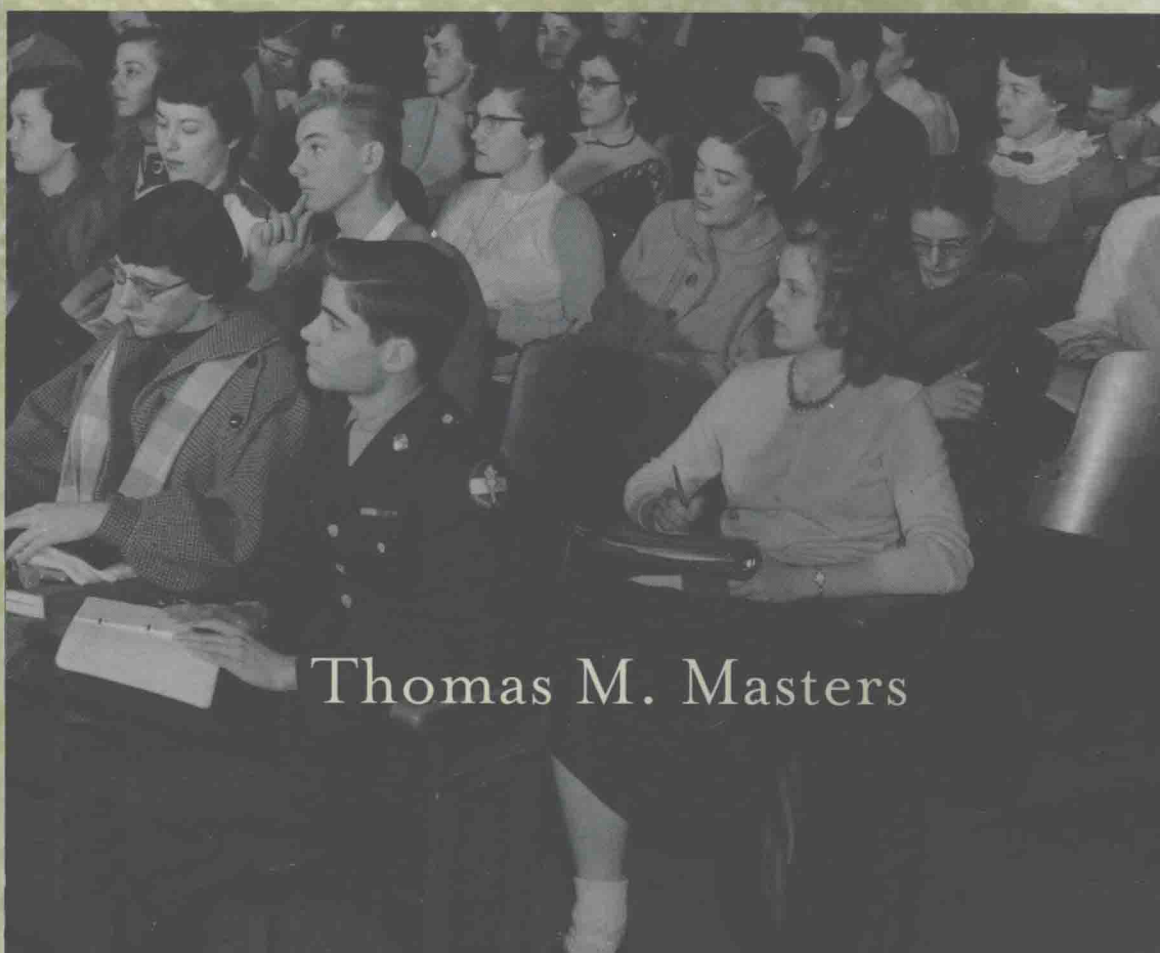
practicing writing

THE POSTWAR DISCOURSE OF FRESHMAN ENGLISH



Thomas M. Masters

practicing writing

THE POSTWAR DISCOURSE OF FRESHMAN ENGLISH

Thomas M. Masters

With a Foreword by Janice M. Lauer

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH PRESS

Published by the University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, Pa., 15260

