

Composition Theory

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About two years ago, the English Department at Arizona State University approved a Ph.D. program in English with an emphasis in rhetoric and composition as an alternative to the existing program in literature. I have been developing a number of new courses for the program, among them a course in composition theory, which I would like to describe here.

Because we already had a related course in the teaching of composition, which is required of all new teaching assistants, I wanted to develop a slightly different course. The biggest difference is that the course in the teaching of composition is more of a practicum, whereas the course in composition theory emphasizes conceptual frameworks. Not that the new course neglects the teaching of composition. In fact, in setting up the course, I asked myself the following question: What is the role of theory in the teaching of composition?

Teachers of writing are constantly faced with the problem of what to teach and how to teach it. When they seek guidance about such matters, where will they get it? From trial and error? Intuition? Other teachers? Textbooks? If they get guidance from textbooks, they may find that their teaching is based on outworn compositional principles derived from the 19th century.

The teaching of composition ought to be organized around the most significant principles and concepts of a discipline. There is a need to identify the primary structural elements of a discipline. As Jerome Bruner puts it in The Process of Education, "grasping the structure of a subject is understanding it in a way that permits many other things to be related to it." The role of theory in the teaching of writing is to enable teachers and students to be able to place the bits and pieces of their knowledge about writing into a structured pattern for better understanding and for transfer of training.

The emphasis in this course, then, is on "structured patterns," on the kinds of conceptual frameworks that underlie the teaching of composition. The course is divided into eight units: contexts for composition; aims, modes, and forms of discourse; invention and the composing process; arrangement; discourse processing and comprehension; style; revising and editing; and evaluating writing.

The basic texts used in the course are the following: W. Ross Winterowd, ed., Contemporary Rhetoric (N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975); James Britton and others, The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18) (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1975); James L. Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1980); Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell, Evaluating Writing (Urbana: NCTE, 1977). In addition to these books, I use selections from various books and journals I shall cite as I go along.

Contexts for Composition

In this section of the course, the emphasis is on the rhetorical situation and on audience. Readings include Lloyd Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 1 (Winter, 1968), 1-14 and Richard Vatz's "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 6 (Summer, 1973), 154-161. At issue is whether the situation controls the rhetorical response, or whether the rhetoric controls the situational response. Wayne Booth's article "The Rhetorical Stance," CCC, 14 (October, 1963), 139-145, with its emphasis on maintaining a proper balance among the available arguments, the audience, and voice in any writing situation, complements the articles by Bitzer and Vatz nicely.

Readings for the study of audience include Chaim Perelman's "The Universal Audience," in The New Rhetoric (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), Walter Ong's "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction," PMLA, 90 (January, 1975), 9-21, and Britton's classification of audience in The Development of Writing Abilities. Some attention is also given to ways of analyzing audiences.

Aims, Modes, and Forms of Discourse

This section begins with an attempt to clarify the confusion that exists with the 19th century concepts of aims, modes, and forms of discourse, and then moves on to consider alternate ways of classifying discourse. Readings include Roman Jakobson's discussion of the aspects and functions of discourse in "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in Style in Language (Cambridge: the M.I.T. Press, 1960), pp. 350-358; James Kinneavy's classification of the aims, modes, and forms of discourse in A Theory of Discourse (N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co., 1980); Britton's "An Approach to the Function Categories," in The Development of Writing Abilities, pp. 74-105; and James Moffett's discussion of speaker, listener, and subject relations, strategies, and modes of discourse in "I, You, and It," CCC, 16 (December, 1965), 243-248.

Invention and the Composing Process

As the readings for this section of the course indicate, more time is spent on invention and the composing process than on any other material. The readings for the unit on invention are reprinted in Winterowd's Contemporary Rhetoric. These include Richard Larson's "Discovery through Questioning," Richard Young's "Tagmemic Invention," and Kenneth Burke's "The Five Key Terms of Dramatism."

