strategies about how to produce effective speeches—speeches because oral presentations dominated written ones. This system of rhetorical education was adapted to writing and underwent numerous changes, modifications, and resurrections. Thus, rhetoric has been a key component of a university education for centuries. In fact, rhetoric and writing formerly held a much more central position in the U.S. college curriculum. Students at institutions such as Harvard in the 1860s could expect to take four years (or eight semesters) of public speaking and writing, in recognition of the fact that one learns to write with extensive practice and training over long periods of time. The one- or two-semester writing course requirement is a fairly recent development, established in the last part of the nineteenth century. (For a history of writing instruction, see James J. Murphy's *A Short History of Writing Instruction from Ancient Greece to Twentieth-Century America* or David R. Russell's *Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870–1990: A Curricular History.*)

Throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, college writing courses bore a striking resemblance to one another. Instructors assigned topics or themes, and students handed in a completed paper, received a grade, perhaps a response, and

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another assignment. First-year writers in the early 1960s, for example, could expect to write a paper a week. Instruction about writing largely took the form of lectures about prose models or some stylistic, grammatical, or rhetorical feature, with occasional discussions about the content of some readings. Beyond this, students were on their own. They rarely received advice or input about their writing until after they turned in work to be graded.

By the mid-1960s, writing teachers, researchers, and theorists had increasingly begun to realize that there was a gap between this way of teaching writing and the way actual writers really worked, whether those writers were businesspeople, journalists, citizens with a complaint, or scholars. For actual writers, writing is a complex process that frequently extends over a period of time. It involves identifying and understanding a writing task, drafting, and revising. Writers frequently seek feedback during this process, talking with friends or co-workers, working with clients, editors, or bosses. It became clear that better writing instruction must include attention to the processes of writing. In other words, students would benefit from receiving input and advice about their writing during the process of completing a paper, not just after it. Teachers began teaching students strategies for "prewriting," "drafting," and "revising," and they began reading and commenting on drafts.

In the past twenty-five years, an extensive amount of research has been conducted on how people write and how writing should be taught. We now understand writing as a complex interaction of planning, writing, and revising, a process that rarely occurs in a linear fashion. Writers, for example, rarely complete their planning once and for all and then move on to writing, never to return to planning; instead, writers move back and forth among these processes. Writing processes are further profoundly influenced by the writer's experiences (life experiences, as well as reading and education) and circumstances, as well as by the different natures of different writing tasks. As a result, there are few universal truths and no simple formulas for all writers and writing tasks in all times and places.

If writing could be mastered by memorizing a few clear and simple rules, we at Illinois State University would certainly "give" students those rules. But there are no simple secrets. Learning to

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write is not like learning the dates of World War II. Writing abilities are acquired over time, through practice and feedback. Of course, there are some helpful strategies and advice that teachers can and will explain to students; after all, through scholarship and research we now know a good deal about writing. But even these strategies require practice before they are ingrained as part of a student's repertory of skills. Writing teachers are part coach, part critic, part expert practitioner. The writing classroom has far more in common with an artist's studio than it does with a lecture hall.

In general, writing is a process of constructing a text to achieve a desired effect within a specific group of readers. This characterization may sound straightforward: writers have something to say, have readers to whom they wish to say it, and know just what effect (actions or attitudes) they wish to produce. And sometimes writing actually works this way. But just as often it doesn't. Frequently, for example, the idea of "what" to say comes not from the writer but from the audience itself. A teacher assigns a paper, or an employer asks for a report, or a reader writes a letter to the newspaper that simply must be answered. In such cases, writers don't "fit" ideas they already have to an audience; rather, they generate ideas to accommodate an audience. Or, to cite another situation, sometimes writers have something to say and even something they want to happen as a result, but they have no sense of a specific audience or place of publication for this writing. The process of writing in this case becomes one of identifying an audience and shaping a text accordingly.

In truth, as a piece of writing evolves through several drafts, a sense of audience helps generate and change ideas, and newly emerging ideas alter the writer's sense of audience. Writers add and discard words, sentences, paragraphs, and entire ideas. They move concepts around. They substitute different words and ideas. They get fed up and start over. They change topics or approaches, knowing that the writing they've already done can be saved, perhaps, for some other writing situation. They ask for advice and feedback regularly. They put things aside and return to them later. They work on several projects simultaneously. They read critically and extensively.