Manufactured in the United States of America
Printed on acid-free paper
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Masters, Thomas M.
Practicing writing : the postwar discourse of freshman English / Thomas M. Masters ; with a foreword by Janice M. Lauer.
p. cm. — (Pittsburgh series in composition, literacy, and culture)
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0-8229-4236-4 (acid-free paper)
1. English language—Rhetoric—Study and teaching—United States—History—20th century. 2. Report writing—Study and teaching (Higher)—United States—History—20th century. 3. World War, 1939–1945—United States—Influence. I. Title. II. Series.
PE1405.U6M375 2004
808'.042'0711073—dc22

2004013589

Foreword

IN THE LAST DECADE, the field of Rhetoric and Composition has been developing a significant body of literature on composition instruction in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. Thomas Masters's *Practicing Writing* offers us an important addition to that scholarship. When I read his text about freshman English in the postwar period from 1947 to the late-1950s, I encountered a narrative I had lived through when beginning to teach in the 1950s. His account is so astute that I vividly recalled the circumstances that prompted a number of us to work so hard in the 1960s for a disciplinary field that would equip us to challenge the "current-traditional paradigm."

One of Masters's important contributions to this scenario is an interpretive frame of six presumptions of freshman English, which he uses as lenses through which to analyze his archival data. These six beliefs, however, do not characterize just the postwar period, but still haunt many of our classrooms today. His first presumption, *instrumentality* or service, identifies freshman English's ambitious goals: providing a capsule liberal education, advancing the dominant political ideology, fostering democracy, teaching reading to enable students to discern important ideas in their other subjects, producing good citizens though academic literacy, and teaching writing to help students express the content they have learned. *Priority* or marginality names an emphasis on craftsmanship, requiring a background in ideas and tools (grammar, style, organization, and development). *Efficiency* describes a constant fine-tuning of the curriculum, modifying teaching strategies but never substantially effecting change. *Individuality* points to an emphasis on self-expression, a presumption in conflict with a goal of conformity to certain social and political roles. *Transmission* characterizes the belief that powers and qualities are transmitted to students "by unseen yet effective means"; that values and skills are *absorbed* through students' encounters with selected texts. The last presumption, *correspondence,* identifies the belief that reading and writing should model the text as an "organic construct

of interdependent meaning." Thus, *Practicing Writing* not only educates but holds up a mirror for us.

Masters's text also provides an impressive example of multimodality, as it draws on the historical work of other scholars like Crowley, Berlin, Connors, and Brereton and on theories such as Michel Foucault's notions of power and discursive practices, and interlaces them with empirical research. In response to critics' calls for more extensive archival work in this area, Masters gives a rich account of three composition programs: Northwestern University, Wheaton College, and the University of Illinois (Chicago and Urbana). He bases his narrative on multiple sources: reports and records of departments and committees, faculty bulletins and catalogs, student publications, personal papers of faculty members (tests, teaching notes, student papers, articles, and book reviews), interviews with forty people, textbooks, and journal articles. In these three different kinds of institutions, Masters finds a number of similar features in their freshman English programs. For example, their first priority was to instill in students a code of correctness and style, and all of these programs emphasized reading and discussion of canonical literature. They felt obliged to develop students' ability to compose acceptable prose, and the purpose of assignments was to enable students to prove they had mastered a type of discourse like description or exposition, with content making little difference. Each program engaged in regular modifications to the curriculum but was resistant to change.

These features also mark many programs today. What Masters didn't find in these programs was attention to such matters as invention, readers and discourse communities, multiple drafts, revision, or peer collaboration—interests of scholars later in the emerging field of Rhetoric and Composition. Reading this account provides us with a perspective on our continuing struggles to extricate ourselves from these presumptions and practices.

