

Talking the Walk:

Writing and Disciplinary Fluency

By BRIAN CONNERY
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

Graduation from an institution of higher learning should represent a student's achievement of a degree of authority in her fields of study. Though the official institutional authorization comes at the very end of the student's career, the teacher's role is to provide throughout that career both the grounds for authority and increasingly frequent occasions for the student to rehearse the role of authority. As the etymology of "authority" suggests, some of the most powerful such opportunities are those when students become authors, i.e., when they write. As Ron Sudol's article on page 2 suggests, some of the best writing assignments, through at least implicit role-playing, suspend the normal power relationship between student and teacher, and allow -- even compel -- the student to write from a position of authority.

Writing affords students practice both in thinking like experts and in communicating like experts. Just as students develop fluency in foreign languages, so they develop fluency in disciplines. We expect, in fact, that at the beginning of a course of study, it may be "all Greek" to them. Consequently, in many cases, as students learn a discipline, their "writing" problems (organization, coher-

ence, precision of dictation, clarity) can best be addressed not by grammarians or rhetoricians but from within the disciplines.

All of our disciplines have conventions and formats for writing, and the best writing assignments familiarize students with them. All too often, however, these conventions and formats are perceived by students as lifeless prescriptions and empty templates, rules

arbitrarily handed down and outlines into which they simply pour their data and thought. When students ask, "Why does *this* information have to go *here*?" one frequently pragmatic answer is,

"Because that's where the reader expects to find it." Certainly, we need always to emphasize to students that readers will need to *use* what they write. But this response amounts to a sort of "because-that's-the-way-it's-done" answer, only one notch up on the satisfaction scale from the "because-I-say-so" answer. We need also to explain *why* it's done that way. We can seize the opportunity to explain the ways in which the conventions and formats reflect both the real-world practices and the very epistemologies of our disciplines -- which they almost always do. What are the

rules of evidence in our discipline? Which datum signifies and which doesn't? How does the conventionally prescribed sequence of information prepare the reader for the conclusion? What is the relation between the data and the analysis? Why is some language considered precise or appropriate and other language not? What are the uses to which this kind of document might be put? And by whom?

Even supposed problems in sentence construction may often be best explained in terms of the discipline. While a grammar teacher, regarding a student-wrought sentence, might remark about "improper subordination," a reader in the discipline may very well recognize that the sentence misrepresents the disciplinarily established relation between two ideas.

In crafting writing assignments which afford students opportunities to write from positions of authority, we should consider the two most common writing situations: writing to and for peer experts, and writing to and for those who know less than we do. Writing to peers requires mastery of the information as well as discrimination of the relationships among data, effective use of the discipline's conventions applicable to the rhetorical

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Writing In and Out of School:

Bridging the Gap in University Courses

By RON SUDOL
PROFESSOR OF RHETORIC

School writing, K through 12, can be pretty exasperating for students looking ahead to communicating in the world beyond school. All those stories, book reports, five-paragraph essays, and cut-and-paste research papers are not obviously connected to writing in the worlds of work and public affairs. One purpose of writing in the university is to help students make the transition from the important but largely invisible processes learned in school writing with the demands for effective communication in the world beyond. Those of us who require students to write in academic courses, therefore, need to confront several paradoxes between the worlds of writing in and out of school. Here's a brief summary of some of those paradoxes:

Most school writing is topic-oriented. The student learns to shape a topic to fit an academic purpose. The aim is to help the student develop, connect, and support ideas.

Writing beyond school is task-oriented. The writing accomplishes work. The writer proceeds with a clear purpose and succeeds only if that purpose is achieved, regardless of a document's other merits.

The topic orientation of school writing leads to an emphasis on formats, focus, and organization. The high school MEAP test in writing anticipates writing beyond school by requiring both topic and task-oriented writing. One reason students often do not do as well as they think they should on the MEAP is that they take a formulaic topic approach to the section that requires a writing task.

The task orientation of writing beyond school demands shrewd analysis of the rhetorical situation—that is, the exigency that demands a

communicative response. The writer needs to sense the drift of an on-going conversation and contribute to it appropriately, following a very wide range of generic models, none of them much resembling the model school essay with its "introduction" and "body" paragraphs.

