

The Use of Artistic Tools in Composition Pedagogy



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Abstract: Despite claims that Creative Writing and Composition don't speak to one another, this article finds that composition does borrow fictional craft elements and artistic tools. Moreover, these devices and tools show up in composition pedagogy in two ways: explicitly or implicitly. Many of the tools found come from fiction writers and poets, while some are from creative non-fiction writers. The article searches through 17 years of journal articles to show how artistic tools are discussed, used, and how teachers adopt or theorize them for writing students. What the essay proposes is a greater independence of the student writer as a harvester and user of rhetorical tools and to have students go past mere techniques into a more conscious use of the tools available to them outside of what the teachers offer, since there could be, and surely are, more options for analytical and artistic creation and criticism.

"a collapse of vision, accordingly, the rise of craft"
— Carl Phillips, "Entry"

I.

Reading among the different journals in our discipline (many of which are cited in this essay), one could intuit that a sort of cold war has ensued in English studies, slowing the exchange of ideas between creative writing and composition, despite encouragement for such exchanges. Douglas Hesse seems to believe in this divide, claiming that differences in research methods between the two fields are responsible for professional disagreeableness (33). Patrick Bizzaro also points to differences of research between composition, creative writing, and literary studies, adding that creative writing needs to teach how it researches data ("Research" 297).^[1] And even as recently as March 2016, *College English* published an article which began "...creative writing and composition function for all intents and purposes as separate pedagogical entities" (Sumpter 340).^[2]

But even a cursory knowledge of all these *intradisciplinary* aspects of English shows creative writing isn't all about plot and character development, and composition isn't all about research and argumentation. Even "our students," Judith Harris suggests, "view the partitions between compositional and creative writing as being more mirages than real walls" (176). In the wake of claims that "real walls" exist, this essay asks: How and where do compositionists borrow the tools of creative writers and make them work in the methodologies of "academic writing"? In what ways are they employed or theorized in the teaching of writing?

One approach to answering these questions is to see this essay as working in the same vein as Meghan A. Sweeney and Maureen McBride's 2015 article "Difficulty Paper (Dis)Connections: Understanding the Threads Students Weave between Their Reading and Writing," wherein the authors used Mariolina Salvatori's *difficulty paper* "to explore student experiences in reading" and to "show[] how basic writing students' expectations extend not only to how the reading will help their writing but also the difficulties in understanding the reading *when the moves done by the published writer are foreclosed upon in the composition class*" (592, my emphasis). Their last phrase is most important for me, since what I'll be calling for in this essay is the composition student's close analysis, plucking out, and personal adaptation of the published writer's moves in the composition class. Sweeney and McBride's students read and responded to a *New Yorker* essay by Malcolm Gladwell and Jonathan Swift's classic satire, "A Modest Proposal." Through their *difficulty papers*, the students identified elements—I would say tools—that Gladwell and Swift used, tools that impeded their understanding of the published writing, tools that (ultimately) could be picked up

and used by the students. But in this instance, the students in Sweeney and McBride's article experienced a "textual mismatch" that "arose from a difference in how composition instructors teach them to write and what they assign them to read," making the adoption and use of these professional writerly tools unexplored (607). One could then say that this essay is the flip-side of Sweeney and McBride's article.^{3} As I'm using the terms in this essay, a writerly *tool* is a move writers use to serve multiple purposes, while a *technique* is aimed specifically at one purpose. A five-paragraph essay is a technique for defending a single claim with evidence; paragraphing, by contrast, is a tool that can do more than act as a "body" or a "thesis." Or again: repetition is a tool that can build suspense, insistence, or boredom, depending on the context; re-stating your main claim is a technique that uses repetition to maintain focus. Thus techniques can be built out of tools, which locates tools at the more basic compositional level.

Techniques are more easily shared than tools, because their use is already established and in play. But some writers have taken on techniques wholesale, with no idea of what tools make them up or make them work, and cannot then adapt them to new contexts or purposes. (Thus we may say that a poet has good technique but a poor imagination, or is a technician but not an artist.) What we want as teachers, I argue here, is to comb creative work for writerly tools, have students try them out to mess with their work, and create (in the end, eventually) their own synthesized techniques. What we want is to adopt adaptive tools for students' developing techniques—not others' techniques that mask themselves as tools.^{4}

Another approach toward my questions is through what Tim Mayers has called "[c]raft criticism... [which] refers to critical prose written by self- or institutionally identified 'creative writers' [where] a concern with textual production takes precedence over any concern with textual interpretation" (34). That is, novelists and poets spend time wondering and writing about *how* writing gets done. Not necessarily *what it means*. When these craft criticism essays are read, they're more likely to be read in a creative writing class. They're ostensibly for other apprentice creative writers. But where does this kind of pedagogy appear in composition courses and in the professional composition literature? Where are *versions* of them in the composition literature? Through this essay, I want to rethink how teachers are teaching writing, especially rhetorical tools (and writing about the teaching of said tools), and how students are writing in response to this teaching. I also want to rethink how composition and rhetoric approaches what we may (in our professional publications) explicitly consider materials, models, and methods for student instruction and writing and how these can slip the holds of classical rhetorical tropes, schemes, or techniques.

