

1985

Trends in Writing Instructions: A New Look at the Composing Process

Joseph M. Moxley

University of South Florida Department of English, moxley@usf.edu

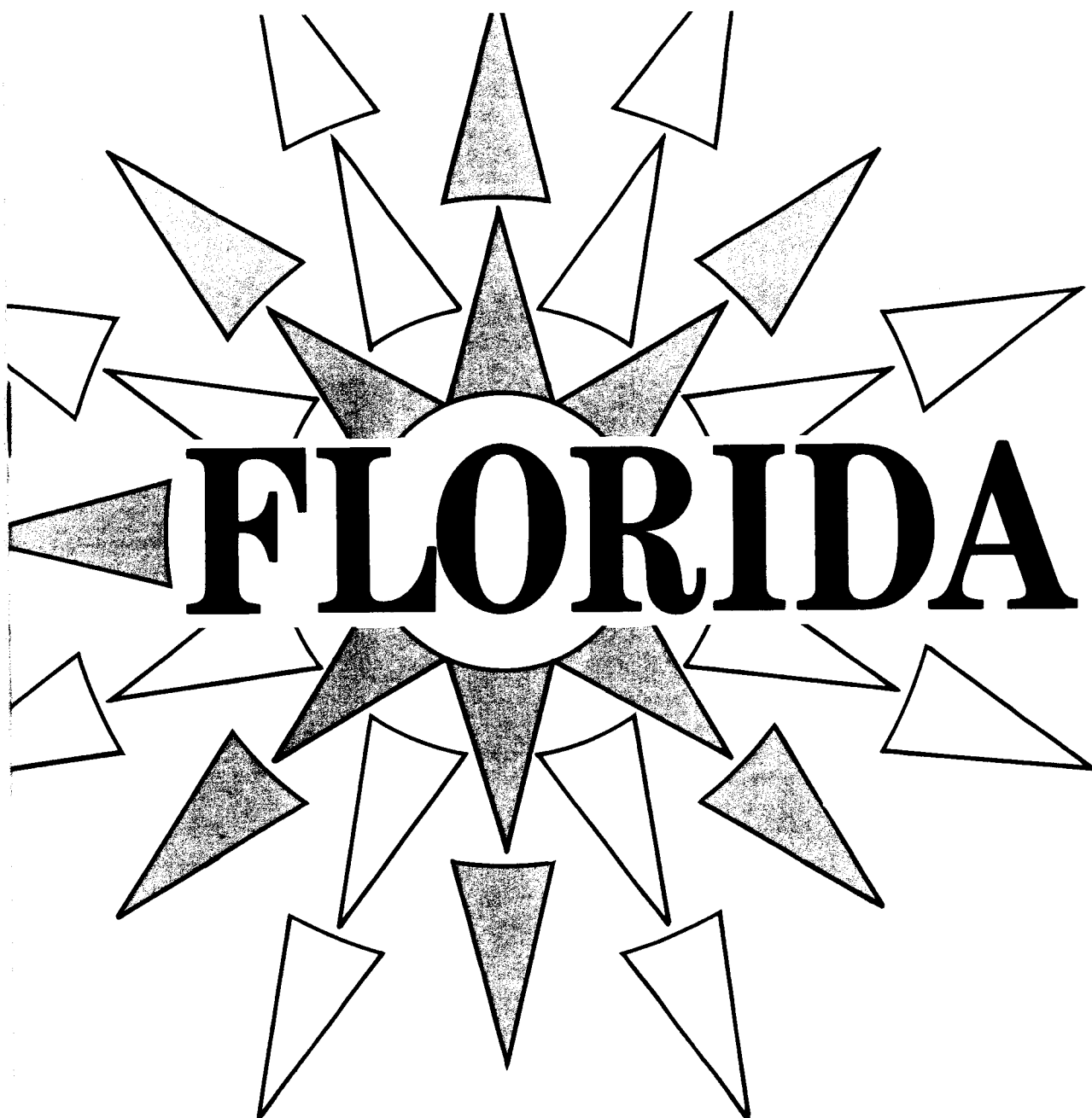
Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/eng_facpub

Scholar Commons Citation

Moxley, Joseph M., "Trends in Writing Instructions: A New Look at the Composing Process" (1985).
English Faculty Publications. 167.

https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/eng_facpub/167

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.



FLORIDA

ENGLISH JOURNAL

Volume 21, Number 2, Fall 1985

Florida Council of Teachers of English

Joseph M. Moxley

Trends in Writing Instruction: A New Look at the Composing Process

"We don't have ideas that we put into words; we don't think of what we want to say and then write. In composing, we make meanings . . . Thinking, perceiving, writing are all acts of composing: any composition course should learn the truth of this principle, that making meanings is the work of the active mind and is thus within their natural capacity.

Meanings don't just happen: we find and form them (Ann Berthoff, *The Making of Meaning*, p. 69).

