

Memoirs of a First-Year Writing Instructor:
A Fantasy

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On the Sunday before the Spring semester, I received a phone call from a secretary at the English Department where I was enrolled in an M.A. Program in Creative Writing.

"Would you mind terribly much teaching English 101?" she asked. "We've had quite a rush of students. . ."

I pushed the phone against my ear. I loved writing, wanted to work with writers, but had never had the chance. "Yes, of course," I said, quickly, wondering if she had the right person. Maybe she'd realize it was a mistake, callously hang up, call someone else.

"Are you sure? It doesn't pay much"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Well, good--that's very helpful," she said. "The class meets at 12:00, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, in Room 11, the English building. And don't forget to sign up for Supervised Teaching. Bye, now."

"Hey, excuse me, just a minute, please," I said, "How should I teach this class? What textbook should I use?"

"Oh, there are a lot of textbooks. Just pick one out. Do what you want."

I noted the perturbed quality of her voice, didn't want to irritate her more. "Is there someone I could call for advice?" I asked meekly.

"Oh, well, if you have to. Call Dr. Robert Worthington. He's at 885-9119. It is Sunday, though."

"Thanks."

The phone went dead. I immediately called Dr. Worthington. He recommended McCrimmon's Writing With A Purpose--the same text my first-year writing instructor had used. Teach them rhetorical forms--how to structure their thoughts into coherent discourse structures--and draw on your experiences as a writer.

I pulled a dusty copy of McCrimmon's Writing With A Purpose off the top shelf of my bookcase. Chagrined by the unread pages and of the memory of how I had presumptuously told my composition instructor that the textbook had no validity for me, how none of the advice in the book matched my experiences gained from writing and rewriting, I now eagerly thumbed through the pages, gleefully perceiving how I could construct a syllabus.

Wanting to share the good news, I called a writer friend who had been teaching for many years. In contrast to Dr. Worthington she said to forget textbook dogmas, to work with students as a writer working with writers, using their writing as a text. A traditional textbook, an emphasis on structure, will not get them thinking. Work on content.

Of course I told her she was crazy, simplistic. As a student, well versed in rhetoric, I was certain "academic writing" differed from "non-academic, creative writing." Academic writing was more

concerned with how something was said, rather than with what was said. For I had learned that the "correct" essay in the composition classroom was defined by complying to formal, structural expectations. Essentially the successful academic essay contained five paragraphs. The first paragraph contained three sentences--the introductory sentence, the theme sentence, and the pivotal, thesis sentence. The following three paragraphs began with the sentence version of the phrases listed in the pivotal thesis sentence, arranged in a hierarchy of importance to the theme sentence. The final paragraph merely repeated the introductory paragraph: it was proof the writer had delivered the goods promised in the beginning. To create this rhetorical structure, I was told to pick a topic first, to form the thesis sentence, to formulate two illustrations for each of the subpoints phrased in the thesis sentence that verified the truth and importance of the theme, to put all these thoughts into a formalized outline, complete with Roman numerals, and then--and only then--to begin writing.

Given this background in rhetorical practices, it was easy to discard my writer friend's advice. I decided to devote class time to discussing each mode of discourse, moving from the simple narrative structure to the more complex persuasive structure. Thus, on that first day and throughout much of the semester, I explained the importance of finding unified, restricted topics--a subject that could be thoroughly expressed in a limited number of words. The majority of students quickly fell into the systematic rhythm of our progression from one mode of discourse to the next. They seemed pleased by this mechanical approach to writing. When I outlined, for example, the alternating methods of the comparison and contrast theme, and demanded a restricted thesis sentence with pivotal points of consideration, they sensed--some of them for the first time--that writing is a mechanical, scientific process that can be mastered by patterning one's thoughts and feelings into a formalistic structure that meets the demands of traditional, academic discourse forms.

An alarming number of students, however, were failing the course and attendance was falling. It was obvious, after reading their papers, that the students were not exploring and inventing material important to them, saturated with their voice and opinions. At best the essays reflected the formal techniques I was emphasizing. There was an appalling lack of conceptualization.