II.

Nested within Mayers's definition of "craft criticism" is a further definition for my "artistic tool": any compositional tool imported from fiction, poetry, literary criticism, or other non-composition-and-rhetoric prose which "has a pedagogical element" much like craft criticism (34). My objective isn't merely stocking a vocabulary larder; rather, the aim is to proliferate practical options for the act of composition.^{5}

So I've gone back 17 years to 2000 seeking moments in composition's past where artistic tools are offered as concepts for pedagogy. The turn of the century was generally symbolic as a changeover from one ethos to the next and also the year Robert Connors published his essay "The Erasure of the Sentence" that set off a renewed interest in sentences and style. While neither of those two are explicitly the topic of this essay, Connors also mentions imitation as a tool, and imitation is always of *someone*, and for my purposes, that *someone* is an artist or a critic. My sources included English studies journals *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Writing on the Edge*, *Composition Studies*, and *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*. Some journal titles that we may expect aren't represented here because their purview was deemed sufficiently too far afield for my research. For example, *English Journal*, while a major NCTE title, is focused on high school education, and *Journal of Advanced Composition* is squarely anchored in the more conceptual and high theoretical aspects of writing in general.

How to sort the articles is complicated because no taxonomy previously exists for what I'm doing, but a basic division can be said to exist between those articles which are more or *mostly* explicit about the kinds of artistic tools^{6} they want to teach and those articles which are more or *mostly* implicit. Out of over 2,000 professional articles in the journals above, I culled 33 by reading titles and abstracts for words and phrases like *artistic device*, *device*, *tool*, *rhetorical tool*, any specific writers' names (e.g. Vonnegut, Derrida, Austen, etc.), and any titles of a work of art (e.g. *Hamlet*, *The Cantos*, etc.), and so on—and from those, the ones I mention in this essay fit my parameters.

To give an example, an article that I admitted was Janet Moser's "In Search of Another Way: Using Proust to Teach First-Year Composition." Her post-colon title gave me all I needed to read further. And I found she was indeed using an artist's tool to teach composition. An article that was a non-admit would be Chris Anson's essay from the most recent CCC (June 2016): "The Pop Warner Chronicles: A Case Study in Contextual Adaptation and the Transfer of Writing Ability." This is a title I wouldn't look further into because of the pre-colon title, even if I thought maybe the

“Contextual Adaptation” may lead to an artistic tool. But to be thorough, I’d peruse the abstract. There I find the article is heavily about knowledge transfer and professional writing. Searching the bibliography confirms this. A close-but-no-cigar article would be Craig Dworkin’s “Mycopedagogy.” The title is intriguing and the first page has epigraphs from John Cage and Lyn Hejinian, and Dworkin even writes: “Experimental, innovative, postmodern, avant-garde—whatever the label...a number of associated literary traditions have been finding their way into the college classroom” (603). But he never points out an artistic tool to conceptualize or teach; rather, he theorizes a new pedagogical approach via John Cage. While not arbitrary, my methodology and taxonomy is capable of a more granular analysis in the future and could further be refined in another iteration of the project.

III. The (Mostly) Explicit Use of Artistic Tools

To start with, what I found was it’s quite rare to find a writing teacher delineating an idiosyncratic compositional move from a writer considered artistic and then bringing it into the classroom as a model for text production. What instead happened was I found teachers getting very close to this point. When this happened, I considered it explicit.

The first example of such a tool would be in Mary T. Lane’s “Using *The Devil’s Dictionary* to Teach Definitions.” Lane also teaches developmental writing courses, but here the students are learning how Ambrose Bierce wrote the definitions for his famous dictionary in order to prepare longer works. She offers examples like “ACADEMY, *n.* [from ACADEME] A modern school where football is taught” (358). The tool here is something we could call “ironic defining,” but defining in such a way that offers students an investment in the words they often use or find suspicious, much as Bierce did. Once students recognize the characteristic aspects of the definitions’ structures, Lane instructs the students to create their own definitions. While Bierce’s definitions are “caustic,” and Lane explains what a “Bierce-like” style is, there’s no exact formula for production (358). What students take away is a tool for picking-up terms that often occur in their vocabulary and skewing them—or in some cases, skewering them. Lane’s article offers her students, I think, a form of linguistic ownership.

