

Is there a correlation between this development and the accompanying social and historical conditions? Hypotheses have been propounded on this question by several authors concerned with different epochs. The dawn of a régime of liberty and democracy, it is suggested, promotes the rise of rhetoric and its philosophical importance, whereas the setting-up of an authoritarian state entails its decline. It is from this point of view that we now judge the controversy between the sophists and Plato;<sup>6</sup> that Gwynn<sup>7</sup> explains the decline of rhetoric following the establishment of the Roman empire; that the role of mediaeval rhetoric<sup>8</sup> is presented; and that the rise and decline of Renaissance rhetoric<sup>9</sup> are explained. Is it not in the same way that the contemporary renewal of the theory of argumentation should be explained?

I hope that these few hints will serve as a starting point for deeper studies by sociologists and historians interested in the problems of the sociology of knowledge.

## NOTES

1. From *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*; Nouvelle Serie, No. XXVI, 1959.
2. Cf. C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *Traité de l'Argumentation*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1958, p. 5.
3. Cf. C. Perelman, *Les Rapports Théoriques de la Pensée et de l'Action*, in *Entretiens Philosophiques de Varsovie*, International Institute of Philosophy, Warsaw, Ossolineum, 1958, pp. 23-28.
4. Cf. C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *Traité de l'Argumentation*, §52: 'La règle de justice'.
5. Cf. C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *De la Temporalité comme Caractère de l'Argumentation*, in *Il Tempo, Archivio di Filosofia*, Padova, Cedam, 1958, p. 125.
6. E. Dupréel, *Les Sophistes*, Editions du Griffon, Neuchâtel, 1948, p. 28.
7. Aubrey Gwynn, *Roman Education from Cicero to Quintilian*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1926.
8. R. McKeon, Rhetoric in the Middle Ages, *Speculum, A Journal of Mediaeval Studies*, Vol. XVII, January 1942, pp. 1-32.
9. E. Garin, *L'Umanesimo Italiano*; *Filosofia e vita civile nel rinascimento*, Bari, Laterza, 1952, particularly pp. 103 et seq.

## The Present State of Freshman Composition

ALBERT R. KITZHABER

COLLEGE ENGLISH PROFESSORS have always been generous of advice to their high school colleagues, telling them what they should be doing that they are not and what they are doing that they should not be. Lately, moved by the general concern for improving American secondary education in the missile age, they have been even freer with their suggestions and have made them more specific. Such criticism is all to the good, even though the suggestions may sometimes be a little naïve and their Olympian tone a little annoying. With so large a proportion of high school graduates now entering college, the high schools should know what kind of academic preparation the colleges recommend.

The deficiencies of high school English courses and textbooks and of the professional preparation of many high school teachers of English have now been made a matter of public concern, and rightly so if any large-scale improvement is to be brought about. But what about the college English courses that nearly half of all high school graduates will take as freshmen? How good are these courses? How well are they being taught? What is in them? What are their announced purposes? What forms do they take? Do they avoid the weaknesses and errors for which college English teachers have blamed English courses in the secondary schools?

As part of the Dartmouth study a large number of syllabuses for college freshman English courses were analyzed in an effort to shed some light on these questions. The syllabuses came from ninety-five 4-year colleges and universities, but represented a total of ninety-eight individual course descriptions, since three universities on the list had separate programs in composition and in "communication." Except for the absence of junior colleges, the list is a fairly representative cross section of American institutions of higher education. It includes both public and private universities, state colleges.

ALBERT R. KITZHABER (1915-2006) was well known during the 1950s and 1960s for promoting progressive modes of teaching composition. This selection is from a chapter in his book *Themes, Theories, and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College* (1963), which was a revision of his University of Washington dissertation research that criticized then-typical methods of teaching writing by setting assignments to imitate the four modes of discourse. That dissertation, *Rhetoric in American Colleges: 1850-1900*, was reprinted by Southern

Methodist University Press in 1990. His work helped form the national writing across the curriculum initiatives of the 1970s, which professionalized knowledge about composing processes and discourse types. After his secondary teaching, Kitzhaber directed first-year composition at Utah State College and directed first-year composition and literature at the University of Kansas. He was president of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1959 and of the National Council of Teachers of English in 1963.

1963

teachers colleges, coeducational liberal arts colleges, liberal arts colleges for men only and for women only, and a few technical institutes primarily devoted to teaching engineering. All in all, there are fifty-eight publicly supported institutions on the list (including two municipal universities) and thirty-seven privately supported ones. Seventy-nine use the semester system, sixteen the quarter or "term" system. (These patterns affect to some extent the content and organization of the freshman English course.) Twenty-two of the colleges and universities are located in the Southeast and South, twenty-two in the Northeast, twenty-nine in the Midwest, and twenty-two in the West.

