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ABSTRACT

Ken Macrorie coined the term "I Search," which puts the writer at the center of the paper and seeks to put a human face on the data collected. Looking for a way to use the research writing assignment to help students learn to adjust their ideas to different formats by becoming more aware of how different structures can be shaped around their ideas, this paper's author/educator plotted writing modes according to their degree of formality and size of audience. Explained in the paper is how the concept of audience awareness was used as a starting point to put together a sequence of student assignments that gradually built awareness of the implicit structures of writing awareness, culminating with a paper that pushed the limits of classic genre-based styles. The first step is an interview paper in which the students find a person with a story, get him or her to tell this story, and then create a paper that mixes the storyteller's voice with their own. The second step is a further complication of the first. Students are asked to abstract an idea out of the first paper that they feel is worth further investigation and, using the elements of the first assignment that relate to that idea, build upon it with the addition of secondary research. In the fairly traditional third paper, students are free to seek a topic of their own, and while the approach is I Search (emphasizing the author's voice), they must also include both primary and secondary research. The final assignment is the climax (handout contains an example). The goal is to show students that they can say what is important for them to say and adjust it in a way that will be appropriate and interesting across a wide range of contexts. A graph and an assignment sheet are attached. (NKA)

Holy Mitosis Batman, It's a Gamete: Blending (Bending) The Research Genre

By Fred Barton

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (91st, Baltimore, MD, November 15-20, 2001)

Holy Mitosis Batman! It's a Gamete

Ken Macrorie, who was one of my professors back when we still used chalkboards, once said, "A meaningful search grows from the seeds in a writer's life which can be revealed immediately to the reader." As you may know, he coined the term I Search which puts the writer at the center of the paper and seeks to put a human face on the data that are collected.

What I'm going to talk about today is what a colleague of mine referred to as I Search on hallucinogens. But first, an algebra lesson: In the handout you will notice a graph of sorts. What I've done is to plot writing modes according to their degree of formality and size of audience. Thus a diary is very informal in organization and intended for a very small audience, usually only one. Whereas school based writing tends to be more formally organized and intended for a larger audience, even if that audience is a single teacher who nonetheless represents the larger criteria of public discourse.

Of course this is a bit of a simplification, but it illustrates an important aspect of the writing process that was inherent in a lot of what Macrorie said, and that is that all writing exists on a continuum starting with the individual writer's connection to an idea important enough to write about and moving out from there to whatever formal limit is

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appropriate. In other words, form becomes the clothes a writer puts on idea, and the research writing genre then, is just a particular outfit for ideas that could also be expressed in other ways.

The other implication of my graph is that all writing structures exist along a line and thus are inherently and unavoidably connected. In other words, just as it is only an algebraic abstraction to select a single point along the line, it is also a compositional abstraction to suggest that expository writing exists as a singularity apart from narrative, descriptive or even what are commonly called creative writing genres.

Macrorie, among others, helped move the emphasis from form to content, but I thought a working knowledge of the implicit structures of different writing modes would give students flexibility with the research genre that could be helpful. I teach secondary through college level students and I knew that most of them had been primarily trained to write essays, and I knew that for a lot of them that training would have to be adjusted to enable them to write reports, memos, letters, proposals, rationales, and the entire myriad of structures and purposes those who decided on a career outside academe would have to deal with. I knew that those structures had similarities to the classic academic structures, but they also had differences, and, as my old daddy used to say, it's not the similarities between present circumstance and past experiences that get you in trouble, it's the differences.

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I wanted to find a way to use the research writing assignment to help students learn to adjust their ideas to different formats by becoming more aware of how different structures can be shaped around their ideas. I Search, of course, helped kids to think about those kinds of things as the papers developed, but I was looking for something that could do more to make implicit structures visible and discussable by the students. I remember reading an article by Donald Murray in which he laid out what he said were the implications of teaching writing as a process of decision making. One of the implications stated: "The student is encouraged to attempt any form of writing which may help him discover and communicate what he has to say. The process which produces 'creative' and 'functional' writing is the same.' (14)

The process may be the same, but the structures certainly aren't. So, what if I created assignments that opened the door for process thinking in a multilevel environment? Two obstacles immediately popped up. One was that I was teaching students who had quite a bit of training in looking at writing certain ways, most of which made the genres discrete mechanisms, each with its own territory. Blurring the boundaries between those structures was liable to be confusing to the students, most of whom had their suspicions about the value of research writing as it was.

