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AUTHOR Westcott, Warren; Ramey, Betty
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ABSTRACT

A difficult task facing college English departments is the creation of a freshman English program that is coherent and theoretically sound and which allows instructors a certain flexibility. Recently, the English department at Francis Marion College undertook a major revision of its freshman program with these goals in mind. The result was a sequence of four distinct composition courses within a single conceptual framework. This sequence is based upon two concepts: decentering as described by James Berlin and the basic communications triangle described by James Kinneavy. The sequence moves from "I"-centered or expressive writing, to "you"-centered or transactional writing, to "they/it"-centered or referential writing. Another essential aspect of the sequence is a focus on critical thinking and research skills. Each section of the sequence develops its own writing laboratory. Specific guidelines and procedures insure that student tutors are capable and well-trained, and close supervision maintains accountability. Students in the freshman sequence are required to make use of the pertinent writing labs, thus allowing them to develop process writing skills. Each section of a given semester course has specific tasks that the student carries out either in the lab or in conjunction with it. Overall, the program has succeeded for several reasons: meaningful guidelines are provided, a clearer sense of progress is fostered in the students, and most freshmen receive significant individual attention to their writing. (HB)

Dr. Warren Westcott
Mrs. Betty Ramey
Department of English
P. O. Box 100547
Francis Marion University
Florence, SC 29501-0547

AIMING FOR EXCELLENCE IN FRESHMAN ENGLISH

Warren Westcott and Betty Ramey
Francis Marion University

One of the most important and difficult tasks facing any college English department is the creation of a freshman English program that will be at once coherent and theoretically sound and still provide sufficient leeway for individual teachers and students to find their own best approaches to the teaching and learning of the writing process. At the same time, the program needs to guarantee that students receive instruction that meets their actual needs as writers. Since most freshman English students will never return to an academic setting after graduation, this means that they need to be exposed to many forms of writing, not only those that are useful in college courses. Several years ago, the English department at Francis Marion College (now Francis Marion University) undertook a major revision of its freshman program with these goals in mind.

The result was a sequence of four distinct composition courses tied closely together in a single conceptual framework that provides a rational progression from one

course to another. In the classroom, instructors are free to develop their own techniques and strategies as long as they fall reasonably into that conceptual framework. In addition, the two lowest level courses have writing laboratories attached to them where students work on individual writing-related projects under close supervision from instructors and trained student tutors.

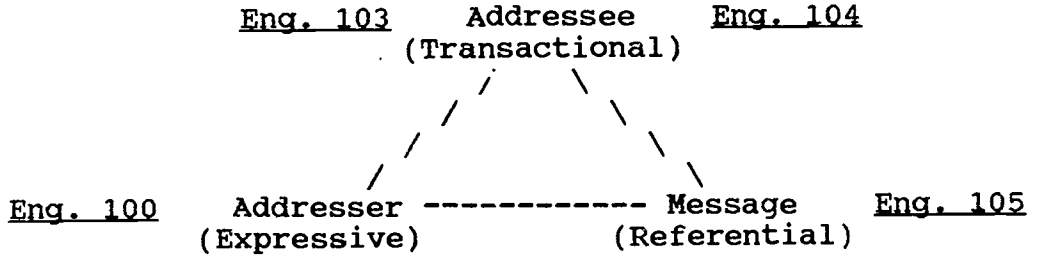
The freshman English sequence is based primarily upon two related concepts. The first is the notion of decentering, which holds that developing writers find it easiest to write about themselves and the things that are most important to them. As their writing skills develop, they become more adept at writing to people and about subjects that are beyond their own personal perceptual sphere. James Moffett characterizes this movement as a progression from "I" to "you" to "they/it," each component being both audience and subject matter. "You" may be a friend, a teacher, an employer--any readily identifiable audience whom the nascent writer can easily visualize and analyze. To write effectively for this specific audience, writers must get psychologically out of themselves and see the world through another's eyes. "They" is a generalized audience of the sort for whom most professional and academic writers write. This generalized audience is not readily identifiable and remains to the writer only a set of abstract ideas about collective needs and prejudices.

"They" is thus the most difficult audience to address effectively because it is the most abstract.

The second basic concept underlying the sequence of courses at Francis Marion University is the idea used by James Kinneavy that a basic communications triangle (addresser - message - addressee) can become a heuristic for identifying distinct types of discourse depending upon the emphasis of each type. Writing that places the greatest emphasis upon the addresser is expressive; that is, its primary aim is to record and explore the writer's own ideas and feelings. The audience of much expressive writing is the writer herself; freewriting, journal or diary writing, webbing and outlining are all examples. When the primary purpose of a piece of writing is to effect some sort of change in a reader or addressee, it becomes transactional writing. Advertising, sermons, editorials, and argumentative essays, among other forms, fit this category. Writing that emphasizes the message is termed referential writing. The purest examples of referential discourse are those that make an effort to eliminate the subjective opinions of the writer and the reader: engineering reports, articles in scientific journals, textual analyses, and so on. Obviously, although the emphasis shifts from category to category, all components of the communications triangle are always present, and the distinctions among the categories are not clear cut. The incorporation of Kinneavy's concepts was particularly important to give

students a sense of the true range of forms of discourse and to break them out of the rigid mold of the five-paragraph academic essay that many of them learned in high school.

