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ABSTRACT

To help remedy the problem of college freshmen being unable to explore the diversity of writing strategies expected of them, an extensive review of current research on the composing process was undertaken. Freshmen writers must realize that composing is often a messy, recursive process based on rhetorical awareness, out of which clear and correct prose evolves through revision. Through the messiness of recursion, revision and rhetoric, good writers constantly reexamine their developing drafts to redefine, elaborate, and test ideas and to anticipate the reader's response. English teachers can easily emphasize these composing strategies in one-on-one conferences so that their freshman students will review, rethink, and revise their ideas from the jumble they have created on paper. Then these students can leave the classroom or writing lab possessing the strategies and skills needed to face the diversity of academic discourse in college. (Thirty-seven references are attached.) (RS)

Strategies and Rhetorical Considerations in Freshman Writing

A Paper Presented at the
Conference on the Freshman Year Experience
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Columbia, South Carolina

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Abstract

This paper reviews theory and research on the nature of recursion, revision, and rhetoric in the writing process. This paper also provides examples on how English faculty can emphasize composing strategies and rhetorical considerations to get their college freshmen to achieve clarity of thought and their intended meaning through their writing process. Composition teachers can share these strategies with their freshman writers particularly through one-on-one conferencing. These students can then leave the composition classroom or the writing lab, possessing the strategies needed to face the diversity of academic discourse in college.

Freshman writers must face the diversity of academic discourse in college. But their preconceptions about rigid rules for composing neat, correct prose at the beginning of the process may block their ability to explore multiple strategies leading to effective academic writing (Rose, 1980). These students also may be thwarted by "writer-based" prose, a failure to transform underdeveloped meaning and egocentric thought into "reader-based" meaning and expression to meet the audience's needs and expectations (Flower, 1979). To remedy these problems in preparing for this writing diversity, freshman writers must realize that composing is often a messy, recursive process based on rhetorical awareness, out of which clear and correct prose evolves through revision. Through the messiness of recursion, revision and rhetoric, good writers constantly re-examine their developing drafts to redefine, elaborate, and test ideas and to anticipate the reader's response, organized around their purpose for writing (Flower, 1979). Recursion, revision and the rhetorical situation are an integral part of the composing process, necessary for effective writing in any task students face in college. Whatever the subject or mode of discourse, all school writing grows together towards one use of the composing process, freeing students to think and learn (Shafer, 1977).

English teachers can easily emphasize these composing strategies so that their freshman students will review, rethink and revise their ideas from the mess they have created on paper.

Then they can arrive at clarity of thought and their intended meaning for any academic reading audience, all through these recursive processes and rhetorical considerations in writing. Thus, the purposes of this paper are (1) to review theory and research on the nature of recursion, revision and rhetoric in writing and (2) to provide examples illustrating how these composing and rhetorical strategies work and how English faculty can share these strategies with their college freshman writers.

The Nature of Recursion

Recursion demonstrates that composing is not a fixed procedure. Writing does not move linearly in a straight line from conception to completion because all planning is not done when words are put on paper, and all words are not on paper before writers review and revise (Humes, 1982). Instead, writers move back and forth among the processes of composing, and many researchers have described this motion as "recursive."

Such researchers as Flower and Hayes (1981a) have identified the processes of recursion: generating, translating, reviewing and changing written language. These cyclical processes reflect writers' "goal-directed" cognitive functions which guide composing; they provide logic and coherence to the entire operation, even when writers perceive their own composing as unpredictable and chaotic. In other words, they may view their writing as making a mess of things on paper. But this messiness

shows these recursive processes naturally at work, guiding writers toward clear thought and meaning for a reader. Shaughnessy (1977) has even said:

> One of the most important facts about the composing process that seems to get hidden from students is that the process that creates precision is itself messy, littering the page with so many deletion marks and emendations as to make some manuscripts almost indecipherable. . . It reproduces for the student a map of the writer's debates, which, in turn, encourages the student to hesitate over his own words. (p. 222)