Information gathered from such sources does, to be sure, have certain obvious limitations no matter how representative the colleges are. For one thing, it goes out of date rapidly. The syllabuses were all for the academic year 1960-1961; those for even the following year would have shown changes in textbooks, in emphases, in requirements, in administrative patterns as a result of the constant tinkering that this course normally undergoes. (Often, however, the pattern of change is circular, one program adopting what has been abandoned somewhere else, and vice versa.) Another limitation is that course syllabuses are not all equally detailed. Some are literally book length, others consist of three or four mimeographed pages. Finally, as any teacher knows, a syllabus represents someone's notion of the ideal. What actually goes on in the classroom usually has some relation to the syllabus but in varying degrees, depending on the closeness of supervision and on the predilections of the individual teacher—his special interests, his opinion of the syllabus or of the textbooks or simply of the person who runs the program.

Aware of these limitations, the director of the study made an effort in 1961-1962 to surmount them as far as possible by visiting eighteen selected institutions on the list and checking the reliability of the syllabuses. The information contained in the syllabuses when corrected and added to by that gathered during the visits has considerable value as a description, accurate in the main, of freshman English courses as they now exist in a wide variety of American colleges and universities.

Anyone reading this many syllabuses or visiting this many freshman English programs—or even a fraction of the number—would almost certainly be struck by at least three main weaknesses of the course as it is now constituted. First, he would be impressed by the confusion exhibited in the course—a widespread uncertainty about aims, a bewildering variety of content, a frequent lack of progression within the course. Second, he would notice a variety of administrative adjustments and precautions that indicate little confidence in the expertness of those who teach it. And finally, he would notice that the textbooks for this course are for the most part less rigorous and less scholarly than those for other college freshman courses.

Confusion in purpose, content, and organization; inexpert teaching; poor textbooks: these criticisms will have a strangely familiar sound to the ears of high school teachers, for they are exactly the same criticisms that college teachers—often directors of freshman English—have been making of English teaching in the high schools. This is not to suggest that the criticisms of English teaching in the high schools are without substance—far from it. But it is important to realize that imperfection is not confined to the secondary schools.

These three general criticisms should be considered first to provide a background for the more specific account of practices and tendencies that follows.

## AIMS, CONTENT, ORGANIZATION

In the most general terms, the principal aim of freshman English is usually said to be the improvement of the student's ability to read and write, the assumption being that these two skills necessarily go hand in hand. A state university in the Southwest, for example, says modestly that its course "aims to give the freshman student the minimum skills he will need to function without disgrace as a reader and writer of English." The so-called "communication" course adds improvement in the skills of speaking and listening to the goals. And if the particular college does not have a separate literature requirement, the statement of aims usually includes teaching the student "to read literature with understanding and appreciation." The only constant in all varieties of the course is some provision for supervised practice in writing, but, ironically, most of the confusion in freshman English stems from differing notions of how writing ought to be taught. The most diverse content may be dumped into the course on the grounds that it will help the student learn to write better. The extent of the confusion can be dramatically illustrated by quoting half a dozen statements from as many different course syllabuses:

1. The Department of English affirms that the work of this first semester should train the student in *accuracy* in English composition. To achieve this general objective, we should include (1) work in the fundamentals, not in the intricacies, of English grammar. . . . Some knowledge of basic grammar. . . . is essential to the student who seriously desires to speak and write his native tongue correctly. We should include also (2) extensive drill on the "mechanics" of composition—for example, work on correct spelling and punctuation, on smooth and varied sentence structure, on clear and effective expression of the thought. We should include (3) training in writing of unified, coherent, and generally effective paragraphs, since the writing of a paragraph will involve all of the basic disciplines of English composition. Finally, as time permits, we should include (4) reading, since through the reading of good writing by others the student may develop his own writing skills.
2. The general aim is to improve the student's ability to read and write through requiring substantial work with a significant body of ideas. Materials presenting living issues of the American cultural and intellectual heritage have been chosen both because of their usefulness in a language program and because they are worth knowing for their own sake. It is expected that the student will improve his ability to read by studying documents important in our national life, and that he will improve his ability to write by expressing on paper his own ideas about these issues.
3. Our course tries to motivate the student by acquainting him with semantic theory concerning the nature and importance of communication. . . . An increased knowledge of a second area—linguistics—ought also to supply motivation. . . . But there is no reason why the course should be confined to language problems. The book of readings permits the inclusion of subjects in which the students may have a stronger immediate interest.

3 main weaknesses

4. A question may arise about the suitability of fiction or poetry or drama in a course which presents what appears to be a program in expository writing. We feel very strongly that the omission of imaginative literature would be a great mistake. Without it, both the teacher and the student would be robbed of the kind of richness which can make teaching an art instead of a craft.

