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TEACHING WRITING THROUGH STUDENTS' WRITING, A METHOD FOR INSTRUCTORS OF COMPOSITION.

BY- ALLEN, ROBERT R.

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AN OUTLINE IS PROVIDED FOR A TEXTLESS RHETORIC 101 COURSE TAUGHT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS. BECAUSE THE IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVE IS TO PROMOTE THE STUDENTS' AWARENESS OF THEIR OWN WRITING, THE SEMESTER IS ORGANIZED AROUND WHAT THE STUDENTS WRITE, NOT WHAT THEY READ OR MODELS WHICH THEY OUGHT TO IMITATE. AN INTRODUCTION, A SET OF ASSIGNMENTS ON CULTURE, AND A TEACHER'S READING LIST ARE INCLUDED. THE MAJOR PORTION OF THE DOCUMENT, "NOTES ON TEACHING REPRESENTATIVE ASSIGNMENTS," CONSISTS OF SAMPLES OF THE STUDENTS' WRITINGS, THE TEACHER'S COMMENTS, SHEETS AND STRATAGEMS USED IN CLASS, AND AN ACCOUNT OF CLASS ACTIVITY. THE COURSE IS ARRANGED SO THAT THE STUDENTS BEGIN WRITING ON THE BROAD TOPIC, "CULTURE." THEN THEY WRITE ON SUCH SPECIFIC TOPICS AS TASTE, CUSTOM, AND CONVENTION. AT THE END OF THE SEMESTER THEY WRITE AGAIN ON THE ORIGINAL BROAD TOPIC. WITH THIS ARRANGEMENT OF ASSIGNMENTS, CLASS DISCUSSIONS AND WRITTEN EXERCISES CONVERGE ON A CENTRAL THEME AND PROVIDE A CHANCE FOR THE STUDENT TO HEAR CONTRASTING POINTS OF VIEW AND THEREBY REALIZE THE COMPLEXITY OF WHAT HE IS TRYING TO SAY. (BN)

Teaching Writing through Students' Writing:

A Method for Instructors of Composition

Robert R. Allen
Department of English
University of Illinois
1967

Contents

Headnote

To assist you to plan your strategy for teaching Rhetoric at Illinois, here is an outline of a textless course. Teaching it, or a course like it, is one option in Rhetoric 101. As your guidelines for 102 and 108 permit, you are welcome, also, to draw on any aspect of my account that is pertinent to your needs if you are teaching either of those courses. Take in whole or in part. Refashion any elements of this matter or spirit that strike you as useful.

Even if your plans are quite unlike my ideas, these materials might still serve you as a counter-example--a model whose difference provides a clarifying vantage-point on the assumptions and objectives you <u>do</u> elect to apply in your classroom. Whether or not this outline suggests possibilities that have not occurred to you, it typifies varieties of latitude to consider. I hope my report will help to elicit inventive contribution from you. I will welcome comment or criticism of what I have done.

By 'a textless course' I mean a semester actually organized around what the students write--not what they read; not around models, which they ought to imitate; not around a subject the instructor has studied. By such a course I mean one for which an immediate objective is promoting a student's awareness of his <u>own</u> writing--before time is spent in analysis of professional writings. The method that I am reporting concentrates on self-directed objectivity. To accomplish this goal, it postpones attention to anthologized readings.

I am by no means the originator of the method. But I have extended certain of its principles, applied it to alternate areas of thought, and placed emphasis where I have not seen it before. Because I have the fresh memory of teaching these materials in a section of Rhetoric 101 last spring, and--most of all--because at the moment I do not hear anyone else bringing the method to your attention, I will proceed to details. I can best illustrate such a course by showing a set of assignments through which I worked.

A set of assignments on Culture

1. Topic for Composition: Culture

2. Finding something out

   a. Describe a situation--any situation--in which you found out something. What did you find out?

   b. Now shift your attention from describing the incident to examining your account of it. What, exactly, is the difference between confronting the situation then and writing about it now?

   c. In writing based on your example and what else you have said, offer a working definition of finding out.

3. Aprearances

   a. Tell about an instance wherein you discovered that something--or someone--was not as it--or he--had seemed.

   b. Discuss your example.

   c. What do the statements you have made in a) and b) lead you to say about the problem of appearances? What are appearances?

4. Boring

> "It is all in a single word, Mr. Ware," she proceeded, in low tones. "I speak for others as well as myself, mind you--we find that you are a bore."
>
> --The Damnation of Theron Ware

a. Discuss an instance in which you found someone boring.

b. Have you ever been boring? How do you know?

c. What is it to be boring? Base your decision on what you have written above.

4a. An additional assignment: Reading some Writing about 'Boring.'

a. Read over the two dittoed sheets that contain eight passages from essays by various class-members [see below] on the subject of 'Boring.'

b. Think about them. Listen for differences between what they say and ways they say it.

Devise worthwhile questions to ask of these selections: questions 1) that presumably would help the writer to see merits and problems in his own work and 2) that encourage you to appraise your own writing that you do at any time in relation to what someone else has written and is now before you.

c. Write and hand in a page or two of your best observations about the excerpted passages.

Say at least something about each one (e.g., by itself or in light of others). You might note the extent or limits of the passage's possibilities, or the gesture it seems to be making--but these are just starters, and you should go ahead with questions and remarks of your own.

1. Boring is defined in Webster's dictionary as being dull or uninteresting. A good speaker's goal is to stimulate his listeners to be interested and therefore not to be bored. However, a boring speaker is not able to stimulate his audience, therefore his audience becomes bored.

To exemplify the definition of boring, I will discuss an instance in which I found my chemistry teacher to be boring. . . .

2. The dictionary defines "to bore" as "to weary by tediousness or dullness," and "a bore" as a person who wearies one through the lack of interest." By examining these definitions they seem to fit several individuals I have come into contact with. However, one of my math instructors in high school seems to suit the definition more than others. His most boring characteristic was the tone of his voice, which never seemed to differ. . . For those "students" who enjoyed a good forty minute nap every day his class provided this opportunity. To add to the ennui, quite often our instructor would, at each opportunity, talk about things completely unrelated to mathematics. . .

On the question of whether or not I have ever been boring, I am afraid I must answer yes. However, I doubt if anyone could truthfully answer no. Surely at one time or another we have bored at least one person by an unintentional know-it-all attitude. Perhaps it was the tone of our voice, or what may have seemed an unending discussion on our favorite topic, which caused us to be boring.

To be boring is a blemish on one's personality. The person who is always or very often boring is, in many instances, excluded from group gatherings and activities because people do not actually want to be with him. This can be explained by human nature. That is, most people would rather be with people as lively or livelier than themselves. In this way many people feel that they will be having more fun and getting more out of life than with a boring person.

3. When I find a person boring, I usually find him to be uninteresting, dull, tiresome. I had a lecturer in chemistry last semester who was just this way. . . A lot of the students fell asleep during the hour or went to listen to another lecturer at a different time. . .

. . . If you can hold their attention while you talk, you probably are not boring. . . If you are unfamiliar with something or someone you are talking about, your chances of being boring are quite good. In a private conversation one of the persons who is listening will tell you if you are boring or he may not say anything to be polite.

4. Eddie, who resides a few doors from me, is a bore. . .

There are a few reliable ways that I can detect whether or not I'm being boring. If the listener seems to let his eyes stray all around me, but rarely at me, I may assume I'm being a bore.

5. . . . A boring person is tiresome, dull and uninteresting; thus to be boring is to make somebody tired and uninterested in a subject that the speaker thinks is interesting.

6. . . . I talked steadily for five minutes when suddenly my audience began to disappear. One by one the boys were wandering off to form their own group, and it was then that I realized how boring I must have been. I quickly stopped talking and joined the others, satisfied once again to be one of the "group."

