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# A Plain Apology: Teaching Plain Style in First-Year Composition

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# A PLAIN APOLOGY: TEACHING PLAIN STYLE IN FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

by

BENJAMIN AUSTIN

Under the Direction of Malinda Snow

## ABSTRACT

A controversial institution from its inception, American higher education in the past decade has come under fire from scholars, college administrators, business leaders, and the U.S. Department of Education. These parties charge that our colleges and universities are underpreparing students for their professional lives, particularly in the areas of critical thinking and writing. I present the case that teaching the plain style of writing, in the vein of Orwell's "Politics and the English Language," would improve both writing and thinking. I provide a sample plain-style pedagogy for first-year composition. I also examine a modern composition studies trend against plain style, and argue the motivations of this trend can be understood by looking at the history of rhetoric and prose.

INDEX WORDS: Plain style, Rhetoric, First-year composition, Education crisis

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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2013

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August 2013

**DEDICATION**

To a wonderful young lady, Benedicta Amakye, whom I hope to know when she's a wonderful old lady. And, of course, to my mother and father.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thanks to Dr. Snow, my teacher, and Dr. Gaillet and Dr. Pullman; without these three this thesis would not have made it.

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## INTRODUCTION

At nearly the close of *The Elements of Style* is the chapter “An Approach to Style,” added by E. B. White in 1979. In this chapter White included a line contradictory to the previous ninety-six pages of authoritarian advice: “There is no satisfactory explanation of style, no infallible guide to good writing, no assurance that a person who thinks clearly will be able to write clearly, no key that unlocks the door, no inflexible rule by which writers may shape their course” (White 97). This was not White backing away from responsibility for his style guide. Rather, it was his advice that the writer must take responsibility himself to make his prose clear, concise, and readable.

I call Strunk and White’s ideal sort of prose *plain style*, and in this thesis I argue that plain-style instruction should be included in first-year composition. Before getting to the argument, we should establish a working definition of plain style. One of the best I have found comes from a group of converted obscure writers—lawyers, in fact—whose transition to plain style can be traced back to the “Plain Style Movement” (Balmford “Beyond a Movement”). The movement first garnered public interest in 1998, with President Bill Clinton’s “Plain Language in Government Writing” memorandum; the memorandum was supplemented by President Barack Obama’s “Plain Writing Act of 2010” (“Plain Language” 2013). Essentially, all federal agencies were ordered to begin writing plainly, which stipulated that prose must be “clear, concise, and well-organized,” among other first-year composition fundamentals (“Plain Writing Act” 2010).<sup>1</sup>

Christopher Balmford, a lawyer and proponent of plain writing, wrote a report defining the plain language movement and its successes. In the report Balmford expressed particular satis-

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<sup>1</sup> Plain language includes writing with strong subjects and verbs, short sentences and paragraphs, ordinary words and phrases, well-organized thoughts, an awareness of audience, and proofread drafts (“Plain Language” 2013).

faction with plain writing's adoption by the legal community, which had for years written in a technical and dense legal prose. This community was especially reluctant to adopt plain language because they doubted it could be "accurate, certain, and precise" enough to convey the nuance of the law (Balmford "Beyond a Movement"). That their minds were changed is obvious, Balmford says, because today "in most English speaking countries, the legal profession no longer argues [this fact]" ("Beyond a Movement").

As lawyers began redrafting obscure legal documents into plain language, they found the task surprisingly difficult. The rewrites were not simply a matter of finding the equivalent common words for legal terms:

In many ways, the phrase "plain language" is inaccurate. It places too much emphasis on language: on words and on sentences. The reality is that clear legal communication depends on much more than eradicating jargon—mere word substitution—and on much more than familiar sentence structure.

Usually, rewriting a document in plain language involves rethinking the entire document—its content, language, structure, and design—while rigorously focusing on the audience and the purpose of the communication. It is this approach that leads to successful communication. (Balmford "Beyond a Movement")

Principles of rhetoric and of plain style are visible in Balmford's explanation. The former are made apparent in his statement, "rigorously focusing on the audience and the purpose of the communication." The plain style principles are subtler than we might ordinarily consider; as Balmford points out, writing in plain style is not about language at bottom. The style is about clearly expressing *meaning*—which, to return to *The Elements of Style*, was E. B. White's point

all along. The author's intended meaning can only come from herself, so it is her responsibility to clarify what she means and to communicate it effectively.

Balmford's inclusion of rhetoric and plain style in communication is a central theme in my thesis. I believe both are necessary for communication and should be included in first-year composition. This creates a problem, however, as the two have had a long and tempestuous relationship, and "in fact they almost always proved to be rivals..." (Croll 61). To include both in one classroom can be difficult, then, and a significant portion of this thesis is dedicated to explaining why the two often disagree, and why they should cooperate—in the interests of creating the best possible communication—instead. To that end, I examine modern rhetorical theory, as well as the history rhetoric and plain style share. This history includes Plato's "Gorgias" and the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century transition in Europe from an oral to a written culture (Croll 45-80, Williamson 4-35). By studying the history these two share, we can begin to see why they so often dispute, and why

In my first chapter I make a case for plain style's inclusion in first-year composition, beginning with the recent education crisis in American colleges. The state of higher education has been investigated by the government and compiled in a report by former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. This 2006 report, "A Test of Leadership," found in our education system "...much to applaud but also much that requires urgent reform" (Spellings vi). This sentiment has been echoed in a number of books, such as Derek Bok's *Our Underachieving Colleges*, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's *Academically Adrift*, and Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus' *Higher Education?* I have also researched the findings of a number of committees and interest groups, including The National Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise and The College Board.

Opinions on many issues vary among these sources, but all are unanimous pointing to a general set of abilities our graduates lack: “the critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills needed in today’s workplaces” (Spellings 3). I argue that writing, particularly the plain style of writing, will improve both writing and critical thinking. The connection between writing and thought is affirmed by the above authors. Arum and Roksa’s research, for example, found a strong positive correlation between critical thought and the amount of writing a student does each semester (83-87). I argue that plain writing is strongly tied to critical thought, citing evidence from the “Plain Style Movement” and the practices forwarded in “Critical Thinking through Writing: Georgia State University’s Quality Enhancement Plan.”

My second chapter further defines plain style, and particularly its relationship to rhetoric. The project begins by characterizing rhetoric from work such as James Kinneavy’s “The Basic Aims of Discourse,” Erika Lindemann’s *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, and E. P. J. Corbett’s “Rhetoric, the Enabling Discipline.” From these sources the essential pieces of rhetoric become clear, such as the notion of discourses (Kinneavy 297-303), and the interconnected role of speaker and audience in communication (Lindemann 40-41). I argue that plain style takes a different approach to communication. In brief, plain style locates meaning in the individual, while rhetoric locates meaning in social norms and various discourses. This difference is outwardly visible in the treatment of prose style itself, for which I use Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* and Joseph Williams’ *Style*. Peter Elbow and Donald Murray also tend toward a “plain style” philosophy; both argue, in various articles, to ignore audience while composing, and to practice writing in non-discursive formats (e.g., Elbow argues against teaching only academic discourse in first-year composition in his article “Reflections on Academic Discourse: How it Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues”).

These differences are subtle, but they are magnified by studying the history of rhetoric and plain style. In the latter half of my second chapter I examine Morris Croll's *Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm* and George Williamson's *The Senecan Amble*. These scholars contextualize rhetoric and plain writing, studying the transition from the sixteenth century (which was mostly rhetorical) to the seventeenth century (which introduced plain style). We find by studying the history that rhetoric tends to be more communal and based on public opinion and propriety, and plain style more individual and based on experience and reason (Croll 120-125). This is why, for the plain stylist, meaning comes before discourse. So, the more that one's perspective grows distinctly rhetorical, the more that discourse itself becomes the sole source of meaning. We see this happening, for example, in James Berlin's "social-epistemic" rhetorical theory: "Ideology [passed through discourse] thus interpellates the subject in a manner that determines... what is *experienced* and what remains outside the field of phenomenological experience, regardless of its actual material existence" (479 my emphasis).

I open the third chapter with a study of modern theorists who adopt radically rhetorical perspectives. These theorists tend to reject plain style and plain style tendencies such as expressivism. Along with James Berlin, I examine the assertions of Richard Ohmann, Carl Freedman, Judith Butler, and Carolyn Miller. Freedman and Ohmann are the only theorists who specifically denounce plain language in the composition classroom. I elected to use all these theorists, however, to show the effect that a purely rhetorical perspective (i.e., that discourse is the source of meaning) inflicts on critical thought. Among other sources, the "Sokal hoax" of 1996—Alan Sokal's sham article that was published by *Social Text*—is evidence of the need for plain language in critical thought.

The latter half of the third chapter seeks a solution to join rhetoric to plain style, and plain style to rhetoric. I examine a number of composition theorists with a strong rhetorical bent, such as “New Literacy” scholars David Barton and Mary Hamilton, and digital media scholarship from Richard Lanham and Greg Ulmer. I find that it is the approach to study, not the rhetorical predisposition, which is the determining factor of whether plain style can make a place for itself. I also examine certain plain style tendencies exemplified by Nan Miller in her article “Postmodern Moonshine in English 101,” and illustrate how plain style itself has been the cause of much discord.

Overall, I hope my thesis gives the first-year composition teacher greater insight into her profession and the ways she can improve instruction for her students. I have drafted a sample pedagogy which is included in chapter four (with a summary below), but the thesis provides some explanation of the nature of communication. Rhetoric, I suspect, may have begun sounding like a target in this introduction. This is not the case. I sincerely believe both rhetoric and plain style should co-exist in the composition classroom. I believe they do already, in fact. Any picture of writing instruction *must* address both halves of communication—I could not have presented plain style without mentioning rhetoric, nor should rhetoric be placed apart from plain style.

There is a platitude that those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it. Through my research I hope to have provided some answer for composition teachers to avoid some mistakes from history, by seeing how and why they occur. I also believe the case I present for a stronger plain-style presence in the classroom might have an effect on these teachers—that I might persuade them, so to speak.

## The Pedagogy

I drew from multiple sources to create my pedagogy, including the GSU Department of English Lower Division Studies online resource site; Barbara E. Fassler Walvoord's *Helping Students Write Well: A Guide for Teachers in All Disciplines* and Joseph William's *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity & Grace*; various "Collegiate Learning Assessment" (hereafter CLA) tests; and advice from Dr. Malinda Snow, Dr. Lynée Gaillet, and Dr. Elizabeth Lopez. I have included in chapter four a sample syllabus; an explanation of my grading scheme; rubric, quizzes and worksheets; the first unit of study; and the first take-home assignment. I made in-depth comments throughout the pedagogy (with footnotes) to guide the reader through my rationale.

Chapter 4.1 contains my syllabus. The syllabus skeleton I downloaded from Georgia State University's division of lower level studies website along with sample first-year 1101 composition syllabi from Sara Higinbotham, Jennifer Forsthoefel, Ellen Stockstill, Judith Irvine, Laura Barberan Reinares, and Candace Nadon. Most syllabi required four out-of-class essays (Laura Barberan Reinares' and Ellen Stockstill's did not). Because my course includes homework and other assignments, and because each essay will be revised at least once, I am assigning only three out-of-class essays. I sought to create a balance of work, both for the students and the professor, so that slack periods were few without anyone becoming overworked. There is a possibility I have incorporated too many assignments. However, Walvoord includes tips for managing time which would prove useful in the classroom, such as not commenting on every draft, or choosing only one or two aspects to comment on; peer review days; conferencing; and keeping paper lengths to five pages or less (7-8).

There are two themes in the syllabus that I would like to point out: 1) The stress I place on teaching writing as a process (which I discuss in chapter 4.2), and 2) The plain style as taught

in the lessons, quizzes, and tests. To teach these concepts I have relied on Williams' *Style*, and to a lesser extent Walvoord's *Helping Students Write Well*. *Style* offers ten lessons, from clarity to elegance, all with the purpose of sharpening meaning and producing readable prose. The class is scheduled to begin working on the *Style* lessons week six, and will continue at a pace of one chapter per week (not all the lessons can be covered).

The grading breakdown reflects the addition of lessons to the class. Sixty percent of the final grade comes from take-home essays, but most of the other forty percent is related to these lessons in some way. The final exam counts ten percent, homework exercises count ten percent, and in-class quizzes and tests count twenty percent (the in-class category also includes class participation and peer reviews, which might prove to be too much). I tried to build the course so the most important ideas—plain language as understood by Orwell, and then unity, development, and organization—are covered first. The *Style* lessons, which are more complex and are based on editing, are saved for last. This way, if a class struggles, the teacher can delay new lessons to continue work on fundamentals.

Individual conferences are vital for writing courses (Walvoord wrote, "Most personal and, I believe, most effective, is the individual conference" (26); Don Murray promotes conferencing in *The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference* (1979)). I have only one set of conferences scheduled, just prior to midpoint. Understandably other teachers might desire a second set of conferences, and could cut out lessons to create the time. Finally, most classes will involve quizzes, tests, or lessons. This is not to imply the whole class period must be devoted to this work, however; I expect every class to have time for discussion and group readings.

Chapter 4.2 contains both my grading guidelines and grading criteria/rubric. I want to instill good habits in the students, and one of the best habits for writing, plain style or no, is revi-



sion. For this reason, the highest grade a first draft can receive is seventy points. This passing score is determined by “college-ready” writing, which I summarize in the grading guidelines and discuss more fully in my criteria. Up to an additional twenty-five points are possible on the revision(s) of the paper. The final five are awarded based on superior writing. This grading scheme came about for a number of reasons. One, I want my students to concentrate on their revision as much as on their first draft. I want them to see their writing improve. Two, this approach will balance the range of talent that teachers face. An above-average writer may produce “B” papers in a single draft. Where she might have been satisfied before, now she must improve. A less talented writer might not produce a passing paper the first draft. So long as he is able to revise his paper to college-ready writing, he will receive the seventy points and additional points for his revision, although not necessarily the full twenty-five.

I created my criteria for “college-level writing” from an in-depth Georgia State University English rubric (“Sample Rubrics”). The rubric was six pages, so I simplified, and divided the criteria between writing and thinking. I got the idea to divide between these two from a rubric on GSU’s “Critical Thinking Through Writing” website. Dividing the rubric this way better demonstrates to students that writing inherently includes thinking.

Chapter 4.3 contains my peer editing guide, the George Orwell “Politics and the English Language” quiz and worksheet, and the “Misquote” worksheet. For peer editing I drew from Walvoord’s “A Guide for Group Discussion of Drafts” (42). As I have planned it, students should bring extra copies with them on peer review day to read and comment on the actual draft. However, Walvoord points to the benefits of group discussion during prewriting phases of papers, or in between drafts; in these groups they can explain their ideas and receive feedback in

places they are weak, or simply get a different perspective (41-42). This is an excellent classroom strategy I was unable to display in the pedagogy itself.

The “Politics” quiz comes on the third day of class. Most of the questions test only rote memory, but others require greater reflection, e.g. give an example of a dying metaphor, or of pretentious diction. The quiz comes early in the semester and is difficult because its purpose is to motivate students (i.e. to scare them a bit); the benefit of a writing course grows exponentially when students work harder. After the quiz, the students will receive a worksheet which we will fill in together, and finally the “Misquote” worksheet to be completed for homework. In “Misquote,” the student must put in her own words a number of aphoristic quotes, such as Robert Frost’s “No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader.” This is a quick and interesting way to have students analyze and put meanings in their own words.

Chapter 4.5 contains the first unit, “Unity, Development, and Organization” (UDO). This unit is scheduled to begin the fourth week of class and conclude at the end of the seventh week. The content of the worksheets for this unit I drew from Walvoord.<sup>2</sup> For the assignment itself, I drew heavily on the architecture of CLA “performance tasks.”<sup>3</sup> The students pretend to be newly-graduated, with a set of credentials; for example, the graduate dual-majored in history and psychology. The student must write a fictitious cover letter for an available marketing job at Southern Company. This is a multi-stage assignment. In the first stage, students locate both the necessary skills for a marketing professional and the skills they have learned through college. I expect students to do this informal research mostly online (and included my own mock study). Based on the qualities of a marketing major, the student must decide how to best “pitch” herself.

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<sup>2</sup> From her chapters “Helping Students Achieve Clear Focus,” “Helping Students Develop and Support Ideas,” and “Helping Students Organize Ideas” (57-125).

<sup>3</sup> The CLA was designed by the Council for Aid to Education as a method to assess learning, particularly critical thinking, problem solving, and writing ability.

Some of the attributes the fictitious graduate possesses obviously fit a marketing major, some obviously do not, but most require some thought to find the uniting characteristics. The task teaches unity in a dialectical fashion: the student must pare away the useless information from the useful. Development of detail is taught alongside unity, as the student is not given enough description of his alter-ego graduate to produce a persuasive cover letter. In the second stage students must write the cover letter. During this phase they must organize their data while being concise and to the point.

There are multiple cover letter drafts online, and students might use those for their organization (or to write the entire letter). But the assignment has many positives: the student must write to a “real” audience, and it showcases a real use for writing. The students will use informal research and critical thinking skills during the prewriting phase, and will be expected to put forth the skills (of the fictitious graduate) in simple, plain English.