One of the effects of Florida's Writing Enhancement Program is that we read and talk a great deal these days about "The Composing Process." And I am certainly in favor of stressing this approach. But I wonder if we all mean the same thing when we say we stress writing as a process in our writing classrooms. On one hand, for example, can we say we are in favor of writing as a process and then turn around and tell our students that they must outline before writing, that they should know what they are going to say and be able to say it in a thesis sentence before writing? Can we grade first drafts of writing assignments and turn around and stress that writing is revising? How many drafts must we pace our students through before we can feel confident that we have familiarized them with the various demands of composing.

I believe answers to the above questions can best be found by reviewing the rationale for the writing as a process approach. Thus I shall first explore the traditions from which the writing as a process approach emerged and thereby clarify its significance; thereafter, I shall evaluate a few ways writing process theory can be translated into classroom exercises.

In large part the emphasis on the composing process emerged from educator's dissatisfaction with the model approach. Truly, until the late 1960's and early 70's, teaching writing was synonymous with emphasizing variations of the four modes of discourse which Alexander Bain introduced in 1866 — that is, description, narration, exposition, and persuasion.¹

Joseph M. Moxley teaches English at the University of South Florida.

Most of us are familiar with the expectations of discourse modes. And in many cases our textbooks, after a preliminary chapter on writing as a process, are organized by these 19th century concepts. We understand that these modes were defined by analyzing completed products. Rhetoricians demonstrate that slight alterations in a writer's purpose and audience result in different clusters of features. For example, expressive writing is primarily sender orientated; the focus of the discourse is concern for the writer's feelings. Representative, narrative, and descriptive writings are primarily concerned with the information that is being transmitted. In contrast, persuasive writing focuses on the receiver of the message. Poetic writing is generally conceived as an artistic object which is primarily concerned with the language of the art object itself, rather than with persuasive and informative elements.²

Now, despite the obvious validity of these and other classification schemes, many researchers and writing instructors over the past two decades have questioned the practical, pedagogical value of teaching the expectations of discourse modes. Instead, these educators argue that we need to focus on invention. Presently, I would like to give a brief overview of the rationale for this trend away from the old rhetoric.

It is commonly pointed out, for example, that it's counter-productive to separate language into mutually exclusive categories: as Ann Berthoff says, "Narrative is the oldest, and sometimes the best, mode of description; it is impossible to define without 'compare-contrast'; description without the aim of definition is certainly tiresome and probably pointless."³

But an even more important problem inherent in stressing discourse modes has been postulated: many researchers and writing instructors argue that discourse modes are innate and the inevitable outcome of exploring ideas. Recent studies as well as historical accounts of writers at work support this notion: writers inevitably shape the form of their discourse while they compose; forming is an integral component of meaning making. These observations have led numerable scholars to argue that it's a great disservice to teach students that writing is filling pre-existing molds with a limited number of specific ideas.

In the following, for example, James Moffett points out that our fascination with classification schemes wrongfully ignores the holistic and organic nature of composing:

Atomizing a subject into analytical categories, inherent only in the subject, necessarily slights the internal processes of the student or language-user, who in any given instance of authentic discourse is employing all the substructures, working in all the categories at once.

By pedagogical slight of hand, an output activity is transformed into something to be read about.⁴

Clearly our current interest in the composing process evolved from our need to account for the mental processes which transpire when writers write. Rather than focus on completed works, researchers attempt to il-

illuminate invention. As a result, we now recognize that written products are completed in response to complex cognitive and affective operations.

Contemporary composing research was initiated by the pioneering work of D. Gordon Rohman in 1964⁵. Rohman divided the writing process into three linear stages: pre-writing, writing, and rewriting. For Rohman, pre-writing consisted of everything which occurs before writing; writing involved the actual physical activity of putting words on the page; and rewriting included the changes writers make when reviewing and polishing a draft.

Since Rohman many others have developed additional models of composing. Janet Emig followed him in 1971 and contributed significantly to our understanding of the composing process when she wrote *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*.⁶ By actually observing student writers when they wrote, Emig discovered that some activities — such as planning, hesitation and silence — are performed throughout the composing process. Noting the recursive nature of these composing activities led Emig to reject the linear nature of the Rohman model.

Numerous additional models have been formulated since Emig and Rohman. Generally these models each attempt to avoid construing composing as a linear process. Moreover, these models remind us that when we teach the writing process we are attempting to understand the way our minds form meaning. Teaching writing is inextricably tied to exploring the way we think when we compose.⁷

Presently, though, rather than reviewing additional perspectives of composing, I would like to discuss some ways our theories of composing can be translated into classroom activities.

GENERAL SUGGESTIONS

1) Talk to students about the composing process. Let them know that published writers continually revise. Let your students know that you too revise.

2) Make sure students are interested in their topic. Because the writing process approach demands that students attend to their writing over time (as opposed to always just writing one draft), it's important that they are involved in a stimulating topic.