Flower and Hayes' research (1981a) illustrates how recursion occurs when the writer's cognitive processes are called into action at any time and in any order during composing. For instance, "translating" thought onto the written page may get writers to develop, clarify and often "change" or revise the meaning of ideas, sending writers back to "generating" more ideas or even setting new goals for the writing task. "Reviewing" what has been written can also lead to further "generating" and "translating" ideas, or "reviewing" could prompt the writer to go back and re-examine, evaluate, and edit the written text. These illustrations of recursion suggest that, instead of students' attention being fixed on a static essay formula or a limited mode of discourse, they are free to engage their thinking and energy on the very heart of writing: that is, generating ideas to

produce insight for the writer and shaping the structure of those ideas to create meaning with a reader.

The Nature of Revision

Revision is very much a part of the recursive processes in composing, perhaps the most significant part for facilitating writing performance in any task because, as Murray (1978) explains about revision developing and shaping the meaning of ideas, "Writing is rewriting" (p. 85).

To dispel any misconception about the purpose of revising in the writing process, Faigley and Witte (1981) write:

> For many years, teachers saw revision as copy editing, a tidying-up activity aimed at eliminating surface errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and diction. . . Revision was something a writer did after completing a first draft. Recent research on both the causes and effects of revision has discredited this simple view of composing. . . Evidence indicates that writers move back and forth among the various activities of composing, and that expert writers frequently review what they have written and make changes while in the midst of generating a text. (p.400)

Faigley and Witte suggest that revision is recursive, which occurs continually throughout the writing process. Winterowd (1981) supports this suggestion by stating, "Many writers do most of their rewriting at the same time they are writing, changing

sentences, substituting words, crossing out some paragraphs and putting others in, making notes for rearranging paragraphs and sections of their manuscripts" (p. 18). In fact, revising not only takes place during the actual process of composing but also occurs at the inception of the written piece, for Hairston (1981) explains: "Revision is an ongoing process. It is not merely a mopping-up or proofreading operation. For most professional writers revision begins as soon as they start writing and may continue until the moment they turn their work over to a typist or editor" (p.37).

An ongoing recursive process instead of simply a final proofreading stage, revision is significant because it includes the following higher order concerns when writers review, rethink and rewrite their texts: (1) changing the meaning of the text because the original intended meaning is somehow faulty, false or weak; (2) adding or substituting ideas to clarify the intended meaning or to follow closely the intended form of the text; (3) making sentences more readable by deleting, reordering and restating language; and (4) correcting lexical and syntactic errors which obscure the intended meaning of ideas (Nold, 1979). Revising then is "changing" the written text to create clear meaning for a reader, no matter what mode of discourse or method of development is required in the writing task.

According to Gebhardt (1984), composition research suggests that revision means changing in the midst of writing a draft, for

revising is both changing and editing. Gebhardt further observes:

> In re-writing and editing. . . making changes in a text is the central intention of a writer, an activity to which a writer can give the necessary time and attention. . . Instead of having to teach two separate things--"drafting" and then "revising"--we can teach the concept and practice of change as it works during drafting and during editing. This approach can help students cope with the complex nature of writing, since it gives guidance about what a writer should do during drafting. . . We present drafting and re-writing to students as applications of the same underlying process of growth-through-change. . . to help them sense how re-writing is an outgrowth of the changes they have been making while they are drafting. (pp. 81-82)

Gebhardt's concept of "growth-through-change," plus the recursive nature of revision, teaches college freshman writers to give careful attention to the composing process itself by reviewing and rewriting while they produce a draft. These students are able to create and, at the same time, clarify their intended meaning which they are generating and discovering through actual composing. Freshmen can then apply this working knowledge of revision to any kind of writing task, so that they are able to master clarity of thought and expression for that diversity of academic discourse throughout college.