Chapter 4.5 contains my first out-of-class essay, “The Mythology Assignment.” After reading the chapter “Eight Brief Tales of Lovers” from Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology*, students must write a myth of their own. Hamilton is a model of plain prose, and the myth narrative gives students a chance to practice plain writing without heavy-duty intellectual work. This assignment comes twice during the semester: once in September (with one revision), and once more in November. The November revision contains the added stipulation that students reduce their word count either 25 percent or two-hundred words, whichever is more. Reassigning the myth will give students an opportunity to practice their newly-learned editing techniques on themselves—on their earlier selves—as well as help them practice writing concisely.

The above pedagogy will teach students to write in a precise, neat style. We will find, in the next chapter, that writing in this plain style has a similarly beneficial effect—precision and neatness—for thought itself.

## CHAPTER 1: EDUCATION CRISIS

Doomsayers have predicted the ruin of American higher education for almost as long as there has been an American higher education (Bok 13-19). A resurgence of these gloomy prognostications has swept along in the past two decades, their authors featuring in news specials and creating controversy.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. government itself commissioned an investigation into the nation's higher education system in 2005, the first such in more than twenty years, with the less-than-happy conclusion that "U.S. higher education needs to improve in dramatic ways" (Spellings vi). But why should we pay attention? Our universities are arguably the most prestigious in the world, and enrollment numbers grow every year. And as I said, the end of the world for the American university has come and gone every few decades for at least the past century. Why are things so bad in this particular crisis?

To answer that question I turned to recent publications critiquing higher education, written in various formats by authors and committees of diverse backgrounds. I selected three books: *Our Underachieving Colleges* by Derek Bok, *Higher Education?* by Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus, and *Academically Adrift* by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa. I also reviewed three reports, the first being the U.S. government-commissioned "Spellings Report" previously mentioned, the second entitled "College Learning for the New Global Century" (2007) produced by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (hereafter LEAP). Rounding out the reports is "The Neglected 'R'" (2003), researched and written by SAT creators The College Board, which concentrated its inquiry on the place of writing in education. And finally there were the

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<sup>4</sup> NPR featured *Academically Adrift* in a 2011 story "A Lack of Rigor Leaves Students 'Adrift' in College." Charles McGrath wrote a *New York Times* review of Bok's *Our Underachieving Colleges* in April 2006. NPR also featured an 2010 op-ed and interview with Andrew Hacker titled "'Higher Education' Is A Waste of Money," featuring Tony Cox as the interviewer.

Dan Berrett countercharged Arum and Roksa's findings in "Students Might Not Be 'Academically Adrift' After All, Study Finds," an article printed in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, updated May 5, 2013, with a rebuttal by Richard Arum.

articles I read, op-ed pieces in the main, but not without their insights.<sup>5</sup> I imagined that by amassing all these statistics and points of view I could plot the landscape of our nation's higher education system, and determine whether recent college graduates really are lacking an education.

But the answer was not so straightforward. Some pundits saw nothing seriously wrong in American higher education, for one.<sup>6</sup> And those experts who did see problems often pointed to issues of affordability and retention rates, which are beyond the scope of this thesis, and even when focusing on education itself they often were at loggerheads.<sup>7</sup> There was, however, one item unanimously cited as proof of decline in American higher education: The falling literacy rate of the college educated.<sup>8</sup> Statistics are often cited for the tangibility they bring to an argument, but this statistic's ubiquity also speaks to the significance of literacy to the American ideal. The ability to read and write is the most important skill imparted by education, and these authors understood that while American parents would regret falling scores in science or mathematics, they could not tolerate illiteracy.

### **Cause for Alarm**

The three books I reviewed provided the greatest background and insight on the education crisis. These authors were also the most willing to skip politics and speak their minds. Where the reports rarely mentioned college presidents, administration, or the professoriate as to blame for slumping education, these topics were fair game in all three books. The authors did not

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<sup>5</sup> Including "The overblown crisis in American education," "A Lack of Rigor Leaves Students 'Adrift' in College," "Students Might Not Be 'Academically Adrift' After All, Study Finds," and "Higher Education' Is A Waste of Money," for example.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Lemann's "The overblown crisis in American education" article (from *The New Yorker*, September 2010) is a good example of those who argue there is nothing seriously the matter with higher education.

<sup>7</sup> Authors diverged particularly on the role of research in the university. Arum and Roksa claim professor and students have struck a "disengagement pact," in which students are not challenged to work hard so as to give professors more time to research (34), and Hacker and Dreifus concur (43-45). Bok, on the other hand, says "teaching has intrinsic satisfactions that cause most professors to work conscientiously at their classroom duties" (31).

<sup>8</sup> "The National Assessment of Adult Literacy indicates that, between 1992 and 2003, average prose literacy (the ability to understand narrative texts such as newspaper articles) decreased for all levels of educational attainment, and document literacy (the ability to understand practical information such as instructions for taking medicine) decreased among those with at least some college education or a bachelor's degree or higher" (Spellings Report 12).

invariably agree, however (such as the issue of research in the academy, or of out-of-classroom activities—see footnotes seven and nine). Though eventually I did reach certain conclusions, perhaps even a consensus, my reader would be best served by seeing how and why I reached the conclusions I did. So we start where I did: as a mediator to three different perspectives.

First: Students are lazy and will underachieve given the chance, professors are wrapped up in research and go easy on students, and college administration is bloated and more interested in tuition than learning. In *Academically Adrift*, sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa claim that instead of a college education, students now practice “the art of college management” made possible by the indifference of all parties involved (23-25, 77).

Second: College never experienced a golden era, students never were industrious go-getters, and education on the whole is in decent shape, claims Derek Bok, in *Our Underachieving Colleges* (11-29). A number of “polemical books” have recently been published decrying higher education, yet the market is satisfied based on growing enrollments. That should mean something (3). However, Bok continues, students should be learning more useful information, professors should be working harder to challenge their pupils, and the college system must begin measuring what has been learned for American education to remain competitive into the future (58-66).

Third: Education has taken a tertiary position in America’s colleges, competing with football programs, research grants, state-of-the-art facilities, and other concerns which have nothing to do with college’s true purpose. In *Higher Education*, Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus adhere to the traditional liberal education, and argue that college is not “training” for the professional world, nor is it to “make students into better citizens” (6,7). Rather, the most important outcome of a college education is to make graduates “more interesting people” (8).

Of these three outlooks, Hacker and Dreifus were generally in harmony with Arum and Roksa.<sup>9</sup> It was only when Derek Bok entered the picture that the confusion began, which turned out to have much to do with their respective backgrounds. Derek Bok twice served as Harvard's president, while Hacker and the others are professors. Presidents and professors both serve necessary roles for campus life, but the two do not always harmoniously interact, or maintain the most flattering picture of the other. Hacker and Dreifus, on the one hand, attribute some decline of education to the "technocrat" presidents who care more for their seven-figure paychecks than the education their students receive (39). And Bok not-very-subtly points his finger at professors like Hacker and Dreifus for exaggerating the education crisis, claiming these scholars are too removed in their ivory towers to have reasonable expectations of a university education. Students do not necessarily love knowledge for the sake of knowledge, and while such devotion is exemplary in a teacher, it makes for critics "too harsh and too one-sided in their judgments" (Bok 8).

But there were places a truce was struck without prodding. All parties involved were concerned that too many adjuncts and contingents are teaching too many classes. Hacker and Dreifus list a statistic from the U.S. Department of Education that seventy percent of college instructors are contingent teachers or graduate teaching assistants, and bemoan the quality of instruction from this underpaid and overworked group. Bok echoed the sentiment, claiming it is "folly" to believe students can succeed in classes without professors who understand the "underlying purposes" of that class (45). Hacker, Dreifus, and Bok were also clear that teaching assistants almost invariably need more instruction on how to teach than they receive. And in the larger picture, the five authors were dubious of the amount of planning that goes into the undergrad-

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<sup>9</sup> Bok's *Our Underachieving Colleges* was published first of all three books, and Arum and Roksa open *Academically Adrift* by quoting from Bok. On many issues, however, Bok takes a more tolerant stance than the other four authors, such as on research in the university (31), or the place of college sports and student activities outside of the classroom (which he says cultivate skills for citizenship) (52-53).



uate education. Their general feeling was that individual departments too rarely set collective learning goals and the methods to reach those goals for students majoring in their discipline. Instead, professors teach their own pet projects, imparting knowledge too impractical and esoteric to be useful even for a liberal arts degree (Hacker and Dreifus 84, Bok 45, Arum and Roksa 88).

Beyond these harmonious tangents the authors were usually of different minds, especially on their views of what a university should look like. Beneath the squabbles, however, a theme took shape: the call for the university to return to the liberal arts.

### **Rigorous Arts**

“If epistemology ranks as higher education, our view is beverage management does not” —Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus take a tone just shy of arrogant in *Higher Education*, but they are not squeamish demarking what counts as college and what is simply job training (98). Education is not “higher” unless driven by the liberal arts, traditionally considered. Derek Bok is more tolerant of vocational courses in college, reminding readers that American universities have taught practical know-how “at least since the Morrill Act of 1862” (Bok 25-27). Where Hacker and Dreifus would relegate professional-sector degrees to technical schools, Bok leaves college’s practical side intact—but not at the expense of liberal education. Instead, Bok wants to bring forgotten studies back to the curriculum for all majors, studies such as moral reasoning and civic duties (72). In short, Hacker and Dreifus favor an exclusive university and Bok an inclusive one.

If we ignore for a moment the approaches of the books, we would see that both have the same goal in mind: promoting the liberal arts. And they are not alone. Arum and Roksa claim the omission of liberal studies is the primary cause of our students’ learning woes (84), and, perhaps obviously, the Liberal Education & America’s Promise committee puts special emphasis on study in the liberal arts for America’s continued prosperity (13). That someone, much less an en-

tire committee, could claim that America's continued prosperity depends on liberal arts is a bit puzzling. I would have thought the report authors would say it is the business majors, the captains of industry-in-training, who are the most likely to keep us moving along the road to prosperity. And make no mistake, LEAP was not referring to a "spiritual" prosperity; they meant material wealth. So what advice could Elizabeth Bishop or D.H. Lawrence possibly offer day-traders and chief financial officers?

In a word, these writers recognize that liberal arts cultivates the ability to think.<sup>10</sup> Take the authors of the "Spellings Report," for instance, who after lamenting the falling literacy rate write: "Employers report repeatedly that many new graduates they hire are not prepared to work, lacking the critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills needed in today's workplaces" (3). Today's workplaces depend on technology, making knowledge imparted by rote training outdated in a matter of years. The fittest workers of the twenty-first century are those with minds flexible and independent enough to keep pace through the changes, and praise for such academic virtues as "critical thinking" is as likely today to appear in *Forbes* as it is *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.<sup>11</sup>

How right are these authors to think the liberal arts sharpen critical thinking and writing? Though far from scientific proof, the Graduate Research Examination strongly supports the assumption. Education Testing Services designed the test in three sections, and describes them thus: Verbal reasoning "measures your ability to analyze and evaluate written material and syn-

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<sup>10</sup> The definition of critical thinking is a contentious topic in itself, one beyond the scope of this thesis. For our purposes, Georgia State University's definition from the "Critical Thinking Through Writing: Georgia State University's Quality Enhancement Plan" suffices: "[C]ritical thinking is an active process that goes beyond basic acquisition and memorization of information to the ability to recognize and rationally consider multiple concepts or elements that constitute a body of thought" (7).

<sup>11</sup> In *Forbes*, May 2012, Holly Green wrote the article "How to Develop 5 Critical Thinking Types"; the article opened "Great leaders think strategically" (Green). A search on *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* website for "critical thinking" returned 691 articles less than a year old which reference the term.

thesize information obtained from it”; quantitative reasoning “measures problem-solving ability”; and writing “measures critical thinking and analytical writing skills, specifically your ability to articulate and support complex ideas clearly” (ETS 2013). ETS’ website also includes a breakdown of scores of the past three years based on intended major. Topping the list for both verbal and writing sections by average score were philosophy majors; physics, mathematics, and materials engineering majors tied for the highest average quantitative scores. The arts and humanities, including English, philosophy, history, and art history, had the highest average verbal scores and writing scores of all departments.

So then, from which direction do we introduce students to liberal education? Are the liberal arts to be brought to the masses as Bok suggests, or, per Hacker and Dreifus, should universities drop business schools and college football to become a single college of Arts and Sciences? But this latter is a perfect-world hypothesis that Hacker and Dreifus admit cannot be. The LEAP authors put it this way: “Liberal education has always been this nation’s signature educational tradition, and this report builds on its core values: expanding horizons, building understanding of the wider world, honing analytical and communication skills, and fostering responsibilities beyond self” (3), which is a reprisal of Hacker and Dreifus’ “principle premise,” that college should “challenge the minds and imaginations of this nation’s young people, to expand their understanding of the world, and thus of themselves” (7). The liberal arts more than any other subject teach one to think for oneself, and though beverage management majors might graduate having read less Mark Twain than we hope, they should have read some. Practically speaking, a college graduate may not be broad-minded from his exposure to literature, and he may not grow reflective from doing philosophy. He may be as crass and dogmatic the day he walks to receive

his diploma as the day he first set foot on campus—but it will be in spite of that education. We now understand the importance of liberal arts. So how do we add rigor?

Cutting right to the chase, the answer is to assign forty pages of reading per week, twenty pages of writing per semester, and to expect the best from our students. This advice comes from Arum and Roksa, our social scientists, who have been fairly quiet thus far in our discussions and disagreements. Their sociology background has as much to do with their reticence as anything else. They are critical of the goals of the professoriate, the lifestyles of students, and the divided interests of the university at large. But they are more interested in numbers, and in solutions professors can teach—in results. The 20/40 rule (or guideline) is one such result.

To properly understand the how and why of the 20/40 rule, we must understand how it was derived. Arum and Roksa conducted a study of 2,322 students over a period of two years; these students took the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)<sup>12</sup>, once before beginning their freshman year and a second time at the close of their sophomore year, with results revealing “that American higher education is characterized by limited or no learning for a large proportion of students, and persistent or growing inequalities over time” (32). That “large proportion” Arum and Roksa spoke of was to the tune of forty-five percent making “no statistically significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills” (36). But an optimistic view means fifty-five percent of the students improved to some significance, and of that, some students really learned. How did they do it?

Arum and Roksa’s methodology was complex, accounting for such factors accounted as SAT scores, reputation of university, interaction with faculty outside of class, race and socioeconomic status, etc. Helpfully, the biggest factors attributable to learning success were grouped in

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<sup>12</sup> Both the CLA, produced by the Council for Aid to Education, and *Academically Adrift* have been criticized. Dan Berrett’s article “Students Might Not Be ‘Academically Adrift’ After All, Study Finds,” published in the Chronicle of Higher Education, provides a good summary.

their fourth chapter: along with the 20/40 rule, having a professor with high expectations and spending time studying alone had the greatest impact on CLA scores. To wit, the baseline student improved thirty-four points between his first and second CLA; students who reported high professor expectations (medium expectations were not enough) scored twenty-seven points higher than the average, and students with a 20/40 class outpaced the average by twenty-three points (Arum and Roksa 83-87). The amount of solitary study ranged from zero to twenty hours a week, with a twenty-point improvement accruing to students spending the most time hitting the books. Arum and Roksa contrasted time in solitary study with hours spent in a fraternity or sorority, and also hours spent in group study. Predictably, fraternity life diminished improvement on the CLA, but interestingly, group study was an even greater burden on scores than Greek life (Arum and Roksa 90).

Inferences can be drawn from these findings. For one, a professor has the most to do with the improvement of her students than any other single cause. But a professor who expects the best (at least the liberal arts professor) will be assigning the amount of reading and writing suggested, so that students must study, reflect, and write. That it all starts with the professor is one of those conclusions so obvious we wonder why it took a chapter to prove it. But the statistics are reassuring.

### **Be Clear on It**

Good thinking is priceless, another obvious conclusion, but after reading the previous sections I hope not as banal a conclusion as it might have been. Not that I endorse liberal education only as a means to an end; rather, it seems obvious to me that all who enter college deserve an experience with some sort of liberal instruction. Even before the professional sector began desiring these skills, they had an esteemable worth.

Thus far we have spoken of the skills of liberal education as composed of critical thinking, problem solving, and writing. But separating them this way is misleading. It would be like taking a track and field Olympian and listing her virtues as a fit cardiovascular system and an ability to run great distances. The description is true, obviously, but it is equally obvious that the strength of her heart and lungs is a product of her running day in and day out. One absolutely depends on the other. If anything, writing's connection to thought is even more complete than the runner's connection to her body. This is why when writing is closely considered, thinking inevitably enters the conversation. "The Neglected 'R': The Need for a Writing Revolution" was written a year before the latest figures from Adult Literacy survey showed the downward slide for our graduates. Here is what it said about writing's connection to thought:

- "Writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge" (3).
- "The reward of disciplined writing is the most valuable job attribute of all: a mind equipped to think" (10).
- "[W]riting is best understood as a complex intellectual activity that requires students to stretch their minds, sharpen their analytical capabilities, and make valid and accurate distinctions" (13).
- "Writing is not simply a way for students to demonstrate what they know. It is a way to help them understand what they know" (13).