The second was that if I did succeed in teaching the students to mix genres what would happen if they went out into someone else's class

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and tried it? Particularly if that someone preferred a more traditional approach to research writing. Unfortunately I knew the answer to that. When I was an undergrad I had been assigned to write a paper on a book titled "A Short History of Literary Criticism" which summarized critical theories from Plato to I. A. Richards. Finding the going tough and rather dry, I decided to liven things up by creating a scene in which these critics could come and go and expound on their theories in a story type format. So I put them all in a bar. Plato was playing pool with Zola. Whitman sat in a booth with Arnold and one of the waiters was Pope. The bartender was Aristotle. I believe I learned a lot from that assignment because not only did I have to know what the positions of the various critics were, I had to think about the implications of their positions as I created conversations among them because I gave myself the rule that I would only use actual quotes in dialogue. And I had a lot of fun writing it. When I got the paper back the professor had written, "See Me" on the bottom. Thinking I was to be congratulated for my creativity and insight I bounded up the creaky staircase in the dark paneled hallway of the English Department office building and knocked on the warped wooden door.

At first I don't think the professor knew who I was, but when I showed him my paper he huffed once, tossed it back at me and told me it would be better if I dropped his class because I was obviously not a "serious student of literature." Two lessons from that experience stay

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with me even now. One is how easy it was for me to learn a large amount of material when I created a context for it. And the other was the importance of audience.

Using the concept of audience awareness as a starting point, I put together a sequence of assignments that gradually built awareness of the implicit structures of writing in my students, culminating with a paper that hopefully pushed the limits of classic genre based styles. On the second page of the hand out is an outline of the program I have used in one variation or another in classes from ninth grade to fourth year college.

The first step is an interview paper in which the students find a person with a story, get them to tell this story and then create a paper that mixes the storyteller's voice with their own. This usually turns out to be a relative or acquaintance. The papers are genealogical in some cases, or historical, depending on if the stories revolve around family issues like immigration, or larger issues like the Viet Nam war. I encourage the students to conduct multiple interviews and to record them.

Once the story has been collected the students are faced with the task of turning the speech of a familiar into a text for a stranger. The biggest problem they face has to do with reconciling the multi-directional nature of speech with the linearity of text. This forces them to begin their task by reflecting on what they know about the relationship between structure and content. Usually narrative is the genre of choice to begin

with, but often students find that the stories were not related to them in a straight narrative fashion, and when they add their own voices to the text, adhering to a straight timeline is too constraining and often results in papers that are disjointed and jumpy.

I've noticed that much of the time in peer review sessions and conferencing is spent trying to fit what students feel is the natural structure of the piece, with all its elements, into what they feel is a logical, cohesive whole that readers can comprehend. I like this assignment because right away the students are confronted with the form or function dilemma. I am pleased to say that most students naturally choose function and then try to find a way to fit form into their priorities.

The second step is a further complication of the first. I ask the students to abstract an idea out of the first paper that they feel is worth further investigation and, using the elements of the first assignment that relate to that idea, build upon it with the addition of secondary research. This has the effect of adding a third voice to the paper, but since the assignment moves back into familiar research territory they tend to drop into the traditional modes of thought. Soon however, they run into the complication of having to fit aspects of their topic from the first paper with its somewhat more flexible structures into the conception they have of a formal research paper. Add to that the fact that they are much more

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committed to what they have to say at this point and the search begins anew for an organization that will serve their needs.