Brewster Ghiselin's The Creative Process (N.Y.: The New American Library, 1952) and Janet Emig's "The Composing Process: Review of the Literature," Contemporary Rhetoric, pp. 49-70 provide an excellent background for a discussion

of the composing process. Other readings include Sondra Perl's "Understanding Composing," CCC, 31 (December, 1980), 363-369; Linda Flowers and John Hayes' "Problem-Solving Strategies and the Writing Process," CE, 39 (December, 1977), 449-461; "The Dynamics of Composing: Making Plans and Juggling Constraints," in Cognitive Processes in Writing, ed. Lee W. Gregg and Erwin Steinberg (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1980); "The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem," CCC, 31 (February, 1980), 21-32.

The last segment of this section of the course is devoted to a discussion of the cognitive processes underlying intellectual acts. For this discussion, I draw in a general way on developmental psychology and upon a number of my own articles: Frank J. D'Angelo, "An Ontological Basis for a Modern Theory of the Composing Process," QJS, 63 (February, 1978), 79-85; "Literacy, Cognition, and the Teaching of Writing: A Developmental Perspective," in Literacy in the 1980's (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming); "Rhetoric and Cognition: Toward a Metatheory of Discourse," paper delivered at the 1982 CCCC Convention, to be published in Pre/Text; "Mental Operations Underlying Discourse Acts," in Sourcebook for Teachers of Writing (N.Y.: Random House, forthcoming).

Arrangement

The section on arrangement moves from a consideration of theories of the paragraph, to theories of paragraphing, to an examination of ways of organizing complete discourses. This section begins with a brief look at 19th century concepts of paragraph development, followed by a look at Francis Christensen's "A Generative Rhetoric of the Paragraph," in Contemporary Rhetoric, and Paul Rodgers' "A Discourse-centered Rhetoric of the Paragraph," CCC, 17 (February, 1966), 2-11 and "The Stadium of Discourse," CCC, 18 (October, 1967), 178-185. Rodgers' concept of the stadia of discourse leads logically to Willis Pitkin's examination of strategies of discourse in "Hierarchies and the Discourse Hierarchy," CE, 38 (March, 1977), 648-659 and "X/Y: Some Basic Strategies of Discourse," CE, 38 (March, 1977), 660-672, and to my exploration of paradigmatic arrangements in "Paradigms as Structural Counterparts of Topoi," in Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition, ed. Donald McQuade (Akron, Ohio: Language and Style Books, 1979), pp. 41-51; "Topoi, Paradigms, and Psychological Schemata," in Proceedings of the Inaugural Conference of the University of Maryland Junior Writing Program, 17 March 1980, ed. Michael Marcuse and Susan Kleimann (College Park: University of Maryland, 1981), pp. 12-16. The unit ends with Kenneth Burke's "The Nature of Form" from Counter-statement (reprinted in Contemporary Rhetoric).

Discourse Processing and Comprehension

The emphasis in this unit is on schema theory as it relates to writing, to reading comprehension, and to the acquisition of knowledge. The field of discourse processing and comprehension is vast, but the texts I have found useful for my particular purposes are the following: Richard C. Anderson and others, eds., Schooling and the Acquisition of Knowledge (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977); Charles Cofer, ed., The Structure of Human Memory (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1976); Walter Kintsch, The Representation of Meaning in Memory (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1974); Walter Kintsch and T.A. Van Dijk, "Toward a Model of Text Comprehension and Production," Psychological Review, 85 (1978), 363-394; Bonnie Meyer, "What Is Remembered from Prose: A Function of Passage Structure," in Discourse Production and Comprehension, ed. Roy O. Freedle (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1977), pp. 307-336; Bonnie Meyer, "Reading Research and the Composition Teacher: The

Importance of Plans," CCC, 33 (February., 1982), 37-49; George A. Miller and others, Plans and Structure of Behavior (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960); Ulric Neisser, Cognition and Reality (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Co., 1976); Stephen P. Witte and Lester Faigley, "Coherence, Cohesion, and Writing Quality," CCC, 32 (May, 1981), 189-205. This is a specialized area, but one that is on the growing edges of composition theory and practice. I handle the material partly by lecture and partly by oral reports.