In school, the teacher almost always (and usually unavoidably) knows more about the subject of the writing than the student writer does. Thus the normal pattern of communication—where the sender has more information than the receiver—is turned on its head.

Beyond school, the normal pattern of communication is restored, and the writer must become highly attuned to the reader's relative ignorance about the subject. This is a heavy responsibility. There's no second-guessing "what the teacher wants."

In school, the teacher shares responsibility for the written product by creating the assignment, offering advice and nurturing, and then judging the outcome. If the outcome is flawed, it may seem to be because the assignment was unclear, the advice and nurturing ineffective, or the grading harsh and unfair. In fact, the grading is probably scrupulously fair and based on published standards.

Beyond School, a flawed piece of writing will only haunt its author. The roles played by teachers in school are here widely distributed and assumed by the blameless exigencies and constraints of rhetorical situation by collaborators of uncertain usefulness, and

by harsh and unfair readers who do not judge writing according to clear and consistent criteria but only by its immediate effectiveness.

In the progressivist tradition, school writing values individual performance, the nurturing of a personal voice, and the adoption of a natural persona.

Writing beyond school is collaborative. The individual may be subsumed by corporate identity, a constructed voice, and an invented persona.

In school, production is slow and process-oriented with time allowed for revising. There may even be an opportunity for rewrites.

Writing beyond school is fast and product-oriented, usually no second chances.

Teachers put surface errors (lapses in grammar, usage, and mechanics) into a broad perspective that includes

many elements of writing. Committing errors may be bad, but it's also a learning opportunity.

Readers in the world beyond school are notoriously unforgiving. They may only know 10 of the half million regulations governing grammar, usage, and mechanics, but a

deviation on one of those 10 will mark the writer as semi-literate.

The temptation to deal with these paradoxes in university writing by assigning split grades—a grade for "content" and a grade for "writing"—should be resisted. This strategy separates topic from task and distorts reality for the student, who will always consider "content" more important.

Please see GAP, Page 3

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"Writing for Success"

Teaching students to write

By BRIAN CONNERY
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

A faculty-driven initiative to improve student writing will be making its debut soon. The Provost has funded a proposal from an ad hoc committee formed last year to generate a conversation about writing throughout the University during this academic year.

"Writing for Success," with representative from throughout the University, will be coordinating, supporting, and administering a year-long program sponsoring special events focusing on writing (outside speakers; workshops and lectures for students; departmental writing contests; faculty roundtables on writing and research; workshops on crafting and evaluating writing assignments) and promoting the discussion of writing in events already routinely offered, like Career Days, brown-bag discussions, or departmental colloquia.

The initiative has received substantial commitments from the College of Arts and Sciences and the Teaching and Learning Committee. Other departments are exploring ways in which they will participate.

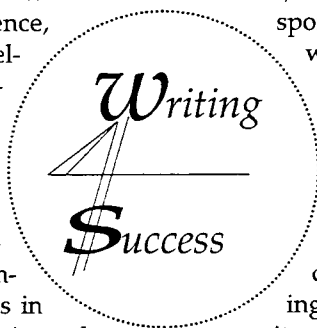
The program springs primarily from a concern about the writing abilities of our graduates. After the Rhetoric 150-160 sequence, which is designed to develop skills in reading, critical thinking, research, and writing requisite to college-level work, the University curriculum has no centralized mandate that students continue to develop these skills in preparation for their civic and professional responsibilities after graduation. Different programs undertake this work in different ways: requiring writing competence for admission to programs, requiring a

course in the major with a strong writing component, requiring an upper-division course offered by Rhetoric, Communications, and Journalism or by the English Department, or by diffusing writing instruction throughout the major with the expectation that individual faculty in individual courses will offer guidance to students about writing in their discipline or profession.

In many ways, this is all to the good: writing competencies are different in different disciplines. Nonetheless, it seems to the concerned faculty and staff who began meeting last year that it would be worthwhile, in this decentralized environment, to provide at least a temporary structure within which students and faculty from throughout the University could come together at least infrequently to share successful strategies and to discuss common problems, as well as to renew our collective commitment to the development of our students' writing competency.