This inevitably leads to discussions about blending aspects of what were previously thought of as discrete organizational systems. Some parts of research writing, such as MLA formats, theses, and argument construction come across relatively unscathed, but others, once considered sacred, like the paragraph topic sentence, often get serious reconstitution. That is not to say that students don't have topic sentences, they do, but the traditional structure often gives way to more diverse and what I'll call dissipated topics as the formal five paragraph essay structure is modified by the structures more typical of personal narrative and creative writing that the students had been experimenting with in the first paper. I am reminded of a study done many years ago by Richard Braddock in which he investigated the structure of professional writing in national magazines and found "Teachers and textbook writers should exercise caution in making statements about the frequency with which contemporary professional writers use simple or even explicit topic sentences in expository paragraphs. It is abundantly clear that students should not be told that professional writers usually begin their paragraphs with topic sentences." (302) My students seem to have discovered on their own the benefits of more flexibility in paragraph development that Braddock found in his study of professional writers.

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The third paper is as close as we come to a traditional research format. In this paper the students are free to seek a topic of their own, and while the approach is I Search, which puts a lot of emphasis on the voice of the author, they must also include both primary and secondary research in the piece. My intent is to place them in a situation where they have to blend various voices from various sources, both textual and verbal. I want to keep them thinking about the relationships among the various organizational structures and their goals as writers. This is really a test to see how the students carry over the decisions they have made about the relationship between form and function. Our mantra in this assignment is "put a human face on the data" a secondary chant might be "people like to read about people." Most of the discussions in the peer groups and conferencing revolve around keeping the author's voice in the piece, which the students see as a crucial element in making the paper interesting.

The concept of making it interesting is something that seems to evolve over the course of the semester. At first the students are merely concerned with being clear or getting their point across. Engaging the reader, challenging the reader, or merely keeping the reader from yawning his or her way through the paper isn't even on the radar screen at first. As we go through the assignments though, conversation in the peer groups revolves more and more around grabbing the reader and keeping his or her interest. I'm certain the fact that the students pick

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their own topics contributes to the sense of ownership and thus commitment, but I like to think that as the students see the potential options in blending the formats, they come to realize that they can go beyond simply reporting data they've collected.

I've found in this assignment that students naturally return to the classic research writing formats they have been taught, but find that they are unsatisfactory. Initially the conversation in peer groups revolves around complaints, complaints from the writer that the paper just isn't going anywhere and complaints from the readers that there is nothing for them to grab onto. My role in this section is to remind the students of things they have dome on previous papers that may be of use here. Even though we have done two previous papers where we played fast and loose with organizational formats, some students are still reluctant to use those approaches on a paper that started out from a classic research writing type context. Sooner or later though, either through the modeling of other students, my suggestions or just a frustration with the way the paper is going, these student begin to weave into their pieces elements of story telling, conversation, humanness, or what we often like to call voice, but what could be more appropriately called in this class, voices.

The last assignment is the climax. It's the one that prompted my colleague to use the term hallucinogens when describing what I was after. You have an example of this kind of writing in your packet, although Claude Flyer wasn't written in my class, it was written by one of

my students for an aviation meteorology class. In this assignment I challenge the students to go where no one has gone before with research writing. I do a lot of modeling in my classes anyway, but in this section I do even more. We take papers students have written in the past and turn them into poems, for instance, or we'll take a formal research paper from another class and make it a one-act play. Everything is on the table for this paper. We have done dramatic readings of journal articles, and sung a government report. If I've done my job right, I've been chipping away at my students' preconceptions about form all semester long. Now it's time to apply the last few whacks to that edifice and bring it down. Hopefully in its place we have built a more dynamic structure, one that can accommodate a wider variety of organizational schemes. A house without so many walls and many more windows and doors.