I began to question the importance and helpfulness of teaching rhetorical strategies. Implicit in the aims of rhetorical instruction is the belief that inexperienced writers are not capable of thought because they lack the ability to structure their thoughts. Thus, according to this rhetorical opinion, knowledge of how to structure content in a socially acceptable fashion is needed by the writer if the writer is to formulate and explore ideas successfully that can be understood by the writer's audience. The writer must learn that her work is being compared against the background of what is considered an acceptable academic paper. This is, after all, one of the primary reasons for distributing literature in the composition classroom. Presumably the inventive capacities of inexperienced writers increase proportionately to

the extent writers are familiar with the various modes for forming content.

However, in opposition to this rhetorical assumption that a writer's content develops as the writer becomes more familiar with the traditional modes for structuring content, I witnessed little growth in the content development of the student essays, despite an increased awareness and use of traditional rhetorical forms emphasized in the classroom. Given that my emphasis on structure wasn't working, I wondered whether this emphasis was, in fact, partly responsible for the failure on the part of the students to explore ideas and feelings important to them. While realizing that what students think is best for them is not always on target, I decided to ask the students whether they thought emphasis on form helped or hurt their ability to develop content and to shape the content into accessible forms.

It was on a typical winter day that I asked the question. We had just seen a film created by one of the worst writers in the class. Jerry Sulking, the student who had difficulties spelling a word, much less writing a coherent sentence, had created surrealistic image after image, shattering our conceptions of what life was like in the womb. Through a subtle mixture of convoluted lenses, each lense a further departure from the reality of our human eyes, Jerry Sulking had drawn our class together, binding us with his clear vision of what could be.

After silence was replaced with embarrassment, I asked, "Can anyone please share his or her response with Jerry?"

More embarrassed, shifting feet sounded. "I think it was real nice," several students said. "Yeah, it was good."

Bart Matthews, a college football player and constant heckler, chipped in, "The part of the doctor was played with gusto. . . ."

I found these empty responses irritating. Jerry Sulking turned away from his fellow students, hunched his shoulders and dropped his head down into his Jacket.

"What's wrong with you people? Why are you so insensitive?" I asked. "Why don't you express your feelings and ideas? Now and in your papers. . . .It's not fair to Jerry to respond with 'yeah, good film, nice going, have a good day.' In fact, why don't we spend the rest of the period writing a note to Jerry, sharing with him how viewing his film made us feel."

"Is this a persuasive paper?" Karen Lewis asked.

"No dummy, it's narrative," Bart Matthews said.

"What form do you think such an expressive message should take?" I asked the class at large.

"Did you bring your textbook?" several of the more serious students asked each other.

And thus the question of whether the form of a piece of writing should precede the actual writing of the piece came before the class. I breathed quickly, nervously, realizing this very important question could not be avoided any longer.

"Just how helpful, how relevant, are all these rhetorical strategies we've been discussing?" I asked.

Jerry Sulking's head popped out of his jacket. Several students dropped their pens and paper. Eugene Engelhart, an engineering student stood up and shut the door to the classroom.

Hunter Thomson took a tape recorder out of his knapsack. He put a cassette of The Wall album by Pink Floyd in the tape recorder and then danced around the circle of students in rhythm with the following lyrics:

We don't need no education
We don't need no thought control
No dark sarcasm in the classroom
Teacher, leave them kids alone
Hey! Teacher, leave them kids alone
All-in-all your just another brick in the wall

That's precisely how I feel," Bart Matthews said. "You shouldn't teach rhetoric without considering our experiences. Don't you think we know how society expects us to conform? Man, we don't need no more thought control."

"Right on!" Karen Lewis said. "All this emphasis on form suggests that no sense of form comes from our minds. That's simplistic!"

Roger Kinneving said, "It's really rude of you to contend that we, as first-year college students, fail to possess innate, organic modes for organizing materials. We are human, after all. Stop building theories on assumptions that we're vegetables, waiting to be born in human form. Don't pigeonhole us into scientific vacuums, into demeaning theories. Please, recognize our creative abilities.