. . . From these examples I conclude that to be boring is to seem dull and uninteresting to your audience. If your audience is glad to see you leave, then you have been boring.

7. . . . The Principal would also talk to informal groups in the same manner he addressed the large student assemblies. Soon, people would avoid meetings where he was appearing so that they would not be completely bored for that length of time.

. . . . I have never been told that I was boring, but some things even your best friend won't tell you.

8. . . . I was forced to listen out of respect for authority, and, in part, by the almost steely eyes of this stranger, which, at first, arrested my attention. . .

There have been many times that I, while talking to someone, realized a sense of boredom resulting from our conversation. More times than I care to remember fell short of being stimulating conversation or welcomed presence. One can tell when he is becoming a bore, when the other participant assumes an overly agreeable attitude, which reflects his boredom. When this comes about, it is best to leave things where they are and excuse yourself.

To be boring is to cause annoyance by thrusting yourself into someone else's attentions. To be boring is to be a nuisance. . .

5. Responding

a. Discuss an advertisement that has caught your attention. (If possible, attach the ad to your paper, transcribe it, or bring it to class.) What is the precise relationship between that ad and you?

b. How does the ad work?

6. Bad Taste

a. Discuss a situation in which you objected to someone because he was acting in bad taste.

b. What is bad taste?

7. Good Taste

a. Write about a situation in which you exercised good taste.

b. What was 'good taste' in this instance?

c. What distinguishes good and bad taste as you have thought and written about them in this and the previous assignment?

d. What is 'taste' and how does it work?

8. Embarrassment

> Bad taste usually involves an act that would embarrass yourself or others and this act is not called for.
>
> --a student-writer

> Bad taste is when a person shows no consideration, respect, or courtesy towards others by distracting others around him or making them feel ill-at-ease in a situation by embarrassing them.
>
> --another student-writer

> King Kong's little elves on the roof-top they dance
> Valentino-type tangos while the make up man's hands

Shut the eyes of the dead not to embarrass anyone,
But farewell, Angelina, the sky is embarrassed,
And I must be gone.

--"Farewell, Angelina"

a. Write about embarrassment.

b. What is embarrassment?

9. Custom or Convention

a. Tell about two situations: first, one in which you behaved according to a custom or a convention, and, second, one in which you did not.

b. In a thoughtful continuation of your remarks, relate the two situations.

10. Law

It's all right. He's licensed to kill.

--someone's remark about James Bond

Take away Law, and man is nothing but a gross mass of all impiety.

--from a sixteenth-century book by G. Markham

a. Write about an occasion on which you were said to have broken a law.

b. Did you agree?

c. In writing about it, how have you distinguished law from taste, convention, or propriety?

d. What is law?

11. Prestige

He is a big man on the campus.
--a saying

To be a footstool is a vile and abject thing.
--Lynne (a writer in Shakespeare's time)

a. What is prestige among persons about you?

b. How is it attained, retained, supported, measured? How is it expressed?

c. What is it like? (In saying what it is like, try to find a simile or metaphor more to your liking--and more expressive of your meaning--than the two contained in the epigraphs on this page.)

d. Complete as coherent an essay as you can on the subject of prestige.

12. Class

When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?
--John Ball, 14th Century

Society consists of five sorts of men: gentlemen, citizens, yeomen, artificers, and laborers.
--William Segar, 1602

In America there are no aristocrats.
--a saying

In writing an original essay on the subject of class, it may help you to keep these questions in mind:

a. What importance has social class in any book that you have read?

b. What constitutes social class in the life that you know?

c. What relation has social class to your life on this campus?

13. Time

Write an essay about Time. Some questions you might ask are these:

a. Has it ever seemed to you that you were wasting your time?
What were your thoughts about it then?
What better use might you have made of your time?
What did you do about it?

b. How are you distinguishing 'wasting time' from 'boredom,' which you thought about in an earlier assignment?

c. What attitudes toward work and leisure are implicit in what you are saying?
To what extent do these attitudes agree or disagree with other sets of attitudes, current or past, that you know about?

14. Work

> My father and mother worked in a rage to put us above their level; they had married to make us possible. We were the only conceivable end to all their striving; we were their America.
>
> --Alfred Kazin, A Walker in the City

Write an essay about Work. Among the many questions that you might ask yourself in order to open up the subject are these:

a. What are one or more kinds of work that you do?

   What is it like? Why do you do it?

   What do you think about it?

b. What kind of work do you not do? Why not? Who does it for you?

c. How much choice do you have in the matter?

15. Re-writing

a. Re-write the paper you wrote for assignment #2.

b. What happened when you re-wrote it?

   What was your writing like before?

   Discuss your process of re-writing.

16. The Composition of Culture

Your topic for composition is Culture--an empty, abstract, and meaningless term until you make it otherwise.

Write a polished essay in which you compose your culture.

a. Preparation: You <u>will</u> be composing culture if you think of your process of writing as an opportunity to do some concentrated and independent thinking. You will be <u>composing</u> to the extent that you regard writing as an active process whereby you create order in your mind (and on your pages) where less existed before.

When you are declaring the precise terms in which you see and define the world just beyond yourself, you will be establishing tentative control over experience outside you--because you will be stating the relationship between you and it.

You are free to make strategic use of any thinking, writing, or reading that you have done heretofore--as long as you see it freshly and write about it anew.

b. Writing: Let the choices you make at the moment you are writing help you to think precisely. Make and explore distinctions. Think about what you have said by noticing what you have not said. Write without leaning on expressions discarded by others. Find a tone of voice that sounds like you, not someone else. Try to have the tone of what you are writing appropriately expressive of your attitude toward the substance of your discourse.

c. Maximum length: 5 pages

Introduction

At the outset I oblige the student to be responsible for all the thinking that appears in his compositions--and to express that thinking in language that is his own: not forked from some authoritative platter; not from a dictionary, critic, or casebook full of experts. In each assignment, within a cohesive series, I provide the opportunity for a student to set out from a given situation that is germane to his own experience. The assignment leads him to move beyond the sphere of his private experience to explore a more general idea--e.g., a concept of cultural relevance--that his specific instance has anticipated. Thus my assignments are variations on a basic formula: a selected incident permits the student to establish a sufficient and suggestive definition of an abstract, mental construct--in his own, not borrowed, terms.

One writing-habit I work to implant in a student is expanding his subject to engage and to cope with a question of interest and pertinence e.g., how a certain societal relationship operates. Another, related habit is grounding his generalizations in nourishing, manageable specifics. The ability to establish connections between a specific incident and the reflections based upon it is the mark of mental ownership in student-writing I look for most. Like homely stitches in sewn cloth, better that the connections show than be wanting, e.g., "On the basis of what I have said in my account, I offer this working definition of 'embarrassment.'" On these premises, I prefer the limitations of operational, situational definitions, e.g., "Embarrassment

is the act of making someone feel like a fool," to the inutility of detached ones, which are powerless to instruct us because they are remote from the writer's experience.

Not only do I expect a student to show evidence of connection between different levels of abstraction. I also place him in position to write about the process of making such connections. Some of my assignments incorporate the act of making intellectual steps as part of the subject-matter. (See, for example, part b in assignment 2.) As he addresses the difference between living through a certain experience and--later--writing about it, a student may come to regard writing as a special opportunity for making sense of what is around him. Writing can be a time at which he builds self-respect--respect for powers of organization and privileges of second-looking that are worth his caring for. My object is to promote a view of writing as a thinking-process, not an automatic recording of thought. It is an act of consideration, not a compilation of sources.

I do not claim to be purely inductive. If a teacher is to keep induction untarnished, he must be prepared for a student's paper, or a class's discussion, to come out absolutely anywhere. By 'inductive' then, understand me to mean intentionally so. I qualify the term because I am aware that what may be discovery for the student may coincide with confirmation for me. I nudge the student toward confirming the definition of writing on which the course is based. He senses discovery. He comes to see his writing as a process of establishing tentative, sufficiently expressive order on experience.