Rhetorical Considerations

In addition to recursion and revision, many writers also consider the rhetorical situation as an important element of the composing process. In rhetoric the subject, purpose, audience, and persona (writer's image) affect writers' decisions about content, language, syntax, readability and tone for any writing task (Flower & Hayes, 1981a). And writers' choices determined by these rhetorical considerations are synthesized into the recursive processes of generating, translating, reviewing, changing and goal-setting, all of which are influenced by the writer's subject, purpose, audience and persona. During "reviewing," for example, the writer may "change" the text to meet the demands of the rhetorical situation. And if the writer gets feedback on the piece from an audience, he or she may re-enter the composing process to make further changes or revisions to satisfy the reader's needs and expectations. In fact, Rose (1980) found that students having the least trouble composing were aware of and got feedback from their audience in the process of testing their writing plans against the readers' needs and expectations. Rhetorical awareness then guides writers through the recursive motions of composing, whatever the occasion or the task may be.

The concern for rhetoric in process-centered writing constitutes the current trend in teaching composition, as Brown (1982) explains:

> Instead of teaching particular forms or modes of discourse (in hopes that students will encounter these forms in their "real world" writing) and emphasizing a static notion of style largely in terms of correct use of Standard Written English, the new paradigm characterizes writing as rhetorical-problem solving (giving students practice in the process of composing that will be transferable to other writing situations) and recognizes the text not as a static entity but as a place where the writer and the reader collaborate to create meaning. (p. 297)

Brown adds that this recent interest in rhetorical awareness has led to models of composing for types of writing in various academic fields. In fact, most writing-across-the-curriculum programs assume a broad rhetorical model (Kinneavy, 1982). This teaching trend suggests that rhetoric in the composing process applies to any school subject, preparing student writers for the diversity of academic discourse in college.

Empirical Research on the Composing Process

In related studies, researchers have presented empirical evidence on the positive effects of recursion, revision and rhetoric in facilitating writing performance. One such study is Emig's Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (1971), a hallmark study of composition research which has led other investigators to explore the nature of the writing process.

Accordingly, among studies focusing on recursion, Perl (1979) examined the composing processes of five unskilled college writers, discovering that the writers' composing did not occur in a straightforward, linear fashion. Instead, they used a recursive process with as many backward movements as forward motions, in which each piece of discourse was created and shaped according to the writer's notion of audience. Perl also observed that rereading or backward movements in the text became a way for the students to discover ideas and to determine whether or not the words on the page captured the intended sense of meaning. In another study of college freshman writers, Pianko (1979) reported that most of the students started writing before they had a complete conception of what they wanted to say; in fact, they did most of their planning not only before but also during actual composing. Many of the writers also paused, scanned, and rescanned while writing. And when they did reread, they went over the entire text to review their work and to revise or proofread. Stallard (1974) also found evidence that good student writers planned more, paused longer and more frequently to review and contemplate what they had written, and revised more than poor writers, both during and after the first draft. Stallard concluded, "a major behavioral characteristic of the good writer is a willingness to put forth effort to make communication clear to a reader" (p. 216). In sum, these studies demonstrate the

vital role of recursion for student writers to discover, generate and develop their ideas clearly.

In addition to recursion, researchers have reported significant findings in studies on revision. Many of these findings have shown student writers moving continually back and forth as they revised to make structural changes in the text for shaping meaning during composing (Faigley & Witte, 1981; Peitzman, 1981; Sommers, 1980). In an observational study, Graves (1975) noted that revising helped young student writers develop a sense of audience, clarity and cohesion by reflecting on their writing. They also mastered such mechanical skills as correcting spelling and punctuation; in fact, these students mastered punctuation as well as students receiving formal instruction. Graves concluded that the more these students revised the content, the more proficient they became in writing. Corroborating this conclusion, the results of Bridwell's study (1980) also showed that student writers receiving the highest ratings revised more frequently and extensively than those students who revised little or none at all. This empirical evidence suggests how the recursive nature of revision gets freshman students to review, rethink and rewrite for achieving better quality, clarity and even correctness in their writing.