Startled by this outstanding transformation in my students' attitude and ability, I stumbled into one of the chairs. The worst students in the class were leaping out of their seats, preparing to address the class from the teacher's podium.

"I only have one thing to say," Carol Lording said, "emphasis on form is boring! I'm capable of organizing my thoughts--once I find thoughts to organize. It's stupid for me to pay for these writing classes when it's assumed I've got to organize my thoughts before I have them."

"Quite right, Carol," Jack said. "The rhetorical approach is mechanistic. It reduces the importance of the meaning making function of language. For as words emerge into ideas, feeling and contradictions are inevitably discovered, which leads to greater thought and concept development."

Sandy Hegoland, the best writer in the class, stood before the group. "Look at my frizzy hair," she said. "Your demand that I envision an inorganic, rhetorical structure and outline how the topic will be shaped before I've even begun writing is making me crazy. I'm constantly pulling my hair out. It's absurd to demand that I encapsulate my message into a pivotal thesis statement before I've teased out all the ambiguities of whatever it is I'm examining."

Eugene Engelhart, speaking as the representative of the engineering students, approached the podium. "Outside the composition classroom," Eugene said, "writers do not generally preconceive an overall structure and then fill in the content. The competent builder needs the ingredients of concrete before he can pour it into the mold. Successful writers employ many strategies of the modes of discourse in a single piece of writing. Outside the

classroom, adherence to narrative, expository, descriptive, or persuasive rhetorical strategies is virtually nonexistent.

"And thus, you are alienating us from our experiences with your end-product, formulaic demands. Your request that we preconceive an overall structure for ideas we haven't formulated yet it is sharp contradiction to what is known of the thinking, creative process." Eugene Engelhart pointed a straight finger at me. "Don't you know that the individual must observe, analyze, before forming conclusions? The parts are most certainly larger than the whole, the gestalt. And, after all, isn't resistance to closure, broadmindedness, what we define as intelligence? So why all this thought control?"

"Oh, very good," Alice Daffodil, Eugene's girlfriend, chanted. "Emphasis on rhetorical forms ignores the tremendous difficulties we have when encountering and exploring complex issues."

And thus I sat, embarrassed, observing this strange transformation in my students. Though defensive, I couldn't help but recognize the validity of their remarks. For it is true that adherence to rhetorical processes demands that the writer have a fixed purpose and audience in mind before actually writing. Or, as Eugene pointed out, the builder needs to have a fixed notion of the needs of future tenants before constructing the skyscraper. By emphasizing adherence to the pre-established modes of discourse, I had thwarted the energies of the students to explore thoughts that potentially could disrupt the required form.

"And I'd be able to write a lot better if I were allowed to write on topics that interest me. Why is it so essential that we all write on the same topics in the same way? Do you do it this way just so grading's easier? I mean, do we have to write on the assigned topics because they demand a special, predetermined form? I just think it's boring to compare high school and college. Sheezz! Who cares about high school? I'm a big girl now."

"Oh, right, Alice," Eugene said, "I forgot to mention that stuff about the stupid topics. You see the textbook topics are simplistic, mundane, cliched, and impersonal. Topics like 'Describe a Room' are insulting to us, as such topics clearly ignore the fact that we have experiences. Don't you know we've held jobs, have had conflicts with our parents, have been in love? Describing a room just doesn't credit us with having had valuable experiences. I could get into a topic that interested me."

I wondered how I could quietly slip out of the classroom. I simply could not avoid the validity of what they were saying: when I had forced students to adhere to one particular mode of discourse, I had limited their ability to package their content in a way they felt best suited their purpose. I had alienated the students from exploring their own ideas and emotions.

But I knew the students wouldn't let me out without some explanations for why I had been emphasizing rhetorical forms. I walked slowly to the podium.

"Look," I said, "I've been teaching you writing in the same way writing has always been taught. The traditional notion is that you need to study and master rhetorical forms before you can break away from these "pure forms" and find forms that are unique to your way of perceiving and exploring some issue. You say the

rhetorical approach doesn't work, so what am I supposed to do?"

