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ABSTRACT

Examination of the different types of courses and course materials can help identify the parameters and configurations of advanced composition. While usually referring to nonfiction writing, courses labeled "advanced composition" range from expository and narrative nonfiction through fiction and poetry. They also include legal and business writing. Other courses differ from freshman composition in terms of intensity and writing style. Writing across the curriculum programs refine freshman composition with specific applications in advanced courses in the humanities or the social or physical sciences, often team taught or graded by specialists in both composition and the subject area. In terms of skill level, most advanced composition courses expect the students to do a great deal of writing and to become active, engaged critics of their own writing. Texts and syllabi seem to indicate an implicit concensus among teachers on these points in an otherwise broadly defined and diverse discipline. (HTH)

Diving Into the Mainstream:
Configurations of Advanced Composition

by

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Advanced composition is like love; everybody knows what they mean by the term, few can define it to anyone else's satisfaction, and each practitioner has his--and her--own way of doing it. Unlike love, however, there are very few books that focus directly on how to do advanced composition, though there are many exemplars of the art.

My own experience with publishers in the mid-1970's may help to explain why. Though I was an experienced author and teacher of the subject, my proposal for an advanced composition book was turned down by publisher after publisher on the grounds that it was too innovative, too unconventional. "What's the competition?" they asked. "There isn't any," I said. But while a clear field struck me as desirable as an unobstructed dash for a sure touchdown, publishers regarded this as a sure sign of disaster. "Without competition, there's no market. No competition means there's no defined discipline."

The story has what may yet turn out to be a happy ending. Seven years later the book had metamorphosed from adolescence to maturity; three publishers (including one original naysayer) wanted it without my having to lobby to legitimize the discipline; and Fact and Artifact: Writing Nonfiction will be published by Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich next fall. There's a little competition. Or a lot, depending on how broadly you define the field. And "advanced composition," like love, still defies a single or agreed-upon definition. That's one of the reasons it's an exciting, but often perplexing, field to work in.

This paper will attempt to identify the parameters and configurations of advanced composition by focusing on several related issues. Is there any agreement on a core of subject matter central to the teaching, learning, and practicing of advanced writing? Are there certain rhetorical modes or types of writing that the advanced writer must master? If so, at what levels of skill? Does advanced writing, in fact, refer to a level of skill or to particular accomplishments as a writer? If so, to what level and what accomplishments? Or does advanced composition refer instead to a stage on a continuum between freshman and professional writers? These questions can be answered, to an extent, by an examination of different types of courses and course materials designated

"advanced composition" or the equivalent. Indeed, probably everyone in this audience could offer an exemplary model of such a course--and they'd all be somewhat different.

Subject matter. "Advanced composition" usually refers to nonfiction writing, though not invariably. In her just-published survey (in JAC) of advanced composition programs in sixty universities, Bernice Dicks found that students in courses labeled "Advanced Composition" write papers that range, in some courses, from expository, descriptive, narrative, argumentative, and critical nonfiction, to in other courses, poetry, fiction, and drama.[1] Other courses, also under the "Advanced" rubric, concentrate on writing in specialized disciplines: Legal Writing, Business Writing (sometimes with a subspecies, Business Report Writing), Technical Writing, Legal Writing, and Medical Writing. Space does not permit here a discussion of the considerable variations even within these subspecies, though a survey of technical writing books, for example, will reveal that they range from thoroughly detailed discussions of generalized writing processes to highly specific analyses of technical reports, product descriptions, and other

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1. "State of the Art in Advanced Expository Writing: One Genus, Many Species." Journal of Advanced Composition, 3:1-2 (1982), 172-191.

technical models.

Other variations in subject abound. A course in "Advanced Professional Exposition" at the University of Maine, Orono, includes the writing of "informal proposals, letters of inquiry, technical descriptions, formal proposals, abstracts and summaries, and progress reports" (Dicks, 183). Such a course is at least half a light-year away from my own course and the one Jacqueline Berke will describe here that focus on belles-lettristic writing of non-fiction for general readers: portraits, interviews; travel articles and interpretive descriptions of places; reviews of sports, restaurants, books, musical or other performances; how-to-do-it papers and explanations of scientific phenomena; interpretations of controversial subjects; and humor, parody, and satire. The latter two courses appear to resemble one advertised for the 1984 Yale summer school, "Creative Writing: Style and Technique in Non-Fiction Writing," described as "a beginning course for those with some writing experience, stressing the development of style and technique in nonfiction and imaginative genres, including autobiography, journalism, forms of narrative, and the imaginative essay."