For without what he just wrote, his experience remains less organized, and therein less informative, for him and for us.

I am primarily concerned with teaching an outlook: an attitude of energetic questioning. Subject-matter is secondary. Therefore I try to be just directive enough to keep the method in operation. I am permissive about the direction in which the content is carried, but intolerant of any jolts or disjunctions the class permits while moving it there.

The writing, or discussion, for any single assignment is inductive to the extent that I insist that a student's observations lead into whatever conclusions he offers as based upon them. The series of assignments is inductive insofar as each theme addresses an adjoining facet of a broad topic that the course is exploring. (In the course I am citing in detail the topic was "Culture: what it is, and how we make it up." A previous year the main topic was "Perception: relationships between Knowledge and Action; between seeing, knowing, talking and writing.")

In his evaluation of the course, one student wrote, "Upon looking back, I can see that the first assignment that we had seemed to be a rough draft of what was to come later. The next themes were all related in that they seemed to be ingredients of the final assignment that we had to write, on Culture." A second student said, "We started with themes about Discoveries and Observations, and we progressed through Good and Bad Taste to Customs and Cultures. We had to express ourselves on phases of living that are going to affect us for the rest of our lives."

At all points in the series I expect a student to be making new distinctions, e.g., between "Embarrassment" and "Bad Taste," in terms of the verifiable definitions that either he or the class has established in earlier work. Although my directions encourage him to sharpen his perceptions by keeping earlier assignments in mind, the over-all design of the course is such that a student may not realize the integration of the assignments or the perimeter of the main topic until he is well into the term. "At first I didn't think that the assignments meant anything in conjunction with each other. Towards the end they began to piece together, and they formed a picture of what I thought about society," a third student wrote.

There waits the classroom. An instructor with these intentions now takes on what to me was the exhilarating task of making good the method. What his assignments have brought into life must not suffocate in class-sessions. Having constructed excercises that demand adventurous statements on the student's part, the teacher must avoid backsliding into corrective authoritarianism. There is danger of counterfeiting his expectations by inadvertent dictation. He must not, in a disguised lecture, superimpose his own, better paper on the ideas the class has supplied. (It is temptingly easy to be more learned than freshmen--especially when you have prepared the class-hour and may even suspect that you have spent more energy reading the papers than they have writing them, as well. But it is difficult to rival a freshman's advantageous position for learning something.)

In a textless class, attention turns to dittoed responses to the common problem on which each student has written--complete papers or selections from several papers, as best suits the plan for the hour. Each student may gauge the aptness of his paper's approach to the concept eluding definition by noting the diverse ways in which his compatriots have developed the problem. A student sees what he did write in perspective of what his peers have written. Independently, he can measure what he did do by observing what he did not do.

As thinking generates, diverse points of view converge on the central theme. The students whose writing is not represented on the class-sheets can quicken discussion by contributing insights they reached in their own papers, as well as by adding observations that presently occur to them on the management and content of the student-writing that is now the focal point for the class. In a room where so many persons have past and present mental energies invested in partial solutions to the problem in definition before them, empty conclusions are less likely to pass unnoticed, and bland phrasing is unlikely to win toleration.

A strategy is needed to conduct such classes. One such strategy is benevolent non-cooperation. From the start you deny the dogged begging of your students at the table of <u>your</u> ideas until they forage on their own. If you decline to let them pick your mind for hints of the answers to your questions, they will, at last, turn to their own minds. When students grope for signs of your opinion, you volley questions back at their questions. And to keep exploration alive,

you convert their answers to new questions that expand the concept in view.

Enough of theory, and enough of negation. The next thing for me to show is what the students and I actually did: samples of their writing, my comments, sheets and stratagems used in class, and an account of the class's activity.

Notes on teaching representative assignments

Assignment 1: Getting Started

From my point of view as instructor, the object of the assignment (please refer to the assignment itself, on p. 5) is to capture some writing by freshmen in its natural state. Written responses to the assignment will serve:

a. to accustom the class to talking about its own writing

b. as landmarks for later retrospection (Assignment 16 in this series revisits the same topic). When the student comes to write on Culture again, he will take stock of his earlier crack at the topic and be free to incorporate or depart from it or any other writing he has done during the term.

There is no time like the outset. Any lapse of time, after the start of a course, that you let pass before asking students to write reduces the chance of gai ıg a set of papers free from influences of your class. An impromptu-essay, prefaced solely by remarks sufficiently assertive to let the students know:

a. that you want them to write

b. the topic

c. that you are interested to read what they write

will produce samples of writing minimally contaminated by shrewd guesses as to what the teacher wants. Making it evident that you expect them to be interested in what they write is a bigger job. That can begin with the following meeting, when the class looks at its responses to the assignment.

I can think of two advantages to occupying the first hour with an in-class theme:

a. the hour is part of the course, not anticipatory to it
b. at the second meeting you have writing by students to distribute (as you would not have if the first assignment were to be handed in at the second class).

As planned, assignment 1 is like an elephant-trap. You provide an empty space. Plop! In the papers fall. Faulty and bulky as they are likely to be, the specimens are held in captivity, available for the entire class to examine.

Here is a representative freshman's essay on "Culture"; I am reproducing it with its errors intact:

> If a person where to ask me today, "What is culture?", I don't think that I could answer his question sufficiently. Culture is not a thing that can be classified into certain traits. Culture differs from person to person so that no one answer would be meaningful.
>
> To generalize, I could say that culture is a vast knowledge of the world and a refinement of taste. But who is

to say who is cultured and who is not. Surely I'm not able. To a primative backwoods farmer, or to a Madison Street bum, I may seem cultured because I've finished high school. But to a rich, famous worldly traveler, I may seem to be a common proletariat.

A civilizations culture is usually based upon it's fine artwork and learned scholars. But only a few of the members of this civilization may truly be cultured. The rest are usually status seekers using the work of others to make themselves seem important.

To me each person has his own culture. That is, his own likes and dislikes. Culture does not have to be the love of an artform that many others see as beautiful. It should be what a person wants it to be and should not be a basis for judgement of character by others.

Because it undermines its own potentialities as it goes along, the paper is typical of the lot. Who will come out and say something in his essay if he doesn't? One would like to say a number of things at once to this writer: that, initially he squanders his energies in bet-hedging; that his declaration of inability is unwittingly borne out by his weak and tentative passes at the subject; and that he bogs down in relativity, stirring himself only to retract his most ambitious generalizations. One would like to point out to the class that the essay isolates the term 'Culture' so insufficiently

that what he says of it in the last paragraph could be just about as true of 'Haircuts,' i.e., the context that the writer provides is so bland that if someone switched the subject of the paper without our knowing it, it would be hard to tell the difference.

But all this cannot be said at once. One must begin with something manageable. And better to conduct a class that trains the students in alertness to their peers' writing than one that merely lets them consume the instructor's response to it. I contented myself with basing a class on the way in which various papers began.

What about the errors on the surface of the paper--distressingly abundant here? Whether they appear to be the result of ignorance or of carelessness, I am inclined to give them fuller attention privately than in class-discussion--i.e., through individually-tailored, written comments that reach the transgressor when all the papers are returned, at the close of the hour. My over-riding objective is to equip each writer with the ability to see his prose as another person would see it. A power of general, critical detachment with respect to one's writing seems to me a necessary foundation for anything more than a perfunctory concern for conformity. If a writer is to develop an attitude toward formal correctness that is meaningful, it must be built on an interested responsibility concerning his content. He must respect what he has to say enough to want to present it in a form that does not deface it. Hence an instructor does well not to let the relationship between himself and any of his writers crystallize into the fixed roles of weary magistrate and habitual, petty felon.

