



# WLA Newsletter

. . .writing as a liberating activity. . .

ISSUE ELEVEN

Spring 1978

FINDLAY COLLEGE

FOR HIGH SCHOOL AS WELL AS COLLEGE:

## ERRORS AND EXPECTATIONS

Charles L. Waters  
Taft Senior High School  
Hamilton, Ohio

How does an instructor teach essential writing skills to students who seemingly do not possess rudimentary understanding of syntax? Chapter Three of Mina P. Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (Oxford, 1977) provides an innovative insight into the problem. Perhaps the students who appear incompetent in composition are being taught in a manner which does not take advantage of their native facility with English and which evaluates their compositions as finished products rather than creative, oncoming processes. Basic students may feel that the teacher is superimposing upon the writing process a rigid syntactical decorum which squelches creativity and inhibits spontaneous expression. They may feel they are being asked to write in a fashion that seems awkward and strained about topics upon which they have little to say. The result is writing that, in reality, is only awkward, and often monstrous, imitation of standard syntax.

Shaughnessy identifies four major errors found in awkward syntax: accidental errors, blurred errors, consolidation errors, and inversion errors.

The accidental error is a small mistake open to instant remedy if it is called to the student's attention--mistakes such as my for by. There

## THE COLLEGE REPUTATION OF ERRORS AND EXPECTATIONS

Early in 1977, as most college-teaching readers of WLA know, Oxford University Press issued an important new book by the director of the Instructional Resource Center of City University of New York. The book, Mina Shaughnessy writes in the Introduction, "is mainly an attempt to be precise about the types of difficulties to be found" in papers written in developmental or basic college classes. The book has seven chapters: "Handwriting and Punctuation," "Syntax," "Common Errors," "Spelling," "Vocabulary," "Beyond the Sentence," and "Expectations." And these various sections, Shaughnessy writes, try to do several things: "first, to give examples of the range of the problems that occur under each category of difficulty; second, to reason about the causes of these problems; and third, to suggest ways in which a teacher might approach them" (p.4).

Response to Errors and Expectations immediately marked it as an exceptional book. In a review in College English, Harvey Wiener described the book as "the first systematic, thorough, and rigorous view of error." And he concluded that it "shows us all how to plan our own roads, no matter what the specific territory of our students' problems and our own capabilities" (March 1977, pp. 715 and 717). Donald Stewart was equally enthusiastic in Freshman English News. "Unlike the material in most of the handbooks on the market today," Stewart wrote, Shaughnessy's "discussions of /To page 3./

is no general pattern of causation for this error, and proofreading seems to be the only solution for it.

The second error is more complex to remedy, because, with it, there is no discrete rule to be addressed. A typical blurred mistake is found in the sentence, "By going to college a young person could get an increase his knowledge about the world he lived in." Shaughnessy perceives two blurred forms here:

1. could get an increase in
2. could increase his knowledge.

The third error deals with the subordination, coordination, and juxtaposition of structural elements. The error here is that manipulation of structural units often distorts meaning or creates ungrammatical expressions. Shaughnessy maintains that error in conjoining and placement may be caused by differences between spoken and written sentences. Speech permits a greater latitude of redundancy and a looser coordination of structure than does written communication. The introduction of one adverbial clause or a coordinate clause demands that the writer be able to fit the added element to the foundation sentence, either by the interruption or the qualification of the essential thought, or by the balancing of ideas in a fluid yet logical arrangement. Despite the difficulty such manipulation presents to basic writers, Shaughnessy feels that even awkward attempts at consolidation should be encouraged because they show a "responsiveness to the writing situation" and avoid a permanent regression to overly simplistic structure.

The fourth error is that involving an inversion in which normal syntactical flow is interrupted. The following sentence shows a typical inversion error: "It is my belief that what you do you should be praised for it." Faulty use of relative pronouns often contributes to inversion errors such as this one: "I am getting able to discuss many different points of view in the course which I could not do it before."