Other advanced writing courses appear to differ from

conventional freshman English in intensity-rather than in kind, judging from two textbooks designated for such courses. Specifically labeled as advanced rhetorics are Maxine Hairston's Successful Writing: A Rhetoric for Advanced Composition and Richard Coe's Form and Substance: An Advanced Rhetoric. Although their emphases differ somewhat, both books discuss such matters as reasons for writing, writing processes, methods of development, sentences, paragraphs, and revising. Coe devotes considerable space to the rhetorical modes of description, comparison and contrast, classification and division, definition, analogy, narrative, process analysis, causation, and argument, and expects students to have both a theoretical and practical interest in rhetoric as a discipline. Except for brief sections on writing grant proposals, nontechnical reports, business letters, and Coe's two-page discussion of publication, the subject matter of both books replicates the material of many freshman rhetorics, as do the suggestions for writing, despite their assumption of a more versatile and sophisticated students who will carry out these tasks. The implicit view of these texts is that advanced composition is an intensification and refinement of the standard fare of freshman English.

Yet even disregarding specialized courses, such as legal or technical writing, Dicks's survey (completed before Coe's

and Hairston's books might have been adopted) reveals other significant assumptions about the subject matter of advanced writing. Style evidently receives far greater emphasis in advanced composition than in freshman English. The texts vary considerably in the level of rhetorical finesse and sophistication demanded of the students and include: Strunk and White, Elements of Style; John Trimble, Writing with Style; Richard Lanham, Style: An Anti-Text and Revising Prose; Francis and Bonniejean Christensen, Notes Toward a New Rhetoric; E.D. Hirsch, The Philosophy of Composition; and Edward P.J. Corbett, Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student. I would expect a more recent survey to include Lanham's Analyzing Prose, and Joseph M. Williams's Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace. Through a variety of methods and approaches, these texts try to help students develop the ability to compose, revise, and edit their writings, to attain clarity, economy, appropriate emphasis, precise and interesting word usage, a distinctive authorial voice and persona, varied sentence patterns and length, and suitable punctuation. [2] The authors and teachers of these books assume that their students have a far greater initial familiarity with units and structures of writing (words,

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2. See also Michael P. Hogan's list of textbooks, distributed at the founding meeting of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition, Minneapolis, March, 1979; and Bernice W. White's list, presented at CCCC, Washington, 1980.

sentences, paragraphs) than freshmen commonly have. They assume also a far greater willingness on the students' part to take risks with their writing, to experiment with these structures, and to exercise their self-critical facility in learning how to alter an manipulate these structures through multiple experimehts and revisions with, as Williams says, greater "clarity and grace."

Still other texts encourage students to see how excellent writers practice what topically-oriented books such as William Zinsser's On Writing Well and my own more detailed Fact and Artifact preach about how to write about people, places, performances, science, sports, humor, and other subjcts: Joan Didion's Slouching Towards Bethlehem, Lewis Thomas's The Lives of a Cell, E.B. White's Essays, or anthologies of the works of such writers, among them Popular Writing in America and William Smart's Eight Modern Essayists, that also includes essays by Forster, Woolf, Lawrence, Orwell, and Baldwin. Tom Wolfe's The New Journalism appears to have had its heyday in the late 70's.

Writing Across the Curriculum programs, such as those at the University of Maryland, College Park, the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and the University of Texas, Austin, include one or more junior or senior level writing or

writing-intensive courses related to the subject matter of the student's major. In some smaller colleges, such as Beaver, and Franklin and Marshall, the teaching of writing has become a truly interdisciplinary endeavor as faculty in all departments try to include writing in courses at all levels, and to hold students accountable not only for what they say but for how they say it--a function relegated, de facto, to English departments in many other institutions. (However, that this ideal is only partly realized in some schools with Writing Across the Curriculum programs is explained candidly by Toby Fulwiler in "How Well Does Writing Across the Curriculum Work?[3]).