Masters uses details from the archives of three institutions to create a powerful mosaic that illustrates these presumptions. His in-depth account is lucid, intelligent, and also cautionary. As he says in the conclusion, freshman English of this period is a phenomenon with a "durable ideological apparatus," both tenacious and elastic—stretching to the present or appearing in new guises.

JANICE M. LAUER
Reece McGee Distinguished Professor of English
Purdue University

Preface

ANYONE WHO HAS TAKEN, taught, or administered a 100-level college course should find value in *Practicing Writing*. I suspect that anyone interested in the intellectual, cultural, and social development of the United States after World War II would also find it interesting. I have written this study, however, with two particular audiences in mind: academics from any field who are interested in literacy issues; and English scholars and practitioners, especially in the discipline of Composition.

Many presume that the perennial problem of students' "illiteracy" has a simple, straightforward solution. Mike Rose calls this "the myth of transiency"—"the belief . . . in the American university that if we can just do *x* or *y*, the problem will be solved—in five years, ten years, or a generation—and higher education will be able to return to its real work" ("Language of Exclusion" 355). David Russell connects Rose's myth with the seductive, misguided expectation that the complex problems of academic literacy can be solved via simple reforms: "New forms of remediation continually hold out the promise that, with enough organization and cooperation, drill and reinforcement, students can be trained to write once and for all; that Americans will again possess this elementary skill, this component of general education, and teachers can get on with their 'real' work: teaching specific information" (*Writing in the Academic Disciplines* 165). *Practicing Writing* shows how for a decade the faculties at Northwestern University, Wheaton College, and the University of Illinois (Urbana and Chicago) tried to do *x*, *y*, *z*, and beyond, but the "problem" of freshman English resisted a solution. I hope that the anecdotes, examples, facts, and discussion of this study will maintain the interest of those both inside and outside English departments, and will show how the history of freshman English is important not only to those who teach it, but to everyone who has a stake in students' literacy.

David Russell explains why it is important that academics outside of Composition understand its history: "In the end, a narrow focus on the history of composition courses may actually reinforce the myth of

transience, since it may credit freshman English with a larger or more cohesive effect than it has ever had. . . . Simply reforming freshman English (again) will not adequately address the deeper issues of writing acquisition: the nature of academic writing, its relation to disciplinary formation and perpetuation, and its relation to students' access to professional communities" (32). *Practicing Writing* should help anyone who cares about postsecondary education appreciate the complexity and the challenge of something seemingly as simple as offering or, harder yet, reforming a course that is supposed to teach undergraduates how to write.

A Note on the Sources of This Study

The principal sources for this study have come from the archives at Northwestern University, Wheaton College, the University of Illinois (Urbana), and the Special Collections of the University of Illinois at Chicago. At Northwestern I examined records from the office of the dean of liberal arts; the English department; catalogs; the personal papers of faculty members who had taught or administered freshman English, including Fred Faverty, Wallace Douglas, Jean Hagstrum, Ernest Samuels, and Harrison Hayford; as well as copies of an intramural newsletter concerning the course, "The English 'A' Analyst." The archives at Wheaton contain a file of minutes from the Department of English from 1949 to 1964, both committee meetings and departmental meetings. I also examined the personal papers of Clyde Kilby and Peter Veltman, as well as copies of student publications, student-written history research papers, catalogs, a faculty-prepared style book, the minutes of faculty meetings, and copies of the faculty bulletin. The Urbana archives include catalogs, student publications, the personal files of Charles Roberts, and the records of the University Senate Committee on Student English. At the University of Illinois at Chicago I examined catalogs, records of the Humanities department, the chancellor's files, copies of student publications, and the personal papers of Falk S. Johnson, who directed the Division of Rhetoric from 1949 to 1966. I also found departmental and personal records in the English department offices in Urbana and in Chicago.