5. We believe that composition is best taught when it occupies the place of chief emphasis in a course and is not combined with a formal study of literature. . . . Our experience has led us to believe that our students are unprepared in writing largely because their high school or preparatory school teachers stressed literature rather than composition; that the study of literature, if introduced into a composition course, tends to push into the background the more needful work; that there is not time in a single semester to do justice both to a study of literature and to a study of composition; and that the study of literature is properly preceded by a study of language.

6. We still ask our students to write, and to write a good deal. But they are asked to write about the subject matter of the course; quite as they are in other courses in the college. And when we consider that our students are asked to learn about the phonemic structure of the spoken tongue; the relations of that structure to the spelling of the language in writing; the basic grammatical devices of spoken and written English; the logical conventions of classification, definition, induction, and deduction that inform an accurate use of the language in intelligent discourse, we find a great deal to write about; indeed.

As these statements suggest, the personal theories—or simply the preferences—of the people who have charge of organizing courses in freshman English determine the nature of the course; and what goes by the name of freshman composition on one campus may bear little resemblance to a course of the same name on another. The course may be based on any of the following, or on innumerable combinations of them:

1. Traditional grammar, usage, and mechanics (punctuation, spelling), often with the familiar exercises in sentence diagramming
2. The "new grammar"—structural linguistics
3. Literature, organized by major types, by major figures, by restriction to a certain period such as twentieth century, or by restriction to someone's list of Great Books of the Western World
4. Rhetoric of various kinds, from the classical theory of Aristotle and Quintilian to the familiar nineteenth-century systems of paragraph development and "forms of discourse"
5. Logic, in amounts ranging from only a day or two spent discussing fallacies to book-length treatments that dominate an entire semester's work
6. Semantics of various kinds and according to various prophets
7. The communication process and the mass media
8. Public speaking
9. Propaganda analysis
10. A kind of watered-down social science survey based on collections of essays drawn for the most part from current magazines

And then there are the maverick courses—sometimes both interesting and substantial—that do not fit into any of these categories, such as the course at a distinguished men's liberal arts college that, at least until recently, required each student to buy a box of colored crayons to use in preparing some of the assignments.

Usually it is hard to detect much evidence of clear progression in the freshman English course. The second semester is likely to be either a totally different course from the first—a course in lyric poetry, for example, or one in the short story; following one in usage and expository writing—or a mere repetition of the first semester distinguished only by the requirement of a long paper. Often there appears to be little real difference between the kind of content and writing assignments found in the freshman course and those with which the student has grown all too familiar during the three or four years before he entered college—topic sentences and the uses of the apostrophe, sentence outlines and subject-verb agreement, papers to be written on "My Favorite Teacher," "A Happy Vacation," "My Most Embarrassing Moment."

#### QUALITY OF TEACHING

Although there are exceptions, especially in smaller colleges, the freshman course is most commonly assigned to graduate students who teach part-time while working toward an advanced degree and to junior instructors newly out of graduate school or recouping their finances by a few years of full-time teaching between the master's degree and the doctorate. The latter are found most commonly where no advanced degree in English is offered. The former flourish at almost every university that offers a doctorate in English and at many institutions where only a master's degree is available. The plan is attractive to the administration because it means substantially cheaper teaching for the largest course on the campus. It is attractive to the senior professors in the English department because it means customers for the graduate courses that they want to teach. (At more than one institution these part-time teachers are almost the only customers for the graduate courses.) And it is attractive to the graduate students themselves because it offers them a kind of subsidy without which most of them would be unable to seek advanced degrees.

Some of these teachers are enthusiastic, experienced, expert; more are bored or resentful, lack previous teaching experience, are ill-informed on what they are supposed to teach, particularly on language and composition, and are teaching with little supervision or guidance. Part of the trouble is the sheer size of the operation, especially in the state universities. Last year, for example, one such institution had a freshman class of 7,500, which was divided into sections of approximately twenty-five students each. This meant some 300 sections of freshman English to be taught. All of them were taught by graduate students since the university could not afford to hire enough experienced and expert teachers for so large a program, even if such people were available in the necessary numbers—and of course they are not.