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A Further Note on Form and Formulas

At various points in our development as writers, we have all been taught forms or formulas for writing. It's important to realize, however, that while different writing situations have many things in common, no single formula is going to work for all writing situations. The world is far too complex always to be boiled down into some universal pattern of writing. High school students, for example, are frequently taught "the five-paragraph theme" (which may indeed have five paragraphs, or three, or twelve). Basically, this form consists of "tell them what you're going to tell them, make (usually) three points about it, and tell them what you told them." Certainly, there are writing situations in which an approach like this will work—some testing situations, for example. But in many other writing situations, the artificiality of the five-paragraph theme results in writing that warps the subject at hand. (Does every topic in the world really come in three parts—or in any number of predetermined parts, for that matter?) The five-paragraph theme assumes that topics are best handled by being partitioned into some fixed number of subtopics, preceded by a telegraphing thesis sentence and concluded by recitation of what the reader has just been told. College teachers often perceive a five-paragraph theme as substituting a formula for careful thought. In their haste to partition a topic into subtopics, writers often give no thought to the relation of those subtopics to one another. As a result, they don't build coherent papers whose parts have organic connections. What such writing might gain in organization and clarity for its readers it may lose in vitality and interest, at its worst suggesting that the writer really hasn't dealt with the topic at hand; instead, he or she has simply applied a formula.

The point is that while stock formulas are sometimes very helpful—and useful when that's the case—most often the writing situation is the best determinant for developing the form of a piece of writing. What a writer needs to do to be effective on a given topic with a given audience should always guide his or her sense of form. Of course, there is plenty of guidance available. One value of reading as a writer is to see how other authors

writing to similar audiences on similar topics have organized their writing.

A good deal of writing takes the form of generalization and support. The writer has a progression of points he or she wants to make and includes support for each assertion, sometimes with one idea and its support in each paragraph. If this works well, readers feel as though they are being led in some meaningful progression, from one idea to the next. Other writings have a more reflective or narrative form, in which the writer seems to be led from one experience or idea to another less for logical reasons than for suggestive or aesthetic (artful) ones. Whatever the form, organizational design should be clear and natural for readers. Trying to outline a piece after it's written—or having peers try to do so—provides helpful feedback on organizational clarity.

English 101 students frequently report that they earned A's or B's in high school, believe they are good writers, and thus are frustrated at the difficulty or standards of English 101. What they need to keep in mind is that college writing puts demands on them they didn't have to address in high school. This is only natural. College biology, for example, covers different topics and ideas than does high school biology. If college writing courses were identical to those in high school, there wouldn't be a need for them.

What most distinguishes writing courses at Illinois State from most high school writing courses is that students regularly are asked to deal with argumentative nonfiction, perhaps reading several articles that take different positions on an issue. They are asked not only to summarize these readings but also to analyze and critique them. They have to be able to evaluate the qualities of arguments and defend positions for audiences that may be familiar with the background readings and have come to different conclusions. We find that students have a difficult time doing this. Any complex new task is difficult. We don't necessarily expect students to come to the university knowing how to do this well. But this new kind of writing is difficult for most students in the way that college-level calculus or a second language is difficult for them.

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The Importance of Framing the Writing Classroom as a Space of Public Discourse

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Michael Stancliff's essay describes the public nature of writing in the democratic classroom and outlines strategies for dealing constructively with conflicts that public writing may cause.

In the front matter of all my syllabi, I include some statement about the "public nature" of classroom discussion and writing. The following is my most current rendition and is adapted from departmental syllabi here at Arizona State University:

> Please think of our class as a public forum. Throughout this semester, you will be expected to share your writing with others and to participate in class discussions. If there are things that you feel so strongly about you are unwilling to listen to alternative perspectives, I ask that you not write about these issues. Also, don't disclose any more about your personal life than you are comfortable with. Of course this does not mean that you should avoid addressing what is most important to you or that you should

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