These four major errors in syntax are the very errors conventional teachers vehemently attack with their red pens--after papers are written. Shaughnessy contends that such a delayed response is anchored in a perspective which insists on viewing the student's paper as a finished product, a product to be evaluated according to the strictures of grammatical propriety and accepted idiom. A better approach to teaching composition is to view student papers in process as they are being written. A kind of collaboration between student and teacher is suggested here. This collaboration is more than rapport, and it is more than toleration of bungling awkwardness. It is an attitude of the teacher, and a sequence of three steps for the student. The student must generate a thought, put it down on paper, and polish it for reading. The teacher does not refuse to help during the three steps; Shaughnessy is aware, for example, of the intricate interplay between vocabulary and syntax and she gives emphasis to transformational sentence-combining exercises and word-awareness drills. But the core of the approach rests with the three progressive steps.

The first step is often difficult. Students may find themselves in a traditional classroom with rows of chairs and a teacher lecturing on a stipulated and boring topic. Or they may find themselves in a "counter-classroom" that attempts to "abandon procedures and objectives under the illusion that freedom is something people simply fall into after authoritarian structures crumble." Shaughnessy prefers neither situation. Instead, she thinks the classroom must be a forum of dialogue. Small groups assigned a given task may work together; individual ideas should branch from group discussion. The point, here, is that dialogue be initiated; the student cannot write in a social vacuum. The teacher responds in a facilitating role--not a dispenser of knowledge or a Victorian master. Teachers should prescribe, encourage, discuss, paraphrase, and suggest until the student's thought is generated and encoded. Teachers do not wait to grade papers; they participate in the papers' creation in an on-going and becoming process.

Finally, student papers are readied for reading. Proofreading is critical here, and the students, in all probability, must be taught this skill. For clarity, they may even have to re-state their written thoughts orally before final written transcription. If so, Shaughnessy writes, they will probably be falling back on a native facility with the language to correct errors which "would never have been produced in speech."

ERRORS AND EXPECTATIONS  
AND BACK-TO-THE-BASICS:

An Editorial

Twice in the last few months, readers have expressed the concern that Errors and Expectations might be made an unwilling ally in political efforts to focus more and more attention of language arts teachers on usage and proofreading skills that some people label "the basics." After all, here is a book about error--a book that has been widely accepted within the ranks of writing teachers. Those facts alone could be represented as evidence in a school board meeting, bolstered by some creative out-of-context quotation.

Such an abuse of Shaughnessy's book, of course, is unlikely by people who have actually read it. Even those who read no further than the Introduction will find a caution about the misapplication of Errors and Expectations. Shaughnessy anticipates one sort of objection to the book: "Why, some will ask, do English teachers need to be told so much about errors? Isn't their concern with error already a kind of malignancy? Ought we not to dwell instead upon the options writers have rather than the constraints they must work under if they are to be read without prejudice?" In answer to such questions, she writes this telling comment: "The proportion of time I spend analyzing errors does not reflect the proportion of time a teacher should spend teaching students how to avoid them."

Ctd. from p. 1

error are extremely penetrating and consistently informed by the best scholarship." The book, he concluded, is for all teachers of English composition" (Spring, 1977, p. 20). And in College Composition and Communication, Susan Miller wrote that the book is "an indispensable tool for teachers of any writing students" (Feb. 1977, p. 92).

To see how indispensable a tool Errors and Expectations might be for high school teachers, WLA asked an experienced teacher to write the review that begins on p. 1.

OBJECTIVES THAT MOTIVATE

Albert Yoder

Southside Virginia Community College

In the past several years, there has been a trend in the English profession to specify and define the various objectives the English student is to meet in his/her writing. Specific objectives are now commonly found in rhetoric texts or the teacher's manual accompanying the texts. These objectives may not always be phrased in purely behavioral terms, but they do indicate what the student is expected to learn. These objectives are useful; however, they also are limited.

They are limited in the first instance because they are not chosen by the student but by the teacher and/or author of the text. In other words, they represent what the teacher expects the student to learn, not what the student expects or desires to learn. A second limitation is that most of the objectives found in the rhetoric texts are very specific and short range. They represent only what should be learned in a particular unit of study. Rarely are there general objectives for the act of writing itself. There may be a statement to the effect that the student will be expected to write an essay of two hundred and fifty words with variety, development, coherence, and unity. But, general as that may seem, it still does not provide an objective for the act of writing itself. In effect, it says that if you want to write a good essay, it must contain variety, development, coherence, and unity. Usually, each of these elements is then further reduced to objectives defining precisely what constitutes each. What is lacking in all this is a general, overall, objective for writing. What is lacking is an answer to the question, why write at all?

