

“Academic Writing”—Euphemism or Oxymoron?

Introduction

The expression “Academic writing” sounds like it might be a gentle way of pointing to bad writing—writing that is not “real” but something less than real, standing to real writing as Pidgin English might stand to real English, as a sort of dialect for communicating with the natives of Academe, who are incapable of using the standard version of the tongue. But the natives of Academe are not really natives. That is, they are not born into this culture but grow into it, perhaps losing something real on the way. Nevertheless, there **is** such a thing as academic writing, and students in the academic world need to master it. I am not questioning that. But I am trying to point out that it is, in fact, a dialect of a larger language—or, more accurately, a discourse. Someone who writes English well, can easily master academic English. On the other hand, someone who seeks to master only academic English may find it difficult to reach even that limited goal. If academic writing is an oxymoron rather than a euphemism, however,—that is, if it can’t be both academic and writing—then those who teach it are in big trouble.

On this occasion, I do not wish to argue that the expression “academic writing” is an oxymoron. Rather, I want to suggest that aiming exclusively at the academic dialect is not the best way to produce good writers—even good writers of academic discourse. I believe that students must be good writers before they can be

good at academic writing. If I am right about this, it means that the aim of writing instruction at colleges and universities should be directed to the larger target first, before shifting to academic discourse. How can we help students become better writers—period (or, perhaps, question mark?). That is the first issue we must address, and I shall begin addressing it here by sharing some personal anecdotes that have to do with writing instruction.

First Anecdote—Writing Improvement Without Instruction

Many years ago I directed the first course to use computer technology in the humanities at Brown. We used a section of the standard “Introduction to Poetry” course, with a tightly focused syllabus, in which students wrote responses to poems based on various levels of information about those poems. In the digital section of the course every student could read the responses of every other student, after each level of response was complete, and they could also read what the instructors said about each student response, and they could comment on all that, including the Instructors’ observations. Without going into excessive detail about the workings of the course, I can report that, when we printed out each student’s written work at the end of the semester, they had written an average of eighty pages, with some going well over a hundred. And it was clear that most, if not all, of them were writing better at the end of the course than they did at the beginning. They were

writing better, that is, without having had any instruction about writing, or receiving any corrected papers, or being dragged through stages of revision.

So—What happened? That is, to what cause or causes can we attribute this improvement in writing. As I understand it, there were three main causes: first of all, the fact that they wrote a lot; secondly, the fact that they wrote knowing that their peers were reading every word; and finally the fact that they got to see how academic writing was done. Practice may not make perfect, but it certainly makes better. If you shoot a lot of baskets, you will become a better shot. It is as simple as that. So the amount of writing makes a difference. The quantity of writing produced in the course actually contributed to the improvement in quality of writing by the end of the semester.

That was a major aspect of the process. But so was the fact that every writer was aware of an audience that included not only the instructors but also their own peers—their fellow students. They wrote a lot, then, but they also wrote under a kind of gentle peer pressure. They wrote three times a week: First in response to a single poem; then, in response to that poem and other poems by the same poet or on the same topic; and finally in response to what critics had said about the original poem. In the third assignment, students sometimes wrote about one another's critical work. For example, one student noted that another student had anticipated what a professional critic said about the poem. They praised one another

sometimes, and they occasionally took issue with what an instructor had said. They were paying attention to one another's work, and they wrote with the awareness that this was happening. Without specifically concentrating on it, what Jerry and Cathy call "They Say/I Say" was part of what they were learning. And it worked.

There was also, I believe, a fourth contributing cause to the general improvement in writing: namely, the material being studied—that is, poetry. If we stop thinking about poetry as something irrelevant to writing instruction because it belongs to the despised category of literature, we might discover that it is simply a very demanding kind of writing, in which the search for the best words in the best order is absolutely crucial. If we look into poems with some depth, considering revisions made in the course of composition and the poet's reasons for making them, we can scarcely help but learn something about language and become more conscious of the ways in which we use and abuse it, as well as the ways in which poets make their texts more pleasurable and powerful by their semantic and syntactic choices. Good poetry is always good writing—writing we can learn from. But there are teachers of composition who would ban poetry and other forms of "literature" from their courses. Just as there are teachers of literature who consider rhetoric and composition beneath them and would not think of using their beloved literary texts to help students become better writers. These views represent a gap in the English teaching profession that we need to close.