My research included telephone and personal interviews and correspondence with approximately forty persons who had taught or adminis-

tered freshman English in these four programs. The teachers included Ernest Samuels, Jean Hagstrum, Wallace Douglas, and Harrison Hayford at Northwestern; Robert Warburton, Peter Veltman, and Paul Bechtel at Wheaton; Lynn Altenbernd and George Hendricks at Urbana; and Marion Kerwick, Chadwick Hansen, Mary Sidney, Arthur Greenwald, Bernard Kogan, and Falk Johnson at Chicago.

I wish to acknowledge the help of the archivists, without whom this study would have been impossible. These include Patrick Quinn at Northwestern; Thad Voss, David Malone, and David Osielski at Wheaton; William J. Maher and Ellen Swain at Urbana; Carolyn Adams at the Champaign County Historical Archives; and Alan Kovac, Douglas Bicknese, and Mary Diaz at Chicago. Others who have been helpful in critiquing this study during the many stages of its long, slow birth have been Patrick McGann, Rance Conley, Carol Severino, David Jolliffe, Peter Hales, William Covino, David Russell, Don Mitchell, Dennis Baron, Janice Lauer, Jean Ferguson Carr, David Bartholomae, and the anonymous reviewers from the University of Pittsburgh Press. I would like to thank Christina Acosta for her editorial help, Anne Masters for her research assistance, and my wife, Kathleen Lynch Masters, for her honest feedback and encouragement. Finally, I owe a special debt to David Spurr, who helped me conceive the plan of this study and guided me through its earliest drafts.

Contents

Foreword by Janice M. Lauer ix

Preface xi

Introduction 1

Part One—The Discourse of Freshman English

CHAPTER 1: Instrumentality 29

CHAPTER 2: Priority 50

CHAPTER 3: Efficiency 62

CHAPTER 4: Individuality 73

CHAPTER 5: Transmission 100

CHAPTER 6: Correspondence 117

Part Two—The Practice of Freshman English

CHAPTER 7: The Course 131

CHAPTER 8: The Student 164

CHAPTER 9: The Teacher 183

Conclusion 208

Notes 221

Works Cited 235

Index 247

Introduction

> People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does.
>
> MICHEL FOUCAULT

IN THE LAST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS, NO ACADEMIC SUBJECT HAS received as much scrutiny as rhetoric and composition. John Brereton claims that "historians of composition have created the single most impressive body of knowledge about any discipline in higher education" (*Origins* xiv). Anyone with a serious interest in composition as a discipline has come to understand the principal features of its history and theory: origins of present practices in the late nineteenth century; the gulf between the sweeping scope of classical rhetoric and the marginal space that writing instruction has occupied in the academy; the subjugation of a "low" composition to a "high" literature within English departments, where writing instruction usually resides; the ways in which the pedagogies and actions and products of teachers and students alike can be interrogated via all of the contemporary schools of criticism. Without doubt, those who study the discipline as well as those who practice it know far more about what they do, and why they do what they do, than I did, for example, when I began teaching English in 1968.

Still, as I read those studies, from Albert R. Kitzhaber's *Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850–1900* to the most recent articles in *Pre/Text, Rhetoric Review, College English,* or *College Composition and Communication,* I sense a difference between many scholarly conclusions about writing instruction and my experience as a teacher. Brereton also notes a limitation in the familiar histories. "Most historians have regarded rhetoric as the ideal, composition as a fall from grace, and the last two decades as the beginnings of a great recovery" (*Origins* xiii). He points out that because of their "genuine interest in the philosophical underpinnings of nineteenth-century rhetoric," and because theory, as represented in books and articles, is more accessible for study, some historians have emphasized philosophy, theory, and ideology at the expense of actual classroom practices (xii).[1] In their attempt to document the history of writing instruction in American higher education, scholars have tended to study the most accessible kinds of evidence—textbooks, monographs by acknowledged leaders and experts in the field, journal articles, descriptions of writing programs, syllabi, biographies of notable teachers, administrators, and theoreticians.[2]