In a fashion even more deliberate, Janet Moser of Brooklyn College adopts Marcel Proust. Her essay “In Search of Another Way: Using Proust to Teach First-Year Composition” shows how her composition class doesn’t use texts “solely as stylistic models for imitation, but rather as paradigms for the solutions to standard problems in student composition” (58). Her approach means freshmen *do* learn to read and hunt for possible solutions in the work of artistic writers—those with a non-academic agenda—thus having students turn non-academic tools and moves into academic ones. Or, at the very least, freshmen can persuade (massage?) academic forms of writing to acknowledge the aesthetics and utility of a novelist’s tools. Moser also claims that the Proustian exercises “[lead students] to produce more insightful, less predictable essays” (66), presumably because a common hurdle in freshman composition is the need for students to shake off received phrasing and syntax and structuring, often taught as the five-paragraph essay or attention grabber of high school prose. Particular Proustian elements picked up by the students include “complex metaphors...how they are extended, the choice of vocabulary, the images and allusions evoked, the wide-ranging sensory appeals, the use of repetition. [The students] also look at the syntax of these complicated, sophisticated sentences, their balance, their pace, their rhythm” (63).^[7] If it seems that Moser is participating in pure imitation or some kind of pedagogy-through-osmosis, we should see she is trying to refine a unique element (or elements) of one author—specifically Proust’s long, winding and reflective sentences—and asking students to manipulate the tool for their own ends. The invitation of the artistic tool asks students to find a way to use it, to take it up. It asks them to make something of it, to stake something on it, to place their words into, or alongside, the tool and its history, and move up against some other piece of experience, some other discourse.

The difference between imitation and the extraction of an author’s tool from their work is, I believe, the loss of context in the student’s prose when wholly imitative practices are assigned. That is, if teachers teach imitation only, students are mere copyists. Whereas if teachers teach how to recognize, extract, and reuse certain moves from an author’s catalogue, then students are learning to harvest what they read for future tools and methods of composition, crafting a very particular set of personal tropisms.

Among the articles, metaphor is one trope, or way, into artistic tools and is examined and explored by other scholars as a general way to introduce figurative language into freshman academic essays via writers like Martin Luther King, Jr. (Moe) or through the disturbing fairy tales and folkloric retellings of Angela Carter (Crachiolo). Extending such a metaphor and folktale exercise, Jeffrey Howard writes about using folktales, in this case Red Riding Hood, and asks his students to “rewrite the text in such a way that it implicitly supports a position or agenda on some social issue” (171). Howard draws on Joseph Harris’s idea of “rewriting,” emphasizing the students’ role as “storyteller,” explaining “[storytellers] conserve cultural elements and stories, but they also innovate on those cultural units or memes in the process of transmission” (171). In this instance, Howard isn’t borrowing a tool from a known and specific author, unless one points to the Brothers Grimm or Charles Perrault as the ultimate authors of many folktales. Instead,

Howard focuses on the shape and elements of a folktale, namely the *bias* or *moral* of the stories. This is what he encourages his students to borrow and modify, making the agendas of, say, Red Riding Hood, their own. The reasoning for the exercise comes from his claim that students can learn to “implicitly support[] a position or agenda on some social issue” without heavily-handedly bringing it out in a thesis statement. This is interesting as a teachable tool because it asks the students to adopt and modify an attitude or disposition rather than a form of syntax or grammar. And, in a way, the folktale (or its basic structure) models for students a method for “having a say” about an issue, should the students have felt they had nothing to say beforehand.^[8] If this seems odd, consider how a folktale like Hansel and Gretel comes already prepared with a moral and outlook on existence, i.e. one in which children are abused, abandoned, at risk of being eaten by other people, and must rely on their wit (or others’ stupidity) for survival. Students are manipulating the skeleton of the folktale to play up or play down these elements, using it as a structure for their own contemporary arguments or narratives. Howard concedes that “many students may struggle with balancing creative storytelling and implicit argument/agenda” so much so he “[has] no idea what their agenda or position on the issue actually is, although the end result is often quite ingenious as stories go”; likewise, students often veer too far into explicit argumentation (176-177). The rhetorical lever inherent in the folktale is the ability to insinuate and offer claims through narrative means—an ability not easily mastered in freshmen writing. The tool crosses the borders between creative writing and composition, and, I think, makes it hard to say that they’re “separate pedagogical entities.”