Admittedly, a few texts do begin at this basic level, but when they do it is usually because the author has an answer of his own that he wants his readers to adopt, just as he wants them to adopt the more specific objectives later in the text. The two most common objectives of this kind are that writing will improve self-expression generally and that it will be vocationally advantageous.

When you try to define basic objectives for writing you are, or should be, concerned with motivating your students. It would be pointless to give me a list of objectives for playing football, no matter how well they are drawn up, if I fail to see why I should play football in the first place. Furthermore, it may not even be enough for someone to tell me why I should want to play. A coach might say I will improve my coordination and stamina, but if I have no personal desire to improve those qualities, I will still not be motivated. The same is true for writing.

/To page 4./

This seems to present a dilemma: basic general objectives for the act of writing are necessary, but those provided by the teacher or text may not be personally compelling for each student. A means of resolving this dilemma is to list as many reasons for--objectives of--writing as occur to you and present them and an accompanying explanation to your class. Here is just one possible set of such "objectives."

#### Reasons for Writing

##### INTRINSIC GOALS

1. Self-realization
2. Self-expression
3. Self-understanding
4. Self-discipline

##### EXTRINSIC GOALS

5. Recognition--teacher, peer, parent, public
6. Material gain
7. Fear of failure and/or punishment
8. Vocational advancement
9. Academic advancement

You may be able to think of possibilities, and you should give your students the chance to make suggestions of their own. When the list is complete, ask your class to consider it for several days. Specifically, ask them which of the possibilities they find most motivating; which objectives answer needs they feel strongly. In this way, your students, with your help, will be discovering reasons for wanting to write well, and these goals that mean something to them personally are essential to real motivation.

However, for motivation to occur, a goal must also be something specific and concrete, not abstract and general. To achieve this, ask your students to take the most important reasons they have chosen from the list and compose a paragraph on each--describing as specifically, concretely, and vividly as possible what might happen if they were to achieve those goals. If someone feels he should write well for peer-approval, he might imagine a scene in which his peer group reads something he has written and becomes genuinely enthusiastic about it. If someone else feels she should write well because it might help her vocationally, she might imagine a scene in which her boss is so impressed by a report she has prepared that she gets a raise. It will not be enough for students to write such paragraphs once. To be well-motivated they must constantly keep their goals in mind. And for this reason you should ask them, periodically, to write imaginative descriptions of situations in which they might realize their writing goals.

All of this may sound strange, a mixture of Dale Carnegie, pop psychology, and some form of meditation. But I think there is logic--in fact, common sense--behind it. It may seem strange because this line of thought and the accompanying exercise are not subjects commonly found in the standard English texts and articles. And the reasons for this omission is that the English profession virtually ignores straightforward discussions of motivation, although there would be little writing and less writing improvement without motivation.

The exercise I have described is primarily a means of motivating the student, but it can also benefit the teacher. I do not grade the descriptions the students write, but I do read them with care. And the benefit I derive from them is that since I know why my students want to write, I can better direct my comments, on papers and in conferences, toward their specific goals. Although the sort of comments I make on grammar might not differ from paper to paper, my comments on subject and rhetoric would. I approach students and their work differently because their goals differ. I would not approach someone who was writing for recognition the same way I would someone who was writing for self-expression. Different writers have different goals, and their instruction also must differ--at least beyond the level of mechanical competence.

To summarize: goals or objectives are important, but they must exist for the act of writing as well as for its specific components. To be worthwhile, to motivate, goals for the act of writing must be chosen by the individual writer; they must be personal, vivid, concrete, and periodically recalled. Goals devined in this way will not only motivate students, but will help the teacher teach students how the elements of writing can help them meet their personal writing goals.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

## A FOLLOW-UP

Issue Ten contained a little contest called, "Where Do We Go From Here?" It was an invitation for teachers to write describing how they would deal, instructionally, with a piece of student writing, the first third of which read like this:

On the third week of November after a rip roaring season, I was reading the newspaper. I was trying to see if the league pick the same players I did for the All-Star team. So I was reading the paper and I found that some of my picks were there and some weren't. There were some that surprise me. Like when I read that I make the honest menable team. I couldn't believe it. I John Johnson at 5'6" making honest menable at linebacker.