That computer course in poetry happened more than thirty years ago. There was no world wide web then. In fact, we only had one monitor, connected to the mainframe computer at Brown, and the students had to sign up for time on that machine over a 24 hour day, with the instructors reserving the most civilized hours for themselves. Current digital resources make it much easier to reproduce certain aspects of the process that emerged in that experimental course, but, if students are going to write a lot, instructors will have to respond a lot. Teaching writing is labor-intensive. Always has been, always will be. But one thing we should learn from this experiment is that instructors may, in fact waste a lot of response time marking up errors and performing other tedious tasks, when some other kind of response may be both less time-consuming and more valuable. Which brings me to my second anecdote.

Second Anecdote—The One-Page Paper

Recently the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown celebrated its fifteenth year of existence and the thirty-fifth anniversary of the establishment of its ancestor, the Semiotics Program. Students who had gone through the old program came back to Brown and interacted with current students in MCM, and many of those returning had a serious record of accomplishment, like the filmmaker, Todd Haynes, and the radio innovator, Ira Glass. They all spoke about their

experience at Brown and about the connections between that experience and their later work. One of the recurring themes in these discussions was their experience of writing one-page papers, which were a feature of this program that made a lasting impression on them.

The one-page paper was tied to the pre-digital world, in which typed papers were the norm. Papers had to be single-spaced on one side of a page, but were allowed to go all the way from side to side and top to bottom of that page. And the best way to write a good one was to write something longer and cut it down in revision to the size of a single page. There was no requirement to revise, but revision was the best way to write a good paper in this format. The formal requirement, like the formal requirements of composing a sonnet or a haiku, exerted a useful pressure on the content, leading students toward writing that was interesting for the instructors to read. At these anniversary sessions, the question of the origin of the one-page paper assignment came up more than once.

The answer to that question is that it came through me—not **from** me, but **through** me. When I was in graduate school at Cornell, I took a seminar in Jane Austen with the great Chicago Aristotelian critic, Ronald S. Crane, who had just retired from Chicago and come as a Visiting Professor to Cornell, where one of his former students was chairing the English Department. Crane required us to write a one-page paper on a Jane Austen novel every week, and, after some harsh grading

we graduate students learned how to do this is a way that earned the tolerance if not the respect of the master. And I learned something that I used in every university in which I taught after leaving Cornell. At Brown, in the Semiotics Program, other faculty followed this procedure, because they learned, as I had, that it really works, producing more interesting papers.

In responding to these papers, I rarely marked anything on the student's text, but always tried to make a comment on the back that demonstrated that I had really read it and had reasons for my judgment of it. I also put a number, from 1 to 10 on the back, indicating how highly I rated it, later translating a student's total number into a letter grade. Some of my colleagues did things differently, I am sure, but this method worked for me, in that I kept getting interesting papers from students and felt confident that they were really reading and thinking before completing those papers. They wrote well, for the most part, I believe, because they knew I cared about that, and because they were convinced that I could tell good work from bad, and very good work from just pretty good work. They also wrote well, I am sure, because they were interested in what they were writing about. Academic writing is always writing **about** something, which means that the designer of courses must provide something interesting for students to consider and discuss. Just how to achieve that will be the topic of the next section of this particular academic discourse. My recommendations will be based on more than fifty years of teaching,

but I will try to avoid lengthy personal anecdotes and make my discourse more appropriately academic.

Non-Anecdote—What should students write about?