Whereas Howard at least tries to pull out a few aspects of the form to conceptualize for students, the approach by Miryam Wasserman displays a more implicit use of an artist. Wasserman selects Edgar Lee Masters’s *Spoon River Anthology* to help developmental writing classes get a foothold on academic writing. She *uses* the poems but doesn’t extract a definitive tool of Masters’s to share. Instead, she relies on Masters’s verb choice and quirky portraits of disturbed small-town folk to assist students in writing essays and thinking about language (32-33). She doesn’t choose any one aspect or model. The whole work stands on its own as a monolith to push against. This is as distant as an explicit artistic tool gets in the classroom; and if any, this is the way I think most compositionists approach style and invention through literature in the classroom.

IV. The (Mostly) Implicit Use of Artistic Tools.

In contrast to Howard’s folktale structure is Laura Micciche’s essay “Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar” where she describes the teaching of grammar (after Martha Kolln’s *Rhetorical Grammar*) as rhetorical empowerment and a form of cultural critique. Micciche also seems to search for moments where artistic tools are used and encourages students to keep commonplace books.

As I have conceived the commonplace book, students follow each entry with at least one paragraph of analysis in which they identify the work achieved by specific grammatical techniques in the passage. I ask students to look critically at writing by analyzing passages from their favorite authors, literature and textbooks they are reading in other courses, syllabi, Web-based texts, television advertisements, segments from presidential debates. (724)

She then focuses on the interdependence between “what” we say and “how” we say and how “language as *made* and *made to work* on people’s lives is central to being able to use language strategically” (724, emphasis in original). What Micciche is getting at is the difference between teaching the rhetorical trope’s form itself, say, anaphora, and teaching the way a particular author uses it, e.g. Harper Lee or Kurt Vonnegut or Malcolm X, showing how (in this instance) established authors turn them. Thus, the instruction she’s exploring is the particular, not the universal.

For example, in the article, Micciche shares a moment where one of her students, Chris, inspects how Kurt Vonnegut uses the word “charm” in *Breakfast of Champions*. Here’s what Chris wrote:

In his definition, Vonnegut uses the word “charm” in one form or another six times within five sentences, and he uses the word “oodles” three times. He also uses the same basic sentence structure for the last three sentences. These repetitions convey the satirical nature of the explanation. That is, Vonnegut is mocking the word by over doing its definition. Rather than combining the subjects in the last three sentences and making one compound sentence, Vonnegut chooses to repeat the same sentence format three times in a row. This has the effect of enforcing each separate subjects place in the explanation. In this case the word comes out as being somewhat discredited. Vonnegut’s point is that lots of people have charm and those who don’t can usually fake it. (727)

Chris’s observations about “charm” are keen. And it makes a fine commonplace book entry. When you give a student

a general rhetorical trope and ask them to produce it, the results can be exciting—but it's also just as exciting, if not more so, to ask a student to enter the stream of that ongoing discourse by engaging and reworking, retooling, the words that have come before. Micciche doesn't go on to mention having students return and pluck out examples collected from their commonplace books and start writing off of them. (Perhaps it is an implicit claim she makes, as would be fitting.) Still, almost all the examples encourage the examination of an artistic tool but, again, don't advocate for them. That is, they aren't turned around in class and conceptualized as ways toward invention. Instead, a broad sense of osmosis or intuition is left hanging in the air.

Similar in vein is David Bartholomae's "Must We Mean What We Say," where he discusses how to get around the "dreaded standard issue of the English class" (26) in favor of one written in "the language of adults speaking about things that matter to them" (26). But Bartholomae's essay starts an interesting pattern: that of suggesting a "non-composition" book as a composition textbook. This claim isn't new in Bartholomae, who claimed in *Writing on the Margins* (2005) that poet Lynn Emanuel's *Then, Suddenly*—"is a book, I believe, with much to teach students about writing—a composition textbook" and goes on to admit that he's personally amassed "novels and books of poetry that are better composition textbooks than most of what I can find on the market" (6). So it is without surprise in the article that we read him offering Tony Hoagland's poetry collection *What Narcissism Means to Me* "as though it were a writing textbook" stating, "[i]t enacts a set of lessons. It is about writing. What lessons does it hold for you [the student]?" (21). The lessons that may be inside the poems aren't brought out in any explicit way. They are located but given over to the student to unearth.