Another part of the difficulty is the lack of status that the freshman course has long suffered from. On many campuses freshman English has been a sub-collegiate course, one that is clearly more appropriate to the high school than to an institution of higher education. In intellectual rigor it has too often

who is  
doing the  
teaching?

lack of  
status

been inferior to other freshman courses. Most English departments have regarded it as a kind of therapy that they perform without enthusiasm; and they have made it into a narrowly practical how-to-do-it course with few if any intellectual pretensions. In many universities that are unable to impose entrance requirements, the freshman English course has frankly been viewed by administrative officials as a means of weeding out academic undesirables who cannot be prevented from enrolling. Because of the kind of course that freshman English has become as a result of these circumstances; the best minds in the profession have rarely concerned themselves with it or its problems. Few first-rate men have taken the trouble to write textbooks for freshman English. A great deal of research has been done on aspects of the course but almost invariably by professors of education and their graduate students, hardly ever by people whose primary interest is English. It is seldom a course that most teachers—even most graduate students—look forward to teaching; but instead one that they merely endure and too often do not give their best efforts to.

But much of the poor teaching that one so often finds in freshman English is less the result of inexperience and indifference than of inadequate professional preparation—as indeed it is in the high schools also. The blame for this state of affairs must rest squarely with the college departments of English that have given these teachers their undergraduate and graduate education. Preoccupied with the study of literature, English departments seldom require the future English teacher—high school or college—to take courses that would give him a genuine professional competence in teaching either language or composition; yet it has been estimated that for the first six years of his career the college English teacher will find that 90 per cent of his teaching will consist of classes of freshman English in which he is supposed to teach both language and writing.<sup>1</sup> Missing from the usual English curriculum for the prospective teacher of English are courses in advanced composition, history of the English language, the modern study of English structure, rhetorical theory, English prose style, logic, semantics. The curriculum is almost entirely literary; with the result that the young teacher of freshman English is ill-prepared for the job he is asked to do and pines for the day when he can teach the literature for which his studies have qualified him. The effect of this attitude on the quality of teaching and on the morale of teacher and students can be surmised.

### QUALITY OF TEXTBOOKS

Freshman textbooks in many fields could stand considerable improving, but those for freshman English courses—in particular, the handbooks and the books of readings—are, as a class, likely to be among the poorest, the least scholarly, that the student will encounter. There are some good books among them, of course, but they are the exceptions in what has become a fantastically overcrowded field.

Most handbooks are deficient both in their view of language and in their theory of rhetoric. The attitude toward language that one finds in most of the current handbooks is still largely prescriptive, though it is true that this emphasis has lessened over the past ten years. Few books, however, have yet tried to present to the college freshman even a small part of the new knowledge about language that has revolutionized the serious study of this subject in the last

several decades. As for rhetoric, the majority of handbooks present a desiccated rhetorical doctrine that has probably done a good deal more over the years to hinder good writing than to foster it—the position of the topic sentence and mechanical rules for developing expository paragraphs, sets of critical abstractions which the student is urged to apply to his paragraphs and themes like a foot rule to a piece of lumber, injunctions about length of sentences (not too long, not too short), and the importance of figures of speech.

The books of readings, used presumably for analysis and imitation but actually serving more often than not merely as springboards for discussions of things in general, are a phenomenon peculiar to freshman English. Again, it must be admitted that some of these books have been put together with intelligence and taste, but the overwhelming majority of them are cut-and-paste affairs that can ill sustain a course of true college grade. Typical section headings in one of these books include "The College Scene," "The Relations of God to Man," "The Individual and the State," "The Meaning of America," "Freedom of Expression," "Man and Woman," "The Art of Living," and "Science and the Future." The last of these, in the volume quoted from, is followed by the parenthetical subheading "Where is science taking us?" The answer presumably is contained in the forty pages that follow, in which an article on detergents is sandwiched between Herodotus's explanation of why the Nile overflows and a selection by C. P. Snow.

The overabundance of textbooks for freshman English has already been mentioned, but it will be of some interest to spell out the extent of this abundance a little more exactly. As part of the analysis of freshman programs, a list was made of all the textbooks that were required. Seventy-six of the ninety-eight course descriptions specified texts. Leaving out dictionaries, complete literary works, and the so-called "controlled research" or "source" books, the list included the following:

- 57 different books of readings (two-thirds in use at only one college)
- 24 handbooks (half in use at only one college)
- 12 workbooks (all but one in use at different colleges)
- 4 handbook-reader combinations
- 35 literary anthologies
- 22 miscellaneous textbooks

Included in the miscellaneous group were four research-paper manuals, three books on linguistics, two on public speaking, two on logic and semantics, two on logic alone, two on developing reading skill, a style sheet, a glossary of literary terms, a book on how to write technical reports, a pamphlet on spelling, another on using dictionaries, a massive cultural, intellectual, and social history of the United States, and finally something called *30 Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary*.