I smiled for a moment, thinking I had them. Perhaps I could escape with some pride yet. "None of you have any better ideas of how writing should be taught, do you?" I asked.

My smugness was again rebuffed. For at the end of the Pink Floyd album Hunter Thomson completed his dance routine and took off his black leather coat and black sunglasses. He spun a couple of pirouettes before the podium, his hands held up in the air and proclaimed, "there is another way! It ain't based on no thought control, though. So it probably wouldn't grab you."

"I'm all ears," I said, hoping he'd get dizzy or something.

"Well, fortunately, man, there exists an extremely powerful organic mode for organizing material which all writers possess, be they experienced or inexperienced. This mode is fired by the imagination and cannot be sold in textbook discussions of rhetorical strategies, as it is the sole property of the individual."

"Yeah, go-for-it!" several students yelled.

"Right on, right on, and I'm comin' down right through you," Hunter yelled. "You see academic writing or textbook writing don't gotta be viewed as a mechanical activity. Effective writing is simply not finding a form and then filling in all the empty spaces. Writing's a creative, organic process of forming meaning and structure from chaos, from nothingness. You know, the big unknown. It's purpose and desire to communicate, not external, traditional forms, that motivate writers to communicate.

"Oh, that's deep, real deep," several students said. "Absolutely penetrating!"

Hunter strutted away from the podium. "You think I should spin it around a little, mix up the thoughts?" he asked, while holding a strand of Alice Daffodil's hair between his fingertips. Eugene Engelhart, Alice's boyfriend, squirmed in his seat.

"Oh, please do," Alice said.

"Well then, Alice, to put it bluntly, the shaping of content, the formulation of an identifiable, accessible structure, occurs most naturally in response to introspective, explorative thought. Writers wish to allow their ideas to evolve and contradict in relation to each other before worrying about the development of an accessible, overall structure."

"Oh, yes," Alice said, her voice hesitant, deep, "always employing totally rational forces on such a creative process leads to sterility. We need to release our inhibitions, free ourselves from artificial structures."

Not knowing what to do, feeling I'd lost total control, I remained silent as Hunter picked up his coat, sunglasses, and danced, arm-in-arm, with Alice out of the classroom.

Bob Zimmerman, the reborn Christian in the class, took to the podium.

"Oh God," I muttered to myself as he pulled the King James Version of the Holy Bible out of his chest pocket and placed it before him on the podium.

"I wish to quote from the Book of Genesis," he said, "as we can all benefit by studying God's words:"

. . . In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and

darkness was upon the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, and that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were of the first day.

"And thus you see my friends, just as Hunter said, the creator shapes meaning from chaos, from nothingness, and then allows form to emerge by comparing the similarities and contradictions between the different functions of his creations as they evolve and contradict with each other."

"If no one minds," Jerry Sulking said, "I'd like to put the cap on today's discussion by sharing with you one of my favorite Jungian metaphors."

I noticed that Bob Zimmerman was reluctant to give up the podium, but with a quick elbow and push, Jerry got rid of him.

"My awareness that a writer's content should naturally precede the form and that the nature of the content should essentially determine the form is as natural to me as my realization that water runs downhill, forges the riverbank and erodes the rocks and trees growing along its fertile path. Form follows the development of content and is shaped by the purpose of the content, just as the riverbank is formed by the downhill rush of water to the seas."

"Boo! Hiss! You shouldn't have pushed Bob," Karen Lewis yelled. "Everyone should speak for so long as they want."

"No man, don't worry," Bob Zimmerman said, "it's okay. We all gotta serve someone. . . ."

"You guys don't know a good metaphor when you hear one," Jerry Sulking said. He returned to his chair, retreating beneath his parka.

Eugene Engelhart, apparently recovered from the desertion of Alice Daffodil, returned to the podium. "A model of how work can be organically formed recognizes that language is not a stagnant reservoir, but a flowing river that can be contained and released in numerous ways. An organic form, as opposed to the inorganic imposition of form, will reflect the writer's style and unique vision, because the work is formed by organic connections between the ideas and concepts as they evolve and contradict in the writer's mind, transferred to the written page. At times, such writing will flow towards some focus, demonstrating the resolution of some fixed problem for the writer, while at other times, the writing may be dominated by digressions, emptied of clear progression, as the combinative aspects of language and the associative, naming aspects of language emerge and seem to take control from any conscious desires of the writer."