Bartholomae focuses on two poems: a darker, "racially complex" poem called "The Change" which is an example of the Hoagland's shifting and pushy voice (21) and one called "America." Focused as it is on revision, Bartholomae's assignment reproduces one student's introductory paragraph in response to Hoagland's poems. He asks the class "How are these [student] sentences in conversation with a figure like Tony Hoagland, as you've seen him in his book?...What are you doing in return?" (25). The student's paragraph takes on a brash and knowing critical persona—one not far from that found in the poems. Its first line is, "When I picked up this book, *What Narcissism Means to Me*, I thought: Great, another narcissistic asshole to add to my asshole-saturated life." The class resists the borrowing. Here's Bartholomae's take:

But this was copying, one student said, a routine, a caricature of Hoagland. It is rude. And, of course, it is a routine; it is not original; it is a caricature, and it is, in more than one sense, rude. But this opening belonged to this writer on this occasion; it was hers, as much as any of us ever owns our writing, and it was smart (a gesture toward the kind of thinking we think of as smart), it was stylish and voiced. (26)

Setting aside the parenthetical, this backs up a kind of pedagogy which believes that if the kind of beginning one has in mind is a revised one, it is a voiced one. The kind Bartholomae has in mind. One with "[t]he courage to offer caricature. Personae as common property. New turns of phrase and tones of voice; new ways of speaking and gesturing" (27). In this case, the artistic tool in question is each of those in the aforementioned list, and they were those that Hoagland brought to the table. What's implicit about this is Bartholomae's *stepping away* from the table and letting the students discern the tools (whatever those may be, we never find out for sure) for themselves, much as Micciche appeared to do with her commonplace books.

With the outsider persona in mind, there's the subversive twin of Bartholomae in Geoffrey Sirc, advocating for Nirvana's Kurt Cobain and his posthumous journals as a model for writing in composition. Sirc, too, is seeking a nonstandard standard in the way of a guiding text, and hails Cobain's journals as "an interesting composition textbook," setting it in opposition to the kind of anthologies taught in composition courses, the kind edited by essayist Robert Atwan (*Best American Essays*, etc.) (11). Instead of literacy narratives, students should offer up musical autobiographies, he suggests. It's the kind of writing that wouldn't "be popular with certain writing teachers who would wonder why [a student is] chronicling his life's passions instead of perfecting university forms" (21). Sirc describes Cobain as a contemporary Orpheus and questions the "work" in composition.

In Composition, there is NEVER anything more important than the work. Instead of trivializing [Cobain's] journal's potential as eccentric compendium into just a space to answer reading questions, limiting its richly auto-archival possibilities to the production of media-centric essays, why not forget the work? What Composition needs most, perhaps, is a bad attitude. (23)

Clearly, Sirc wants to introduce a punk aesthetic into the composition course; and it's by way of the scattered and improvisational journal, a format which he sees degraded by answering series after series of prefabricated Reading Questions. What Sirc desires to reclaim is "the journal as retrojective/projective archival technology for an engaged life" (16). What this also moves to do—along with Bartholomae, and by extension Micciche—is question the role of

content in composition. Along with questioning the role of *which* and *what kinds* of readings or textbooks teachers have their students read. So the kind of theorizing possible with these non-standard textbooks or artistic tools is one which says there's a fund of resources available to be used—nay, demands to be used. Why bother, they might say, with the middle-man of a composition textbook, and why not go straight to the source?

V. Conceptualization of Tools.

What is going on in these articles? Whether implicit or explicit, what Bartholomae, Micciche, Sirc and the rest remind us of is an important, simple, yet often forgotten point: that the way we write our own writing depends on the way we read others' writing. Furthermore, that students are trying to conceptualize writing tools in these articles. It would be fantastic for students to already know how to conceptualize—and some may—but the modeling of it in the above examples is what I think can be expanded on in composition. We can build it up more. As we've seen, to conceptualize a writing tool from one field (artistic) to another (academic) requires a number of steps.

1. The recognition of a tool in the artistic work,
2. The naming of the artistic tool (not always done),
3. The shifting of scenes and the application of the new tool in an academic setting.

The tension between the student and the pre-existing prose offers the writer a context from which to jump out of and work against or support that context. Everywhere in the articles under review I observe teachers trying to urge student writers to get us—their readers—to pay attention, to rouse us from an apathy in which widespread literacy has submerged us and become taken for granted. As I've mentioned, poets and writers are often incessant about trying to locate and list these. A great list of poetic moves can be found here: htmlgiant.com/craft-notes/moves-in-contemporary-poetry. Some are versions of classical rhetorical moves, but some are tweaks on these, e.g. "Abstract epistolary: Using 'Dear [abstraction or common object]' in the title or first line" (n.p.). I would emphasize the naming of the artistic tool ("abstract epistolary") because naming allows a sense of capturing the idea and locking it in. Moreover, naming has the added effect of allowing the writer to invent a term—a creative by-product of the whole process. It also builds a sense of discernment in the students; this way, not every writer is the same. Prose starts to take on a topography and shades of difference that make a difference. So how to apply these three steps?