The instructor who, by the end of the term, hopes to put himself out of business by delegating the task of police-work from himself to his writers, must do whatever he can to disallow the student's expectation of a routine amount of tolerated correction in exchange for any piece the writer has handed in.

On the sheet of excerpts that I distributed, the first three sentences of the paper that I transcribed in full, above, made up sample number 1. These were other sample-openings:

2. Culture is a term which can be used to describe or categorize groups of people with each other, or place these people in a certain time period historically. Culture could possibly be defined as the effects of man on his environment or surroundings and also the development of arts and sciences by man during a given period in history.

   Culture is constantly changing. . .

3. The word culture is difficult to define in one sentence, or even two, for it has many interrelated meanings. Culture can reflect the past traditions of a nation or civilization and reveal many characteristics of the people involved.

4. Americans are thought of as being a homogeneous mixture, therefore all having the same type culture. This idea seems completely wrong when we look at the many different groups of Americans.

5. When we look at a glass of water with the naked eye, we see the water as being clear and pure. But when we take

a single drop of this water and put it under a microscope, we can see many irregularities. In the same way, in order to see the complete American culture, we must look at it closely.

To distinguish theory from practice in dealing with a subject, I asked the class to entertain these questions:

a. How might you have written on "Culture?" i.e.,

i. What sort of topic for composition was "Culture?" (Sample answers from the class: Big. Unspecified. Vague. Abstract.)

ii. What directions did you have? (Answers supplied: Almost none. Only to write on it.)

iii. What options did you have when you were faced with writing on this topic? (What follows in A and B is the summary of discussion:)

A. Refusal to write: Someone tossed out the simple observation that, evidently, no one had refused to write on the subject. This obvious remark pleased me because it gave promise that the class would go on to appreciate the existing conflict between their nominal assent--they showed compliance by the fact that they did write--and the dragging-of-heels that characterized their essays.

B. Compliance

1. Unwilling: Did such an attitude find expression in any of the papers? Yes. In cautious treading on the subject. E.g., in 2 where "can" and "could" join the tentative word "possibly" to make a low declaration of writer's assurance.

2. Willing: Implied in the more confident beginnings of 4 and 5. For example, in 4 the writer indicates that he has an idea of his own by arguing against a statement with which he takes exception. 5 makes a claim to ownership of the subject. It is evident in his refusal to be hurried. He can afford to take his time because he knows where he is going. To think of an opposite, his situation and his need for urgency are obviously different from the border-guard who reports to Army Headquarters, by telegram, "The Chinese are coming." 5. raises an expectation that he will adequately treat the whole subject by imparting a sense of mastery over a selected sample of it.

As I continued to question the class, I hoped more closely to address the notable gargling, apologizing, and self-effacement of papers 1, 2, and 3:

iv. To what extent were you qualified to write on "Culture?" (Discussion took this pattern:)

A. Ill equipped. One student took umbrage in his inexpertise. His words were, "Many attempts have been made at a fitting generalization as exhibited by our first papers. However, most of us fell short of an accurate definition, due primarily to a lack of knowledge of the subject." This statement permitted a discussion of the relation between knowledge and equivocation. I started it by taking up the student's point. "Accurate definition?" Can a definition be "accurate enough," as opposed to accurate or not accurate? Can a definition be sufficient to certain conditions that a writer establishes--as opposed to comprehensively or universally true? Need you be an authority? a cultural anthropologist? Must a person have taken a course in Sociology in order to write about Culture? Must he have read a textbook of anthropology?

B. In position at least to try. Able to take a flyer at the subject.

After these speculations, which emphasized how the assignment might have been approached, I turned the class more directly to what they had written.

b. How did the students write about Culture: what can you say about the openings of the essays?

i. What did they state?

ii. What did they imply? (Comment: 5 implies that he knows what he is talking about. He speaks as if he has perspective on the topic. He seems on the way to a controlled essay. His analogy implies that he could do more, but given his situation, he thinks it most proper to do just this.)

iii. What were they like? What gestures did they make? (I suggested translating them in terms of social situations. Best attempts by the students:)

What 2 does is like someone entering the room where a party, to which he has been invited, is going on, and saying, "Coming to a party is a difficult thing. It is a problem of confidence in making an impression. A

great deal depends on what one says first. A party is defined as. . ."

The impression 4 makes is of a person who says, "There is a lot of loose talk about Culture. Most persons would be satisfied with agreeing with it. It's time someone put an end to it."

The gesture that 5 makes is to treat the whole by concentrating on a part. When his hostess passes him the pie she has baked for dessert, he helps himself to a slice, rather than lifting the whole pie onto his plate.

By asking students to visualize, through paraphrase and caricature, the impressions that writings make on them, I permit some exaggeration of what they see. But by magnifying the writings before them, distinctions emerge that were not apparent to their untrained eyes under normal light.

The class-activity that I have described should make apparent my predilection for teaching with reference to process as opposed to form. Like a behaviorist in psychology, I am more interested in a writer's conduct--what we can say he is actually doing--than in what external prescriptions he ought not to be violating. Hence to the 'topic sentence' I give the raspberry. As a teaching-device it is brittle. Is a piece of writing any more satisfying to our curiosity

because it has a topic sentence? Are we any better because we can nominate a topic sentence in it? Will we ever know whether the writer intended it to confess a topic sentence? Is writing a check-list? What is the point in pinning the name on the topic sentence in the prose of a writer when the more informative expenditure of energy may be to admit that all the sentences resist the application of the term? And who but an instructor of Freshman Composition would ever suggest to a human student that he work by recipe? How far does any one of us come at times from lapsing into a cook-book formulation on writing that is more like this than not?

> Add one topic sentence to beginning and amplify thoroughly. Pour in one middle; thicken until it attains body. Compare and contrast briskly. Bake in classification until firm enough for definition. Frost evenly with conclusion. Sprinkle lightly with style. For grade-winning research-effect, decorate with footnotes.

Which of these two questions would you rather train your students to be able to answer: "Does my paper have a topic sentence?" or "How have I opened my paper?"

My emphasis is obvious. The method of class-work sets out three connected steps for the student, through repeated practice, gradually to master. The student actively responds to the writing

of a fellow-student (or, conversely, hears his fellow-student respond to his own writing); the student himself takes a new response to his own completed writing; the student is now ready, the next time, to incorporate awakened habits of critical response to his own prose while he is writing. He is more ready to re-think and to rewrite before he hands his paper in.

With this as my object, I am working to scotch the effort-saving "Once-and-for-all" attitude toward written work wherein the student fortifies himself against both the expenditure of mental energy and unflattering self-assessment by saying to himself, "I'm glad that's over." I would like to instill the notion that no piece of writing is impervious to possibilities of revision. Writing is unlike those many past conversations that haunt the mind of each of us, wherein, afterwards, we can think of much better things to have said. Writing, unlike the comeback that you wish had been faster, remains open for both reconstruction and retouching.

Assignment 4

The object: I designed this exercise about Boredom to make students more aware of changing relationships between a speaker and his audience--and, by inference, between themselves as writers and their audience. I was offering a public, social parallel to the otherwise mute and solitary business of pounding out a freshman-theme for the prime purpose of getting through it. I hoped, as a result, that they would be prone to take a side-long glance at themselves. I

wanted them to consider that they might bore me and bore each other. I would like to leave them with an inclination to regard their compositions as addressing a "live" audience, and not just written to gratify the institutional demands of the theme-correcting section-man--whom each of us is probably viewed as being more than we like to think. I was not above trying to inject a touch of humility into them. I hoped that in the future it might occur to them to calculate the risks of boredom on their own part.

