

# TEACHING WRITING:

NEWARK, DELA

*Methods, Materials,  
& Measurement*



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*Volume 6, Number 1*

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All first-year teaching assistants at the University of Cincinnati are required to enroll in a three-hour course entitled "Introduction to the Teaching of Composition" and a two-hour "Practicum in Teaching College Composition." The first is a consideration of current theory in writing instruction, and the second is a practical workshop in helping new teachers through their first term as instructors of writing. The theory course involves lecture, discussion, and extensive reading, while the Practicum is a workshop devoted to exchanging effective teaching strategies.

I organize the presentation in the theory course around the major paradigms of composition instruction competing for attention today, focusing on their approaches to the teaching of invention, arrangement, and style. My major premise is that--contrary to established wisdom on the matter--all theories attempt to teach writing as a process. In other words, the important differences separating them do not have to do with the distinction between a process and product approach. Instead, the competing paradigms are distinguished by the way they regard the process, each one defining it differently. Each is convinced that it proposes a process approach, but none sees the process in quite the same way. This is unfortunately difficult to realize because all current theories take into consideration the same elements in describing the process, using the same terms--writer, reality, audience, and language--but defining them differently. The result is a different relationship among them and, perforce, a different process.

I see the four major paradigms to be the Classical, the Current-Traditional, the Expressionist, and--for want of a better term--the New Rhetoric. My course considers each school and its historical origins, showing how the various conceptions of the process make for different directives in teaching invention, arrangement, and style. I also indicate how one can work back from approaches to teaching writing, to the implicit view of the process being advocated. The materials read come primarily from three collections: W. Ross Winterowd, Contemporary Rhetoric: A Conceptual Background with Readings; Richard L. Graves, Rhetoric and Composition: A Sourcebook for Teachers; and Gary Tate and Edward P. J. Corbett, The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook. I also, however, require reading in selected composition textbooks and in journals that are placed on reserve in the library.

The major sources for the Classical paradigm are of course Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. Their modern application can, however, be seen most readily in Corbett's Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student and one or two other textbooks, now alas out of print. This represents an especially fruitful starting point since it enables students to acquire the rhetorical language needed for the rest of the course, language which most do not bring with them.

The Current-Traditional paradigm can be seen in countless college writing textbooks now in print. This view has become the whipping boy of "process"--centered approaches to writing instruction, designated as being concerned only with the written product. Yet it does see writing as a process, with elements grounded in an eighteenth-century positivistic view.

The main exponents of the Expressionist Paradigm are such figures as Ken Macrorie, Donald M. Murray, William Coles, and Stephen Judy. The historical roots of this view are found in idealist philosophy--in Plato, German Idealism, and, more locally, Emerson.

The New Rhetoric is found primarily in the work of Richard Young, Anne Berthoff, Peter Elbow, and, more recently, Linda Flower and Barry Kroll. Its philosophical roots are in Ernst Cassirer, Susanne Langer, John Dewey, and--from another point of view--Kenneth Burke and I. A. Richards.

The Practicum consists of weekly discussions of classroom techniques to be used in following the department syllabus (required for all first-year teachers). I have used Beth Neman's Teaching Students to Write to give students practical advice for teaching specific writing skills, and I plan to include Erika Lindemann's A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers this year. Since I am also teaching the syllabus used by the students in the Practicum, I share my successes and failures in the course and encourage students to do the same--offering techniques that have been especially successful or asking advice for handling particular problems. I hope to show the participants that teaching writing is a gigantic undertaking that is never quite mastered, but that certain attitudes and approaches are more successful than others. I especially want the students to avoid the compulsion of beginning teachers to assume too much responsibility for their freshmen charges--working beyond reasonable limits or blaming themselves for matters outside of their control.

Since students are enrolled in both courses simultaneously, I am able to emphasize the merging of theory and practice throughout. At the end of the term, each student is required to submit a ten-page essay explaining her conception of the composing process and outlining the approaches appropriate to teaching this process. The student is thus compelled to take a stance--however tentative--leading, I hope, to a clarification of thinking and an integration of theory and practice. Whatever methods are used to teach writing have to be grounded in the student's implicit assumptions about the composing process--in theoretical concerns involving epistemological and meta-rhetorical questions. It is my faith that these courses, taught in this way, lead the student to intelligent decisions about teaching writing, resulting in an intellectually consistent pedagogy.