From a teacher's point of view, it would be best to start by giving an example of what is meant. (The following is from my own interests and experience. Readers should obviously use what seems compelling and helpful for them.) So (a) offer writers a short story or a poem, etc. (b) have them read the work enough times to suss out patterns or unique compositional elements by asking a question like "what formal elements or moves does the author use that make this work different from other stories or poems?" (c) e.g. in a story by George Saunders one may recognize that he often capitalizes certain formal nouns and camel cases them, i.e. when two capitalized words are pressed together, often to show a business, e.g. a hair salon called BowlCutz. The question to ask, of this particular tool, is why do this? What does it get Saunders, what effect does it create that, without it, wouldn't occur? (d) then naming the rhetorical tool/move, in this case, something like "satirical capitalization" or "formal idiocy" and (e) lastly, trying to work the new move into their writing, perhaps calling attention to an element of their own writing or an idea in a text they're reading. Here are a few more examples (chosen from various areas of prose/poetry).

- i. Poet Carl Phillips's "hyper-intercalations"—in his collection *Rock Harbor*, Phillips especially makes a point of interrupting himself so much that the syntax, and potential sense, of the sentence can veer away from the reader, yet he keeps it on track. E.g., here's the beginning of the poem "Entry":

As if an ark—
or,

like one, how slow...

How it does not seem
to leave the shore or
want to so much as—more,

whatever it must, already, it is
letting go.
(48)

Phillips starts either in the middle of, or at the beginning of, a comparison but cuts it off for a description, which is then cut off by a hyphen for another phrase that has two interruptive words ("more"/ "already") inside of it.

The idea here being that the narrative voice can merge with the thinking voice and have layers and contradictions.

- ii. Science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson's "general nouning artists and thinkers"—in *2312*, Robinson's main character, Swan, is a version of a future conceptual artist, who creates "abramovics" and "goldsworthies" both of which are meant to be references to performance artist Marina Abramović and land artist Andy Goldsworthy. By taking the specific actions and objects made famous by these artists and turning them into general nouns, Robinson has created new words. This works in *2312* because of the unique last name, but it could work when combining first and last names. One could see a student writing about a negative experience that was a "stephenking" or "a total hplovecraft."
- iii. Detective novelist Ross MacDonald's "self-destructive cliché"—this isn't necessarily indicative of MacDonald's prose, but he does it. And it's a good example. The following is from his novel *The Doomsters*: "We passed a small-boat harbor, gleaming white on blue, and a long pier draped with fishermen. Everything was as pretty as a postcard. The trouble with you, I said to myself: you're always turning over the postcards and reading the messages on the underside. Written in invisible ink, in blood, in tears, with a black border around them, with postage due, unsigned, or signed with a thumbprint" (29). MacDonald sets up the stereotype for consumption, then brutally deconstructs it, thinking through the implications of the stereotype, thus having his cake and eating it too.

To further illustrate how I think this kind of conceptualization is to some degree working inside composition already, we should look toward Geoffrey Sirc and Thomas Rickert's recent long Intermezzo essay published through *Enculturation*. "California Cosmogony Curriculum" uses James Moffet as a thematic lodestone and proposes using music as a source of compositional inspiration along with "philosophical thinking, language arts, and song" with the hope of resolving them into a "larger harmonic, and in this form of compositional 'harmothematics,' [] offer insight, inspiration, and direction for college English's *raison d'être*" (5). In the last chapter, "Cosmology, Curriculum, and Class Work," Sirc and Rickert write that they "had felt a deep rightness about the curricular power of song to achieve growth in language and conception for the students we teach. We saw writing about music as one way to allow writers to order their worlds, each writing as another entry in an on-going musical autobiography, generating a personal cosmology" (62). Part of this personal cosmology includes "teach[ing] the tools of craft" which entails classical "rhetorical devices" (63). For example, they have students make a mixtape and annotate each choice on the list. Through this assignment, students are concentrating on tight (potentially lyrical) forms of composition, i.e. the music review. On top of this, they are working within a written form they're more familiar with. So they read *antithesis* and *metaphor* as used inside Marilyn Manson's review of The Doors and pick up on *appositio* and *asyndeton* through Steve Erickson's music writing (64). (Further, the students read Viktor Shklovsky's "Art as Device," an essay that enumerates, catalogues, and explains a slew of rhetorical tools and devices in prose and poetry.) I laud Sirc and Rickert's work and find it right on track with what I am currently calling for: having students witness first-hand how writers are (consciously or not) using rhetorical tools (or techniques) in their writing that can be lifted and used in the students' writing. Yet what I'm trying to sharpen up here is the adoption of *not just* classical tools and techniques.