John C. Bean, in his textbook *Engaging Ideas*, similarly ties writing and thinking: "Quite simply, writing is both a process of doing critical thinking and a product communicating the results of critical thinking" (3). And Georgia State University itself has signaled the connection of writing to critical thought through its "Critical Thinking through Writing" program, whose stated aim is "incorporating writing as the conduit for the expression of critical thinking" ("QEP" 4).

The university has put this in practice through a campus-wide requirement for undergraduates to pass two “critical thinking through writing classes,” as well as implementing such programs as writing across the curriculum and the writing studio (QEP 4-13).

In short, modern educators are convinced of writing’s connection to reflective, critical thought. Clear writing, it might be supposed, is equally understood as vital to critical thought: but for my project this connection must be explicit. George Orwell wrote one of the most famous essays, “Politics and the English Language,” taking up this connection. In this essay Orwell asserts a dynamic relationship between language and thought—the more slovenly and imprecise the language, the easier it is to have “foolish” thoughts, which in its turn promotes the use of unplain language. Being precise with words *was the mental effort* to being precise with thought, or at least Orwell believed so (“Politics”). Although his essay is intuitively true, it would be better to have some empirical data—which, if we return for a moment to Christopher Balmford and the “Plain Style Movement,” we find.

The impetus for this movement was democratic. President Obama’s stated purpose was “To enhance citizen access to Government information and services by establishing that Government documents issued to the public must be written clearly, and for other purposes” (this final phrase is itself ambiguous) (“Plain Writing Act”). However, in at least the legal domain a fortuitous set of results began to emerge. Judges and lawyers found that their muddy language was hiding mistakes, and Balmford concluded that “plain language *improves* accuracy, certainty, and precision” (“Beyond a Movement” my emphasis).

Balmford listed a number of official rulings and comments to this effect. Here is one such, a comment on a ruling from Lord Reid of the English House of Lords: ““This clause does not make sense as it stands. But the client must not be penalized for his lawyer’s slovenly draft-

ing... I must consider whether underlying the words used any reasonably clear intention can be discerned... I was surprised to learn that this botched clause had somehow found its way into a standard book of precedents...” (qtd. in “Beyond a Movement”). An even stronger endorsement of plain language was voiced by Merwan Saher, the director of communications with the office of the Alberta auditor general, who noted that “...clear, concise writing influences our audit rigor by identifying the need for more thought or evidence. In summary, by exposing unsupported audit recommendations, plain language improves audit quality” (qtd. in “Beyond a Movement”).

The improvement of audit quality and rigor is directly analogous to student paper quality. Thought itself in these departments improved, simply by writing with strong verbs and nouns, organizing thoughts, and using everyday language. Plain style has a direct relation to thinking—it forces the student to get concepts down concretely, just as Orwell said it did. Of course, clear writing has long been upheld by first-year composition teachers in their rubrics and their instruction, for the benefit of clear communication. But the true benefit of plain writing, of making the student put it in her own words, is not just clarity. It is the written expression of intellectual comprehension.



## CHAPTER 2: THE PLAIN STYLE

There is a common misconception of plain style, which runs: “plain” writing is boring, technical, by-the-book, logical, free from emotion, and otherwise free from any poetic expression. Nora Bacon makes this case in “Style in Academic Writing,” which she attributes to a “tension between style and substance, between language that ‘dazzles’ and language designed primarily to express truth” (176). Plain style is the latter. Bacon then singles out the *The Elements of Style* as a study in contradiction. The lessons of the book provide the “plain” sort of advice, Bacon writes, but E. B. White’s chapter “An Approach to Style” has a “wonderful time fooling around with language” (176). Which in fact is no contradiction at all: it only appears so because Bacon has pictured a dusty, bureaucratic style as plain, when plain style is really about *clarifying meaning*. Plain prose can be deeply eloquent, as Oliver Goldsmith writes:

What we clearly conceive, says Boileau, we can clearly express. I may add, that what is felt with emotion is expressed also with the same movements; the words arise as readily to paint our emotions, as to express our thoughts with perspicuity... In a word, to feel your subject thoroughly, and to speak without fear, are the only rules of eloquence, properly so called, which I can offer. Examine a writer of genius on the most beautiful parts of his work, and he will always assure you that such passages are generally those which have given him the least trouble, for they came as if by inspiration... (“Of Eloquence”)

E. B. White, in “An Approach to Style,” was expressing a writer’s appreciation and respect for writing. But the chapter was written in plain style—White used his words for the sake of his meaning, not for the mere sake of words themselves (97-120).

The rest of this chapter will show that rhetoric does not completely account for plain style, nor should it try to. We will begin by construing the general characteristics of rhetoric from the work of such scholars as Erika Lindemann, James Kinneavy, and E. P. J. Corbett. The broad picture of rhetoric assembled from these scholars will then be contrasted against writing principles voiced by E. B. White, Peter Elbow, and Donald Murray. I posit that principles from these latter three scholars are in fact plain style, and will use the history of rhetoric and plain style, as presented by Morris Croll and George Williamson, to argue this. In the final section we can begin to examine a modern trend in rhetoric: the purely rhetorical viewpoint that reality is discourse and that human beings are conditioned by ideology, as promoted by Carolyn Miller in “A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing.”

### **Two Halves**

Rhetoric, broadly speaking, is the study of what makes communication effective. To determine what will be “effective,” to be able to counsel, rhetoric must know the context: this includes author, purpose for writing, audience, common ground between author and audience, and the form of the text itself (*First Essays* 5-6). This concept—the effectiveness of communication—has been expressed various ways. E. P. J. Corbett, for example, said that we should understand rhetoric “as the discipline concerned with the inter-relationships among a speaker or writer, his message, and the audience” (26). Corbett continued, that “[c]onsciousness of audience may well be the most important contribution that rhetoric can make...” in the composition classroom (30).

Erika Lindemann expanded on these characteristics with her “assumptions” of rhetoric (40). These assumptions include that rhetoric is both a practice and a study, e.g. we practice rhetoric by communicating, we study rhetoric in scholarship; that rhetoric is a “culturally deter-

mined, dynamic process,” (40) or in other words, rhetoric must know audience and context to be effective; and that the purpose of rhetoric is to “induce cooperation,” which is understood as “the intention of changing attitudes or behaviors, of explaining a subject matter, of expressing the self, or of calling attention to a text that can be appreciated for its artistic merits...” (40-41).

From these characteristics we see that rhetoric is a contextual study, one which must account for the different perspectives human beings take, and also a study based on the “whole” human being: her passions, her reason, her intuition, her emotions. We are almost ready to turn to plain style, save one more insight from James Kinneavy.

Kinneavy’s discourse theory has proven to be both influential and long-lasting.<sup>13</sup> In “The Basic Aims of Rhetoric” Kinneavy posited that a discourse itself, i.e. any instance of full communication, inherently contains its own rhetorical situation. Kinneavy expressed this, “By aim of discourse is meant the effect that the discourse is oriented to achieve in the average listener or reader for whom it is intended. It is the intent as embodied in the discourse, the intent of the work...” (297). The audience, the author, the purpose for writing, the form of the text, all to some degree can be derived solely from the discourse. To classify the aims themselves Kinneavy posited a fourth actor in the “communication process” (or rhetorical triangle): reality (301). Hence, a discourse aimed at the writer would be “expressive,” and a discourse aimed at reality would be “referential” (302).

Kinneavy’s realization that rhetorical effectiveness (or the rhetorical situation) is actually held by the discourse will prove to be useful later for my own project. For now, let us sum up the more general rhetorical features. First, rhetoric depends on context to make communication ef-

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<sup>13</sup> In 1972, E. P. J. Corbett surveyed the growing field of rhetorical scholarship, and citing Kinneavy, said that he believes “rhetoric ... is the discipline that can best equip our students to perform most of the social offices that devolve on them as citizens of the human community” (27). Twenty-five years later, Erika Lindemann again positioned Kinneavy’s work as a cornerstone in rhetorical theory in her textbook *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* (19-21).

fective: audience, purpose, constraints, etc. Second, audience plays a significant role in learning to communicate, and remains significant even after one has learned to communicate. And third, the existing discourse itself determines many rhetorical choices. Kinneavy puts it this way: “each aim of discourse has its own logic, its own kind of references, its own communication framework, its own patterns of organization, and its own stylistic norms” (304). But it is not simply the four aims which have their own logic and style—discourses can be more particular, like the discourse of the scholarly publication *Science* compared to the discourse of *Highlights*, or the discourse of Catholicism compared to the discourse of Presbyterianism.

Before entering the discussion of plain style we should note that rhetoric and plain style are almost always blended in writing (or all communication), so the plain/rhetorical division is somewhat artificial. However, after this section we will turn to historical periods in which communication, and thought, was almost wholly rhetorical. It will become clearer then why I have chosen these characteristics to distinguish plain style. The three characteristics are, first, that plain style takes a universal approach to writing, while rhetoric adapts to the norms of the particular discourse group; second, that plain style de-emphasizes audience, and stresses the writer; and third, that plain style tends to focus not on the conventions of discourse, but on the writer “putting it in his own words.”

Properly speaking, plain style begins to separate from rhetoric in the approach plain stylists take toward their style. Such stylists are not fanatics, but they *are* certain their way is better. Here is what I mean: “Will [Strunk] knew where he stood. He was so sure of where he stood, and made his position so clear and so plausible, that his peculiar stance has continued to invigorate me...” (Strunk and White xv). This was how E. B. White introduced a new generation of writers to plain style. In part, White was warning of the strictures (one might even say suffering) that

learning plain style entailed. But his real point was personal. One who finally “got” plain style would see an inherent excellence, a moral goodness—“the Strunkian attitude toward right-and-wrong”—to writing this way (xvii).

This “attitude toward right-and-wrong” carried over into all aspects of Strunk and White’s style guide. *The Elements of Style* was not written for the discourse of scientists, journalists, and no one else. The very name, “elements,” implies a fundamental measure for all writing, which White declares was exactly his former professor’s purpose: “It was Will Strunk’s *parvum opus*, his attempt to cut the vast triangle of English rhetoric down to size and write its rules and principles on the head of a pin” (xii). Joseph Williams, whose text *Style* I rely on for my pedagogy, takes the same universal tone. Williams opens *Style* saying “This book is based on two principles: it’s good to write clearly, and anyone can” (2). Williams takes this further, and on the back cover claims, “In only ten brief lessons, *Style* helps writers compose readable prose on any subject, for any purpose” (*Style*).

Plain style continues to distinguish itself in its treatment of audience. It would be oversimple, and false, to say such writers simply ignore their audience. White, for example, admonished courtesy from the writer to keep the reader in the loop, saying “It is now necessary to warn you that your concern for the reader must be pure: you must sympathize with the reader’s plight (most readers are in trouble about half the time)...”—but this only sets up his true advice, which is “never seek to know the reader’s wants. Your whole duty as a writer is to please and satisfy yourself, and the true writer always plays to an audience of one” (120). Donald Murray noted that this attitude is a common among writers, in his article “Teaching the Other Self: The Writer’s First Reader” (87). Murray lists such authors as Edward Albee, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Edmund Blunden, and Rebecca West, who all have echoed the same sentiment. In the article

Murray describes the writing process as a conversation between a pair, one the writer and the other the critic—an audience of “two,” in a schizophrenic sort of way. But any other audience, any other reader, should be kept out of mind until the author finds what he is trying to say (87-89). And Peter Elbow echoes this advice in “Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Writing.” He claims that to find the “strong, authentic voice in our writing,” writers should forget their audiences while drafting (339).

In another of Elbow’s articles, “Reflections on Academic Discourse,” he rephrases this argument for voice (and argues against teaching only the discourse of academia), claiming that students should be encouraged to write in ordinary vernacular that “render[s] experience” (136). Elbow explains that this sort of plain language aids critical thought, in mostly the same terms Balmford claimed plain language helped legal discourse: “The use of academic discourse often masks a lack of genuine understanding. Putting it crassly, students can do academic work even in street language—and indeed using the vernacular helps show whether the student is doing real intellectual work or just using academic jive” (Elbow 149). Street language may not quite be plain style, but it is much closer than academic writing.

These three concepts—attempting clarity in prose, putting audience out of mind while composing, and writing early drafts in ordinary language—do not seem out of the ordinary. Yet this advice is peculiarly anti-rhetorical: What sort of discourse would you compose by following White’s counsel to write only for yourself? Perhaps we would assign all of White’s essays and editorials a mostly expressive aim, per Kinneavy’s theory, but such a classification seems to miss his (and the other writer’s) point.<sup>14</sup> Mike Rose, in an article on teaching remedial writers, explained this failure of Kinneavy’s theory: “Reflexive, exploratory discourse has been too exclusively linked to ‘personal’ writing, writing that deals with making sense of one’s own feelings

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<sup>14</sup> Kinneavy himself noted that most discourse had more than one “aim” (297).

and experiences. In fact, making meaning for the self, ordering experience, establishing one's own relation to it is what informs any serious writing" (203).<sup>15</sup> Many fiction writers (such as White) write this sort of prose, I believe, prose "aimed" at the writer that seems to take "reality" as its subject. In fact, the "expressivists" Murray and Elbow I believe argue the same. It is not coincidence that expressivism is also anti-rhetorical (to a degree).

### **The Past**

There are two very famous historical periods in which plain stylists rebuffed rhetoricians. The first of these is ancient Greece, and is mostly remembered through a number of Socratic dialogues. The "Gorgias" recounts a meeting between Socrates and Gorgias, who chanced to meet the morning after a party. Following some pleasantries, the real dialogue began, when Socrates put a question to Gorgias "[W]ith what is rhetoric concerned?"; to which Gorgias responded, "With discourse" ("Gorgias" 2009). For the remainder of the conversation Socrates painted Gorgias' art unflatteringly, comparing it to cookery which makes food taste good whether it is healthful or not. Aristotle was more tolerant of rhetoric, and in his *Rhetoric* offered some of the first "plain" advice in history: "Style to be good must be clear, as is proved by the fact that speech which fails to convey a plain meaning will fail to do just what speech has to do... Clearness is secured by using the words (nouns and verbs alike) that are current and ordinary" (Book 3 Chpt. 2).

The second period, and nearer to our own age, is the latter years of the Renaissance. Lindemann includes a brief summary of the time, describing it as a "war" between a scientific plain style and a more ornate, oratorical style (49). The scientific stylists stressed invention and looked to the ancients, particularly Seneca, as their model for prose. Lindemann names Francis Bacon as one of the promoters of the scientific style, and describes such prose as "characterized

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<sup>15</sup> From "Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and a Proposal"

by relatively short sentences, simple words, and little ornamentation. A plain style, a code similar to mathematics, best expresses the precise, objective observations of scientists” (49). Morris Croll expanded on the history of the age in *Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm*. This time, he writes, was in fact “the formative period of modern prose style,” for the good reason that it marked the end of the spoken age in Europe and the beginning of the written one (62). During the Renaissance, European life (of the wealthy) was lived in grand halls and courts, where orators would declaim in the ornate Ciceronian style. As books and writing proliferated, the verbal “schemes” which were so effective spoken aloud proved tedious on the written page, which in part helped shift prose to the plainer style (Croll 63).

However, European culture and education itself were shifting, and this was where the real victory for the latter stylists originated. In the early sixteenth century, education was a matter of learning the social customs and proprieties of court, and of memorizing by rote the ancients such as Plato and Aristotle. Croll referred to this sort of study as the *forms* of education (110). As the sixteenth century progressed, a new passion for learning began to emerge: the study of *matter*, or the critical examination of facts and human experience (Croll 111-113). Francis Bacon, in *The Advancement of Learning*, compared the two ages: “It appeareth also that Logic differeth from Rhetoric, not only as the fist from the palm, the one close the other at large; but much more in this, that Logic handleth reason exact and in truth, and Rhetoric handleth it as it is planted in popular opinions and manners” (Chapter XVII Sect. 5). For scientists looking to describe “exact” truth, the ornate Ciceronian schemes got in the way; meanings were best displayed in plain prose.

This plain prose was not a mathematical code, as Lindemann suggests, nor was it promoted solely by the new scientists. Desiderius Erasmus, a humanist and scholar, was actually the



first to begin mocking the emptiness of the ornate style (Williamson 12-13). The essayist Michel de Montaigne and the Neo-Stoic philosopher Justus Lipsius both rejected grandiose oratory as well, favoring Seneca's plainer style (Williamson 121-122). And for a time, these plain stylists and their study—reflection, skepticism, and philosophy—were even more important than science (Croll 66). This is why our expressivists, Murray and Elbow, reveal flashes of an anti-rhetorical stance. To find the “authentic” voice in our writing—or as Don Murray put it, “. . . those words that may reveal a truth, that may reveal a voice” (2009)—puts every writer in the role of Montaigne, or Bacon, or Socrates. It is the work to put into words what “I” really mean.