From the fact that at seventy-six colleges and universities fifty-seven different freshman essay anthologies are being used, one can draw a number of possible conclusions: (1) Many of these books are so nearly alike that it matters little which one is used. (2) Fads and novelties affect choice of these books as much as they do choice of women's hats. (3) Local authorship plays a large part in the decision to adopt one of the books, since two-thirds of them are used at only a single school on the list, often where one of the authors is

employed. (4) The glut of these books, all produced by presumably busy scholars, suggests that the job of putting one of them together is considerably less burdensome than the writing of most other kinds of books. (5) Fifty-seven different books of readings for what in theory is the same course suggests a degree of uncertainty about the aims, methods, and proper content of the course. Perhaps none of these interpretations is entirely true, but none is wholly false either. Certainly there is an extraordinary number of these collections on the market, and they come and go with extraordinary rapidity.

After this survey of the difficulties under which the freshman-English course labors, it will be useful to look more closely at the course in its various forms to get some notion of the specific policies that govern the work done in it. The practice is now almost universal of making some provision to segregate students in this course by their presumed ability in English composition. Since the course patterns that result from such a policy differ considerably from one another, it will be best to look separately at those for poorly prepared students, for superior students, and for the majority of students who fall into neither of these groups.

#### REMEDIAL COURSES

The number of colleges and universities offering remedial English courses has dropped sharply in the last several years. Though the trend may be said to have been started by the widely publicized decision of the University of Illinois to drop its own course, it has been reinforced by the pressure of rising enrollments and by the recent national concern for raising educational standards at all levels. A little more than half of the ninety-five schools whose freshman English programs were studied had no such course on their books in 1960-1961; and at least three of those that did dropped the course the next year. Probably no more than 40 per cent of the schools still offer the course; often, though not always, these schools are located in states where legal requirements prevent selective admission. One university in the South frankly calls its course "subcollegiate" and says that the main object of the course "is to teach high school English to weak college students." It underlines the point by requiring a high school textbook of grammar and rhetoric. A few schools that do not have a formal remedial course maintain "writing clinics" which the poorest students are either required or invited to attend in order to get special help. Increasingly, students appear to be put on their own in such matters: "This help is available; it's up to you whether to take advantage of it."

Of those schools that still offer a remedial course, about two-thirds give it without credit, and nearly all the others hedge the credit about with some kind of restriction. In some places the credit does not count toward graduation, and thus a student taking the course has a three-hour deficiency to make up. In others, the student is required to attend class five hours a week but gets only three credits.

Two-thirds of the schools that give the course offer it as a part of the regular curriculum, available during school hours and taught by members of the English department (though nearly always graduate students or junior instructors). No fee is charged. The others have removed it from the English department

entirely and offer it, for a special fee, by extension (in the evening or by correspondence) or in the summer session only.

Students are assigned to remedial courses on the basis of standardized objective placement tests, often backed up by one or more compositions. Most schools have provisions for correcting errors in placement, either upward or downward, on the evidence of the first two or three themes written in whichever course a student has been assigned to. The percentage of students put in remedial courses varies widely, from 40 or 45 per cent at three universities on the list to only 5 or 7 per cent at other institutions. The mean is about 15 per cent.

The content of these courses is, as would be expected, mainly drill on grammar, usage, punctuation, spelling, and elementary rhetoric—sentence structure, the simpler kinds of paragraph structure. Workbooks are commonly used, often taking up more time in the course than practice in actual composition does. Papers are customarily assigned at the rate of one a week, though written exercises of one kind or another may come more often. The papers are nearly always short—no more than a page or two—and often may consist of only a single paragraph. Topics generally are pointed toward the student's own experience and call for simple narrative or expository treatment. A large proportion of the writing is done in class, sometimes all of it. The reason seems to be compounded of a desire to give more individual help to the student as he is composing and an anxiety to be sure that the student is doing his own work.

#### PROVISIONS FOR THE SUPERIOR STUDENT

As college English departments have shown less and less concern for the needs of the dullest and most poorly prepared students, they have taken a sharply increased interest in the needs of those who are brightest and best prepared. More than two-thirds of the ninety-five colleges were making some special provision for superior students in 1960-1961; and since this trend is still on the rise, there is no doubt that the proportion is even higher now. Among those institutions that apparently were not making some effort to accommodate the usual freshman English requirement to the needs of the bright student were three small and highly selective colleges that do not teach freshman English at all; at most of the others, special treatment for individuals is possible through the Advanced Placement Program.