So let me further consider another example, this time from critic and writer Chris Andrews's monograph, *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction: An Expanding Universe*. Here Andrews (one of Bolaño's main English translators, the other being Natasha Wimmer) observes and names five unique tools in Bolaño's fiction: expansion, circulating characters, metarepresentation, overinterpretation, and embedded stories. Take for example "expansion": when Bolaño used this tool in his writing he "revisited previously published texts and expanded them from within, scaling up the rhetorical figure of tmesis, which cuts a word and inserts another (often an expletive) into the cut, as in 'neverthebloodyless'" (34). Andrews excerpts the before-writing (a story from the collection *Nazi Literature in the Americas*) and the after-writing (the novel *Distant Star*) (36). We see how Bolaño created a compositional method for himself, then exploited it for his needs. What started as a classical tool (tmesis) is inflated to include a shape of writing that the classical rhetoricians (perhaps) didn't intend it for. What I call artistic tools, Andrews calls "processes discerned by genetic reading" (34). I like this quite a lot and feel an affinity with his approach. He claims that "Bolaño's fiction invites us to read genetically, that is, looking for traces of method in the finished work" (34). I would go so far as to suggest that part of the work students would do in conceptualizing writing tools is genetic in this way. These are the kinds of examples to show students and have them consider what Andrews had to do in order to conceptualize the tools. What's extra-convenient about these particular tools is their place in a chapter about systems of *making* fiction.

The greater point is that the tools Andrews locates aren't panaceas for composition students. None can be. Rather, the question is: *how could they fit into writing instruction?* Their usefulness (or job) in fiction is obvious after Andrews explains it. And as a fiction writer and composition teacher, I wonder: *what can I borrow from here? what slides between porous borders?* Following Andrews, though, I am seeing these as tools for production. I recognize what may be predominantly—or exclusively—used for making fiction can be used for producing the kinds of prose written

in composition courses.

VI. Whither Is Composition or Creative Writing Bound?

I want to point out that it is in these small moments, as seen above, and in the articles of the journals, where creative writing, literature, and composition merge or bring together their combined weight—it is in these fleeting moments where those who claim the separateness of the disciplines should look for reconciliation—or better yet, a longstanding co-operation. Students are continually, if unconsciously, mutilating and deforming their writing for an acceptable grade.^[9] The kinds of tools and moves these articles advocate try, I think, to stave off the unnatural warping of their writing to some obscure model. Students have no idea what their writing is like without the academic abstractions. They know virtually nothing about their own writing because they judge it before even having a chance to work on it. Theoretically, the recognition, extraction, and application of artistic tools, as described above, lends writers the opportunity to work with and through their writing alongside other writers before applying a self-reflective critical stance.^[10] It is an operation of two modes: reader and writer. And they are side by side in a loose partnership, so that the student-critic who found and adapted the artistic tool is a collaborator with the student-writer who executes it. What should be brought out to students through this operation of artistic tools is that writing can know things the writer of it doesn't.^[11] This is how writers excel; by going back to learn how to read their own writing and repeating the whole process *ad infinitum*.

We should start teaching writing that is rich in interesting rhetorical tools. (Interesting in that they're not falling stillborn from the composition/rhetoric textbooks or handouts or modules.) We should ask students to provide what they're reading right now and work through trying to extract artistic tools from those writings (no matter their relevance to academe). After all, this is how many of us in the discipline may operate as writers, by raking through graphic novels or song lyrics, and it's how poets, novelists, and essayists have operated, and still operate. And from here, it would be beneficial to see other teachers highlighting where and how their students are picking up rhetorical tools. For example, in digital writing, how do we (or can we) bring what Twitter affords writers into the academic setting? How can a student adopt the citational aspects of tweets, retweets, and subtweets and use them in a non-digital essay? Moreover, how do those artistic moves translate? Do they transfer? This essay should, I hope, show that there are already the threads of a greater tapestry being woven here—under our noses and out of sight—the warp and woof of which proves that academic writing and creative writing, as professional disciplines, are less stable than they conceive themselves as being. What this essay is proposing is a greater independence of the student writer as a harvester and user of rhetorical tools. The point, the story I've been trying to tell in this essay, is to have students go past techniques and into a more conscious use of the tools available to them outside of what the teachers offer, since there could be, and surely are, more options for analytical and artistic creation and criticism. If we're trying to prepare students not to need (and rely on) us and go forth and read and collect tools, then this is where this kind of work should start.