3) Stress that writing is a process of making meaning. Let students know that all writers do not necessarily know exactly what they want to say before they write. In other words, the emphasis is on what you want to do rather than on what you want to end up with.

“The composing process, I think we can say, is empowered from beginning to end by the dialectic of question and answer. The way to bring this fact to life for our students is to encourage writing from the start — not topic sentences and thesis sentences of course, but lists, class names, questions, and tentative answers and new questions. This ‘pre-writing’ is writing.”⁸

4) We need to teach our students to ask questions of their material. We need to let them know that we talk to ourselves when we write. We talk about what we are writing, about what we have written, and about where we want to go. Thus, we need to tell our students that it is important to keep track of our thoughts as they occur in order to maintain a focus and develop our ideas.

5) Allow time for conception to take place. Promote ambiguity and prevent premature closure. Let students know that writing is a process of discovering information as much as one refining information. We need to teach students that false starts are an integral part of composing.

6) Ann Berthoff recommends that students keep their journals and class notes in double-entry form.⁹ Essentially double-entry form involves recording excerpts from reading material on the left side of a page and then responding to these excerpts on the right side. Berthoff believes using double entry journals encourages thinking by forcing students to respond to specific ideas. In fact, Berthoff extends this exercise to student papers when she has students write editorial remarks on the right side of their completed pages.

7) Encourage students to employ images and metaphors. Language and images have a generative power. We should encourage students to creatively play with language so they can learn the constructive power of language.

8) Writing does not happen all at once. Writers pause and hesitate; they reread their work. They wonder: "Where am I going? What am I doing?" We need to create an environment in which this can happen.

9) We need to encourage students to perceive high-level, global revising goals. As Nancy Sommers has pointed out, students are too word-bound. Rather than seeing revising as a process of changing whole sections and evaluating global issues — such as whether the purpose for the writing remains consistent — students consider revision to be checking spelling, fixing grammatical errors.¹⁰ This, of course, gets back to discussing composing concepts with our students. We won't be able to decipher their misconceptions of composing if we do not discuss what they do and what they think they should do when they write.

Finally, I would like to mention one of the greatest advantages involved in teaching writing as a process: when we familiarize students with their own composing processes and sensitize them to the ways they form abstractions, we are teaching them skills which are transferable to all writing tasks.

References

¹R. J. Connors, "The Rise and Fall of the Modes of Discourse," in *College Composition and Communication*, 32, 1981, 444-455.

²J. Britton, T. Burgess, N. Martin, A. McLeod, & H. Rosen, *The Development of Writing Abilities* (11-18) (London, England: Macmillan, 1975).

³Ann Berthoff, *The Making of Meaning: Metaphors, Models, & Maxims for Writing Teachers* (Upper Montclair, N.J.: Boynton Cook, 1981), p.11.

⁴James Moffett, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 13, p. 203.

⁵D. G. Rohman & A. O. Wiecke, *Pre-writing: The Construction and Application of Models for Concept Formation in Writing* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 1964).

⁶Janet Emig, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1975).

⁷For an excellent review of discourse models, I recommend either of the following two sources: D. Foster, *A Primer for Writing Teachers: Theories, Theorists, Issues, Problems* (Upper Montclair, N.J.: Boynton Cook, 1983). McAndrew and Williamson, "Research on Writing I: The Composing Process," pp. 60-68, in *Research & Teaching in Developmental Education*, 1984, pp. 60-68.

⁸Berthoff, p. 76.

⁹Berthoff, p. 45.

¹⁰N. Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," in *College Composition and Communication*, 31, 1980, pp. 378-388.

Call for Manuscripts

Spring, 1986

The heart of any secondary English curriculum is literature. Textbook anthologies serve a useful, but limited, purpose in providing literary works for class study, but they almost never include recently published long works — i.e., novels and full-length plays. Furthermore, it is often difficult to identify readily available titles which are current, accessible in terms of vocabulary, theme, and length, and significant as works of art. There are several sources of information on current Young Adult literature, but discussions of useful current novels and plays which are intended for adult audiences are hard to find. Therefore, as a resource for teachers searching for appropriate current titles, we will devote the Spring, 1986, issue to **Adult Long Works Published Since 1970.**

Articles in this issue will probably take a variety of approaches to the topic. Some articles may deal with single works, while others may be broad discussions of a national or regional literatures (e.g., "What's 'New' from Canada." "Current Southern Novels Worth Teaching," etc.). Writers should not assume widespread familiarity with the plots of the works they discuss, nor should they attempt technical critical analyses. Instead, writers should focus on how a given work meets the needs of students and teachers in middle school/junior high and/or high school. Discussions of teaching strategies may be helpful, but they should not be the primary focus of articles.

Submission deadline: April 1, 1986

Send submissions to:
Florida English Journal
 P. O. Box 837
 Lynn Haven, FL 32444