As part of investigating recursion and revision, studies have also found that writers' concerns for the rhetorical situation (subject, purpose, audience and persona) distinguish

good prose from bad writing. Flower and Hayes' research (1979, 1981b) in "protocol analysis" has shown that during the composing process, good writers generated and developed ideas on the subject by responding to a larger rhetorical problem, depending on the writers' purpose or goal, their sense of audience and their sense of self-image or persona. Flower and Hayes recommended a reader-based, rhetorical approach for teaching invention in writing, because thinking about the writer's purpose, audience and persona is a powerful strategy for discovering, planning and generating ideas on any subject. Based on Flower and Hayes' recommendations, Herbert (1983) conducted a study in which she designed a process-centered, college composition course for basic writers, offering students rhetorical principles and heuristics common to a variety of writing situations. From the results, Herbert concluded that the basic writers benefited, not from remediation of particular mechanical skills, but from the composing process of writing whole discourse and considering the rhetorical situation. This research suggests that if college freshmen consider these rhetorical elements while writing and revising any task they face in academic discourse, they will have the strategies for reaching their goals of producing effective prose to satisfy the needs and expectations of any reading audience.

Other studies continue to report positive effects of process-centered writing instruction (Alloway, Carroll, Emig,

King, Macrotrigiano, Smith, & Spicer, 1979; Clifford, 1981; Diftefano & Killion, 1984; Hillocks, 1984, 1986). Such studies having implications for teaching suggest that students need to be engaged in the writing process and explicitly taught about it, and that they need to become rhetorically reader-based in their composing (Crismore, 1979). But where do college composition instructors begin to get their freshman students engaged in this process and to make them aware of recursion, revision and rhetoric as strategies for any kind of writing task. What teachers must first do is have their freshman writers get themselves into a real mess.

Recursion, Rhetoric and Freshman Writers' Revisions

From my teaching experience in the college classroom and in the writing lab, often I have witnessed recursion, revision and rhetoric at work in freshmen's composing processes for improving the clarity and development of their ideas and intended meaning. When I have observed students composing, many of them pause while writing a draft. Later when I ask what they are doing while pausing, most of them reply that they are reviewing the text either to plan what to write next or to change words, sentences and even larger chunks of discourse. Their messy drafts show these changes as evidence of recursion and revision at work in the students' composing. This suggests that when these students are given enough time to write to get into a mess, these

recursive processes occur naturally in their composing, thus reflecting their mind at work. The following excerpts from one freshman student's drafts help to illustrate her recursive processes as she rethinks and revises her writing to develop and clarify her ideas further in an essay discussing the need for a teen center in her community:

> The parents of the kids at the club could be grateful for the fact that their children would not be coming home stoned or drunk that night.

The student then reviews the passage and makes the following changes to restructure sentences and to generate more details:

> The kids that had been at the club that night would not be going home drunk or stoned; for that, their parents would be grateful. That night proved to me that not all of my younger counterparts were rowdy wanderers on weekends. They could have a good time without showing off their cars or getting drunk.

By the final revision the students' original draft is a mess with deletions and additions in language, but this mess then evolves into the following piece:

> The kids who had been at the teen club that evening would not be going home intoxicated or stoned; for that, their parents could be grateful. That night proved to me that teens can have a good time without drugs or alcohol, and

that they can enjoy a night out without showing off their cars by racing down city streets.

Through recursion and revision, this student has shaped and developed her intended meaning for her reading audience. But clarity only came about by first creating a mess on paper.

Some students first come to classroom or writing lab conferences, apologizing to me because their drafts are such a mess with words or sentences scratched out, new ones added, and displaced notes jotted down in the margins--something these student view as unusual. Their preconception is that writing should be neat and correct from the inception of the piece, unlike their way of composing which they think deviates from the norm for most writers. They are surprised, though, when I praise them for their messiness and explain that their composing process is very normal and natural, much like the approach of many other writers. The students' drafts show how they construct meaning through their creative and critical thinking. And the following example illustrates one student writer's thinking by first making a mess on the page eventually to create clear meaning of thought:

4 minors were drinking liquor from a liquor store and were seriously hurt in a drunk driving accident in which one of them was killed.