### **In My Own Words**

In this final section we look at one last aspect of plain style thus far not explicitly mentioned: the truth. It has been spoken in the above remarks, in fact in many of them: an authentic voice, a Strunkian right-and-wrong, a logic that handles reason “exact and in truth.” Plain style does seem to bear a certain affinity for truth. However, this truth is not in the sense that plain style knows something rhetoricians (or anyone else) cannot grasp. Rather, the plain style's perpetual focus is on the author's meaning, so it makes sense that these meanings are what *I* really believe, and that my meaning in some way is who I am. Richard Eastman, for example, said “that style is outlook and that outlook is discovered through the activity of writing itself” (Eastman ix). E. B. White said almost the same: “Writing is an act of faith, not a trick of grammar.” This moral observation would have no place in a rule book were it not that style *is* the writer, and therefore what you are, rather than what you know, will at last determine your style. If you write, you must believe—in the truth and worth of the scrawl. . .” (White 120). And Orwell, the quintessential plain stylist, said that “The great enemy of plain language is insincerity” (“Politics”).<sup>16</sup> By

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<sup>16</sup> Strunk and White probably deserve the title of quintessential plain stylists as well.

this, Orwell does not just single out deception—Orwell means those who are too lazy to truly search for what they mean.

This focus on truth is somewhat absent in rhetoric, or at least I never discovered mention of it in my research. It seems rather the opposite: the further that one adopts a rhetorical point of view, the more truth gets swept up as another context. In fact, Protagoras’ “man is the measure of all things” is not so very different from Marx’s “ideology”; in both, society is the creator of truth. Not everyone would agree that Marx was a rhetorician, however, and that topic is beyond the scope of this thesis. What we can say is that rhetoric has always tended to look for meaning in the social format, even in ancient Greece: “The sophistic scheme of education included a great use of oratory because it was founded on a study of politics; the individual man was conceived as a kind of mirror reflecting the character and interests of his town or state...” (Croll 55).

So long as rhetoric is balanced by an individual perspective, the political man (in the sense of the social man) is a necessary and beneficial component of life. As rhetoric re-entered the academy in the 1960’s and 1970’s, however, a number of rhetorical scholars rejected this balance. Carolyn Miller is one such.

Miller opens “A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing” with an interesting argument. The argument begins with a tribunal at the college she teaches, in which a number of professors are voting on whether a technical and scientific writing course should constitute a humanities credit. To vote in favor—that science writing is a humanities course—would remove the onus on technical students from having to take a literature class (Miller 610). Miller, a technical writing teacher, argued that her subject *should* constitute a humanities course, because science itself merely pretends at “positive” knowledge. That is to say, literature and science are interchangeable because both are fiction.

Miller begins this argument by defining positivism as “the conviction that sensory data are the only permissible basis for knowledge” (612). She notes that in this positivist perspective, language must simply get out of the way of truth, and also calls it a form of “intellectual coercion,” since we must “accept what Science has demonstrated. After all, if we do not see the self-evident, there must be something very wrong with us” (613). However, Miller continues, a new epistemology has been theorized “based on modern developments in cultural anthropology, cognitive psychology, and sociology... This new epistemology makes human knowledge thoroughly relative and science fundamentally rhetorical” (616). With these epistemological developments, Miller is able to survey what has become of science and technical writing:

Good technical writing becomes, rather than the revelation of absolute reality, a persuasive version of experience. To continue to teach as we have, to acquiesce in passing off a version as an absolute, is coercive and tyrannical; it is to wrench ideology from belief. Much of what we call technical writing occurs in the context of government and industry and embodies tacit commitments to bureaucratic hierarchies, corporate capitalism, and high technology. If we pretend for a minute that technical writing is objective, we have passed off a particular political ideology as privileged truth. (616)

Having made all scientific knowledge rhetorical, Miller ends the article saying we can define the rhetoric of science “as written communication based within a certain community and undertaken for certain communal reasons”—as discourse, essentially (617).

Themes from this article will continue to crop up in the next chapter, including positivism (or empiricism); ideologies; discourse; science; politics; and relativism. The most pernicious belief these rhetoricians pass off as truth is that the individual cannot find his own meanings; every-

thing is cloaked behind an ideology that is carried in discourse. And because plain style repudiates ideology, we will see these rhetoricians attack it.

### CHAPTER 3: MODERN CONTROVERSY

In the previous chapter we saw that plain style is tied to critical thought, individuality, and a notion of truth. Not all writers and scholars are enamored of the style, however, and some composition theorists actively promote a different style of writing. In this chapter we will examine the assertions of Carl Freedman, Judith Butler, Richard Ohmann, and James Berlin. I will argue their rejection of plain writing includes a denial of plain philosophy, and that these theorists urge a wholly-rhetorical worldview in the writing classroom to promote a progressive form of politics (as we saw with Carolyn Miller). I will use prior events, such as Alan Sokal's 1996 hoax article "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" to illustrate how obscure, abstract writing diminishes critical inquiry.

The theorists above are not representative of the whole field of rhetoric and composition scholarship, however. In the second half of this chapter we examine two sub-disciplines in the field, "literacy studies" and "new media," to determine how plain style can fit within rhetoric. Lastly, a place for rhetoric is made in plain style, by examining Nan Miller's "Postmodern Moonshine in English 101."

#### **The Argument for Obscurity**

A little more than a decade ago the scholarly journal *Philosophy and Literature* began hosting an annual "Bad Writing Contest" to spotlight the most pretentious, obscure, "jargon-clogged" scholarship from recent academia it could find (Dutton "Bad Writing"). Winners included Fredric Jameson, Roy Bhaskar, and Judith Butler.

In an editorial piece for the *New York Times* Butler defended herself against her bad writing award, and pointed out that news media ignored that "bad writing" winners came only from "scholars on the left whose work focuses on topics like sexuality, race, nationalism and the

workings of capitalism” (“A ‘Bad’ Writer”). However, she continues, the trend does raise the question: “[W]hy are some of the most trenchant social criticisms often expressed through difficult and demanding language?” (“A ‘Bad’ Writer”). Butler answered that her “difficult and demanding” style itself helped challenge “common sense” thinking that harbors social injustices (“A ‘Bad’ Writer”). That is to say, the very form of her discourse worked to undo social inequalities as much as the message contained in the words. Conversely, Butler also implied that a message in simple and clear language works to maintain the status quo; unknown to the plain speaker, such common language is a promotion of the “hegemonic.”<sup>17</sup> Butler did not argue the truth of her assertions in her op-ed, resting instead on the authority of the Frankfurt school. A number of theorists have argued the merits of these claims, however. Around the same time Janet Emig and Donald Murray began popularizing writing as a process, Carl Freedman and Richard Ohmann were publishing critiques of plain style and its ideology.

In “Use Definite, Specific, Clear Language,” Ohmann asserts that advising composition students to use such plain stylistic advice will “suggest to students that they be less inquiring and less intelligent than they are capable of being”; he also asserts that “teaching basic skills is an ideological activity” (384). To support the first claim Ohmann lists an exercise from a writing textbook in which a vague phrase is rewritten with greater detail. This is the less precise phrase: “The telephone is a great scientific achievement, but it can also be a great inconvenience. Who could begin to count the number of times that phone calls have come from unwelcome people or unwelcome occasions? Telephones make me nervous” (Skwire and Chitwood qtd. in Ohmann 385). Here is the phrase expanded in more concrete, specific language:

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<sup>17</sup> Butler’s expanded argument: Common sense and the status quo are often unknowingly corrupted by unjust beliefs, e.g. slavery is a social good. This invisible, corrupting force is called “hegemony.” Scholars (among others) have a duty to correct these injustices. The Frankfurt school, which comes from a tradition promoting social justice, has shown “how language plays an important role in shaping and altering our common or ‘natural’ understanding of social and political realities” (Butler “A ‘Bad’ Writer”). So, one way of fighting social injustice is to adopt an uncommon prose style.

The telephone is a great scientific achievement, but it can also be a great big headache. More often than not, that cheery ringing in my ears brings messages from the Ace Bill Collecting Agency, my mother (who is feeling snubbed for the fourth time that week), salesmen of encyclopedias and magazines, solicitors for the Policemen's Ball and Disease of the Month Foundation, and neighbors complaining about my dog. That's not to mention frequent wrong numbers—usually from someone named 'Arnie.' The calls always seem to come at the worst times, too... (Skwire and Chitwood qtd. in Ohmann 385-386)

Ohmann admits the added details make the sentence more specific, but says they “add no insight to it. The specific details close off analysis” (Ohmann 385-386). By “close off analysis” Ohmann means that the writer draws too heavily from a personal perspective and not enough on the social issues implied by the telephone. Ohmann lists a few more exercises of the same sort and dismisses them all based on their lack of social analysis.

We know from the previous chapter that many scholars would disagree with Ohmann's first premise, that students are “less inquiring and less intelligent” when they write in ordinary language from their own perspective. Mike Rose's claim seems especially pertinent, that “...making meaning for the self, ordering experience, establishing one's own relation to it is what informs any serious writing” (203). However, Ohmann's argument becomes most dubious when we realize that he pushes a particular brand of social analysis, a bias visible in three questions he would offer the student of the less precise “telephone” phrase.

- “How is it that so many of our scientists' ‘achievements,’ with all their promise of efficiency and ease, turn out to be so inconvenient or worse in the long run?” (386).

- “Why does an invention designed to give people control over their lives make many of us feel so often in the control of others?” (386).
- “Why does a device for bringing people together (as its proprietors are constantly telling us in commercials) in fact so often serve as the carrier of frictions and antagonisms?” (386).

These are loaded questions, to say the least. “What is the value of science?” is effectively what Ohmann asks, and he maintains this tone throughout the essay.<sup>18</sup> For example, in another vague-to-more-specific pair exercise (a description of an old country store), Ohmann re-asserts that details are blocking social analysis: “Such emphasis on visible surfaces... draws attention to a detached present experience, dissipating the image of an earlier kind of civilization in which most people lived on farms, the family was the main productive unit, few of people’s needs were commercialized, and technology was manageable and local” (388). Ohmann’s fallacy in both the telephone and country store example is that it is the *details* which make social analysis impossible. It seems more likely the textbook authors Skwire and Chitwood were simply demonstrating how to use detail to improve vague descriptions. More to the point is why the writer *should* have picked these specific qualities from all the other possible descriptions of a country store, including other aspects of social analysis.

Ohmann’s characterization of plain style is equally questionable. He describes the style itself as “solipsistic” and “empiricist,” which, aside from using “solipsistic” rather than “individual,” is how we described plain style in the previous chapter (390). Ohmann, however, puts a pejorative connotation on these words (or on empiricist, at least). He portrays a writer of plain

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<sup>18</sup> For example, in another passage comparing vague-to-more-specific, Ohmann says that writing in precise language and details “...draws attention to a detached present experience, dissipating the image of an earlier kind of civilization in which most people lived on farms, the family was the main productive unit, few of people’s needs were commercialized, and technology was manageable and local” (388).



prose as “a person incapable of coping with events, victimized by others, fragmented, distracted—a kind of likeable schlemiel. He or she may be a less ‘boring’ writer, but also a less venturesome and more isolated person, the sort who chatters on in a harmless gossipy way without much purpose...” (386). Yet Mark Twain criticized the injustice of slavery in plain style, Ernest Hemingway coped with the stress of war in plain style, and George Orwell was no schlemiel.

Ohmann’s article depends on the superficially plausible notion that descriptive words can only describe physical objects, and not emotions, not concepts, and not issues of social injustice. By the end of the essay, Ohmann has reached a conclusion startlingly similar to Judith Butler’s:

When in the cause of clarity and liveliness we urge them [students] toward detail, surfaces, the sensory, as mere *expansion* of ideas or even as a *substitute* for abstraction, we encourage them to accept the empirical fragmentation of consciousness that passes for common sense in our society, and hence to accept the society itself as just what it most superficially seems to be. (391 his emphasis)

This is the easy plausibility I spoke of. Plain style encourages vivid, direct writing, and if society has below-the-surface forces working to further inequality, the perhaps plain thinking would be ill-equipped to identify them. However, Ohmann does not just tell us to look for these forces—he strongly suggests that technology has grown unmanageable, that science is of dubious value, and that “commercialization” is a problem. That plain style can engage these topics is doubtless.

Why Ohmann asserts that plain style cannot is a question worth considering: I believe it is the nature of empirical and “solipsistic” thought itself that Ohmann is rejecting. An *individual* can weigh Ohmann’s position, the positions of others, and from her experience<sup>19</sup> draw her own conclusions. But then, she might decide she enjoys her telephone and the other benefits of science

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<sup>19</sup> None of the above authors mentioned this, but “empiricism” from the time of Aristotle’s *Organon*, and including the empiricists Locke and Hume, was fundamentally tied to experience.

and technology. Hence Ohmann, in his criticisms of specific and clear language, points to the very features we have been looking for: critical thought and broad-mindedness.<sup>20</sup>

Carl Freedman rests the majority of his arguments against plain style on similar assumptions as Butler's and Ohmann's.<sup>21</sup> However, in "Writing, Ideology, and Politics: Orwell's 'Politics and the English Language' and English Composition" Freedman offers one original criticism of Orwell's plain style. The criticism begins with Orwell's advice, "When you think of a concrete object, you think wordlessly, and then, if you want to describe the thing you have been visualizing you probably hunt about until you find the exact words that seem to fit it" ("Politics"). As Freedman sees it, almost all words, even the most material ones, involve some level of abstraction: "Even words so particular as, say, *dog* or *tree* do involve considerable generalization and linguistic mediation. What do you see if you try to 'think wordlessly' (as Orwell says) of the referent *dog*?" (Freedman 331).

Admittedly, one does not see much of anything by thinking of the "referent" dog. However, Orwell's advice was to "...think wordlessly, and then... hunt about until you find the exact words that seem to fit it." ("Politics"). Freedman did not start by asking his reader to picture a dog—he gave the word, *dog*, and then asked us to visualize it. Had we imagined the dog first, we would have pictured a particular dog and then described it in particular words. So, strangely, Freedman has offered a convincing demonstration confirming Orwell's point.

To stay for the moment on the topic of Orwell: if we examine "Politics" we see that Butler and Orwell begin their arguments in relative harmony, "that the worst thing one can do with words is surrender to them..." ("Politics"). Or as Butler seems to say, to avoid being misled we

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<sup>20</sup> My thanks to Michael Scrivener and Louis Finkelman's "The Politics of Obscurity: The Plain Style and its Detractors," Steven Roney's "Postmodernist Prose and George Orwell," and Stewart Justman's "Orwell's Plain Style." These articles provided much needed insight into the opponents of plain style.

<sup>21</sup> Empiricism seems to be the catchword for many of these theorists: Freedman writes, "The issue here [in plain style] is the limitations of empiricism itself, with its impossible quest for the unmediated particular abstracted from context..." (334).

must scrutinize the words of common sense. But the critical theorists absolutely break with Orwell in their solution. Butler claims we should fight common words with uncommon words, and substitute jargon in place of direct, clear prose. Further, Freedman, Butler, and Ohmann all at least imply the same sort of conspiracy theory, that “ideology” subjugates individuals who use plain language. This is a radical idea, but we gave a charitable voice to the wisdom that argues this line of thought. It was found wanting. So what of less charitable views?

### **A Plain Response**

Denis Dutton, former editor of *Philosophy and Literature*, wrote that he grew “fed up” with Judith Butler’s sort of writing and so began the bad writing contest (“Language Crimes”). Here is her winning sentence, selected from an article in *Diacritics*:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power. (qtd. in “Language Crimes”)

As Dutton explains, the contest rules state that obscurity of style alone was insufficient to count as “bad writing.” Authors won because they were *deliberately* dense—the author conceivably could have conveyed the same message in much plainer language, but chose not to (or perhaps had grown accustomed to writing in such language) (Dutton *Language Crimes*).

Recall that seventeenth-century plain stylists charged the Ciceronians with empty, inflated words as well. Dutton's accusation is more serious than theirs, and we should distinguish between the ancient orators and the modern theorists. Most noticeably, the Ciceronians did not "beat the reader into submission [with their technical jargon]," but charmed the listener with speech (Dutton "Language Crimes"). In this sense, though, Ciceronian and theorist are the same. The former appealed to *pathos* with the beauty of his language, the latter to *ethos* with the difficulty of his writing, but both relied on surface features of language rather than originality or profundity of thought. Both are rhetoricians. What separates them is a quality only the Ciceronian possesses—the artistry of spoken language. This art is like music, and a Ciceronian's speech, even at its worst, was a sort of ancient pop song: catchy melody, vapid lyrics. The Ciceronian was upfront about his preference. He wanted to write speeches, he was not concerned with matter. The theorist tells a different story. He is concerned about matter so abstract and deep that ordinary language cannot express it. According to the "bad writing contest" rules, then, while the Ciceronian and theorist are both rhetors, only the latter could be a "bad writing" winner.

Of course, Butler and the other contest winners truly might believe they must write in obscure language. But should they argue that obscure prose should be taught in first-year composition? A leading group of philosophers tied clean language with rigor just a few years prior to Butler's bad writing award. In a public letter to Cambridge University, the philosophers petitioned university scholars to decline Jacques Derrida's honorary degree for reasons including a "written style that defies comprehension," and for "work [that] does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigor" (Smith "Barry Smith"). And in between the years of the Derrida letter and Butler's award, a sort of proof was delivered to the postmodern community that greater clarity might indeed be called for.