The freshman sequence follows the progression from "I"-centered or expressive writing (English 100 and 103) to "you"-centered or transactional writing (English 104) to "they/it"-centered or referential writing (English 105). By doing so, it attempts to follow the natural course of writing development and to expose students to a range of possible types of discourse.



There are other ideas behind the course descriptions as well. An ability to use the conventions of Edited American English is essential for successful writing, especially in an academic environment. At the same time, research has shown clearly that teaching those conventions apart from a meaningful rhetorical context is ineffective. The remedial course (English 100) and the first course in the standard sequence (103) place special emphasis on sentence-level correctness, but that issue is addressed primarily in the context of the students' own writing.

An essential part of learning to write is learning to think critically, both in the sense of the logic and

complexity of ideas and in the sense that writers also need to be critical readers of their own and other people's writing. Reading and writing are opposite sides of the same process. In the early courses of the sequence, especially in English 104, the emphasis is on producing "writer/readers," to borrow Donald Murray's terminology. In English 105, the emphasis is reversed to produce "reader/writers." In this last course, written texts frequently become the subject matter, the "it," upon which referential writing is based.

Finally, research skills are essential for success in college, so both in English 104 and, especially, in 105, students must engage in research both in and outside the library as a way of finding inspiration and support for their writing. In English 105, they must also master the mechanics of using a standard documentation style.

Probably the most unique aspects of the freshman program are the writing laboratories that are parts of English 100 and 103. These labs guarantee that, no matter what teaching style the classroom instructors adopt, beginning students will have significant exposure to individualized instruction in the writing process.

Since many of the students in English 100 (the only course defined as "remedial") have significant problems with sentence-level problems, the English 100 lab is designed specifically to address those areas and leave the classroom portion of the course free to pursue more important aspects

of the writing process. Exercises in areas such as correcting sentence fragments and using -s endings correctly are assigned in the lab on the basis of patterns of error that the instructor sees in the students' classroom writing. The exercises themselves are unremarkable, but they are completed under close supervision (typically there are six instructors and student tutors working with 30 students in these labs), and students are required to practice the principles they learned in the exercises in samples of their own writing.

In the English 103 laboratory, on the other hand, students work through the entire writing process, from brainstorming at the beginning to polishing the final draft--again with regular consultation with the lab staff. As in the English 100 labs, the lab staff-student ratio is kept low; typically, three instructors and three student tutors work with two classes of twenty students each. Two of these instructors are also the students' classroom instructors since students at registration are automatically put into labs linked with their classes so that their professor can get to know them better and can keep track of their progress and their problems.

The student tutors must be recommended by an English faculty member and must have completed a minimum of English 104. Some of the tutors are taking English 340, a course in theories of writing that requires that the students get

practical experience by working in either a lab or the Writing Center two hours a week during the semester.

All tutors must attend training sessions held two days at the beginning of the semester and twice during the semester. During the beginning sessions, tutors read sample essays and do dry runs with faculty members present. At all the training sessions, faculty and tutors discuss the writing assignments that will be given and try to anticipate problems. Lab staff members are encouraged to ask probing questions that let the student writers themselves figure out how to improve their papers; the tutors are instructed not to simply correct or rewrite the papers for the students.

The English 103 labs, which meet twice a week for fifty minutes, are self-contained; that is, no work may be taken from the lab to be completed at home or in the classroom, thus insuring that help from the lab staff is always readily available and student progress can be monitored. With one exception at the beginning of the second third of the semester, all work is kept in notebooks which are stored in the lab. No outside research is required since the emphasis is on writing about the students themselves and subjects that are important to them.

During each semester, students must complete three writing assignments in the lab, one during each of three five-week periods. During the first and final third of the semester, they may choose their writing assignment from one of three prompts. Each prompt describes a situation,

specifies an audience, and states guidelines (suggestions about possible ways of attacking the assignment and pitfalls to be avoided).

During each of these sections, students go through the entire writing process from the first thinking stage to the final proofreading stage, getting help whenever they encounter a problem by simply raising their hands. When a tutor or instructor gives help, he makes an entry on a progress report. Short comments are written about help given in rhetorical areas such as development, organization, and audience analysis as well as about sentence-level errors. Tutors and faculty members who later help the student must check to see what previous help the student has received so that they know whether to give only a quick explanation of the problem before sending the student back into the writing process or whether the student has already heard a brief explanation and needs a lengthier one.

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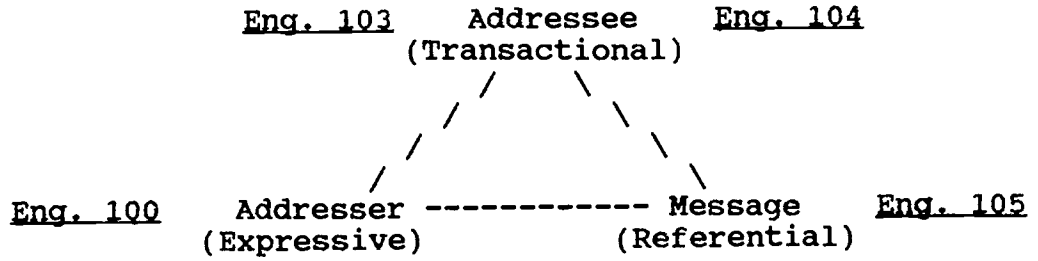

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