Since no one entered the competition for WLA's parsimonious prize, there are no neat, what-I-would-do-with-it items to print here. So, instead, here is a fumbling little sketch of what I did to work with the student pseudonymed "John Johnson" during the 1972-1973 academic year. (RCG)

The first draft, like the example above, was riddled with usage and mechanical difficulties. But, as I looked at the paper, these problems were not the main concerns I had. Far more significant were two related problems (which are more evident in the full draft than in the snippet above): a general tendency to over-summarize, and a disinclination to expand ideas by using supporting examples. So, in a private conference, I spent fifteen minutes suggesting a couple of ways John Johnson could expand his draft and develop it with details; then I asked him to try another draft. In similar conferences on drafts two and three, I continued to keep the focus on the content and development of the paper, but I also drew his attention to proofreading problems, dropped -ed's, and comma splices. Such attention, however, came after John had already achieved some success making his writing more specific and interesting and clear. My intention in this, of course, was to build a more positive attitude toward writing--and especially revision--before trying to confront ingrained language habits that had been a source of frustration for John through five years of English classes.

The fourth draft of the paper, while certainly not a model of EAE conventions, showed clear improvement. In the original, for instance, family reaction had been pretty much compressed into this sentence: "My whole family were going crazy about it." But by draft four, this section had been considerably expanded, specified, and to my way of thinking, clarified: "My mother read it and said, 'That-a-boy!' Then Ricky said, 'What is going on?' Mom explained what had happened. Rick grabbed the paper in disbelief and began to read it. After reading it a joyful smile was on Rick's face. Ron, who played with me that season, was as happy as I was. Jim yelled upstairs, 'Hey, you guys, John's name is in the newspaper for football. Just like a herd of cattle, my sisters and brothers ran down stairs.'" And this one section of the draft continued for two more paragraphs.

KEY EDITORIAL CONCERNS OF WLA NEWSLETTER

- \*The fundamental compatibility of craft and creativity in good writing and in effective writing instruction.
- \*The role of writing classes in freeing student imagination and creativity.
- \*Ways that teachers can expand the range of instructional options open to them.

\* \* \* \* \*

WLA SUBSCRIPTION

If you would like to be added to WLA's mailing list for the next few mailings, send \$2.00 to Richard Gebhardt, Findlay College, Findlay, OH 45840. Make checks payable to Findlay College.

## ARTICLES WELCOME

WLA welcomes brief articles that relate to the Key Editorial Concerns and grow out of practical experiences in writing classes. More-or-less regular WLA Departments: Teaching Tips--2-3 page outlines of a unit or an approach to a specific teaching task. Interconnections--Examinations of approaches or materials of one level of writing class (e.g., college, high school, middle grade) from the perspective of a different level. Reading Lists--Recommendations, preferably annotated, of useful or stimulating reading. Student Perspectives on the writing teaching enterprise, its methods, its materials.

# **“Basics,” Careerism, and Responsible English Teaching:**

## **A Workshop for High School and Junior High School Teachers**

**19-23 June 1978**

**Findlay College**

### **Workshop Focus:**

How to respond to pressures for the "basics" and career education without sacrificing the integrity of writing and literature courses.

### **Workshop Topics:**

- Teaching Writing: Recent Developments and Classroom Applications
- Responsible Balance in Writing Classes: Skills and Imagination
- Teaching Literature Is Teaching Reading: Strategies of Critical Reading
- A Primer on Reading for Teachers Not Trained to Teach Reading
- Career Concerns in the English Class
- Technical Writing as a Way to Teach General Principles of Composition
- Science Fiction as a Way to Teach General Principles of Literature
- Response-Centered Teaching and Literature for Non-Academic Students

### **Credit:**

Three semester hours of credit may be earned for participation in the whole workshop--morning, afternoon, and evening sessions from Monday noon to Friday noon. Non-credit workshop registration will also be available.

### **For further information contact:**

Richard Gebhardt  
English Department  
Findlay College  
Findlay, OH 45840  
(419) 422-8313, Ext. 303

WLA Newsletter  
Department of English  
Findlay College  
Findlay, OH 45840