The name "Writing for Success" was adopted in order to emphasize writing as a means to an end and thus to remind students of the ways in which writing is integral to the achievement of their objectives. Proposals, memos, charts, reports, email, and other forms of correspondence are essential to the work of most of our graduates, frequently demanding a fourth or more of their working day. Professional and personal success for the vast majority of them will depend upon their conceiving of themselves as lifelong writers.

The committee is now planning events for the rest of the year and welcomes suggestions. Contact Brian Connery, Department of English, x2251, connery@oakland.edu. **END**



The Teaching & Learning Committee would like to thank Ron Sudol & Brian Connery for contributing to this issue.

G A P From Page 2

The content and its manner of presentation should be treated as inseparable entities.

It would be more effective, instead, to introduce some features of task-oriented writing into academic assignments. The written product can do more than provide an opportunity to display learning. It can also communicate in the way that out-of-school writing communicates: explain a difficult concept or procedure to a novice; connect a topic to the formation of public policy; present a new idea to a client; argue a point in a public forum; present a concept in narrative form; reconstruct the learning process as a personal journey; defend the need for complexity where simplicity is desired; and many other such scenarios.

Such scenarios are rhetorical because they invite the writer or speaker to think through the communicative context, work toward a purpose whose achievement can be readily assessed, and find an appropriate voice, persona, and genre. There is ample room within such a rhetorical framework to use writing for traditional academic aims—to master the lexicon, discourse conventions, and intellectual structures of various disciplines; to reinforce, validate, and articulate learning; and to discover and make meaning. **END**

Call for Nominations 2000 Teaching Excellence Award

One award will be made for the academic year 1999-2000 to a full-time, tenured or tenure-track member of the Oakland University faculty. The award includes a cash stipend of \$2,500 and will be presented at the Fall 2000 commencement.

The letter of nomination should contain sufficient supporting statements to permit an initial review of the nominee and should address the following:

- ❖ Superior classroom teaching
- ❖ Innovative instructional practices
- ❖ High educational standards
- ❖ Productive learning environment
- ❖ Environment which inspires and motivates students

Student nominations are *preferred* but any member of the Oakland University community may nominate. Self-nominations will not be accepted. Faculty are encouraged to announce this nomination process in all classes.

The Committee will contact the nominees and chairs of their departments to request additional information. Previous Teaching Excellence Award winners and current members of the Teaching & Learning Committee are not eligible. A plaque containing the names of previous Teaching Excellence Award winners is on display in the lobby of Kresge Library.

Nominations accepted through December 31, 1999. Letters of nomination should be sent to: Teaching & Learning Committee, Attention: Prof. Mark Simon, School of Business Administration, Oakland University, Rochester, MI 48309-4493. For more information contact Prof. Mark Simon at (248)370-3295 or simon@oakland.edu

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situation, and a command of technical language. Evaluation of the writing produced by these assignments is evaluation of the student's competencies in all of these, every one of which is essential not to writing itself but to the discipline in which the writing is situated.

Assignments which posit a "lay audience" require writers to answer questions about *why* we do and say things the way we do, as well as to translate both the jargon of the discipline and the discipline's modes of

analysis into readily understandable terms -- a knowledge base and set of skills that will be essential throughout students' careers and lifetimes not only for training others but for promoting their work. Pedagogically, the creation of such assignments employs the old dictum that the best way to learn a subject is to teach it.

In both rhetorical situations, students have the opportunity to occupy positions of authority, and in both, by playing the role of the reader, we, as teachers, can evaluate the student's work in terms of its effectiveness in getting the job done.

Thinking in terms of effectiveness

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*Deadline for the winter edition is
January 15, 2000. Please submit
articles to Kristine Thompson, School
of Health Sciences.*

allows us to consider such matters as content, organization, format, diction, grammar, and usage in relation to one another and to a readily identifiable objective rather than to an abstract standard of correctness. We can identify for the student the areas in which the document succeeds and fails, and we can explain the impact of these successes and failures upon the document's overall effectiveness. Some problems may require referrals to other resources: reference books, the Academic Skills Center, or a course with a writing component. But many problems may be addressed by our own disciplinary expertise. **END**

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