In 1996, New York University physicist Alan Sokal wrote an article and submitted it to *Social Text*, Duke University's cultural studies publication. *Social Text* published the article in a special "Science Wars" edition. Two months after its publication, Sokal announced to the world that his essay on postmodern science had been a parody, an article "liberally salted with nonsense." Sokal claims it was published anyway because "(a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editors' ideological preconceptions" (*A Physicist Experiments*). By "sounded good," Sokal meant that his article mimicked the style of postmodern theorists. As for the "ideological preconceptions" it flattered—Sokal downplayed scientific truth, cited numerous luminaries in the postmodern field, and concluded his essay with "the content and methodology of postmodern science provide powerful intellectual support for the progressive political project" (*A Physicist Experiments*).

Sokal explained he wrote the parody because he "had become troubled by an apparent decline in the standards of intellectual rigor in certain precincts of the American academic humanities" ("A Physicist Experiments"). He was particularly concerned, he wrote, by the denial of objective reality that was fashionable in these areas. If there can be no standards, no right and wrong answer, then truth depended on whether "it sounded good."

The clarity of thought enjoined by plain style is no guarantee to truth, nor is it a proof against mistakes in thought. Instead, for the reader, plain prose is a display case, with ideas exposed and arranged so that discrepancies and absurdities cannot hide. For the writer, fully exposing her ideas motivates her to think well and get her meaning right. The principle likely would have saved *Social Text* much embarrassment. Had Sokal written, "Reality does not exist," it is unlikely his article would have been published, but couched as "it has become increasingly ap-

parent that ‘physical reality,’ no less than ‘social reality,’ are at bottom a social and linguistic construct”—well, it sounded good.

### **Modern Sophist**

Judith Butler argued explicitly against plain style, and we have seen reason to believe she was wrong. In this section we will examine the implicit ways modern composition theory works against plain style. Before we begin, a brief explanation will help one understand how I mean this.

Socrates and Orwell were odious to sophists for a trait both shared: their penchant to look at the world to understand the real way things are. Neither man claimed to have absolute or complete knowledge. Both simply took as self-evident that with observation, reflection, and common sense, they could separate some of what was true from what was not. The “plain style” was their attempt to put into words their ideas on reality, as fully and as clearly as they could. For the plain stylist, then, reality is a check on the use and misuse of words. Rhetoricians are distinguished from plain stylists, among other reasons, by their study and love for words, for discourse itself. This is why, when a rhetor turns to sophistry, we so often hear the rejection of objective truth. The easiest way to elevate words above reality is to deny the latter in the first place, and from Gorgias to Judith Butler, this is precisely what has occurred.

One of the first Americans to introduce relative truth to composition scholarship was Robert Scott. In his 1967 “On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic,” Scott looked at the current state of rhetoric in America and decided its insignificance was due our belief in truth. He reasoned that if most truths were shown to miss the full standard of certainty, rhetoric would gain new life (Scott 15-17). So he reprised an argument at least as old as the Italian scholar Giambattista Vico:

essentially, the overwhelming majority of things a human “knows” he cannot say he knows with absolute certainty (16).

Scott’s description of the mechanics of “rhetoric as epistemic” was unclear, but twenty-one years later composition theorists had filled in the gaps and put a slight variation on the name: “Social-epistemic rhetoric.” James Berlin was an architect of this theory, and in “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” he summarizes its major tenets. To begin with, all the human being knows of himself, other people, and the material world is conditioned by language. There are no individuals, so to speak, merely products of an interchange between cultural customs and politics, which are inherited through language. There are many different “languages” (rhetorics), but all serve some ideology—none are “innocent.” And finally, there is no reality that undergirds language, at least none that a human can know (Berlin 477-479). Even more disturbing, Berlin’s system makes writing a secondary concern in the “liberated” composition classroom: “Yet, as Ira Shor makes clear, the point of this classroom is that the liberated consciousness of students is the only educational objective worth considering, the only objective worth the risk of failure. To succeed at anything else is no success at all” (492).

Alan Sokal wrote that his hoax article could have been published only because of “a sophomoric skepticism, a bland (or blind) agnosticism...” that pervades a few circles in academia (*A Physicist Experiments*). In curious two-part logic, the theorist first declares we cannot know truth, and we cannot trust our instincts or common sense. The theorist then simply acts as though he has the truth—that he fights the hegemonic, that the hegemonic fights him—and any challenge or second-guessing to him is a naïve product of the hegemonic.<sup>22</sup> This is pure rhetoric, and

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<sup>22</sup> Oceania is always at war.

more than that, it is sophistry. One is reminded, reading Berlin's passage, of Kinneavy's warning in "The Basic Aims of Discourse":

In speech departments where persuasion was, for too long a time, too prominent, two cancerous effects have often followed: first, expository or reference discourse is assimilated into and made equivalent to persuasion and Aristotelian rhetorical proofs are extended to all discourse; secondly, even literature is reduced to persuasion, and some modern theories of oral interpretation now speak of the oral interpreter's function as one of coercing the audience into a desired emotional attitude. (304)

That these critical theorists have hidden in plain sight as rhetorical scholars makes sorting the valid from the fraudulent more difficult, but not impossible.

### **Rhetoric and Composition**

Whatever Robert Scott's purpose or influence, the study of rhetoric has blossomed. My plain-style pedagogy will fit within this field, but two issues must be addressed. First, rhetoricians and plain stylists have a history of disagreement that would make one skeptical of cooperation. A demonstration that the current rhetorical field can welcome plain style would be useful. Second, many of the concepts rhetorical scholars use are likewise used by critical theorists and postmodernists. These latter theorists are utterly opposed to plain style (and the feeling is mutual), but the concepts are not in themselves guilty; a way to dispel suspicion, then, would be of benefit to plain style. We need the two to shake hands and put the past behind them.

Let us start with plain style's admission into rhetoric. The studies of new media and new literacy are young but established disciplines in rhetoric and composition that concentrate on the social aspects of communication. For the latter, literacy scholars David Barton and Mary Hamilton claim that "literacy is a social practice," and literacy itself is "more usefully understood as



existing in the relations between people” (8). For the former, Richard Lanham claims the internet will change conventions of copyright laws, the meaning of the words “text” and “author,” and the traditional format of the printed book (156).

Both new media and literacy studies have a strong social bent, and even reference the same concepts that critical theory does; e.g. Barton and Hamilton claim that literacies are “historically situated” and that there are “dominant literacies and vernacular literacies” (7-10). But the literacy scholars never claim that reading and writing condition individual behavior, or that the dominant literacies subversively work to support those in power. The closest they come to this sort of thinking is in their conclusion, when they write that “people’s understanding of literacy is an important aspect of their learning, and that people’s theories guide their actions” (12). Both seem patently true.

On the other hand, Richard Lanham makes the surprising claim that the internet will change the most fundamental processes of the human mind: “The idea of beginning-middle-end—the fundamental Aristotelian laws of artistic creation and indeed of rational thought itself—is called into question [by the internet]” (155). Greg Ulmer, another new media scholar, also asserts the internet will undo “Aristotle’s book logic,” and that where once man was “literate,” new patterns of thinking—juxtaposition, chora—will make him “electrate” (vii). These claims not only contradict the *a priori* truths of rational thought, they are implausible bordering on specious.

My point is not that plain-style pedagogy fits in new literacy studies but not new media. Rather, plain style will either find a place in rhetorical theory or not because of the method of the respective scholars themselves. The picture from Lanham and Ulmer is warped. It seems more likely the two decided what they wanted to be the case and wrangled reality to fit their facts. And

though in Barton and Hamilton the plain stylist finds an unusual perspective, reality is still visible through that perspective. We are social creatures who communicate constantly through reading and writing, and one only need try the written conventions of a lawyer to realize that her prose takes practice. Barton and Hamilton were empiricists about their work, then, and so plain style actually does not need to make a place in their scholarship. It was there from the start.<sup>23</sup>

The other side of this—how plain style can drop its guard against rhetorical theory—is again best seen through example. Nan Miller might not be a plain stylist, but she takes a strong position against the innovations of critical theory, e.g. Ira Shor and Paulo Freire (Miller 25).<sup>24</sup> I concur with Miller’s position on these two theorists. However, Miller makes a case against Erika Lindemann as well, and this case seems mistaken. How it occurs is a point worth noting, as it is one I believe plain stylists are apt to make.

In Miller’s “Postmodern Moonshine,” Lindemann is portrayed as a theorist-hijacker of the University of North Carolina and North Carolina State’s English programs, establishing her vision of first-year composition. Lindemann appears in three of Miller’s six fallacies of current composition pedagogy, including the following: Lindemann’s belief that first-year composition should “empower writers to membership in various discourse communities” (Lindemann qtd. in Miller 13); Lindemann’s belief that “the making of knowledge” and the “student-centered class” are appropriate aims of the composition class (Lindemann qtd. in Miller 21); and most poignant for Miller, Lindemann’s belief that literature has no place in the composition classroom (Miller 27).

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<sup>23</sup> It seems Barton and Hamilton share a trait with Linda Flower and John Hayes, who in turn share the trait with James Britton. All five posit theories, and after, all five ask: “‘But is that really how it happens?’” (Britton qtd. in Flower and Hayes 366).

<sup>24</sup> Ira Shor and Paulo Freire both advocate a “liberatory discourse,” a “...cultural action inside or outside a classroom where the status quo is challenged, where the myths of the official curriculum and mass culture are challenged” (Shor and Freire 12).

Lindemann's quotes sound like the trappings of a theorist such as Shor. However, when one begins to examine Lindemann's work, one discovers someone quite different. In *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, Lindemann says, "Writing permits us to understand not only the world but also the self. We discover who we are by writing" (7). She quotes approvingly from Bacon and Orwell in the same book, and offers several chapters of advice on teaching and writing strong, direct, clear—plain—prose. As far as Miller's latter claim, that of Lindemann's dismissing literature from the writing class—Miller asserts it is because Lindemann sees "Shakespeare and his ilk as carriers of oppressive Western values—racist, sexist, patriarchal, and imperialist" (Miller 28). When one turns to Lindemann's article "Freshman Composition: No Place for Literature," however, one finds a different argument. Lindemann claims that when an English professor is teaching a class with literature as its content, reading and teaching literature tend to overpower writing instruction (Lindemann 311-313). Lindemann never mentions, or even alludes, to "oppressive Western values," and throughout the article keeps the best interests of the student in mind.

So while Ira Shor, Paulo Freire, and Lindemann all promote a "student-centered class," one never hears Lindemann make claims of a "liberatory dialogue," or that the teacher is also a "politician" (Shor and Freire 11-12). In her own words on the class dynamic, Lindemann says:

For it is also true that a growing number of writing classes encourage students to use writing to interact with one another. They discuss work in progress with classmates. Their writing emerges from their own interests and accomplishes goals they have defined for themselves. Such classes enable students to see themselves as real writers and readers, engaged with others in using language to shape communities. (34)

This is a social form of teaching, but no rejection of individuality. Almost all students one day will find themselves a member of a group with the expectation to contribute, and to some degree conform.

One might disagree with Lindemann,<sup>25</sup> but Miller loses her credibility when we realize the Lindemann in “Postmodern Moonshine” is not the real Erika Lindemann. I do not believe Miller’s mischaracterization was on purpose; rather, I believe it arose from a common error of those who tend toward the rationalism of plain-style thinking. When one works very hard to achieve truths of reality, those truths are often accompanied by a growing sense of superiority. This is especially true of scientists and philosophers—Nietzsche, in one of his aphorisms, wrote “Whenever I climb, I am followed by a dog called ‘Ego.’” And Alan Sokal, looking back at the years leading up to the hoax, said, “A lot of the blame for this state of affairs rests, I think, with the scientists. The teaching of mathematics and science *is* often authoritarian” (“An Afterword”). This tendency to arrogance seems to have been a part of plain style always; the Stoic philosophers in Rome were never as popular as Cicero because their “haughtiness” turned off most people (Croll 48). This is, in part, the balance the rhetorical character brings to plain style: a tolerance, a good will for man in all his shapes and peculiarities, and even his imperfections.

Peter Elbow spoke of this mixture of plain style and rhetoric perfectly in an article on the balance of teaching: “I concluded that good writing requires on the one hand the ability to conceive copiously of many possibilities, an ability which is enhanced by a spirit of open, accepting generativity; but on the other hand good writing also requires an ability to criticize and reject everything but the best, a very different ability which is enhanced by a tough-minded spirit”

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<sup>25</sup> Gary Tate, in “A Place for Literature in Freshman Composition,” presented two possible objections: 1) There are too many academic discourses to teach them all (176), 2) The purpose of the liberal arts is to teach what it is to be a human being, and should not entirely be “professionalization” training (177). This latter sounds remarkably like Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus.

(“Embracing Contraries” 54).<sup>26</sup> We—individual people, I mean—have our tendencies, either to the open spirit or to the one tough-minded. What Elbow, Murray, Lindemann, Socrates, Barton, Bacon, Kinneavy, White, Sokal, Orwell, Aristotle, Balmford, and Montaigne had in common was that they had *both*.

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<sup>26</sup> From “Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process.”

## CHAPTER 4: THE PEDAGOGY

This chapter contains the lessons, syllabus, and related documents I have created for teaching plain style in first-year composition. I have heavily annotated the work with my comments, which are found in the footnotes. Below is the syllabus, planned for a fall semester 1101 English course.

### 4.1 Syllabus

English 1101 – Composition  
TTh 1:30 - 2:45 Aderhold 326

<b>Instructor</b>	Ben Austin
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#### Overview

Everyone in this class can write – the goal is to make you better at it.

I do have a specific idea in mind when I say “better at it.” When we write, we all write the same thing: our thoughts. Our readers judge the worth of our thoughts, and part of your grade will come from your logic, insight, and originality of thinking. I can help only a little with this. Just as important to me, however, is how clear and easy your thinking is to follow – another judgment that comes from your readers – and *this* is a product of writing craftsmanship, a skill I can help with. If you can master the principles of this craft you will be able to write in the *plain style*, which happens to be more interesting than its name suggests.

I will read your papers, as will your peers. But you will have us to assist you this semester only, so your most important reader must be **you** – you must learn to read carefully, to revise your work by the principles taught in this class, because then and only then will you improve.

### **Learning Outcomes**

- Learn to write as a process, including prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing.
- Learn to improve drafts through revision and editing.
- Learn to focus your thinking through revision.<sup>27</sup>
- Learn to be objective, and to argue effectively.
- Learn to write for different audiences and for different purposes.

### **Required Texts**

Singer, Marti and Cara Minardi, eds. *First Essays: A Peer Approach to Freshman Composition*.

3rd ed. United States of America: Hayden-McNeil Publishing, 2009. Print.

Williams, Joseph. *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity & Grace*. 4th ed. New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1994. Print.

Lunsford, Andrea. *The Everyday Writer Georgia State University Edition*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2009.

A notebook with pockets (only a suggestion)

PDF's may be found online; I will provide the addresses in class

### **Course Assignments**

- 60% of your final grade comes from three essays (20% each) you will write outside of class;
- 20% of your final grade comes from in-class quizzes, tests, essays, and peer reviews;<sup>28</sup>
- 10% of your final grade comes from homework exercises;

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<sup>27</sup> I consider this “write to learn.” But that expression might have a different meaning in English departments, e.g. the knowledge is socially constructed theory.

<sup>28</sup> I structure the course so that students peer review only in class. However, it might prove useful (especially if you have industrious students) to have in-depth peer reviews for homework.

- 10% of your final grade comes from the final.

### *Course Schedule*

#### **Week One<sup>29</sup>**

8/27: Course introduction and syllabus review.

8/29: In-class writing assessment “Writing Prompt.”

Assignment: “Politics and the English Language PDF”

#### **Week Two<sup>30</sup>**

9/3: “Politics” open-note quiz, worksheet.<sup>31</sup>

Assignment: “Eight Brief Tales of Lovers” PDF.

9/5: Introduction to revision and editing using “Writing Prompt”; Grammar quiz.

Assignment: Myth rough draft<sup>32</sup> due 9/12. Read “Shitty First Drafts” PDF.

#### **Week Three<sup>33</sup>**

9/10: Discuss “Eight Brief Tales of Lovers” in class, explain Peer Review process.

9/12: Myth rough draft due Peer Review Day.<sup>34</sup>

#### **Week Four<sup>35</sup>**

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<sup>29</sup>The first day is consistent with every first-year comp syllabus I read. The prompt topic on the second day does not much matter. You may want students to choose their own topic (e.g. “Tell me about something you’re good at doing,” so they write on something important to them and take more care composing. The teacher wants to get a feel for their personality, writing, and ability. I would suggest to students they take notes on Orwell.

<sup>30</sup> Orwell’s advice spans the course, which is why we open with him. The quiz may be something of a surprise, but I want students to understand they must keep up, and work. In fact, the first two weeks should give students an overview of the whole course: in-class lessons and exercises, and on 9/5, the application of those principles to their own work.

<sup>31</sup> The quiz tests student’s work ethic. The worksheet is similar, but I want it more practical and to include exercises.

<sup>32</sup> Do not tell students the full assignment, i.e. that they must pare down the draft the second time around. I don’t want students deliberately padding their work (at least as much as can be avoided).