The epigraph: I placed an epigraph at the head of the assignment to initiate the long-range and cautious process of teaching students to write about items outside their own experience without disjunction from their own train of thought. In assignments 2 and 3 it was reasonable to demand of a student that he show the whole course of his investigation because the conditions of the assignment made it as easy as possible for him to do so. The student started from scratch. It was fair to insist that the writer be able to demonstrate each step when he extrapolated a general statement from his account of specific circumstances. It was fair because he was setting out from an example he could not help but know more than enough about--an incident that was particular to his own life.

The epigraph is there to suggest that other minds, beside their own, have touched upon the class's common topic. The epigraph does no worse than to contribute an external thought. I also mean it to suggest to the student that he could explore his memory for stored experience that is other than just personal. If a student does set

out to manage some aspect of the epigraph--or to incorporate an ingredient like it--by now he knows that he is expected to establish as much control over it, and to display as clear transitions for a reader to follow, as if he were once again treating an occurrence born and bred in the paddock of his private experience.

At the far end of my purpose is the hope that a student will grow to be able to take up--and put down--a book to assist him in the conduct of his own essay, rather than be swamped by the outside source and leap overboard from his own paper. The reference should serve the student, not the student serve the reference. Too often a student will fail to see a book or an essay he is citing in <u>his</u> terms; instead, he will lose himself in <u>its</u> terms.

According to the papers submitted, teachers take quantitative honors among agents of boredom. This is fair payment, I suppose, in return for our part in the conspiracy called Education that has held each student stuck to a school-desk so much of his waking life.

More telling than this was the unanimity with which student-writers dramatized themselves as passive consumers--so rarely performers--in the intellectual transactions they wrote about. I for one will henceforth be all-the-more self-conscious about teaching any sort of class in which the student does not take an active part.

Similarly, it was more amusing than surprising to observe that few students could bring themselves to write in detail about themselves as purveyors of boredom. Specific examples in response to direction b) were rare in forthcoming. (As Johnson must somewhere have said, through the stratagems of self-defence, we continue in spite of ourselves to think well of ourselves.)

Assignment 4a

I set assignment 4a as a check on how the class-sessions were going. Each student would write out comments on answers sampled from the group. I would have them do on paper some of what I had thought they had been doing in class--against the possibility that I had only been hearing what I wanted to hear. It would permit me a lingering look at the quality of the constructive criticism I was accepting in class. Because the extra assignment would give me a piece of speculative analysis from every student, it would remind me who else existed. I would find work from persons whose actual non-participation might be escaping my notice amid the business of conducting the class from day to day.

As it turned out, I was glad that I had added this diagnostic procedure to the run of assignments. The range of results was wide. I was alternately satisfied and distressed. At their best, the independent criticisms were as promising of discernment as this one:

> Passage 1 seems limited in its implications. The beginning establishes a rather humble attitude for the author, who is not able to devise his own definition of boredom for the scope of his paper, thus having to rely upon Webster's Dictionary for one. I would ask him to present his own definition for the example that he is to describe.

But the lot also contained judgments that began as awkwardly as this: "In the second passage the writer has made good use of word usage." Here was a student in plain need of a less creaky vocabulary for talking about prose. In the following class I could start a discussion from the rock-bottom that I had struck.

> Instructor: Our constructive critic speaks of "good use of word usage." First, can a writer be using words and <u>not</u> be carrying on word usage? Next, what can we do to press a sharper insight from the present form of our critic's remark?

Similarly, I could place other of the lowest cards on the table: "Six gives a good example and uses it quite well. His conclusion is also good." With one like this, I could work toward the class's establishing a distinction between empirical and evaluative statements, and I could initiate a discussion of the attractions of showing the evidence on which you are forming a qualitative opinion. Here is the route I took:

a) What is our critic saying?

b) What is he <u>not</u> saying?

c) What is the difference between saying, "good. . . well. . . good," and "this. . . that. . . this?"

d) What name shall we give to the difference that you hear?

e) What elements in passage 6 can we point to and come out supporting our critic's free-floating and enthusiastic commendation? I.e., What observations can we make that will entitle us to shift gears into approval, at which speed he begins?

Another simple class-procedure naturally grows from an exercise assembling class-work as this one does. The instructor chalks two, conflicting statements on the blackboard, and asks the class to resolve the opposition as best it can, e.g.,

a) Passage 3 is so very "iffy" that nothing solid is established. His definition can be no more than tentative, at the most.

b) Selection three enriches its general statement by supposing some specific applications. It literally delimits its main point by establishing cases of boredom. He tells you that when such-and-such is going on, then the state of affairs in question applies.

My sympathies run with the praisers of the "if-then" view of life. Falstaff was by no means the last to get good service from the rhetorical form, which allows you to take the measure of interesting consequences by envisioning conditions that are contrary to the facts of your immediate situation. By imagining something relatively remote from you, you end up with more to know.

One last feature of this exercise that I will mention was its reinforcement of a good habit. It encouraged at least one student to take a delayed look at his own work. Here is a writer attaining perspective through detachment. Here is a writer resuming a conversation with himself, which activity (I would like to imagine) attends the best of writing.

> Passage 8 compells me to ask the author if "to be boring," is really "to be a nuisance?" Cannot someone be a nuisance and not be boring?

Although the speaking voice is stiff in its weak show of anonymity, it is nevertheless the statement of a writer who is seeing his own work freshly. It is the instructor's job to get such a colloquy going, and continually to up-date the time at which it begins to take place.

Assignment 5

I am certainly not the first instructor to bring ads into the classroom. Nor am I the first participant in our culture to reel between attitudes of keen fascination and tortured outrage in response to the Pageant of Commerce that I see about me. I am at once amazed and terrified by the things that the Purveyors of Goods seem unabashed to want me to do.

In his few but suggestive pages on the subject of advertising in Understanding Media, Marshall McLuhan convinces me that moral outrage is hardly our most interesting response to what is going on around us. He proposes, rather, that we will better exercise our intelligence by setting aside stock moral reactions and seeking accurately to appraise the abundant outlay of their intelligence as reflected in the motivational transactions directed towards us.

A second book clears further cobwebs. Wisely accepting Professor McLuhan's injunction against soft-shoeing through the postured routines of stage-horror once more, Walker Gibson helps us to feel, nevertheless, that we are somehow evening the score. In his witty and practical book, Tough, Sweet and Stuffy, Professor Gibson does not so much tell us things we do not already know about the ways advertising gets at us. He merely gives us better names for what we do know. He makes us feel in control by supplying us a system that works better than the terms that we had at our command before. To any instructor with a trace of inclination to take them in, I recommend these brief readings. They calm you down.

On the other side, there are books that are good to read because they rile you up. They let you know that there are things to worry about. For anyone who had assumed that Vulgarity in our culture was a simple matter, and that the commodity was plainly identifiable by a visible grossness, a half-hour with David Ogilvy's Confessions of an Advertising Man refines such notions. The old maxim for test-cases, "If it's coarse, it's Vulgar," proves insufficient to cope with the exalted attitudes toward matter and money that the speaking voice of that book expects us to affirm. It is a book that sets a high-water mark in what it asks a reader to believe. You keep looking for the wink in the authorial eye, but it never comes. You finally have to believe that a statement like this about his clients' products is delivered in sincerity. "Are these not the finest goods and services on earth? I think they are and that is why I advertise them." Inadvertently, the book has the effect of a Maoist tract. By revolting you against the high line of complacent affluence, it indirectly advocates Spartanism. It gets you thinking that the cultural alternative Right Guard or Red Guard is not an open and shut choice.