The particular arrangements made for these students take many forms. In some institutions a few students may be totally exempted from any requirement in freshman English, though they will usually be required or encouraged to elect one or more advanced courses in English. In many places bright students are exempted from a part of the normal requirement—the first term usually—then either made to take the rest of the regular sequence or, more commonly, put in an accelerated course that combines in one term the work of two. Sometimes a grade of A or B in the accelerated course will confer double credit; more commonly, students satisfactorily passing the course are asked to elect another English course, nearly always a more advanced one in literature. Some colleges and universities do not exempt students at all but instead put them either in homogeneously grouped sections of the regular course in which the standards have been set higher than in the regular sections or in a special full-length sequence with different textbooks—new courses, really,

What happens in remedial classes

Remedial students left on their own; get help.

more challenging to good students than the regular courses would be. These sections often are quite small, a dozen or fifteen students.<sup>2</sup>

The students thus singled out for special attention are identified in several ways. Colleges and universities that use the College Board tests are likely to rely principally on scores for the Verbal Aptitude Test and the English Composition Achievement Test, together with the "Writing Sample" when it is available. The decision may be shaded with such other factors as high school grades, an evaluation of the high school itself, and predictions of a student's academic success made by high school teachers and principals. Institutions not affiliated with the College Board use a variety of other objective tests, sometimes locally developed. These tests may be supplemented by a short theme. A few schools exempt students from the first-term course solely on test and other data assembled before actual enrollment. Most require eligible students to take a special proficiency test and to pass it with distinction. This examination is usually an impromptu composition on a topic demanding rather lengthy and complex treatment. At still other institutions, students are not exempted from the first course but may be exempted from the second on the basis of grades earned in the first—usually A or B. There are great differences from school to school in the percentage of students for whom these special arrangements are made. At some, as many as a fourth of the freshman class are exempted from the first course; at others, as few as 3 or 4 per cent.

In the special sections and courses, sometimes the same textbooks are used as in the regular classes, but the level of class discussion, the quantity of reading, and the quality of writing are adjusted to the greater potential of superior students. Usually, however, some or all of the texts will be different from those used in the other classes—longer, more difficult, often more of them.

The great majority of these special classes have a pronounced literary bias, usually with considerable writing done in connection with the study of literary texts. Sometimes literature is frankly in the foreground—courses in literature, with occasional assignments in writing; other courses claim to be primarily ones in composition, with literature read mainly to serve the purposes of instruction in writing. When the pattern specifies more than one course, the literary emphasis is likely to be stronger in the later course or courses of the sequence, which sometimes become purely courses in literature, with examinations the only writing.

Perhaps most commonly the literature content comprises a survey of major types, though a sort of indiscriminate "great books" or world literature emphasis is often found. One Midwestern university has prepared several lists of six or eight paperbacks, each list dealing with a common theme ("The Dead Sea Scrolls," "Freud and His Critics"). Instructors of the special sections choose one of the groups of titles as the reading for their classes.

The writing in these special courses is usually expository, if the term is construed broadly to include the kind of analytical and evaluative writing that arises from the close study of literature. The total amount of writing required is usually greater than in the regular courses. Papers are likely to be fewer but longer—800 to 1,000 words rather than 500 to 600. At least one unusually long paper is a normal feature of each special course. This paper, which may range anywhere from 1,200 to 5,000 words, is based either on one of the many "controlled research" books or on library investigation.

## THE STANDARD PROGRAM

Depending on how many students a particular college separates from the top and bottom of the pile, the standard freshman English program may enroll anywhere from 55 to 97 per cent of the freshman class. For the ninety-five schools studied, the mean is about 75 per cent.

The primary emphasis in the first course of the standard program is on expository reading and writing; better than four out of five of the colleges on the list exhibit this emphasis. Early in the term it is a fairly common practice to require some reading of biography, autobiography, and description and to ask the student to write a few narrative or descriptive papers based on personal experience, but this work is usually intended only as a preliminary to the study of exposition.

Except for a few highly individual programs, the remaining fifth emphasize the study of literature, with writing assignments growing out of this study. The literature is most commonly organized by types; the writing is analysis and criticism of individual works. With a few exceptions the colleges where this literary emphasis appears in the first term are those with rigorous standards for admission—the Ivy League and a number of small, highly selective liberal arts colleges. One explanation for this tendency, and the one most likely to be advanced publicly, is that most students at such schools are better prepared in English than the average entering freshman and can safely forego systematic instruction in the mechanics of composition and the rhetoric of expository prose. This explanation is by no means irrelevant, but certainly another to be considered is that many of these colleges have a long tradition of belletristic study in the freshman course that they are reluctant to depart from.