A specific example from one of the standard histories of rhetoric and composition illustrates how a historian has described the theoretical framework for classroom practices without examining adequately the practices themselves. In *Rhetoric and Reality,* James Berlin proposes to examine both the theoretical as well as the practical. "In examining the variety of rhetorics that have appeared in the English departments of American colleges in the twentieth century, I will . . . be concerned with the rhetorical theories that have appeared, as well as with the epistemological and ideological elements to which they are related. But I want also to examine the concrete classroom practices to which these theories have led" (5). Berlin aims to proceed from theory, philosophy, and ideology to the experience of teachers and students. Once he had established a theoretical basis, however, what evidence of "concrete classroom practices" did Berlin actually investigate?

In "The Communications Emphasis: 1940–1960," the fifth chapter of his study, Berlin analyzes rhetoric courses during the postwar era. In discussing how communications courses included concepts taken from general semantics, Berlin cites programs at the University of Iowa and the University of Denver as examples of a conservative and a liberal ap-

proach. He found evidence of events at Iowa in a collection of essays edited by Earl James McGrath, *Communication in General Education,* dated 1946. Berlin selected evidence of classroom practices in the Denver course from a *College English* article, also from 1946, by faculty members Levette Davidson and Frederick Sorenson. Having presented the content and pedagogy of the courses as explained in these two sources, Berlin summarizes the limited penetration of communications courses into university curricula in a parenthetical comment: "At most schools, current-traditional rhetoric continued to be the central approach of composition instruction" (*Rhetoric and Reality* 104). Although Berlin aims to examine "concrete classroom practices," he relies solely on one book and one article for information regarding what was happening in the classrooms at Iowa and Denver and then lumps all of the particular experiences that happened elsewhere under one general title: "current-traditional."[3] Brereton points out the hazard of reducing the daily experience of thousands of teachers and students to a convenient label. "Interpreting the history of composition as a loss and then a revival of rhetoric has given a partial view, a view that explicitly devalues almost a century of teaching and learning. And an unwieldy name like current-traditional, one that almost scorns precision, is about on a par with 'Dark Ages' as a satisfactory investigative or taxonomic tool" (*Origins* xiii).[4]

Several other commentators have observed the lack of attention to everyday classroom experience in the histories of our discipline. As early as 1982, in "Is There a Text in This Class?" Susan Miller notes that most histories of the discipline might best be categorized as histories of what had been published, rather than of what had happened in the classroom. In 1987 Stephen North writes, "There is little evidence as yet to suggest that Composition's Historians have tried other avenues: private collections, small town or school libraries, attics and garages; or the people themselves, teachers and students, either for written or oral material" (74). Brereton notes in his 1995 study, "In searching for the ideologies, historians sometimes ignored the actuality of the experience of students and teachers, curriculum planners and administrators. Indeed, we rarely looked at the writing itself" (xiv). In his 1994 article, "Composing English Studies," Richard E. Miller critiques the approaches of Gerald Graff (*Professing Literature*) and Evan Watkins (*Work Time*), both of whom he claims neglect the importance of the material conditions of teaching. Miller

calls for an approach to institutional history focused more directly on "the solicitation and treatment of student writing" (174). He cites Edward Said's injunction in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* that critical work begin "with concrete instances drawn from everyday reality that lie outside or just beyond the interpretive area necessarily designated in advance and thereafter inscribed by every theory" (242). Miller suggests:

> Investigating . . . the actual work of reading and writing students are required to do within a given educational system, the textbooks produced by educators alongside their reforms, personal accounts of the educators' teaching practices, and moments when educators quote student writing in their texts—this kind of institutional history would help to rescue the student from theoretical oblivion, make possible a critique of departmental and curricular reform proposals on pedagogical grounds, and provide a record of the range of local solutions to the problems all English departments face in teaching students how to read and write in the academy ("Composing English Studies" 177).