One of my purposes in the assignment was to focus on social situations where a predictable response is expected of you. The new awareness for the student to attain is a discovery of his precise mixture of willingness and discomfort in granting the expected reaction. The first point was to know that in society there are always voices defining you. The second was to exercise the freedom that you have--

to say how you like being defined in that way. Like assignment 4, attention centers on one's self through a time-spanning process. It was like the assumption that before and after you are being bored, you are not the same. Similarly, the student was to keep his eye on himself amid all that is happening to him when he is being touched by a manipulative advertisement. We would be using our powers of mind well if we could both predict and evaluate our conduct with respect to new experience. (Such an accomplishment might deserve the name 'civilization.')

A second purpose: I knew that students wrote <u>like</u> ad-copy. I wanted to know if they <u>could</u> write <u>about</u> ad-copy. My impression was that they <u>did</u> write with an apparent satisfaction with slogan-phrasing and slogan-thought. My object was for them to recognize it and to distinguish its opposite. I tried to set up a situation that would promote objectivity in that it would oblige them to step back and to say what ad-copy is like.

Earlier in these notes I registered my uneasiness over what I call mere consumership on the part of students--my dismay that in so many accounts of their mental transactions they describe their adoption of passive, receptive roles as if it were only natural to do so. Here again I thought I might be able to put the mirror to student-nature and to make inroads on cultural torpor by promoting at least a recognition of their intellectual propensity to take things without question and to take them lying down.

A third purpose was curiosity. I wanted to learn more than I already knew. I wanted to keep posted on the manly advance of the male-cosmetic industry. I hoped to find out if the chest-hairpiece actually existed yet. (Could anything that can be imagined be marketed?) And I wanted to know where students drew the line. When they absorbed a statement like, "If you took a shower every hour, you wouldn't have to worry about perspiration odor," were they insulted by the assumption of their body's objectionable inability to conduct social intercourse without antiseptic precautions? Did they resent the implantation of fears of their inadequacy? Or were they earnestly grateful to the brotherly voice whose advice seemed vaguely to promise an attainable, desirable social success?

Fourth, the assignment opened the door for a look at questions of obedience, e.g., to societal requests, instructions, orders, and commands. "Put your hand over the grey half [of my picture on the page] and see how much younger I look," says the voice of the man who is merely asking you to witness his discovery of "Great Day"--a coloring-preparation designed also to help you "handle your grey-hair problem." (Don't be afraid to <u>touch</u> the apple, said Eve to Adam. I'm not asking you to <u>eat</u> it--though after <u>I</u> touched it I wasn't afraid to eat it.) The long road of tacit assent, which leads from Simon-Says-Do-This all the way to Dachau, passes by way of the American art of the advertisement. To take note of how we react in a simple, amoral situation, like an ad, is a way of better preparing ourselves <u>to</u> react in a complex, moral one.

During a seemingly disconnected interval I tried an experiment. I gave members of the class a series of simple motor-commands, e.g., "Miss Fine, put this piece of paper on the window-sill," until someone at last challenged me as having no worthy purpose in issuing them.

A note on directions: It occurs to me that instead of reading as it does, assignment 5 could bear such additional instructions as these (so that, between the present a. and b., it would read):

b. What appeals are being made to you?

c. To what extent are you being imagined as a member of an ideal audience? And to what extent <u>are</u> you the ideal auditor that you are pictured as being?

d. What actual response is asked of you? What are you being asked to do?

e. What response do you give?

f. What decisions are you making by responding as you do? Are you excercising taste by reacting as you do? If so, what sort of taste?

To estimate the point at which a writer becomes encumbered with helpful suggestions is to confront the principle of diminishing returns. If not used in the wording of the assignment, such questions are ammunition for the class that follows <u>on</u> the papers.

Anyone who puts together assignments at all like the ones in this series discovers a rule of thumb: you get just about what you ask for. At the extreme of directions that are too thin is the danger of giving so little help that--although a few adventurous papers may strike new paths--more will disappointingly cover only the bare outline of the little you seem to have asked for, and take <u>that</u> minimally far. At the other extreme, with directions too full, you are likely only to get your suggestions explored (at worst, touched as if by an inchworm). You are all the less likely to be surprised with attacks on the problem that had never occurred to you--for I am speaking of methodological approach more than of the informational matter that the student brings to bear.

Between the two, I tend to settle for the upper limit of tolerable fulness. I try to hint, through directions, at guidelines that the student may find it profitable to investigate. I care little if he chooses another route, as long as he demonstrates the links between the levels of generality that he is moving through. I take the risk of confounding him with possibilities, but I think of those possibilities as rungs on a ladder whereon the student may climb, in his paper, as high as he can. In a second round of thinking the climb continues, in the succeeding class. "The directions," said one student-evaluator, "help you get started, but don't block your getting to your own ideas quickly and easily." "They should not force me into a particular viewpoint," another student observed. An instructor does well to experiment by varying the quantity of his directions from theme to theme.

More important than directions, the strongest caution I would give to any instructor, with respect to his activity in a classroom, concerns the tendency to do more than one should. When we are uneasy about the prospect of silence, we talk too much. When we are fearful of unsatisfactory answers from students, we tend to answer our own questions--or, worse, never actually to ask them at all. Whether I designate this common preemptive inclination as up-staging, taking all the tricks, scoring all the insights, or having all the fun, I am speaking of one thing: the failure to leave as interesting mental work for students to do in class-discussion as they are capable of taking on.

To rein in my own propensity to dominate the floor on the subject of advertisements, I altered the format of the class. I gave the class over to a few successive students. On his feet and without his paper, each presented his ad and recounted his response to it, fielding questions from the rest of the class and from me all the while.

The sort of question that seemed most worth asking aimed at such distinctions as these:

a. Whether the student could hear the difference between talking in terms of the ad and in terms to be applied to it, i.e., if he could recognize that he was still in the ad talking like it, when he ostensibly intended to stand outside it, talking about it.

Student: Any tire that would give me extra traction or allow me a bigger margin of safety would be well worth my time and expense to investigate.

Question: Is this you or the ad talking? Are you in or out of the ad when you say that?

b. Whether a student could see that he was having it both ways--that he was sounding at once like a contented, prospective consumer of the product and like a skeptic, irritated by the suggestion that he contemplate acquiring the item.

c. Ascertaining that a student could distinguish his response to the ad from his response to the product, e.g., pursuing this student's statement: "Though I believe gin the worst type of alcoholic beverage I have tasted, this ad appealed to me in one way."

d. Exploring the borderline of what may be non-verbal:

Question:

i. What part in the ad does the label of the bottle in the picture play?

ii. Is the label of a real bottle, not the one in the picture, also an ad?

Assignment 6

One workable index of the success of a person's writing can be seen in the number and kind of questions we want to ask of a piece after reading it. One way of giving a student credit for what he accomplishes and, at the same time, suggesting to him that he could almost always have done more than what he did with his material is to turn over a paper and its author to the class for open-questioning, and to keep track of the nature of the questions asked. Again, the sort of questions that come forth give a profile of the strengths and weaknesses of the essay, and an examination of that profile exercises the critical abilities of the class. For example, I set this portion of an essay before the class; the situation that the excerpt presented seemed to me classic in its provision of basic elements for an investigation of such a question as taste:

> I once encountered an instance in which I objected to someone because she was dressed in bad taste. I was attending a funeral for my grandfather and a lady came dressed in a bright orange coat and a shocking flowered hat. At a funeral one should wear dark neutral shades because it is a remorseful occasion; instead she wore a bright outfit as if she were attending a carnival for a gay time. Therefore she was inappropriately dressed. . .
>
> Bad taste is a result of uncouth actions, untactful speech, or inappropriate dress.

As soon as I started things off, by saying, "What do you want to ask the author?" this was the line of questioning that the class offered:

a. You say how the lady dressed. Do you think it was intentional on her part? What do you suppose she thought about it?
b. You say you objected. Was it silently or openly?
c. What did you want to do about it? What <u>did</u> you do about it?
d. Who decides what the lady "should wear?" Society? Who is society?
e. How do you know that anyone agreed with you in your objection?
f. Who said anything about "speech?" What that you said before prepared the way for that?
g. What do you make of the fact that all the words that you used in your summary are negative? What does that suggest?