The ancient topic for students coming back to schools in the autumn—“What I Did Last Summer”—was always assigned, I believe, in the forlorn hope that those students might actually be interested in what they did last summer, along with the suspicion that, whatever it was, it was probably more interesting for them than what they were doing right now: namely, sitting in a classroom and writing a paper. Personally, much as I might have wished to be re-living my last summer on the present occasion, I had to compose an academic paper about academic papers, on the orders of that notorious task master, Les Perlman, with the further prospect of delivering the product of this work in an attempt catch the interest of an audience who already know too much about this topic. And here I am, now, in the delivery room, so to speak, sustained mainly by the difficulty of the task rather than any hope of success. All of which has led me to put this matter of “interest” at the center of my thoughts, as the main problem of academic writing.

Interest operates at more than one level in writing instruction. Students of writing need interesting things to write about, and teachers of writing hope for interesting papers to read, since they must read and respond to so many of them.

And these two interests are not in conflict but are complementary. If the writer's interest is low, the writing is not likely to be interesting to the reader. But, if the writer is really interested in the topic, there is a chance that he or she will produce a text that may stimulate the reader's interest as well. This combination of interests then makes it possible that the reader's comments and advice will, in turn, interest the writer and actually receive some attention. The whole instructional web is sustained by interest and likely to collapse without it. How, then, can we improve the odds that students in a writing course will actually be interested in what they are asked to write about?

Well, part of the instructor's job is to make the material interesting to students, to organize it and present it in ways that will stimulate student interest. Which means that the instructor must be interested in it first, in order to pass that interest along to students. This, I believe, is an argument against all rigid curricula, in which the same set of readings is forced on all the instructors and all the students. A certain amount of freedom is necessary for this process to succeed, and I would argue that the more freedom at this level, the better the result is likely to be. Imagine a course called "Writing About X"—in which each instructor chooses his or her own X, and all students choose the section of the course in which they enroll. At Brown a while ago an instructor offered a section of a basic writing course called "Writing About *Ulysses*," in which all they read was James Joyce's

novel and a few supporting materials. This worked—and worked quite well—because the instructor was very interested in Joyce and because all the students in the course had selected this section to attend. They knew what they were getting into and opted to learn about *Ulysses* while improving their writing.

At present, however, in many universities, the great divide between literature and composition functions to keep the texts most English teachers admire out of the writing classroom. It also functions, of course, to keep many of the best English teachers out of the writing classroom as well. I want to suggest, then, that these two problems have a common solution. Let every teacher offer a writing course in some text or set of texts that really interests that teacher, and let students select the section they wish to attend. I can imagine a section called “Writing About Food” taught by a Professor Dagwood and attended by a lot of little Elmos, though I would not advise trying a course in “Writing About the Sandwich”—which might be a bit too specialized. In a writing course there must be texts that are good examples of the kind of writing being studied. There is a lot of good writing about food, in a range of textual genres, which makes a course in “Writing About Food” a real possibility. I can also imagine that a course in “Writing About Shakespeare,” or even “Writing About *Hamlet*,” taught by a Stephen Greenblatt, or someone who aspires to that level of achievement, could work very well. The point is to energize the classroom by bringing together instructors and students who share an interest.

Another object of such courses should be to get good writing into the course for the students to read and discuss, and this means, in a course on Shakespeare, not just some of Shakespeare's good writing but some good writing about him. Another aspect of the computer poetry course that I used to begin this discussion was that students got to read some criticism or "writing about" the poems as well as the poems themselves and various drafts of them. They had a chance to learn from examples of this kind of academic discourse and to decide which examples of it were good and which were not so good. One difference between a "writing about literature" course and a regular course in literature might well be the attention paid to writing **about** the sort of literature being considered. This is one way, as Jerry Graff and Cathy Birkenstein know very well, of providing clues for those who are clueless in the academic world.

Students need to see how the critical or academic trick is done, but they also need to understand how the creative trick is done in the first place. I have rarely taught poetry without asking students to write poems. It is a very useful discipline. A haiku about what I did last summer might be more interesting than an essay on the subject. Something like this:

On old Brickyard Pond

Kingfisher , turtle, canoe--

So near, so far.