Though the main focus in the first term is generally on the reading and writing of exposition, a number of other concerns appear often enough to deserve mention. One of these is the familiar "review of fundamentals," a survey of the conventions of grammar, usage, and punctuation that the student has suffered through annually from the seventh grade on. At some colleges the "review" may last all term; at others it comes in the first weeks. This feature of the freshman course appears to be declining, however, especially where enrollment pressures have become acute or where there has been an appreciable rise in the quality of students admitted. At such colleges the level of performance expected of students has been raised, with the result that class discussion of elementary errors in correctness is being drastically reduced and often eliminated. Increasingly, students are left to decide for themselves how much reviewing they must do to correct this kind of mistake. The errors in their compositions are identified by the teacher, but unless a certain error is being made by a considerable number of students in the class, it is not discussed during class time; the student is referred to a handbook for enlightenment or (in chronic cases) to a writing clinic. In effect, many college English departments are now saying—and meaning it—that matters of this sort are not a proper subject for collegiate instruction and must be learned before the student enters college.

Another concern of the first term of freshman English is the serious study not just of so-called "functional grammar" but of language itself, especially English. The study is justified not primarily as a means of improving writing

but rather for its value in a scheme of liberal education. About a tenth of the courses examined included some work of this sort, often extending over several weeks. Another discipline figuring in the courses of the first term is logic, which appears in about one course out of eight. Semantics is a third, appearing about as often as logic but taking up much less room in the course now than when it was at the height of its vogue fifteen or twenty years ago.

In the second course of the freshman English sequence, the pattern in colleges on the semester system is likely to differ from that of those on the quarter system. Under either plan this one year of English will be, for most students, the only required work in the subject. The second semester is, then, more often than not the terminal course, and with this in mind a little over two-thirds of the English departments operating on the semester plan require the reading of literature in this term to ensure that all students will have at least a minimal exposure. The writing tends mainly to be analysis and criticism of the literature.

In colleges that are on the quarter system, which provides three terms instead of two, only a fourth of the programs specify this kind of reading and writing for the second course. The most prominent emphasis in the second-quarter course is on logic, particularly in relation to argumentative and expository reading and writing. (Only about a fifth of the colleges on the semester system have this emphasis in the second semester, though two of the three that require a third semester of English include logic in that course.)

Another kind of emphasis that can be observed in the second-term courses is advanced rhetoric, usually in conjunction with a more sophisticated study of exposition than was found in the first term. Of the colleges on the quarter system, roughly one out of five has this pattern; of those on the semester plan, one out of ten.

In the third-quarter course, more than half of the colleges using this plan specify literary readings (with related writing), since this is usually the terminal course of the sequence. The others show a great variety—mass media, style, semantics, logic, exposition, American civilization. Some writing, usually expository, is customary regardless of course content.

In colleges and universities on the semester plan, the amount of writing varies in the first semester from 3,600 words to 10,000. The first of these figures comes from an Ivy League university which asks its freshmen for three 1,200-word papers in its one-semester course (it is a course in literature). The second comes from a college on the West Coast which requires its freshmen to write 20,000 words in two semesters of English composition. The mean figure for the institutions on the list is about 6,000 words in eleven themes. These papers average 500 to 550 words, with those written in class a little shorter and those outside a little longer. In the second semester about ten papers are written, but since one of these is usually a "long" paper, the total number of words written in this term approaches 8,000.

Where the quarter system is in effect, about seven themes are written in each of the three terms. The length of papers averages 500 to 550 words in the first and third quarters but 700 in the second, when it is usual to require a longer paper. (Only a few colleges ask for another long paper in the third quarter.)

A few schools on the list require a long paper in the first term it is rarely a research paper but instead an extended narrative or exposition of the same

general kind that the student has been writing earlier. In the second term three-fourths of the freshman programs require a long paper, and a little more than half of these ask for the usual "library" paper. Most of the others base the assignment on one of the many "controlled research" books, which ease the strain on library facilities and reduce the danger of plagiarism. It is interesting that about a fourth of the programs do not require any kind of long paper. The syllabus of one state university tells instructors that they may assign papers over 1,000 words long if they wish, but they should do so "only after the most careful consideration. Almost all detected plagiarism in English 4 themes occurs in papers over 1,000 words long. . . ."

The great majority of young people entering college each fall can expect to do a lot of impromptu writing in their freshman English classes. A few colleges, in fact, require all themes to be written in class, and many require half. The mean would probably be at least a third. The few colleges that do not insist on one or more impromptu papers are generally those with very selective admission policies, but even in the Ivy League class themes are not unknown. These papers always count more heavily than those written outside of class. The explanation is that class papers are the only ones that the instructor can be absolutely sure are the result of every student's unaided labors. A number of colleges require the last two or three papers of the course to be written in class; the student must get passing grades on these themes to pass the course.

In spite of the pressure of rising enrollments, themes are usually marked and graded by a student's own instructor rather than by a theme reader (even though the instructor may often be a graduate student just beginning to teach). This situation may not last. Several colleges and universities are now using readers for themes. The growth of the "lay reader" plan in high schools may soon encourage college administrators to extend it to freshman English courses as an economy measure: though graduate students can scarcely be called expensive labor, housewives cost even less.