Then, taking stock of the questions they had asked, the class decided:

a. that most of their questions demanded more specific information
b. that the paper passed over issues they wished it had treated

c. that the class had seen more lively implications in the writer's essay than the writer had.

I asked, in turn, "Who shou'd be asking these questions anyway?" suggesting that a lively writer would do well to raise such questions himself, as he goes along--asking them not just to avert future criticism, but more fully, responsively, and imaginatively to explore his subject.

Another paper that I used in class contained a pair of sentences that made possible a discussion of the role of standards in bad taste:

> Bad taste (as are many of the themes assigned) is a very personalized word. Logically, you must have good taste in order to criticize bad taste.

The class chose to ask this writer just how relative he thought taste was, and when does it stop being relative? They asked how official was good taste? I introduced one more, "How do you live with respect to it?"

When a freshman's ability to provide lasting answers lags behind his power to ask good questions, I am resigned to things-as-they-must-be. But I make no willing acceptance of a student's work that contains no attempt to answer or, worse, no effort to question.

Assignment 7

A student's paper that I quoted in the notes to assignment 6 posited a fixed point of good taste from which other judgments are made. In so doing it anticipated two of my aims in assignment 7: to give further training in finding a way to express ideas waiting to be related, and to train in finding better relationships between ideas that <u>have</u> been expressed.

As in the plans for the other assignments, the efforts that the students initiate on the papers are appraised and continued in class. A student develops a topic as best he can; in the following class his paper is both challenged and extended. The class argues with his ideas and picks up their exploration from the point at which he left off. Thus papers are not just publicly scored for their wants; they become stepping-stones for pursuit of the common topic. Even if more questions are asked than are finally answered, my covering bet in favor of this method is that if both the writer in his paper and the class in its discussion ask as many valid questions as they can, the subject will be opened to greater advantage than if either assumes there are no more questions to be asked. I am betting that in the act of asking questions, relationships <u>to</u> express will come to mind. I am also betting that in a well-posed question half the wording of a satisfactory expression of a relationship otherwise eluding precision comes forth, like a gift, in reward for the effort.

This was the sheet of passages by students that I distributed in class:

1. . . . Taste is a person's style or manner of showing a good or bad sense of being appropriate or unappropriate at occasions or events where a person's actions and dress are expected to coincide with the actions and dress accepted in society.

2. A few weeks had passed and then I learned that the Institute had had an art fair and the painting I appreciated so well had won a prize. After learning this news, I realized that I showed myself a good judge of art when I saw the painting earlier.

3. The way in which people react to your actions should give a clear indication of whether or not you have acted in good taste. If they are embarrassed, or feel uncomfortable about what you may have said or done, you have acted in bad taste. On the other hand, your own experiences, together with your conscience, may tell you how to act in a particular situation.

4. Taste is a function of the individual. A person must decide for himself what is good or bad taste. If an individual is true to himself and believes that he has done the reasonable and just thing, then he has acted in good taste. This is related to Emerson's belief that "nothing is at last sacred but the integrity

of your own mind." No one can judge another person. Each person must decide for himself whether he has shown good or bad taste.

5. Good taste is fundamental to human qualities, while bad taste is merely the lack of good taste.

6. Good taste and bad taste are extremes at either end of a scale that includes style, appreciation, and judgment. . . If your decision or performance is accepted by the people around you, then it is probably in good taste. Since this is partially an individual preference, there is no sure way of knowing exactly what is "good taste" or "bad taste."

Taste is the ability to make a critical judgment in reagrd to the social acceptance or rejection of this judgment.

7. When a person acts in a manner that is proper or agreeable with the moral laws of society, then he is acting in good taste.

Taste (in the sense I have tried to explain it) is what morally fits into society and what does not. You can think of taste in the sense I have talked about it in the same way as you think of taste when eating. If something you are eating agrees with your sense of taste, then you like it. But if it does not agree with you, then you do not like it. The same thing happens in

society--if the manner in which you are acting is not agreeable to the laws, then it is bad taste. If it does agree with the laws of society, then it is in good taste.

Here is my summary of the points the class took up in their questions and carried on through discussion:

1. Despite the writer's inclination to play it safe with synonyms, he hits on the useful notion of expectations. We can go on to say that meeting the standards of taste is like making a series of calculations. You stake your reputation that your public actions will win approval. If your conduct is accepted, you may be said to have acted in good taste. Good taste is an accolade.
2. This writer is uncovering the role of reinforcement in the build-up of shared judgments that we call taste.
3. This writer has an advantage. He sees his experience dramatically. His eyes are open to his interaction with what is around him. He knows that his impressions are only half of the story. How his surroundings react to him makes up another half. It is the first principle of psychiatry. People react. By assuming that there is give and take between himself and his environment, he doubles the area of his pertinent subject-matter.

4. Writers #3 and #4 introduce the competition between private and public judgments. #4 is especially optimistic about holding his own. Might he be whistling in the dark? How simple a matter is it to get other people to take us on <u>our</u> terms?
5. Writer #5 comes close to expressing good and bad taste as reciprocal elements. His is like a mathematical equation: B = 1/G. Are they absolutely relative? Can we think of any constant factors that we ought to include in the relationship that should express them?
6. This writer made an energetic and varied attack on the problem. The class thought of three schemes for characterizing his variety. They used these polarities: specific-general, concrete-abstract, and explicit-figurative.
7. He is on the edge of opening to view a habit of speaking that we take for granted--the way we accept a word like 'disgusting' as a signal for bad taste without thinking of it literally. It reminds us that what we mean by 'Taste' in the assignment is actually a figurative appropriation of the word.

Assignment 11

These were objects that I had in mind for the students:

a. to discover metaphor as a strategic resource for their writing
b. to face the problem of control in the use of figurative language
c. to estimate the extent to which we use figurative language without necessarily being conscious of it.

I meant to convey the idea that figurative language is neither good nor bad in itself. Whether it helps or hinders you as you write depends on when and how you use it. For a writer to keep it working for him requires a sense of knowing when there is more work it could be doing, and when to stop short of over-working it. It takes a bit of imagination to get you going. It takes some practice and restraint to keep you from going too far. It takes a reader's ear.

Here is a paper in which a student hits on a fairly workable figure--though the paper's second paragraph delivers answers to direction b. of my assignment like a victim at gunpoint:

> Among the people I know maturity and wisdom rank highest in the requirements for prestige. A person who acts in a mature manner with a high degree of intelligence is held high in their esteem.

Prestige is attained by having a certain consistency in maintaining the fore mentioned qualities. People begin to admire such a person, value his judgment, and desire his friendship. Prestige is retained also by consistency and measured by the amount of consistency. The people that follow a person of prestige are the support for it. The more prestige a person has the more supporters he will have.

Having prestige is like being the headpin on a bowling alley. The followers and supporters are all behind the headpin. When it falls, they follow. Such is the case with an individual of prestige. If he fails to maintain his consistency, he loses his followers and his prestige. It is his responsibility to remain standing so the people behind him will have an example to follow. They have a great tendency to imitate him, so he must set high standards and not fail in his efforts.

Thus prestige is an important part of society. Society is a combination of leaders and followers. The standards of society depend upon the success of esteemed individuals in maintaining their prestige as an example for their peers.