<sup>33</sup> Intro to peer review includes an in-class worksheet. Tell the students that peer review is the first step of revision, which they will be doing to their own papers shortly. It’s important.

<sup>34</sup> Read these drafts, but don’t comment yet, or students will be overwhelmed with editors.



9/17: First lesson on basics: Unity, Development, and Organization worksheet.<sup>36</sup>

Assignment: Homework exercises<sup>37</sup>

9/19: Unity & Organization second day. Unity/Organization quiz.

Assignment: More exercises on unity and organization.

### **Week Five**

9/24: Myth revision due.<sup>38</sup> Revision lesson two: Idea development and reason.

Assignment: Read “Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Offenses” PDF.<sup>39</sup> Begin thinking of your critique/problem-solving topic.<sup>40</sup>

9/26: Revision Lesson Two Continued. Illustrate development and evidence with Fenimore Cooper. Discuss critique assignment.

Assignment: Critique topics;<sup>41</sup> write an outline or one-page essay that includes the topic, thesis, and evidence. Due 10/1

### **Week Six**

10/1: Idea development continued. Peer review topic, thesis, and evidence.

Homework: Exercises. Begin writing Critique Rough Draft.

10/3: Editing Lesson One: *Style* “Clarity 1: Actions” exercises 3-1, 2, 3, 4

<sup>35</sup> The class determines, to some degree, how long the teacher remains in the two revision lessons. This is because the criterion for passing this class is college-ready writing ability, which I define as the ability to write an essay that needs no heavy revision. Please see my rubric for further explanation.

<sup>36</sup> Use one story from “Eight Brief Tales” and as a class go paragraph by paragraph, explaining organization. The teacher may want to bring other works (such as compare/contrast pieces, argumentative essays, etc.) to demonstrate unity and different organization techniques.

<sup>37</sup> If students had a hard time with focus or with organization on the prompt, you may want to reassign that.

<sup>38</sup> Would the class benefit from another revision with teacher’s comments? The teacher must play this by ear, but I would suggest that if students on the whole struggled to find the right words to cut out, the teacher should add another revision.

<sup>39</sup> Include a guided response with broad questions to help students piece together how Twain succeeded.

<sup>40</sup> Some students will not want to critique. So turn the assignment into a problem-solving essay, and in class on 9/26 show that Twain’s work, toned down, is a problem-solving exercise of sorts. Problem solving still tests analytical ability and reasoning.

<sup>41</sup> Teachers may prefer to save arguments for the final section, in which case the Profile assignment may be swapped here.

Assignment: Critique rough draft due 10/8. Also, score your critique on a scale of 0-4 for unity, organization, and evidence. Each category gets one score. Provide a three to four sentence justification for each score, and cite specific reasons why.<sup>42</sup>

### **Week Seven<sup>43</sup>**

10/8: Critique rough draft and self-score due. Editing Lesson One Continued.

Assignment: *Style* “Clarity 1: Actions” cont. exercises 3-9, 10, 11, 12.

10/10: Conferences.

### **Week Eight**

10/15: Midpoint: Last day to withdraw with a “W.” Conferences continue.

10/17: Editing Lesson Two: *Style* “Clarity 2: Characters” 4-1, 2, 4.

Assignment: Homework exercises.

### **Week Nine**

10/22: Discuss the two readings in class. Editing Lesson Three: *Style* “Concision” 5-1, 2, 3, 4

Homework: Exercises

10/24: Critique Final due. “Concision” continued.

### **Week Ten**

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<sup>42</sup> The critique score might be more useful after the actual critique has been finished, since students might simply write the score immediately after they finish. The purpose is to have them review their own work to spot weaknesses, and to let you (the teacher) know how ably they do so.

<sup>43</sup> I picked this week to begin conferences so teachers can meet with students who are struggling, not working, etc. before the midpoint. Advise them to drop, if need be. Concentrate on the critique assignment (or minor but consistent flaws) in everyone else’s conference. Student’s self-critiques should give you an idea of their ability at revising their own work. It’s up to the teacher (and the teacher’s available time) to hand back Critique rough drafts with comments, or save them for 10/22. This could be a real problem if students begin their revision before 10/22, so advise them accordingly—it might be to the student’s benefit to take a week off this assignment, and the teacher could assign exercises during the conference days.

10/29: Editing Lesson Review: Agents and Actions, Nouns and Verbs, and Concision.

Test.

Assignment: Take Wednesday off. Actually, decide what your profile will be.

10/31: Discuss Profile topics in-class.

### **Week Eleven**

11/5: Profile Rough Drafts Due. Editing Lesson Five: *Style* “Cohesion and Coherence” 6-1, 2

Assignment: Exercises.

Revise your Myth piece one last time. It is due 11/21.<sup>44</sup>

11/7: Lesson Five Continued. *Style* “Cohesion and Coherence” 6-4, 5, 8

Assignment: Exercises.

### **Week Twelve**

11/12: Return Profile Rough Drafts. Revision due 11/21.

Editing Lesson Six: *Style* “Emphasis”: 7-1, 2, 3

11/14: Lesson Six Cont.

### **Week Thirteen**

11/19: Editing Lesson Seven: *Style* “Elegance” 10-1, 2, 4

11/21: Peer Review Profile Assignment. A lesson in editing.<sup>45</sup>

### **Week Fourteen**

11/26: Thanksgiving Break

11/28: Thanksgiving Break

### **Week Fifteen**

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<sup>44</sup> I let a month pass before re-assigning this so the students will read their work with fresh eyes.

<sup>45</sup> I don't know how successful peer editing the second draft will be after the teacher commented on the first draft.

12/3: Final Lesson: Rules made to be broken *Style* “Correctness”<sup>46</sup>

12/5: Final revision of “Profile Article” due; Final class discussion.

FINAL 12/12 (I invented the date):<sup>47</sup> “The Great Enemy of Clear Language is Insincerity” prompt. Grammar exercises.

### **\*Interpreting the Course Schedule**

Pay attention to the progression of **lessons** of the course. Like a mathematics class, we begin with fundamentals and continue to more complex techniques. But everything builds on the foundation, and that means the most important lesson is the first. No matter how concise or deep an essay, without a unifying thought and organized structure, it cannot pass.

### **Attendance and Participation**

We will have regular in-class lessons, quizzes, and peer reviews. We will also discuss material as a class, and the final exam will be taken from these in-class exercises and discussions. It is vital you consistently show up and participate.

Every student gets one unexcused absence. A second unexcused absence is 5% off your final grade, a third absence for any reason is 5% off your final grade, and if you miss four classes you must come talk to me during office hours or you will be dropped from the class.

You must show up on time. After two warnings, I count each tardy an absence.

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<sup>46</sup> Most authors of stylebooks include this in an earlier section, so I might move this lesson (Orwell saved it for the end of his essay, though). Essentially, if a piece of writing follows none of the rules but works, it works. You have to learn the rules before you break them, though, or so I’ve been told.

<sup>47</sup> I do include a final. I deliberately put the prompt on the syllabus so students can begin thinking about what it means before they take the final. The final itself I have not included in my sample pedagogy.

### Peer Review<sup>48</sup>

On peer review days you must email me a copy of your draft before class and bring two paper copies to class. These copies will be read and commented on by two peers. While you do not have to follow their advice as you revise, you must save these copies and hand them in with your final draft.

*Your* peer reviews will be included in your class participation grade, so take care while reading and commenting on other's work.

### Grading<sup>49</sup>

The major essays will be written in drafts, and only the final draft will be graded. I consider two criteria when grading: the strength of the final draft, and every improvement up to that final draft. Some of your drafts will be commented on by your peers, some by me, but the final copy must include every prior copy, including all peer-reviewed work.

For each draft after the first you must submit a summary<sup>50</sup> of what you did to change your work and explain *why* you made those changes. If I feel you aren't taking the revision process seriously, you'll have to re-submit the next class period. If this is the final draft, you must re-submit by midnight the following day, or face late penalties.

Grades will be determined using the following scale:

A+	97-100
A	93-96
A-	90-92
B+	87-89
B	83-86
B-	80-82
C+	77-79
C	73-76

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<sup>48</sup> I suggest a sign-in sheet for peer review day; have students list their peer-reviewers so you can keep track.

<sup>49</sup> It's going to be more work going through each draft, but I think it's the best way. You (the teacher) want to see not just where your students struggle on their first draft, but also where they struggle to improve.

<sup>50</sup> Whether I comment on drafts or not I collect summaries every time. I should always have drafts through email so I can check to see students are taking the process seriously.

C- 70-72  
 D 60-69  
 F Below 60

Anything below a C is a failing grade.

### **Late Work**<sup>51</sup>

Work is due at the start of class.

For drafts except the final draft I deduct ten points from the final grade per **class period**.

For final drafts I deduct ten points from the final grade per **day**, including weekends.

### **Plagiarism**<sup>52</sup>

You plagiarize when you pass off someone else's ideas or writing as your own. **I take plagiarism seriously**. If this were a math class and I caught you cheating on a test, you would get a zero on that test. This is a writing class—if I catch you cheating on a paper I will report you to administration. If administration decides you may stay in the class, you must rewrite the paper, and the highest grade you can make **for the whole course** is a C-.

### **Incompletes:**

Receiving an Incomplete: The notation of "I" may be given to a student who, for nonacademic reasons beyond his or her control (e.g., a student is called to active duty), is unable to meet the full requirements of a course. In order to qualify for an "I", a student must:

- Have completed most of the major assignments of the course (generally all but one); and
- Be earning a passing grade in the course (aside from the assignments not completed) in the judgment of the instructor.

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<sup>51</sup> I want to encourage punctuality while discouraging students quitting mid-assignment. This is why I am more lenient for the middle drafts. If a class begins to have problems getting early drafts in on time, or if they aren't trying on early drafts, this policy should change.

<sup>52</sup> If it were up to me, plagiarism should be an immediate fail. It doesn't work that way apparently. During the class introduction I would be very specific about this section; let students know the difference between plagiarism and errors in citation, and urge them to annotate if they feel a quote or idea is questionable. The Orwell exercises (rephrasing quotes) on the third day should be another chance to explain plagiarism. Rephrasing a quote is something of a grey area (especially for students who would be tempted)—there should be no question.

When a student has a nonacademic reason for not completing one or more of the assignments for a course, including examinations, and wishes to receive an incomplete for the course, it is the responsibility of the student to inform the instructor in person or in writing of the reason. A grade of incomplete is awarded at the discretion of the instructor and is not the prerogative of the student. Conditions to be met for removing a grade of incomplete are established by the instructor.

### **For English Majors**

The English department at GSU requires an exit portfolio of all students graduating with a degree in English. Ideally, students should work on this every semester, selecting 1-2 papers from each course and revising them, with direction from faculty members. The portfolio includes revised work and a reflective essay about what you've learned. Each concentration (literature, creative writing, rhetoric/composition, and Secondary English) within the major may have specific items to place in the portfolio, so be sure to check booklet located next to door of the front office of the English Department. Senior Portfolio due dates are published in the booklets or you may contact an advisor or Dr. Dobranski, Director of Undergraduate Studies. See the English office for additional information.

### **Disability Services**

If you have a disability that may affect your performance in this class, please tell me by the end of the **first week** of class.

### **Writing Studio**

Writing tutors. The studio is on the ninth floor of General Classroom Building, room 976. The tutors will not edit your work, but they can show you how to improve your paper. No walk-ins, you must make an appointment at [www.writingstudio.gsu.edu](http://www.writingstudio.gsu.edu).

### **Online Evaluation of Instructor**

Your constructive assessment of this course plays an indispensable role in shaping education at Georgia State. Upon completing the course, please take time to fill out the online course evaluation.



## 4.2 Writing Guidelines and Rubric

I take an unconventional approach to grading which I explain in the guidelines. I include an explanation for teachers, an explanation for students, and a more traditional rubric below those.

### GRADING GUIDELINES

(My comments for teachers)

The writing student's process of learning differs from most subjects; he isn't taught facts outside of his knowledge so much as he comes to understand what he already possesses. Learning this way, he sets his own bar and teaches himself to reach it, and then surpass it. This personal bent of writing is an advantage for the writing teacher. With the student making his own limits, no matter how good he is, he can challenge himself. And that's where real improvement begins.

I have tried to build my pedagogy around this advantage. The whole class cannot be graded solely on improvement, because first-year composition must test the student's ability to write at the college level. I award seventy points, a passing grade, to papers demonstrating minimal college-level writing skill. The other thirty points are devoted to motivating students to improve—twenty-five points for progress made during revisions, and the final five for individual talent, bringing the total to a possible one hundred points per assignment.<sup>53</sup> I believe that every student will hit a wall at some point during the drafts. This wall isn't the limit of the student's ability, but the point at which he considers a paper done. The most important draft he writes, then, will be the next one. He must make this draft better.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> If two students work equally hard on all drafts, but one student's final product has some special quality, the teacher needs a way to acknowledge it.

<sup>54</sup> Some students will never be satisfied. A part of the teacher's job is to teach students when it is enough, and to stop.

I worry how my pedagogy will work in real life. Students might wait for revisions to begin trying, and better students might deliberately write first drafts below their ability to make revision easier. But I give teachers credit, too. I bet teachers usually know about how much a student tried. And if the right tone for the class is set, I believe students can learn excellent habits.

(Student section)

I grade on two criteria: 1) Whether a document displays college-ready writing ability, and 2) The improvement made during revision. The first criterion determines whether you pass or fail, and is worth 70 points. The remaining 30 points come after the first draft.

Here's a scenario to make sense of the grading scale: Student A is talented but lazy. She turns in a pretty good first draft and putters around during revision, making only a few superficial changes. Her final draft is strong writing, but not much changed from the first draft. Student B isn't quite as talented. His first drafts need revision just to pass, but he works hard every revision, and his first draft compared to his final is a block of marble compared to the statue. Now, talent cannot be ignored, and I give as many as **5** points for writing that displays exceptional insight, distinctive voice, or mastery of craft. However, this class is about more than talent, and the other **25** points are awarded for learning the lessons and applying them in your work. Student A—let's assume she never learns, and gives me the minimum each time—will get high 70's on her papers. Student B didn't start with even a passing grade, but he finishes in the upper 80's to low 90's.

**Criterion 1** – the first **70** points – What does college-ready writing look like?

- A clear thesis
- Strong idea development: objective, considered, and logically coherent
- A well-organized structure: ideas flow naturally and join cohesively

- Enjoyable to read, with varied sentence structure and clean prose
- Proof-read, and mostly free of grammar and spelling errors
- See the attached rubric for a more complete explanation of college-ready writing

These are principles; the particulars will change depending on the assignment. The myth you write, for example, will not have a thesis so much as a unifying idea, while the critique assignment must have a thesis in the traditional sense, with a topic, a framed argument, and a position. These criteria are also listed in order of importance: your paper begins with the introduction and thesis, from which everything else comes. The supporting ideas are the characteristics of that thesis, and after you have a good idea of those characteristics you will get a feel of how to arrange them so they are best presented.

***Criterion 2*** – the next **25** points

Writing is usually pretty bad on the first draft. This is why you have heard, repeatedly, not to wait until the night before to begin writing your paper. This class is different—wait until the night before to write your first draft. Write it earlier than that, if you don't like pressure, but as long as your paper has a topic, supporting paragraphs, a conclusion, and meets the word requirement, it's good. If it lacks these, or if it's absolute junk (which I determine at my discretion), I'll return it and you'll have to re-write.

The kicker is, I want you *working* after the first draft. We are going to be learning how to improve writing, and the best way, the only way, is by writing and then reading what we've written. This is why I give you a week for first drafts and two weeks for revisions. I want you to be surprised how much your papers improve as you keep working on them. I want you to save your papers and five years from now read them again and be floored that you could write like that. I

want you to take pride in what you're handing in to me. And the only way to get that is to revise, and practice, practice.

### **The Final 5 Points**

Those of you who do something special earn the possibility of an A+. To get the A+, your paper must be college-ready, you must have shown real ingenuity and effort during revision, and the final product must have that certain something that makes good writing great.

### **Assignments**

This part is important. You have noticed I put a great deal of significance on the revision process. So much so that every revision is required—without them all, you get a **zero** for that assignment.

You also must be trying on each draft. If I feel on any draft you aren't applying yourself, I'll give it back and you must re-write by the following class period. If it's the final draft you have until midnight of the next day. If you repeatedly turn in poor work, we'll have a conference.

Finally, a little advice. Some classes you can wait to start studying until a week before the final and do fine. In my experience, this method doesn't work in foreign language and math classes, and it definitely won't work here. The ticket is to consistently work, an hour a day, or a couple of hours every other day. Many weeks you'll have exercises to do and papers to revise before the next class. It's a great deal of work—you'll hate yourself if you wait until the night before, and eventually it will get away from you. Good Luck.

**CRITERIA FOR COLLEGE-READY WRITING/ADVICE FOR PLAIN STYLE (the rubric)**

“Writing is thinking on paper.”

-William Zinsser

To put the above quote a little less poetically, I’m going to grade you on two categories: what you have to say (the thought), and how well you say it (the writing). This might sound like twice the work, but you will find the more you think things through the better your writing becomes. You will also find that because writing and thinking are so closely intertwined, a mistake on one side more often than not shows itself on the other. For example, an unfocused essay will usually be wordy and lack cohesion, and an undeveloped essay will lack flow, jerking the reader from topic to topic without ever quite saying enough.