Drunk driving is a big problem in America.
It is nothing but murder on the streets.
~~Driving while drunk is like mixing oil and water~~. If ~~drivers wouldn't drink and~~ drinkers wouldn't drive, highway deaths could be reduced as much as by 50%. It is about time that citizens stronger ~~people should~~ start taking action against

There was an incident last year where a minor was killed in a drunk driving accident.

26,000 citizens are killed yearly. 70 Americans are killed everyday.

drivers causing on the streets
drunk ~~driving~~ problems and murders ~~being~~

~~committed~~.

This messy passage maps the student's "debates" on word diction, sentence structure, supporting details and organization. After revising she produced the following piece:

> Drunk driving is one of the biggest problems in America today. It is nothing but murder on the streets. 26,000 citizens are killed yearly, and seventy Americans are killed everyday. Just last year in a local incident, four minors were drinking liquor purchased from a liquor store. They were seriously injured in a drunk driving accident, and one of the minors was killed instantly. If drinkers wouldn't drive, highway deaths could be reduced by as much as fifty percent. I think it is about time that citizens start taking stronger action against drunk drivers who are causing problems and murders on the streets everyday.

To reach clear meaning in expressing the point of her argument, the student's decisions for revising also included the rhetorical situation discussed during one-on-one conferences, focusing her awareness on the subject, the purpose (to persuade), audience and persona (the writer's image). Recursion, revision and rhetoric became an integral part of her composing process.

Some worried students come to conferences for help because they do not know where to begin a writing assignment. They suffer from writer's block (Rose, 1980), since their own rigid

rules dictate that these students must have a thesis statement and an organized outline before they can even think of beginning. I then suggest that they start writing and making a real mess on paper--so that they can get themselves out of the mess they're already in. This way they can relax their rigid rules and adopt more flexible rules to explore and discover ideas through writing and through feedback from a reader during conferences (Rose, 1980). One student took this advice and first produced the following freewrite (Elbow, 1973, 1981) on the tragedy of cancer:

> confidence of what I felt that I had to do. Need for everyone to listen. Nervousness that my peers wouldn't understand. Fear that I still couldn't share grief--only to burrow into myself. I have to say what I feel. But can a do it? Yes, by speaking to them I can share the many griefs of cancer victims and families. My aunt meant a lot to me. The speech is about my aunt who died of cancer. Death arrived on a wave of sorrow. Now I'm actually expected to stand here in front of over 1,000 people. How can I say what her life meant to me? How can I stress the impact of her life and death to try and solve cancer? I have no choice. What I didn't realize is that by speaking that day. I released all of the grief that I couldn't on the day of her funeral.

Once this student relaxed and saw her ideas down on paper, she could discover what she really wanted to say and, thus, had a

point of departure on the assignment. And by getting reader response on the rhetorical situation during conferences, she could then re-enter her recursive composing process to continue generating, reviewing, rethinking and changing her ideas for better clarity of her intended meaning with the audience. From her efforts, she created this final revision:

> The auditorium was dark, cold, and quiet. There was only one spotlight, and it was on me. I had a deep confidence in myself because I knew that I had to tell these people of losing my aunt to cancer. But was I really expected to stand in front of about a thousand people and bare my soul? Yes, I was. On that day something inside me told me that I could finally let go of my aunt. By speaking to my school that day, I shared the many griefs of cancer, allowed others to release my grief, and stressed the importance of a cure for cancer. And I learned it is easier to share the grief and to allow others to help me understand. I had also rallied support to work for a cancer cure.

Through the messiness of recursion, revision and rhetoric this student could overcome her writer's block to discover the thesis statement and to go on and develop the rest of the essay as well.