Learning about the history of that form, while trying to write as its masters wrote, should be a pleasurable experience, a kind of game that can lead to a better understanding of how language works—a rise in semantic and syntactic awareness that can help a writer improve as a composer of ordinary prose and even academic writing. But there is another aspect of using creative texts in the teaching of writing that I want to consider before concluding these remarks—and that is what I call “comparative textuality.”

We live in an age of multiple media, which means that certain texts appear in more than one of them—remaining the same in some ways while changing in others. Literary studies in recent decades have mainly taken the path of interpreting the complex or difficult printed text, in some critical mode or other, whether New Critical, Deconstructive, New Historical, or some other current fashion of interpretation. What all of these have in common is the way they position the student as interpreter of the single text, producing a sub-text in a different mode of discourse from the original. They also, of course, position the teacher as a reader of a lot of very similar academic essays in criticism, which is sufficiently dull and demanding work to lead many faculty members to avoid it altogether and others to do it without enthusiasm. Comparative textuality offers a way out of this situation

for both students and teachers. Let me illustrate.

In July of 1949 a woman named Dorothy Marie Johnson published a short story in *Cosmopolitan* magazine. She was quite well known as a magazine writer at that time. This particular story and some others of hers were collected and published in 1953, going through a number of editions in the following years. For one of those editions an English teacher wrote “A Note to Teachers and Parents” in which he suggested, among other things, that this particular story could serve very well for a class of high school students, if they would undertake to make a screenplay out of it. Students may indeed have tried this exercise, but it was also undertaken by some professional writers, James Warner Bellah and Willis Goldbeck, and the film based on that screenplay was directed by John Ford. The title of both the short story and the film was *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, and it is one of Ford’s finest works in that genre of which he was a master.

The film includes a teaching scene, in which a lawyer from the east is teaching illiterates in a western town how to read English, using the local newspaper and the sacred political texts of this nation as his materials. I have written about that scene, but I do not wish to dwell on it for this occasion, but rather to point to the way that the entire film and the story from which it emerged can be used together to stimulate writing by freeing the student writer from subservience to a single text and directing attention to how both versions of this

tale were constructed, and, in particular, by looking at the ways in which the film gives a powerful embodiment to the verbal text and how it also changes that verbal text, modifying the events in the narrative in certain important ways. This modified version was actually returned to the print medium by Bellah, who published the story in the form of a novel based on the film. And this too might be considered if the method of comparative textuality were being used in a writing course.

Every time a text moves from one medium to another interesting changes take place, and this is true when a Shakespeare play becomes an opera, as Shakespeare's *Othello*, for example, becomes the *Otello* of Verdi and Boito, or Shaw's *Pygmalion* becomes a film of that name and finally a musical called *My Fair Lady*. Our world is full of such changes in textual media. And even Shakespeare's *Othello* emerged from a tale in another medium and language to take its place on the stage of King James' Banqueting Hall at Whitehall in 1604, not seeing print in this form until 1622. Studying comparative textuality can take us through time and space as well as from one medium to another. but this is only one aspect of such study. It also directs our attention to the creative side of the compositional process. We are not just interpreting; we are looking at the choices made by the maker of each text. In the case of a move from story to film, we are considering the selection of certain actors to play particular roles, seeing their performances as interpretations of the text, as well as considering changes in the

events depicted or the manner of their presentation.

No longer hemmed in by the single perfect text, the student writer is free to debate the choices made by the composers of the textual variants being considered. And looking at the creative side of the process should help the writer consider the creative side of his or her own compositional process in producing what is, after all, simply another textual interpretation added to a chain of such interpretations. Academic writing always involves performance, the playing of a role that is assumed by entering a discourse in progress. The study of comparative textuality can be excellent preparation for the academic role as well as for others. And the resources for such study are vast. A creative teacher should be able to assemble a set that is workable and interesting—and also be able to modify the set from course to course to avoid the repetition that stultifies much academic writing.

The point of all this, to put it as briefly as possible, is to move the term “academic writing” from one rhetorical category to another—in this case, from euphemism not to oxymoron, but to encomium.