We talk about audience a lot in my class as you might imagine, and no where more so that in the last assignment. The lesson I learned from my old literature professor is never far from my thoughts in this unit, but I find that students almost instinctively know that certain decisions they might make about their papers might be counterproductive in some other classrooms. This doesn't always stop them from arguing for the right to make them, but sooner or later, most of them come, somewhat grumpily, to the conclusion that the needs of the reader impact the decisions they make as writers. The good news is that most of the students feel that they have more decisions they could

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be making. My goal, at bottom, is to show the students that they can say what is important for them to say, and adjust it in a way that will be appropriate and interesting across a wide range of contexts. Some of my students tell me I'm teaching them to be subversive, to be able to write what has value to them, even in situations where the emphasis may be placed on writing what the teacher wants to hear. I'm not completely uncomfortable with that characterization, but I prefer to think of myself as one who gives my students a greater flexibility as writers so they are simply able to cope successfully with a wider range of readers.

So that's my plan in a nutshell. Einstein said any plan that could be put in a nutshell deserved to be there, but nonetheless it seems to be working. I taught one section of the course last spring semester and received 15 papers for the final assignment. Eight were blended stories, one of which provided the title for this presentation, two were poems, one an epic on the history of man's battle against unsightly dandruff and body odor complete with footnotes, two were Platonic Dialogues, one on the nature of television violence between Jerry Falwell and Fred Flintstone, and the others were not readily classifiable, but boy they were fun to read.

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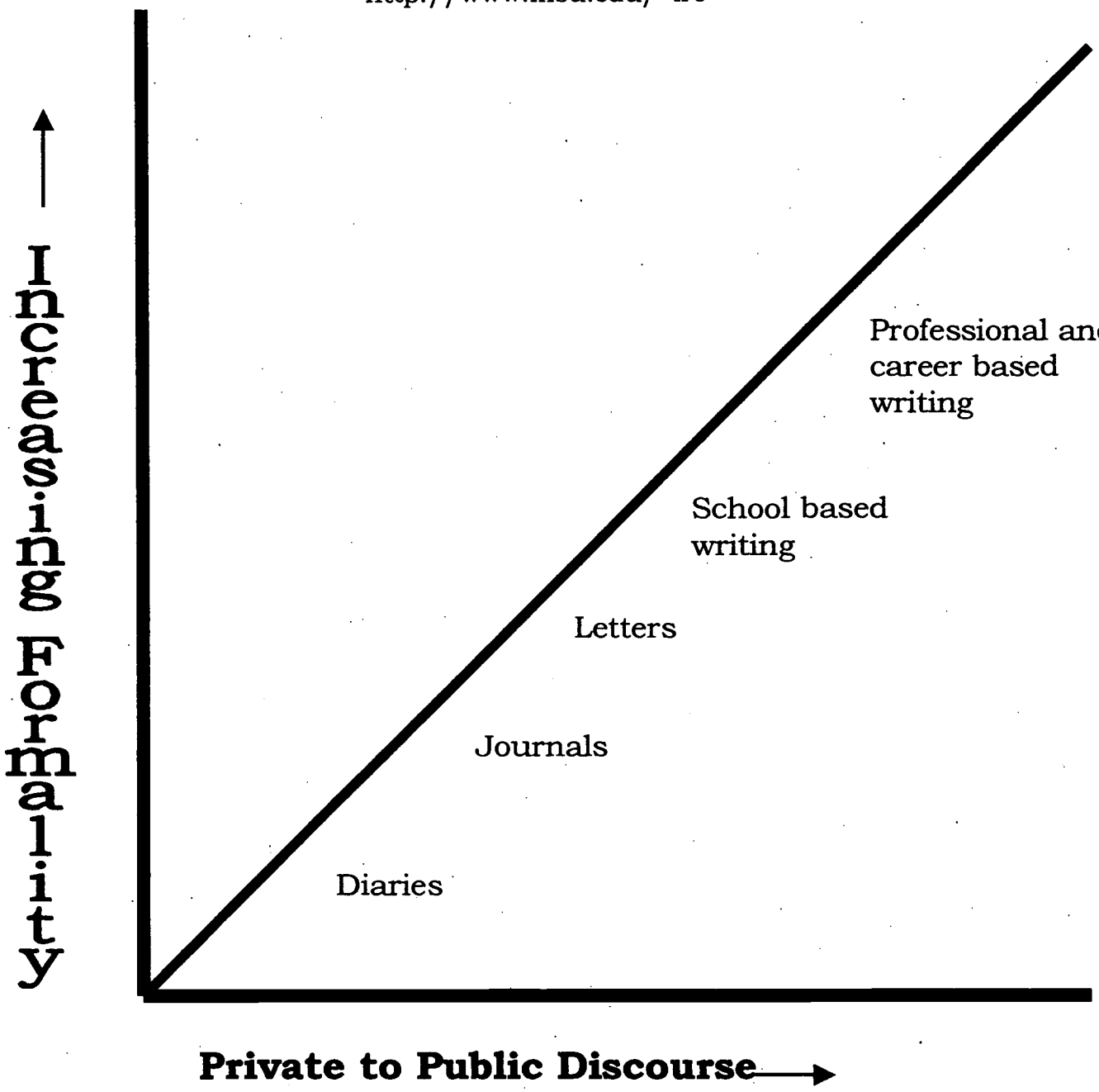