I brought the relative merits of the paper to the class's attention in this sequence of questions:

a. What is the main use of figurative language in the paper?

b. Are there any other figurative expressions for Prestige in the paper besides the "headpin?" (Prestige as height in the first paragraph)

c. Are there any other figurative expressions of any sort? (The college-wide shortage of Latin-scholars left the class no one to give quick release to the literal meaning of "depend" in paragraph four. By schematizing it and other words with the same root, e.g., "append," on the blackboard, I extracted the notion of "hanging down from" from the class. And I alerted the class to the possibility of other words that, by their derivation, are literally figurative. "Supporters" was another example.)

d. To what extent does the writer's main figure gather up elements that come before and after? To what extent is it in keeping with other things that he says?

e. Within what range is the figure comfortably extended? How would the parallel between Prestige and the kingpin be effected by having fewer details of bowling than there presently are? Which ones would you take out? What would be the effect of adding more elements to the figurative side of the main point? How far would you dare take this parallel? What details of bowling would you be willing to add before you felt that you were over-doing it. What details might you add that certainly would be overloading it?

Thus the class was exploring the writer's use of metaphor by seeing it as it was and by imagining it as it was not. To ask of a writer's work, "What does it not say?" is an apt way of measuring what it does say.

Here is a student who is missing the target.

> One may metaphorically envision an average man of prestige in our area as follows. He is a physically average man, and has no special abilities. He can, however, do a little of just about everything, and usually does. His income is good, but he works hard to obtain his wealth. One of the main reasons he has monetary stability is that he spends very little, doing a lot of minor repairs on house, car, and other such items himself. Others like him because of his instinctive humility and his unending efforts to make friends.

Is he sure he has a gen-u-ine metaphor? If so, it's a very pale one. He has come out with something half-way between the form of a seventeenth-century character and an inverted Reader's Digest sketch of The Most Uninteresting Person I Know. Instead of a metaphor he produced a typical type. Whatever his form is, the subject has become confused in the process of writing it out: his idea of Prestige is our idea of Respectability.

How to use the example to advantage in class? How to point out the bland position that the student worked himself into? I

began by asking the class, "What is the simplest statement to which we can reduce the central use of figurative language in this paragraph?" The sum of our efforts was, "Prestige is like this man." Next, continuing to locate and to appraise the figure by paraphrasing it, I asked, "What is this man like?" The restatement that won most acceptance was, "The man who, according to the writer, has Prestige is a reliable, solid citizen."

Several sentences in another student's paper offered a counter-example of greater specificity. I drew the class's attention to them.

> Prestige is buying Boardwalk and Park Place in Monopoly.
>
> Prestige is not having a hippy as a son.
>
> Prestige is the reputation you have among your friends and it is your quality that they don't have.

"What would happen if you put the two writers' styles together?" I asked. "How might the idiom of the second writer help us to beef up the image of the man in the first?" The best of the trials were these: "Prestige is a man whose bills are paid up." "Prestige is being a good neighbor."

To allow more persons a whack at this mode I suggested that the class now turn from reworking the matter of the first paper in the style of the second to any formulation of their own in the snappier style--not necessarily assigning Prestige, the exceptional quality,

as the first writer did to an unexceptional person. Among the entries hastily fashioned in an uneven round was this pair. "Prestige is a three-piece suit." "Prestige is an address on Lake Shore Drive."

To my mind, the class's excursion into such functional definitions avoided the unwelcome cuteness, which is a sign of overindulgence in the form. Insufficient to absolute conditions as such operational definitions may be, the formula, when taken sparingly, can be a welcome source of succinctness and vividness in one's writing. In a lumbering paragraph it is a good change of pace. It can crystallize meaning. Brought to popular attention by the cartoonist of "Peanuts" (e.g., "Happiness is a warm puppy"), the mode is also the recorder of children's unexpected perceptions, as in the book A Hole is to Dig. And in the wood-cut book by R. Harlow, Love is What, it comes near to poetry: "Love is the waiting to meet a friend and thinking it's the wrong place or the wrong time and then your friend comes."

Another exercise, which occurs to me now, and which would put students in position to gauge the extent to which we speak figuratively, whether we realize it or not, would be to ask students to write a paragraph or short essay on a given topic without using any figurative language. When the papers came before the class for inspection, there would surely be disagreements worth attending to. Surely papers accepted as free of figures by some readers would be accused of harboring pale or submerged metaphors. The question of latency in such common figurative expressions as "economic forces"

and "rising nations" (who now bakes bread?) deserves some attention itself. When Bishop Thomas Sprat, three centuries ago, longed for reform of our unreliable language, he was more hopeful than practical. Because he was uneasy about the potential ambiguity of metaphor, he urged a return to a supposed linguistic era of innocence, "when men deliver'd so many things almost in an equal number of words." But anyone who for a moment has imagined the task of exterminating metaphor knows that the enterprise would be as discouraging as swatting flies in a butcher's shop. When you lunge after one, two or three more wake up and buzz at your face.

Assignment 15

Whether we ask our students to re-write each essay or none at all, every instructor will probably agree to wanting some thought to attend the process of a student's revision. If by 'revision' we merely mean that a student should recopy his work, heeding our marginal indications of deviated grammar and punctuation, then revising is about like combing mussed-up hair. Some mechanical grooming is all we are after. Or if we merely expect that a student demonstrate obedience to our terminal comments, e.g., "Be precise" or "Write better," then submission to our authority and guesswork as to our preferences must satisfy us when we get it. But if by 'revision' we mean a literal re-seeing of both the subject and the <u>way</u> the student first went at it, then hard work is required of both ourselves and the student. The student has to think about what he is rewriting, and we, in turn, have to construct situations for him where thought is associated with the process.

I try to deal with the problem in four ways:

a. by insisting that rewriting be going on all the time <u>before</u> I see each essay
b. by making the class's activity, as it works over students' papers, parallel the act of rewriting--thereby reinforcing it
c. by making the most of one occasion late in the term, interrupting the sequence of topical assignments with one like #15.

Because assignment 15 sends the student back to an early piece of work, he should be in a relatively optimal position to have something he can see <u>to</u> revise. If the span of time between his composition and revision is large, then the grounds for complaining that his work looks about the same in the morning's light as it did late last night are removed. If his writing-habits have changed over the term at all, the difference will be there to observe.

The surest way of guaranteeing that the students will do more than just to shuffle into line with respect to your comments is to have them rewriting a paper on which there <u>are</u> no comments. (You can either set aside a batch of papers, on which you have written nothing, for the future occasion, or--as I did for some students but lacked energy to do for all--you can type clean drafts from papers you have marked.) If your comments do sit before the student as he works, you will find it very difficult to get around the deeply ingrained notion of revision as correction.

d. I join it to the request that they also write <u>about</u> rewriting--to underscore my demand that they think about what they are doing, and to give occasion for self-assessment.

The results can be heartening, as is this excerpt from a student's paper: "I said more of what I wanted to and less of what I did not want to." And they can be discouragingly humdrum, as is this passage:

"The rewrite actually amounted to reorganizing my paper, correcting spelling and grammatical errors." What keeps a discouraged instructor from despair? The chance of having the last word and the hope that that last word will register. I can ask that second student why he corrected his "errors" and hope that he thinks a thought sometime about that.

Appendix

A teacher's reading-list: a short selection of books that would very likely influence what you do in a composition class:

Walker Gibson, Tough, Sweet and Stuffy (Indiana, 1966)

> It contains attractively simple insights that characterize enough of the writing around us so that the book makes you feel like a smart man in a complicated culture. You feel ready for anything.

Hans P. Guth, The Wadsworth Manual: A guide for Teachers of Composition (Wadsworth, 1965)

> It helps you decide what you want to do in your course and to appraise what you are doing by outlining various accepted schemes for running a course in writing. It is rich with practical hints, too.

John Holt, How Children Fail (Delta, 1964)

> It offers a persuasive distinction between teaching through asking questions that demand

a thought and ones that elicit only a programmed salute or a fear of not pleasing. It challenges you to watch your students and not just your lesson-plan.