#### A NOTE ON THE COMMUNICATION COURSE

The special variety of freshman English course called "Communication" (sometimes "Basic Communication") is distinguished from the usual composition course by its primary focus on the process of communication, often in a fairly sophisticated way, and on the four "communication skills," reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The typical course of this sort is oriented more toward the social sciences than toward the humanities. The orientation of the composition course is the reverse. The communication course is concerned more with the accuracy of verbal expression and less with its esthetic qualities. The composition course tends to be equally concerned with both. Linguistics, semantics, logic, persuasion and argument, group dynamics, and the mass media are all likely to be studied in a communication course. Required reading seems rarely to be literary but consists instead of books and articles on language and communication and of newspapers and magazines studied as examples of the mass media.

Fifteen years ago communication courses were springing up everywhere. By 1948 there were 200 in existence. Today their vogue has largely passed. Most colleges and universities that once had them have abandoned them

graded  
in-class  
writing as  
1/2 of the  
work

How  
much  
writing

entirely; some of the rest appear to be choking them off with various administrative restrictions; a few others have kept the name but have dropped attempts to give instruction in speaking and listening and have in effect made the course into simply another variety of composition course.

Among the ninety-five institutions on the list, only six retain full-fledged communication courses that offer instruction and practice in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Three of them, part of a "general college" pattern within state universities, exist alongside much larger, conventional programs in composition. Three others, also part of a general education curriculum, seem to have maintained their vigor undiminished, at least partly as a result of a considerable degree of administrative independence that they have enjoyed.

Rarely, an otherwise conventional composition program will make a nod toward the claims of spoken English by requiring one or two short (3-minute) speeches during the year. But for the most part, except for the surviving communication courses, freshman English programs do not attempt to give formal instruction in oral discourse.

The most exciting educational development of the last half dozen years has been the widespread effort to improve the quality of instruction in several of the basic academic subjects, mainly by identifying and concentrating more directly upon their central principles and by bringing their content more neatly into line with current knowledge of the particular disciplines. On the strength of the analysis just concluded, one finds little evidence that the people who plan and run freshman English courses, or those who write textbooks for these courses, have been at all conscious of this movement or of its bearing on their own concerns. Most of them are still doing business in the same old way at the same old stand. Freshman English in the nation's colleges and universities is now so confused, so clearly in need of radical and sweeping reforms, that college English departments can continue to ignore the situation only at their increasing peril.

#### NOTES

1. *The Basic Issues in the Teaching of English*, presented by members of the American Studies Association, College English Association, Modern Language Association, and National Council of Teachers of English, 1959, p. 12.

2. For a fuller discussion of exemption policy and procedures, see Appendix A, pp. 157-163.

## The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Expository Prose

RICHARD BRADDOCK

**M**OST TEXTBOOKS on English composition have presented some concerted treatment of topic sentences, long hailed as means of organizing a writer's ideas and clarifying them for the reader. In the most popular composition textbook of the nineteenth century, for example, Alexander Bain recognized that topic sentences may come at the end of a descriptive or introductory paragraph, but he emphasized that expository paragraphs have topic sentences and that they usually come at the beginnings of paragraphs:

19. The opening sentence, unless obviously preparatory, is expected to indicate the scope of the paragraph. . . . This rule is most directly applicable to expository style, where, indeed, it is almost essential (Bain, 1890, p. 108).

In one of the more popular composition textbooks of the present, Gorrell and Laird present a similar statement about topic sentences—a statement which is paralleled in many other textbooks these days:

Topic sentences may appear anywhere, or even be omitted. . . . but most modern, carefully constructed prose rests on standard paragraphs, most of which have topic sentences to open them.

And of 15 items on "Paragraph Patterns" in a commercial test of "writing," three involve the identification of topic sentences in brief paragraphs. In each of the three, the correct answer is the first sentence in the paragraph (*Basic Skills*, 1970).

How much basis is there for us to make such statements to students or to base testing on the truth of them? To clarify the matter, I studied the paragraphs in representative contemporary professional writing, seeking the answers to these two questions:

1. What proportion of the paragraphs contain topic sentences?
2. Where in the paragraphs do the topic sentences occur?

RICHARD BRADDOCK (1920-1974) was professor of English and rhetoric at the University of Iowa, where he founded *Research in the Teaching of English (RTE)* in 1967, the year he also chaired the Conference on College Composition and Communication. This article was published in *RTE* in

1974. In 1975 it received the first CCCC Braddock Award, which is now given annually for the best article published in *College Composition and Communication*. The award was established as a memorial to his work. (See also *Research in Written Composition*, p. 193.)