Finally, what I think is worthwhile about artistic tools finding a way into composition pedagogy is this: using another's moves helps explain the notion that student language eventually needs someone to ratify it beyond the immediate audience (in this case, the teacher). This ratification is important for those student writers who don't find or can't find authority in their sentences and essays. One can imagine this is in much the same way a graduation or a religious celebration needs an officiate or a version of a symbolical stand-in. In this case, the student-author searches for a third party—e.g. novelist, memoirist, literary critic, etc.—to act as an authenticator. By adapting the tool, the student takes on the already established authority and extends it as a source of credit in the classroom. Not, as one would expect, as an authority for the-powers-that-be-in-college-discourse, but rather for the mere act of composing at all, especially if freshmen continue to enter the university unsure of how to turn a phrase.

Notes

1. For more, see Shellnut 1989; Moxley 1989; Bishop 1994; Bizzaro 1998; Welch 1999; Hedengren 2016. ([Return to text.](#))
2. Sumpter isn't simply historicizing. He does later propose “a tandem course in which first-year students take an expressivist influenced creative writing class and a social-constructionist-influenced composition course simultaneously, with each course's pedagogy being inflected by the strengths of the other” (341). Of course, what those strengths are can vary widely among the profession. ([Return to text.](#))
3. Other recent research that comes closer in spirit than letter would include the Michael-John DePalma's work on transfer of tools between written and digital mediums (2015), and Brian Ray's methods for “how teachers and students can deploy the concept of uptake as a rhetorical tool to strengthen their awareness of genre and multimodality” (184). These articles, again, are playing in the same sandbox as my essay, but we're digging in

- different corners. ([Return to text.](#))
4. I find sympathy with a similar notion in Stacey Waite's *Teaching Queer* where she calls for a "scavenger methodology" (180-184). ([Return to text.](#))
 5. My use of "artistic" vs. "academic" isn't meant to set up an immutable dichotomy or cartoon adversaries. I recognize that academic writing can be creative and artistic and that artistic writing can be academic and full of research. Rather, the terms I use are evocative labels for the purposes of this article. ([Return to text.](#))
 6. Searching in the CompPile database (comppile.org), the phrase "artistic device" brought back zero results. The word "device" on its own brought back 149 results. Among the articles and books, "device" is referred to variously as a technological device, a rhetorical device, a linguistic device, a cohesion device, and an evaluative device. Alternatively, "artistic moves" called up zero results; "moves" alone called up 59 results. "Tool" calls up 760 results. But "artistic tool" calls up nothing. CompPile isn't omniscient, obviously, but it does provide an interesting, and large, source of materials. ([Return to text.](#))
 7. Moser also mentions using Nabokov's *Invitation of a Beheading* and Hemingway as prose models (presumably for "richer" and "leaner" styles, respectively). She adds that the prose of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler could also work well in such a program (65). For her (as for me, too), the outcomes of her program are the know-how "to infuse their own academic writing with the stylistic techniques studied in paradigms of fine prose" (65). She has also recently published what seems a companion piece in a classics journal wherein she uses Herodotus' *Histories* to teach academic writing (Moser 2015). ([Return to text.](#))
 8. I surmise composition teachers understand the weariness of students trying to "come up with something to say" or "have a stake with an issue." Matthew Levy calls this kind of writing the "whatever" essay. These essays create an out for students. The signal move is the undercutting of all prior work up to the end—(itself a rhetorical trope, *anesis*.) Students write pablum or commonplaces "because it protects students from having to take personal responsibility for the huge and ancient injustice of the world, while avoiding the obvious mistake of disagreeing with their grader" (357). Again, I find that having student writers search for, extricate, and employ artistic tools helps cross the boundary between what they commonly see as staid research writing and imaginative, creative writing. Moreover, it gives them a certain "footing" that mere templates can't offer. For more on how templates don't offer what we think, see Lancaster 2016. ([Return to text.](#))
 9. (This semester one of my students told me he was only doing what he was ordered to do for a grade. This isn't a revelation for me; but it's still a sad admission to hear after all these years.) ([Return to text.](#))
 10. This may be reminiscent for the reader of an idea Joseph Harris called "forwarding" wherein the student is encouraged to see their writing as forwarding along an email with their words and the words of another—presumably an academic source—into the world and in conversation with one another. By taking already existing writing and putting it into a new context. The difference here is Harris pushes the writer to reuse the academic extract—with the original meaning—whereas I'm advocating for the writer to take the syntax, grammar, or rhetorical element of the writing. For more, see Harris's *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*. ([Return to text.](#))
 11. A version of this is found with Judith Harris, who asks "Do subjects control or choose the language they want, or are subjects driven and determined by language processes that operate *them*? Language liberates the subject from the inner bondage it must escape in order to confirm its own presence—to see itself from the outside—as others would see it. Language reflects back on itself and often tells us more than we know" (179). There's something of a surplus in writing that escapes the writer's awareness. ([Return to text.](#))

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