The next example specifically shows how rhetoric can guide freshman writers through their recursive processes of composing to transform underdeveloped "writer-based" prose into clear

"reader-based" meaning and expression. Another student came to a conference with this draft of her persuasive paper:

> Warning: The Surgeon General has determined that cigarette smoking is dangerous to your health. Though many austere commercials announce this remark and many cigarette packages forgoing continuously display these words, many individuals ~~ignore the warning~~; ~~take it as a bland remark~~. addicts or not continue to ignore the warning. As opposed to the Sur. Gen. warning, various firms face of the tobacco producing co. bathe their products in the public thus view and inducing the habit of smoking. To aid the general encourage thoughts of the public, rather than promote smoking habits, tobacco co.should encourage smokers especially chain smokers to kick the habit. Non-smokers have the right to denounce smoking in public places. As smokers inhale they endanger their health. When smokers exhale they endanger ~~the health of non-smokers~~ our health, the health of non-smokers. Over half the country is swarming with smokers.

At least by getting herself into a mess, this student has generated her initial ideas on the subject. But the meaning of those ideas remains abbreviated and underdeveloped. The topic does not have a focused central idea and a clear purpose. The connections among the ideas lack coherence. Her argument has no definite direction.

To move her writing in the right direction, I stress the rhetorical situation during conferences. We begin by discussing

what she knows about the "subject" and what further research she must do to develop her argument with supporting details. We then move to the specific "purpose" of her paper: what she wishes to accomplish and how she intends to persuade her audience. She says she hopes to gain her audience's support on prohibiting public smoking; this response helps to focus her purpose and the central point she is arguing in her thesis. We also consider the "persona" or the image she wants to project of herself to the readers, focusing on voice or tone. This consideration leads into her awareness of "audience." So we talk about what she knows about her readers and what she must do to meet the readers' needs and expectations. I also serve as her preliminary audience, becoming a concerned reader collaborating with the writer to create and negotiate meaning out of the mess on her draft. After she has reviewed and revised the text, based on these rhetorical strategies, we then examine the readability of her writing by assessing sentence clarity, abbreviated meaning, and grammatical errors obscuring her intended meaning for the audience. After the conference, she re-enters the process, reviews and rethinks unclear ideas, and revises to produce the following piece:

> "Warning: The Surgeon General has determined that cigarette smoking is dangerous to your health." Though many commercials announce this austere remark, and many cigarette packages display the forgoing words, many individuals,

addicts or not, continue to ignore the warning. Tobacco companies in particular ignore this warning and still continue to bathe the shelves with their tobacco products and encourage smoking in public places, thus inducing the habit of cigarette smoking. We must recognize that smoking in public places not only endangers the lives of smokers but non-smokers as well. The Surgeon General has stated that there are 5,000 deaths annually from lung cancer because of second hand smoke. Tobacco companies, in tune with the dangers of smoking and the seriousness of the Surgeon General's remark, should value the notion of keeping cigarette smoking in reserved areas for the safety of not only non-smokers but society itself. Smoking must be prohibited in public places.

The purpose and the central idea are focused more clearly. The student has also developed and shaped her intended meaning for the audience, establishing greater cohesion or coherence among her ideas. In short, she has transformed "writer-based" prose into "reader-based" expression. What these examples suggest is that student writers benefit the most by making recursion, revision and rhetoric the salient features of composing--not just textual surface features of grammar and mechanics--to achieve clarity of meaning in thought and expression.

Conclusion

Making a mess out of any writing task shows how recursion and rhetorical considerations facilitate the process of getting students to think clearly and critically about the ideas they are composing and revising to create meaning with any reader. Teachers should encourage their freshman writers to get themselves into a real mess with recursion, revision and rhetoric, giving them plenty of time to get themselves out of that mess to achieve clear thinking through writing. Then these students can leave the classroom or the writing lab, possessing the strategies and skills needed to face the diversity of academic discourse in college. In closing, Cooper and Odell (1977) sum up the writing process very well:

> Composing involves exploring and mulling over a subject; planning the particular piece. . . getting started; making discoveries about feelings or ideas, even while in the process of writing a draft; making continuous decisions about diction, syntax, and rhetoric in relation to the intended meaning and the meaning taking shape; reviewing what has accumulated, and anticipating and rehearsing what comes next; tinkering and reformulating; stopping; contemplating the finished piece and. . . revising. This complex, unpredictable, demanding activity is what we call the writing process. Engaging in it, we learn and grow. (p. xi)

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