**Thinking** (or, What am I trying to say?)<sup>55</sup>

**Objective:** Have I thought this all the way through? If there are two sides, did I consider the other side and what someone from that side would say to my position?

**Original, Insightful:** Am I giving my thoughts on the subject or rephrasing what someone else thinks?

**Focused:** Do I have a clear goal that I pursue through the entire paper? Are my supporting details relevant?

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<sup>55</sup> The teacher should discuss the Orwell WS and plain style here. I have a little hint with “What am I trying to say?” The rubric is divided into thinking/writing for that reason. What should be plain are the writer’s thoughts. The writing might be the material display of those thoughts, but it all begins between the ears.

**Developed:** Have I developed my thesis and supporting points fully? Do my supporting points clearly tie back to my thesis?

**Accurate, Reasonable:** Are my assertions actually the case? Does this make sense?

A passing paper doesn't necessarily have to be perfect in all categories, but it can't be severely lacking in any either. First of all, college-ready writing must have a unifying idea that has been developed by supporting ideas. Your myth, for example, must start with one story and tell that story throughout. So begin with that—your main idea and a few supporting ideas—and do your best. As you turn in drafts, I can give more specific advice on areas you may be deficient, and you will be able to work to improve.

**Writing** (or, What words will best express it?)

Nathaniel Hawthorne had the whole thing when he said, "The greatest possible merit of style is, of course, to make the words absolutely disappear into the thought." The best writing is like the best plastic surgery. You don't notice it. But how do we achieve that?

The first step is to get your ideas reasonably clear. Then write them down. You won't get a perfect picture of your thoughts before writing, usually, and so your first draft will have a lot of extra words you don't need, and a blurry picture of your idea somewhere in the prose. But as you continue reading and revising, the structure will tighten, the extra words will fall off, and you'll find a complete, sparkling thought on the page.

Here are the characteristics of that sort of writing.

**Clean:** Are my sentences too long to follow? Have I proofread for errors?

**Organized:** Have I organized for a reason, and was I consistent? Does my reason convey my point most effectively?

**Flowing:** Am I varying sentence structure? Do I have clear transitions? Are there ugly sentences or places the writing distracts from the thought?

**Precise:** Have I picked strong verbs? Do I have nouns for subjects and verbs for their actions? Are my descriptions vivid, and relevant? In short, have I put my finger on what I'm trying to say?

After careful thought and development, after writing and revising drafts, you will find that your writing becomes **pleasurable**, even **compelling**, to read. Every time you write, even if it's just a quick email to a professor or a friend, you should aim for this quality—writing worth reading. This is my final expectation for all of you in this class, an expectation you should hold yourself to knowing that it is attainable, and because you are capable, an expectation I will hold you to and no lower or else be negligent in my duty as your teacher. You will write *well*.

### **Rubric Quiz** (optional)

Why did I split the rubric into writing and thinking?

Why did I put thinking first?

What is “plain style”?

### 4.3 Worksheets and Quizzes

Below I have included a set of guidelines for peer review, one George Orwell quiz and answer sheet, and the worksheet “Misquote.” The George Orwell quiz and worksheet are intended for the third day of class—I intend for the students to keep the worksheet as a set of principles for writing.

#### **PEER EDITING<sup>56</sup>**

Guidelines:

- You must be respectful of your classmates. This means being open-minded to opinions different from your own, and offering criticism that is constructive (not the other kind). It also means making the effort to help the person improve. Don’t just write “Good job” at the bottom. Identify places you feel confused, or think the writer needs to revise. Finally, tell the writer why this revision would help (e.g., would increase unity, makes more sense in this order, etc.), if you can.
- I don’t want you to line edit the whole paper. In fact, simple grammatical mistakes and misspellings can be ignored at this stage. If you spot a particularly wordy sentence, though, you may edit so the writer can see improvement in practice.
- Positive feedback works wonders. If you come to a great sentence or passage, point it out. Was there a neat piece of insight? Say so.
- Writers, save all copies of your draft that have been peer-reviewed. You will turn all of them in to me when you turn in your draft.

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<sup>56</sup> This guide could be a classroom activity: reduce the guidelines to key words, and as a class fill in the what and why.



- At the end of the paper you are going to summarize your impressions. While each paper will have slightly different requirements for peer review, your summary must cover these questions:
  - What is the unifying idea/thesis?
  - What in the paper is working for you? Why?
  - What is not working for you? Why?
  - One thing (e.g. organization, development of examples, voice) the writer does well. How does it benefit the paper as a whole?
  - One area for improvement (e.g. organization...) that would most help the draft. How does it detract from the paper as a whole?

## GEORGE ORWELL QUIZ (MASTER COPY)<sup>57</sup>

1) Two common problems with today's writing:

- Staleness of Imagery

- Lack of Precision

(or, the whole tendency is away from concreteness)

2) Orwell says an effect can become a cause, intensifying the original cause. What is the cause of the “slovenliness of our language”?

3) Give me an example of each of these composition “tricks.” Also, rewrite the trick into plain English.

Dying metaphor, verbal false limb, pretentious diction, meaningless words

4) How should we pick our words? For the sake of their meaning

What is the purpose of images, e.g. metaphors and similes? To make our meaning clearer.

5) The four things to ask yourself before writing a sentence

1) What am I trying to say?

2) What words will express it?

3) What image or idiom will make it clearer?

4) Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?

And the two after?

5) Could I have said it more shortly?

6) Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?

6) Rules for revision.

(i) Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.

(ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do.

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<sup>57</sup> The answers are underlined. I haven't offered this quiz before, so it may be too easy, or too vague. The real point of the quiz is to scare the students a bit (it's the second week) so they will work harder through the semester.

(iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

(iv) Never use the passive where you can use the active. (Though this should be qualified).

(v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

(vi) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Bonus:

“What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way around.”

What is the single most important rule from 5 & 6? What am I trying to say.

Or, you could rephrase: Orwell’s most important rule from 5 & 6 is “What am I trying to say?” You tell me why.

### **GEORGE ORWELL WORKSHEET** (follows the quiz)

- 1) Orwell says the whole tendency of modern prose is *away from concreteness*. So--what should writers try to make concrete? meanings

Among many reasons, prose grows vague for the two below:

- Staleness of Imagery-<sup>58</sup>

- Lack of Precision-

- 2) Sloppy thinking produces sloppy writing.

3) Give me an example of each of these composition “tricks.” Also, rewrite the trick into plain English.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Have students make this advice positive, e.g. “Use language that calls an actual image to mind.” Do the same for precision.

<sup>59</sup> As a class practice cutting verbal false limbs out of sentences.

Dying metaphor – tried and true, writing on the wall, a cold day in hell, selling like hot cakes.

Verbal false limb – in my opinion, will help to effect, give rise to, have the effect of, serve the purpose of, etc.

Pretentious diction – *sui generis*, lacunae (almost all foreign, academic words); big words used *because* they are big, e.g. liminal, proffered, hegemonic, *a priori*, etc.

Meaningless words – e.g., what is the difference between relationship and interrelationship?

4) We pick our words, images, and metaphors for the sake of their meaning, or to make our meaning clearer.

5) The four things to ask yourself while writing a sentence

- 1) What am I trying to say?
- 2) What words will express it?
- 3) What image or idiom will make it clearer?
- 4) Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?

And the two after?

- 5) Could I have said it more shortly?
- 6) Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?

6) Rules for revision.

(i) Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.

(ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do.

(iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

(iv) Never use the passive where you can use the active.

(v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

(vi) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Tell the students the answer to the bonus questions, and then ask them “Why is the most important step ‘What am I trying to say?’”

## MISQUOTE<sup>60</sup>

“The secret of being boring is to say everything.”

-Voltaire

I will tell you over and over that the greatest virtue of your prose is to be clear about its meaning. But writers sometimes break this rule, or bend it a bit, and omit a full explanation in favor of a short piece of insight. These little sayings are called aphorisms, and they can be striking if done right.

We aren't going to practice writing aphorisms now, though. We are going to translate the aphorisms of others, and practice writing sentences. I want you to pick five quotes and figure out what each means. Write notes if that helps. Then I want you to rephrase it and try to capture the full meaning, including the part the author left out. Follow Orwell's advice, and ask yourself: “What am I (or this author) trying to say? What words will express it?” If you think a mental image will help, include it, but it isn't necessary. You must also answer the five starred quotes.

SAMPLE (work in class with students) "I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all."

"I only know what I don't know." (Plato)

"That which we cannot speak of we must pass over in silence." (Wittgenstein)

"Whoever is born with a talent, to a talent, finds his fairest existence therein." (Goethe)

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<sup>60</sup> This activity follows Orwell's lessons. I need a quick way for my kids to have something to say that they intuit but isn't spelled out for them. The teacher might want to play with their answer lengths: No more than two sentences, or something along those lines. Demonstrate plagiarism here too! When you go over the assignment the next day, you might want to explain to students concision, since they've now seen its effect.

I would have the students work all the quotes marked with an asterisk, and have them pick another three or four besides.

"This thou art." (Hindu saying)

\*"No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader." (Frost)

\*"In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. But in practice, there is."

(Yogi Berra)

"If you are going through hell, keep going." (Churchill)

"Whenever I climb I am followed by a dog called 'Ego'." (Nietzsche)

"The nice thing about being a celebrity is that if you bore people they think it's their fault." (Henry Kissinger)

"Egotist: a person more interested in himself than in me." (Bierce).

"Style is the physiognomy of the mind." (Schopenhauer)

"Three o'clock is always too late or too early for anything you want to do." (Sartres)

\*"The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who cannot read them." (Twain)

"The gods too are fond of a joke." (Aristotle)

"If it's your job to eat a frog, it's best to do it first thing in the morning. And if it's your job to eat two frogs, it's best to eat the biggest one first." (Twain)

\*"Never mistake motion for action." (Hemingway)

"The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them." (Hemingway)

\*"I would have written a shorter letter, but I didn't have the time." (Pascal)

"Future. That period of time in which our affairs prosper, our friends are true and our happiness is assured." (Bierce)

"Sweater, n.: Garment worn by child when its mother is feeling chilly." (Bierce)

"Be virtuous and you will be eccentric." (Twain)

#### 4.4 Section on Unity, Development, and Organization

This is the first in-class unit, developed from Barbara Fassler Walvoord's *Helping Students Write Well* and a sample set of CLA tasks. While unity, development, and organization seem straightforward, I believe the concepts may be more difficult to accomplish in actual writing. Students define the three here so that later the teacher may point to individual problems of unity, or organization, and the student will have a better idea of the mistake he made (at least in theory).

The worksheets below are written for students unless otherwise noted. I have included a section for unity, development, and organization. Unity and development will be discussed in class one day, with the first half of the assignment (the research and rough draft) for homework. Organization will be discussed the following day, after which students will write the formal letter.

#### UNITY, DEVELOPMENT, AND ORGANIZATION

You might recall from the Grading Guidelines worksheet that unity is the single most important characteristic of a paper, followed by idea development, and then organization. A paper with serious problems in any of these areas cannot pass.

Most of us should have a pretty good idea what each of these mean (and general definitions are just below). So I'd like to ask, before we begin the lesson: What is it these three "virtues" of writing do?<sup>61</sup>

Answer:

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<sup>61</sup> They make meaning clear. This is why even these three, which are not conceived as stylistic tenets generally, are still part of plain style. Have students give deeper explanations to the role each plays in clarifying meaning, too. I provide blank space under each of the three for room to answer.

*Unity* –The principle that every sentence should relate in some way to the thesis, or the unifying idea.<sup>62</sup>

*Development of Ideas* – The supporting details that flesh out and put example to your thesis. If you write an argumentative or research paper, your thesis is an opinion, and you **develop** your reason for holding that opinion. If you write a story, all the development should lead to the *denouement*.<sup>63</sup>

*Organization* – The way the author arranges his ideas to flow readily, or to make the strongest possible case. Organization as we speak of it here is a *global* concern, meaning the whole paper. But the structure of individual sentences can also suffer from poor arrangement, a topic we will cover later in the semester.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Either have your students answer here or after they read the samples below. It's easier to explain by showing what happens when it goes wrong. A paper without unity will be full of red herrings and dead ends. Comments such as "unfocused" or "all over the place" point to this error. Ask students what else would count as a unifying idea.

<sup>63</sup> Ideas may be underdeveloped, and so are unconvincing; or overdeveloped, and redundant and irritating. They may also only tangentially connect, meaning they broadly address the student's topic but develop it off-topic his specific thesis. This is almost a problem of unity, but the idea is tied to the topic at the jump – every word after just happens to take the idea in a different direction. Of course, if an idea were totally unrelated, it would be a problem of unity.

<sup>64</sup> A disorganized essay is like a disorganized room. You can't find a thing in it without two hours of searching. The tricky part with organization is that if it's *your* room, *you* might be able to find anything at all no sweat.



## Unity

Books and papers are always written for a reason. The strongest writing is single-minded; every word is a means to fulfilling the goal, the reason the author began writing in the first place. This principle really isn't as grand as I'm making it sound, though. Take a look at this email.<sup>65</sup>

//

To: Robert Locklear  
 CC: Johanna Spiers, Emily Dreyden, Russell Whitcomb, Ed Vines  
 From: Kevin Shipley  
 Subject: Today's lunch meeting canceled

Hey Bob,

Wanted to let you know, the marketing team had something of a fiasco over the weekend. They made it to Chicago and kept their meeting, but Phil and the team at Boeing were unimpressed. Charlotte is furious. She's canceled our lunch meeting until she figures out what to do with marketing.

-Kevin

Kevin Shipley, B.B.A.  
 Regional Associate Account Manager, Southern Company

//

Notice anything wrong with this?

Actually, there isn't much to fault Kevin with. His subject line was specific enough that no one needed to read more if they didn't have the time, and every sentence of the body explained why the cancellation. This focus on a single idea is unity.

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<sup>65</sup> Sometimes I will simply list sentences for exercises. But I'm planning on my students taking a fictitious job at Southern Company, and some of their work will be "emails," which provide students opportunities for handling different audiences, contexts, and reasons for writing. This is their intro to the job.

**Idea Development**

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To: [You@gmail.com](mailto:You@gmail.com)

CC: &lt;undisclosed recipients&gt;

From: Regina Spoelstra, [reginas@southernco.com](mailto:reginas@southernco.com)

Subject: Southern Company Job Fair: Interviews on Site

Dear Sir or Madame,

I hope you are having a wonderful afternoon. I wanted to let you know that Southern Company will be hosting a job fair next **Wednesday, October 13, from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m.**, at the company headquarters, **30 Ivan Allen Jr Blvd, Atlanta, GA**. Free parking is available in the company deck. When you arrive security will check you in, and you may proceed to **conference room 113B**.

We are in special need of **human resource managers** with mid-level management experience. We are also looking for **marketing** professionals at the entry-level position. Interested parties with any experience in marketing, advertising, or PR are welcome to apply. Please RSVP no later than Friday with a copy of your resume, and include in the email body a description of yourself and your qualifications.

Best,

Regina

Regina Spoelstra, M.A.  
Human Resources, Southern Company

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Finally! You graduated in May and have been looking for a job since, to no avail. Working for Southern Company would suit you fine, and advertising/PR (marketing) is something you

really have an interest in. Your resume is ready to go, but you're going to have to write your description and qualifications.

Right off the bat, you should know that you graduated *cum laude* with a dual major in history and psychology. Here are a few more accomplishments from your college career:

- Three years of co-ed intramural football.
- Worked twenty hours a week at Starbucks all four years of school. Promoted to shift supervisor.
- Active in the history club; led a campaign that increased membership 220%.
- Won the B.F. Skinner prize and a \$1,000 scholarship for an essay your senior year. The essay title: "Decision-Making Patterns from Adolescence to Adulthood"
- Took an extra two years of Spanish – but you still can't really speak it.
- Volunteered three summers at the local soup kitchen.
- Spent a week in Spain your junior year.
- Were made a Supplemental Instructor for Hist 2200 during your junior and senior year.

You want this job, but you weren't an advertising or marketing major, so it's going to take some finesse to show yourself qualified. That means the **first step** of writing your RSVP should be learning what skills and training make for a strong marketing/advertising/PR candidate, **and** what skills you have as a psychology/history major.<sup>66</sup> Research both of these. With that in mind, you'll be able to look at what you can do and have done and see how that matches the job you're applying for.

The general format of this paper is informal. I want complete sentences and paragraphs, not notes, but you don't need a fully polished paper yet.

Requirements:<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Regina is asking for a cover letter; companies aren't always explicit asking for one. However, I think you (the teacher) should keep quiet on this until the first draft has been handed in, to keep students from going online and finding a paint-by-the-numbers cover letter format. The only way they'll learn organization, the next step, is to think through it themselves.

<sup>67</sup> This would be a good time for the teacher to discuss how unity and development work in practice, and why they are part of plain style. E.g., All students have the same unifying idea for this assignment: "I want this job." But this

- Introductory paragraph on the essential duties of a marketer; include *what* marketers do, *why* they do it, and *how* they do it.
- No less than one page, no more than three.
- Double-spaced, TNR 12 point, 1" margins all sides
- You can directly quote; include the author's name in the text, e.g. Bob Smith says that marketing professionals "make for good TV shows." Even if you don't directly quote, use author's names for material you looked up, either in parentheses or worked into the text.
- Include at the end of the document the web addresses (or names of books and authors) you used for research. It doesn't have to be MLA.