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Assignment Sheet

1. ***Telling Someone's Story***

For this paper you will need to find a person who has a story to tell. It can be any type of story you think would be interesting to read. Your job is to collect this story through an interview, or series of interviews and turn it into a paper using primarily the voice of the storyteller but also your own as an explainer, summarizer, echo, interpreter and so on. You are *not* a reporter, telling the story in your own words, you are an editor, selecting the best and brightest nuggets from the story the person tells, assembling it for the reader and using your own voice to smooth the edges and fill in where necessary.

Example:Think about members of your family who have had interesting jobs, or who may have traveled to interesting countries. An uncle who has been a policeman, or an aunt who has been a nurse probably have interesting stories as anyone whose job requires interaction with other people will undoubtedly have some experiences worth sharing. If you have access to grandparents you might think interviewing them to get the story of your family.

Sources: Working and The Good War by Studs Terkel; Student files.

2. ***And The Point Is***

For this paper you will need to look for an issue raised in the first paper that you think bears further investigation, or explanation, or is just interesting enough to revisit. Using the elements from the first paper that relate to your issue as a foundation, you will build a paper that broadens the reader's understanding by including traditional research sources. These should be textual and electronic sources that place your issue in a wider context than it was in the first paper.

Example: Think about some of the themes that run through your first paper. If you interviewed your uncle who was a policeman they could be themes that deal with criminal issues, or justice in general, or stress, of the impact of dangerous jobs on the family. Once you get an idea of a theme your job is to try and fit your uncle's experience into a larger context. That's where the secondary research will come in—it will provide that larger context.

Sources: "The New Yorker," "Atlantic Monthly;" "National Geographic;" Student files.

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3. ***Look What I Can Do***

Here's a chance to return to your roots. Remember when you *just* wrote research papers? Now you get to do that again, but don't forget what you've discovered in the first two assignments. You will use your knowledge of I Search techniques to zero in on a topic that has some sort of importance for you. Remember our class motto: Writers Write Because They Have Something to Say. You must discover what it is you have to say about a topic and then gather information that will help you say it and place it in the largest context possible. You don't need all the answers to start. In fact, sometimes not having all the answers (or even any of the answers) is the beginning of a wonderful relationship with your topic.

Example: Examples from class text.

Sources: Newspaper file; Student file.

4. ***Wild Thing***

This paper is just like the previous paper except it's different. Make sense? It should by now. Sure, you're going to produce another paper that contains the elements of a classic research paper, but you're going to do it in a way that asks you to think way outside the box of research writing.

Example: Try to think about the paper on two levels. One is the traditional research type paper that collects, interprets and reports information for the reader. The other level is the surprising one. Ask yourself outrageous questions like, what if I wrote this paper as a poem? Think about how you would blend the expected with the unexpected. You may even think about writing the two levels separately and then blending them as a revision exercise.

Sources: Dave Barry Is Not Taking This Sitting Down; Student files.

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