In these Writing Across the Curriculum programs, the ability to write well, to have something to say and to be able to say it in a clear, organized manner and a style appropriate to the discipline of one's major field, is seen as central to the students' undergraduate education. What was studied in a general way during the freshman year is refined with specific applications in the advanced courses in the humanities or the social or physical sciences, often team taught and/or graded by specialists in both the discipline and in writing. Writing in the Arts and Sciences, by Elaine

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3. College English, 46:2 (Feb. 1984), 113-125.

Maimon and other Beaver College faculty has been lauded by the Journal of Advanced Composition as a useful text for such writing, at both beginning and advanced levels, particularly because of its sensitivity to "the differences between the disciplines and . . . [to] the ways a writer must adapt techniques to the expectations of the humanities, the social sciences and the natural sciences."[4]

In "The Centrality of Rhetoric in the Liberal Arts Tradition"[5] James Kinneavy explained the philosophy underlying the University of Texas composition program. Stressing the potential of English departments to integrate the liberal arts tradition throughout the university, Kinneavy sees advanced composition courses as being uniquely capable of maintaining the values taught by classical rhetoric. The ethical and moral concerns of classical rhetoric are inseparable from writing in any discipline, claims Kinneavy. "Fragmented scholars are irresponsible scholars"; the learning of rhetorical principles, the ability to write with honesty, responsibility for one's subject, and

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4. Bernice W. White. "Looking for Books? Two 'Advanced Composition' Texts and One Draftee." Journal of Advanced Composition, 2:1-2 (1981), 181.

5. Talk delivered at Virginia Commonwealth University, March 13, 1984

one's audience are not only fitting but necessary concerns to be reinforced in advanced undergraduate education, in every discipline. To fulfill these aims, Kinneavy's students in the advanced science writing course write, among other essays, a documented, expository scientific term paper, followed by paper of advocacy, that recommends implementation of the term paper subject on the basis of its ethical and moral implications. Yet Professor Kinneavy's course differs considerably from its upper level counterpart at the University of Michigan, where students write specialized scientific papers on their laboratory (or other) research in the format of professional publications in their respective fields.

Level of skill. Judging from information reported in the Journal of Advanced Compositionand from course descriptions and syllabi, the main characteristic advanced composition courses have in common is that they expect the students to do a great deal of writing, and to become active, engaged critics of their own writing and that of their peers. "A great deal of writing" is a relative term; some courses focus on the production of one potentially publishable article, with multiple drafts and revisions over the semester; others require the writing of ten or twelve papers in different modes and on different subjects, with and

without revision. We all know from assessing our own students' capabilities at the end of their semester or sequence of advanced composition that their abilities to write vary widely--just as they did when the students entered the course. Professor R.W. Daniel of Kenyon College responded to Dicks's survey with the familiar lament, "'This course has not proved to be very advanced, because most of the students are not'" (186). Yet many of us have students who publish their writings locally, on or off campus, or for a wider readership.

Texts and syllabi seem to indicate an implicit consensus among teachers on these points. 1. Students will be reasonably proficient in writing and revising large and smaller structures by the end of an advanced writing course--whole essays, reports, or research papers; paragraphs; sentences; words. 2. Students will be conscious stylists, who regard style as integral to the work and not as an afterthought or adornment. 3. Students will know the norms of the written modes in their discipline and be able to write with reasonable proficiency in those modes. Whether or not their writing is to be publishable is a matter for

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6. See, for instance, Wilma Clark, "Writing for Publication in an Advanced Course for Undergraduates," Journal of Advanced Composition, 3:1-2 (1982), 24-36.

debate.[6] My guess is that the more oriented advanced composition teachers themselves are to writing for publication, the more emphatically--and effectively--they will guide their students in this direction. 4. Students will treat writing as a serious and meaningful activity, and will treat their audiences with respect, the "compassion for one's neighbors" that Kinneavy identifies as the heart of the rhetorical tradition.

If we, as teachers, writers, and researchers in advanced composition can agree even on this much, we've made a start toward identifying the parameters of this protean discipline. That its configurations are many and diverse is but a testament to the pervasiveness of writing as a central humanistic concern, as essential, as significant, as variable as love.