Style

This part of the course is divided into three units: classical rhetoric and style, linguistics and style, and readability. Because we have a specialized graduate course in style and stylistics, I can follow my own inclinations. The segment devoted to classical rhetoric and style includes a look at the three kinds of style, the schemes and tropes, and classical imitation. The segment dealing with linguistics and style emphasizes Francis Christensen's "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence" (Contemporary Rhetoric) and transformational sentence combining, as exemplified in Donald Daiker and others, Sentence Combining and the Teaching of Writing (Conway, Ark.: L & S Books, 1979). There is also a unit on linguistics and usage, based on Martin Joos' The Five Clocks (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967). The last segment covers the concept of readability. Readings include E.D. Hirsch's The Philosophy of Composition, Rudolf Flesch's The Art of Readable Writing, and state and government directives related to the "plain English movement."

Revising and Editing

I am not satisfied with most of the material available for this section of the course, but the NCTE is publishing a collection of articles on revision which will be available soon. I have profited, however, by the following articles: Richard Beach, "Self-Evaluation Strategies of Extensive Revisers and Non-Revisers," CCC, 27 (May, 1967), 160-164; Daniel Dieterich, "Response to Richard Beach, 'Self-Evaluation Strategies of Extensive Revisers and Nonrevisers'," CCC, 27 (October, 1976), 301-302; Michael C. Flanigan and Diane S. Menendez, "Perception and Change: Teaching Revision," CE, 42 (November, 1980), 256-266; Donald M. Murray, "Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery," in Research on Composing, ed. Charles Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1978), pp. 85-103; Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," CCC, 31 (December, 1980), 378-388.

Evaluating Writing

The material used in this section of the course is based primarily on Cooper and Odell's Evaluating Writing. Topics covered include holistic evaluation, essay scales, analytic scales, dichotomous scales, feature analysis, general impression marking, and primary trait scoring. I have also found the following items useful: Richard M. Coe and Kris Gutierrez, "Using Problem-Solving Procedures and Process Analysis to Help Students with Writing Problems," CCC, 32 (October, 1981), 262-271; Anne Ruggles Gere, "Written Composition: Toward a Theory of Evaluation," CE, 42 (September, 1980), 44-58; D.G. Kehl, "The Art of Writing Evaluative Comments on Student Themes," EJ, 59 (October, 1970), 972-980; Richard L. Larson, "Training New Teachers of Composition in the Writing of Comments on Themes," CCC, 17 (October, 1966), 152-155; Richard L. Larson, "The Whole Is More Than the Sum of Its Parts: Responding to Students' Papers," Arizona English Bulletin (February, 1974), 175-181; Lee Odell and Charles R. Cooper, "Procedures for Evaluating Writing: Assumptions and Needed Research," CE, 42 (September, 1980), 35-43.

I present the material for this course in composition theory by means of lecture, class discussion, and oral reports. Depending on how quickly we cover the material, I may give one or two exams, an annotated bibliography, an oral report, and a term paper. The oral report is an informal presentation based on the annotated bibliography. The term paper may be a paper describing and summarizing the major approaches to one aspect of composition theory or teaching, or it may involve a research problem of some kind (e.g, error analysis, the composing process, historical research, etc.). Topics include readability, protocol analysis, writing across the curriculum, group inquiry techniques, writing labs, basic writing, audience, and problem solving.

I have taught this course for two years. Each time I teach the course, I add new material, but there is a limit as to what can be taught in one semester. A tentative solution may be to focus on the "basic readings" in the field in class, and to handle new material by means of oral reports and research papers. For more specialized purposes, there is enough additional material so that any of the units I have described (e.g., discourse processing and comprehension) can be the basis of a separate course or a seminar.