#### Pitfalls and Suggestions:

- Understand marketing first. Only after you know what they're looking for will you be able to pitch yourself to their expectations.
- Do not build this entirely out of your imagination, or what you think marketing or a psychology or history degree entails. The facts are the foundation of this assignment.
- You *will* need to be creative about all your accomplishments except the psych and history degree: What did you do to get the history club numbers to historic highs? What was your paper about?
- Finally, begin thinking about organization. Why is your first paragraph on marketing? You have two broad qualifications, your achievements and your education. Which should go next? Why?

(For teachers: This lesson is similar to the first half of a CLA task, and asks for quite a bit from students. Some of the accomplishments neatly fit the marketing profile, such as raising history club membership, and some of the accomplishments don't belong in the cover letter at all, such as the soup kitchen. Sorting the useful from the superfluous teaches unity. Most of the achievements are a little in-between, though, and shaping them to fit the profile teaches devel-

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is only the student's purpose for writing. Details must be developed, and students should understand that the topic (I want to be your marketer) *and* supporting examples (Here are my credentials) must be developed. This is where plain style comes in. A student who didn't research marketing cannot plainly tell you, the teacher, what Southern Company is looking for in the first paragraph. Nor can he tell you which of his achievements are suited for the job, or develop those achievements to put them in their strongest light. The better the student understands the task, the clearer he can state each piece, the neater will each piece tie together, and the fewer words will he have to use. This is obvious, but it must be explained, or better still, demonstrated to students. This is why I have included the quizzes, reflections, and length limits. But some of this must come in class discussion.

opment.<sup>68</sup> Finally, there's a little bit of research involved to learn about marketing, history, and psychology. Taken all together, the main object of this lesson is still unity; students must figure out their destination (becoming a marketer) and have the rest of their ideas point to that.

Before students write a word of their cover letter, they should research advertising/PR qualifications and history and psychology learning outcomes. Once students have that done they'll spot the overlap between their alter ego's training and a marketer's expertise.

Here's my guess at what a student would write:

Mitch Joel of the Harvard Business Review writes that although marketing agencies of the future will change, "Still, the role of the agency remains fairly simplistic (in philosophical terms): help a brand increase their sales and loyalty. Nothing more. Nothing less. And that has not changed since agencies were first invented." I take this to mean, that what a marketer does is create ads that make people want to buy a certain product and keep buying it. The why is simple: they advertise to make money for the company. Marketers succeed by figuring out what drives people, and then tapping into that drive to make their product more appealing than what the person already uses. Or the marketer makes people believe they could use this new product in their lives.

Psych majors need to "record, analyze, and interpret data," from their experiments, while marketers are expected to be "fluent in interpreting analytics and using the data for actionable next steps." (thefuturebuzz.com and about.com, respectively). More significantly, marketing at-

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<sup>68</sup> I consider this first step a brainstorming exercise, and don't mind if students do simply list their achievements with developments. Some students can handle all the sorting and developing and still manage to get the information in a written format. And they'll probably do that here, because those are your stronger writers anyway. I want the students who struggle to see that the first step to clear writing is to have clear thoughts, which come from: 1) A purpose, 2) A developed thought process behind that purpose. Once a student can say not just what she's after but what it takes to get there, she'll have an easier time understanding how to put her best foot forward (organizationally speaking). Donald Murray, in "The Listening Eye," says that he "teaches students what they've just learned" (69). In this case, I'm trying to get students to pick out the pieces of this jigsaw puzzle. The quiz after should teach them "This is unity!" The writing that comes after will teach them to arrange those pieces they've developed.

tempts to understand people's decision making, a topic I find extremely interesting. "I" wrote a paper my senior year on the patterns of decision-making in people from thirteen years old to seventy, and won a regional award and scholarship for it ... (and so on). On the history side, I read on a blog by a history graduate that one huge thing he learned was how to identify trends, which would be a necessary quality for advertising. Marketers would use that ability to make their products appealing and current, and all the marketing website talk about being on Twitter and Facebook and "trending topics."

My junior year I was the history club vice president. We only had fourteen regulars who came to our meetings. I realized students weren't joining because meetings were boring and nothing was going on. I got people involved by setting up a Facebook and Twitter account, hosting pizza parties, and making things sound exciting; and when more people began showing up, it really did get more exciting, and even more people joined. By the end of my senior year we had 45 students an average meeting. My efforts and success with the club actually led to my interest in decision making. I actually saw psychology principles at work. And I knew this was something I was good at. (And so on).

My note: So my student did a pretty good job. She's also starting to assume her alter ego's life. I thought at first to add the "assume your alter ego" in the assignment guidelines, but I hinted at it instead to see who will figure it out.

## Post Brainstorming Quiz<sup>69</sup>

(One sentence per answer)<sup>70</sup>

Why did you start by researching marketing?

What is a marketer?

How does the history degree help?

How does the psychology degree help?

List the supporting details (achievements) you chose in order of importance.

How did those details show you were ready for this job?

How has this exercise helped you achieve unity?

How will unity help you write your RSVP?

## Organization (second half of assignment)

You're halfway to sending your RSVP. All that's left is to 1) Decide what information to use, 2) Organize it, and 3) Write it. You may be wondering at that "decide what information to use" part, since you already narrowed down and polished your qualities that suit a marketing job. However, Southern Company is going to receive hundreds of applications. Regina, or whoever it is reading your email, is going to stop if you write her a novel. You're limited to a single page, double-spaced. So choose wisely what to use and how much of it.

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<sup>69</sup> The teaching part. You've had students brainstorm/first draft their RSVP, and they've also just answered your quiz. Now is the time to discuss and ensure the class is on the same page. The main idea comes first, always, and from it writers are able to develop their examples. Point out in this exercise that EVERYTHING had to be developed, and that development produces a sort of balance through the details. That is, the student started by developing her idea of marketing. From there she found the direction to take her education and achievements. But as she learned more about her education and achievements she was able to fine-tune her picture of marketing. So don't be afraid to alter your thesis as you brainstorm, or write. Unwillingness to deviate from the topic or thesis is mentioned in Walvoord as a common mistake of novice writers, and the gist of this whole comment should be pointed out in class discussion.

<sup>70</sup> You want to teach them to write plainly, make them write economically. You might have to add a sentence, but this quiz is a part of the writing process.

**Keep in mind** that many of the things you just learned in the last lesson will not be news to a professional in the marketing field. For example, marketers need to be able to analyze data, a skill your alter ego practiced in psychology classes. So I would mention this skill and embellish a bit – “I conducted more than twenty experiments, collected and analyzed the data, and wrote peer-reviewed lab reports. I know this skill would fit perfectly for analyzing market trends” – but I would not waste time describing how a marketer would use his own analytical skill, e.g. “Marketers must be able to examine buying tendencies, and be good with numbers.” A real marketer already knows that. Put yourself in Southern Company’s shoes as you write.

On to organization. I have two principles for you as you write your cover letter: Arrange ideas for a reason, and be consistent.<sup>71</sup> As an example, let’s say your **unifying idea** was a picture of your lake house at Lake Tahoe. You might describe the picture far-to-near, starting with the tree line at the far side of the lake, then the expanse of water itself, the shore, and the path up to your house. There are many ways to organize, however, and that was just an idea.

As a piece of advice, don’t worry too much about organization on first drafts; let your ideas unfold as they will. On second drafts, figure out how you’ve organized, and then decide if you want to stick with it or pick another way.

Now, the last step: writing your RSVP. You have more than enough usable information and qualifications developed from the last exercise. Remember to put yourself in Southern Company’s shoes as you write, and before you turn in your draft to check your organization. And, finally, one last consideration. Southern Company has your resume, and knows what you’ve done. The purpose of this RSVP isn’t just to list accomplishments.

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<sup>71</sup> I chose these principles as the introduction to organization. There are better and worse ways to organize, sure, but for now just get your students aware and trying it on their own. The teacher may want two drafts of this cover letter I’d recommend it in fact, and the “reflection” worksheet at the end of the assignment is a first step teaching students to revise their own work.



### Cover Letter Requirements:<sup>72</sup>

- One page, double-spaced, TNR 12 point, 1” margins all around
- Formal tone
- *After* you’ve typed the RSVP, include the dateline at the top: your name, my name, the date, and class. The point is to give yourself the whole page for writing. With the dateline added your paper can go to the second page (but only just, I’ll return it if it’s too long).

### Reflection<sup>73</sup>

How did you decide to organize? Why?

What did you learn from this piece of writing?

What do you intend to do next draft?

What surprised you in the draft?

Where is the piece of writing taking you?

What do you like best in the piece of writing?

What questions do you have for me?

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<sup>72</sup> Almost no requirements. I’m not setting students up to fail, but to figure it out for themselves. You might want to add more guidance here depending on the quality of the first assignment. Or, you might want to re-assign the first assignment, with more instruction.

<sup>73</sup> I would have students do this as a homework assignment one class after turning in their draft. These questions are taken directly from Donald Murray’s “The Listening Eye,” p. 68.

#### 4.5 Out-of-Class Essay

The first out-of-class essay, written in the vein of Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*. The students will be working on their cover letters at the same time, which may prove to be too much; this assignment can be stretched an extra week if need be.

#### **The Mythology Assignment.**<sup>74</sup>

You are going to write a brief myth.

The ancients wrote myths to celebrate the gods and to give reasons for the natural world. The story of Persephone and Hades explained the changing of the seasons, for example. Other myths explained aberrations in nature, such as why different trees would grow from the same trunk. In any case, myths follow a cause and effect chain. The effect was something the writer saw in the world, the cause he invented and wrote.

The setting of your myth can be someplace other than Ancient Greece, but it still needs to explain the cause of something you have observed, e.g. an explanation why we have spring break every year (you can't use this now that I've given it to you). It will also help to have a "god" or two, who is moved by the plight of your characters, or angered by their insolence.

Practice imitating Hamilton's style. If you've read Henry James or Herman Melville, you'll realize they wrote forty-page chapters that covered no more than the three pages of Hamilton's stories. There's nothing wrong with James' or Melville's sort of writing, but in this class I want the opposite. Write with simple words, and simple phrases. Get right to the point. The story should be the centerpiece, and the writing underneath unseen.

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<sup>74</sup> Students will be reading "Eight Brief Tales of Lovers" to have an idea of the nature of a myth. This is the first big essay of the course, and teaches narrative, organization, detail, and imitation.

*Requirements and Suggestions*

- 750-1000 words.
- Note Hamilton's format. Myths usually start or end with the phenomenon (the effect) the writer wants to explain, and the story behind it is told simply.
- No first-person narratives.
- MLA Format: 1" margins all around; left-justified; Name Block that includes your name, my name, English 1101, and the date; Header on every page except first, 1/2" from top right margin with page number and your last name; double-space, Times New Roman, 12-point font.

*Assessment*

Your paper will be evaluated on the following

- Organization and Development of narrative
- Originality, or creativity, of both the story and the cause/effect it explains
- Mechanics, Usage, Punctuation
- Imitation: Pay close attention to Edith Hamilton's style. Write simply, economically. Don't try to be clever or show off. Write so a seven-year-old could understand and a seventy-year-old be entertained.

## The Mythology Assignment, Part 2.<sup>75</sup>

So you have a myth. Good.

The next step is simple. I want you to cut some words out. I'll tell you how many, and you decide which ones. There is one stipulation: Your story must stay intact. If your characters flew around the world on a quest, they still have to travel the world. Their journey can feature fewer stops, though. You must pretend that your story is going on a diet; your belly might shrink more than your arms, but you can't simply hack off a leg to drop 20 pounds. Don't cut out whole sections and ignore the rest.

Pay special attention to details. In *Ceyx and Alcyone*, Hamilton in the first paragraph names the two main characters and tells us "The two loved each other devotedly and were never willingly apart." Eleven words, and not only do we know everything important of Ceyx and Alcyone's character, but we have the motivation for the story.<sup>76</sup>

So tell it "in the true Greek manner, simply and with restraint."

### *Requirements*

- Subtract 200 words or 25% of your total word count, whichever is more.
- MLA Format: 1" margins all around; left-justified; Name Block that includes your name, my name, English 1101, and the date; Header on every page except first, 1/2" from top right margin with page number and your last name; double-space, Times New Roman, 12-point font.

### *Assessment*

Your paper will be evaluated on the following:

- Organization and Development of narrative
- Originality, or creativity, of both the story and the cause/effect it explains

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<sup>75</sup> Part two is not necessarily the second draft, it's the second phase of the assignment. Students need a mostly sound story before going on to this phase. Wait a few weeks after the first phase to assign this draft. Let the students come back to their work with fresh eyes.

<sup>76</sup> You want to discuss details in class a bit more, because much economy (and strength of story) can be gained making details vivid and short. The beginnings and endings of stories often can stand to lose some words, too, but your advice will depend on the mistakes your students make.

- Imitation of Hamilton's style
- Mechanics, Usage, Punctuation
- And most important: How well you cut the words but keep the story.

### Notes for Teachers

“What am I teaching?” At first I answered in terms of form: argument, narrative, description. I never said comparison and contrast, but I was almost as bad as that. And then I grew to answering, “the process.” “I teach the writing process.” “I hope my students have the experience of the writing process.” I hear my voice coming back from the empty rooms which have held teacher workshops.

That's true, but there's been a change recently. I'm really teaching my students to react to their own work in such a way that they write increasingly effective drafts. They write; they read what they've written; they talk to me about what they've read and what the reading has told them they should do. I nod and smile and put my feet up on the desk, or down on the floor, and listen and stand up when the conference runs too long. And I get paid for this?

- Donald Murray, “The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference” (p. 69)

Of course I liked this. Teach students to write by teaching them to improve themselves.

Tell them roughly where they should get and let them figure out the best way of getting there.

Murray says in that same article the best time to teach is when the student has a solid draft for you: no major errors, ready for a professional editor. His point is to push your students until they've reached the limit of their ability. Then you can share some things you've learned to help them out. I don't know if I've accomplished this with these lessons—getting my students to push themselves until it's their best—but that's really what I would try to do.

## CONCLUSION

“How does this help?” is a question to consider when setting out to write a thesis, and one to ask again at the end of that thesis, if only to see how the answer has changed. This thesis helps in two ways: by shedding light on the nature of writing, and by providing an application of that knowledge for the improvement of our students. The latter I offered in my sample pedagogy, which blends a few new ideas with the innovations of the composition field from the past decades. The findings from the first chapter also provide a practical base upon which teachers may build, teachers who are not necessarily teaching writing, or even English. Subjects as wide-ranging as science, business, economics, or policy studies would benefit from applying the 20/40 rule, and ensuring students were forced to think out answers rather than look them up in books. This is the only way it becomes *their* answer. That writing is a necessary component to learning seems common sense to one bred in the liberal arts, but this thesis has produced a compelling case for all teachers, in all disciplines, to begin requiring papers.

I have also shown why it is important to teach students clear, concise writing, especially those in our first-year composition courses. The ability to write this sort of prose is invaluable on the job market, as are the thinking skills that writing inculcates. Students will not master these skills, nor will they be perfect writers upon completion of the course. Rather, they will have the tools, and the experience of writing a strong piece of prose, to know how to write to the best of their abilities. Students must learn they *can* write; not everyone will enjoy the process, not even at the end of the course, but all must have written something to be proud of, to know what it feels like. That is the goal, at least.

As for the nature of writing itself—to sum up, I have illustrated the two parts of written communication, the rhetorical and the plain style. This is an odd definition of the latter, certainly,

and yet it accounts for history from Plato to Montaigne and Bacon, and includes our modern composition classrooms. Just as Kinneavy noted that the individual discourse will often support multiple aims, so will almost all forms of communication have some rhetorical and some plain style principles. To truly succeed, in fact, communication should have both, and students have something to learn from both sides—from Socrates and from Gorgias, so to speak.

Because this thesis defines plain style, I would like to offer one more example of what seems to be a perpetual fondness, and a strength, of the plain style. This persistence, I believe, is attributable to human beings themselves, who do not seem much changed since at least ancient Greece. In another Socratic dialogue, the “Meno,” Socrates and the young, ambitious Meno discuss the nature of virtue: What is it? Can it be taught? Are we born virtuous, or vicious, or neither? After attempting and failing to answer, Meno puts the question to Socrates, who tells Meno an answer he has heard from priests and priestesses: Our soul “has been born often, and has seen all things here and in the underworld, [and] there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things” (Plato 71).

This is as quaint a notion in philosophy departments today as it is in English departments, and yet as Socrates continues to explain recollection, we hear a familiar theme: “As the whole of nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only—a process men call learning—discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection” (Plato 71). Which sounds just a bit like Michel de Montaigne, or Donald Murray, or E. B. White, or Peter Elbow, or Richard Eastman, who tells us “...that style is outlook and that outlook is discovered through the process of writing” (ix)—minus the soul and reincarnation, and so forth. My

point being, it is still important that this part of writing be taught, and that students have the opportunity to find the words which express themselves.



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