I surprised myself by raising my hand, eager to ask a question of this first-year writing student. He nodded solemnly in my direction.

"I think you've made a real good point, Eugene," I said, "but you know that the way language is formed is determined by society and that the individual cannot transfer meaning unless he

or she has internalized the rules of how language is properly formed. And I suppose that's why traditional writing programs place an emphasis on proper rhetorical forms. To use the terms introduced by Linda Flower (1979), writing that is organically formulated may be writer-based, rather than reader-based, if the work is saturated with content accessible only to the writer. So you see, Eugene, teaching rhetorical forms is important if the inexperienced writer doesn't have an idea of how essays are properly structured."

"To be able to project oneself from the text, to view the work in progress with an editor's eyes--these are essential tools the inexperienced writer needs to fit the parts of a text into a whole. The point is, Eugene, you cannot seriously under-evaluate the importance or excitement received by perceiving the text as a whole. A writer's work must be presented in accessible forms."

"Oh, I'm disappointed with you," Eugene said. "You've missed the entire point. Rhetorical formulas must be considered for what they are: tools, nothing more. Meaning--ideas and emotions--creates the need for form. Don't you know your linguistics? The signified always precedes the signifier, because without the signified there is no need for the signifier. And this is why it's imperative that you realize the power of writing well is not found in "the sword"--i.e., the pen, the typewriter, word processor, or even in the most advanced instructional programs, but is, instead, found in the heart of the creator. The power of creation lies solely in the individuality, the spirit of the writer."

"Now I realize that it is against the will of the human intellect to place much faith in the notion that emotional or spiritual urges substantially contribute to the development of the intellect. It's simply easier to ignore the importance of our emotional interaction with our material than to deal with our confusion."

"But you see you've gotta let us become all confused, realize that writing is forming meaning from chaos. And once we're bubbling with ideas, then we'll be keen on communicating our ideas. This all gets down to the old maxim that people learn by doing, not by watching or listening to how something is done. And you know, there's probably a strong relationship between organic and inorganic modes for structuring information into accessible objects for a specified audience. And you gotta remember that even if an inexperienced writer's work is entirely writer-based, the writer is still learning by communicating with himself or herself, identifying self in opposition to other selves, objects. And maybe that writer may never have the wish to communicate to an audience other than himself. Such a decision may be based on personal feelings, rather than because of any analytical dysfunctions. You can't judge whether organically developed, writer-based prose is in any sense a simpler analytical operation than organically developed, reader-based prose."

"Okay, all right," I said, relieved to see the hour was up. "Your points are well taken."

I was glad to see the students packing up their papers and books. I figured I'd go home, drink a couple of beers and go to bed.

"Just a minute," Jerry Sulking said, "I want to wrap this all up with a metaphor."

"Aw'c'mon, Jerry, let's get outta here," Karen Lewis said.

I faked a smile, trying to act like I had a little self-respect left.

"You see, folks," Jerry said, "inorganic rhetorical forms can be likened to major rivers, with established ports-of-call, and well known transport ships, conveying meaning and materials to all of the inhabitants and cities bordering their fertile paths, while the organic formulation of content can be likened to the small streams that flow into and out of the major river. Both waterways represent the structuring modes of the mind, but the inorganic form is more often traversed by a greater number of people. Hence the voice of self, flowing along these inorganic passageways, is often lost in the cacophony of other voices, drowning in oppressive forms."

"Your job as our writing instructor, is to encourage us inexperienced writers to journey into ourselves. You must allow us to follow our own lines of reasoning. Let us take those tiny streams leading away into the black forests, even if you realize it's a dead end. For in our abrupted journeys we may learn something about communication that cannot be gained without digressing from traditional thoughts and modes of structuring thought.

And so, with the completion of this last speech, this unforgettable class ended.

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