The kind of history North, Brereton, and Richard Miller call for would look quite different from the kind of work historians have offered previously. The established histories usually begin with an exposition of the generally accepted statements of theory at a given time, then proceed with illustration via specific examples from program descriptions, textbooks, and articles. A practice-based history would begin with a detailed examination of the particulars of writing and its instruction at a given moment in history and proceed to a description of the presumptions that constitute the discursive practice in which those particulars are bound up.

Practicing Writing provides an example of how to undertake such a project. In *As If Learning Mattered,* Richard Miller comments on the methodology that a practice-based historian needs to follow: "One always studies what one can, shaping a project in response to what can be found, what can be reasonably argued" (45). Even if I can study only "what one can," I have chosen a particular academic discourse, a particular time in history during which it was operating, and the archives

of four particular schools. The first step in explaining this study is to clarify those crucial choices.

I have chosen a historical period with clearly defined boundaries and far enough in the past that I could look at the material with some perspective, yet recent enough that I might still find the kinds of evidence that seem to have been neglected in previous histories. Like Kitzhaber, Douglas, Crowley, Connors, Berlin, and many others, I have chosen to look at the most common site of writing instruction in American colleges and universities—freshman English.

While reading *Rhetoric and Reality,* I understood that the post–World War II era in the United States might provide suitable boundaries and content. It has a clear beginning and end, commencing with the returning wave of veterans in 1947 and concluding with the educational reforms in the late 1950s, after the launch of Sputnik. It is a placid period of the "return to normalcy" between the economic and political turmoil of a great world war and the worldwide social revolution of the 1960s. As Berlin points out, however, "Economic, political, and social developments between 1940 and 1960 had placed in motion a current of ideas that would profoundly affect the teaching of writing" (119). Some of these developments include the rise and fall of the general education approach, including general semantics and structural linguistics; the calling into question of traditional practices including the teaching of prescriptive grammar; the revival of classical rhetoric; the establishment of a professional organization for teachers of composition; the sudden increase in the sizes and numbers of college campuses that began with the returning veterans and continued with children of the baby boom; the introduction of what Richard Lloyd-Jones, in his biography of Richard Braddock, has called "mass education" based on the American industrial model of economies of scale (Brereton, *Traditions* 157).[5]

Selecting a particular course and a particular era is a relatively straightforward act compared with choosing the materials to examine. John Brereton notes in *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875–1925* that archival evidence abounds. "University archives have large quantities of student essays, course syllabi, lecture notes, and teaching materials" (xv). The question, however, remains "How to choose?" In a letter, David Russell told me, "I have tried to look at colleges which might be 'typical,' but the more schools I look at the harder that becomes."

Wallace Douglas wrote to me, "When I first contemplated the history of the teaching of composition and realized the dimensions of the task, I simply retreated. . . . Is there any principle of selection to organize the search? I couldn't think of any, nor can I now." With due respect to such cautions, I offer this explanation of how I selected archives for this study.

James Berlin has identified a time and place in which the "supremacy of eighteenth-century rhetoric" gave way to "a commitment to serving all the citizens of society—not just an aristocratic elite" (*Rhetoric and Reality* 58). The time was just after the Civil War, and the place was the American West. The Morrill Act of 1862, according to Robert Connors, "brought a large new population of students to American colleges and helped to found the major state universities, which would become important sites for composition teaching over the next five decades" (*Composition-Rhetoric* 9). David Russell concurs, noting that "in the decade following the Civil War, as the economy expanded rapidly in the North and West, colleges responded to the utilitarian chorus and began the dramatic changes that would create the modern university and define its role in the new rationalized, urban-industrial society of modern America" (*Writing in Academic Disciplines* 46).

My own background suggested looking in the Midwest for "particulars of writing and its instruction." The self-effacing, dutiful, hard-working, and productive nature of middle America reflects the qualities I associate with freshman English. In 1965 just after the period *Practicing Writing* explores, I took English 100 G, Rhetoric and Composition, at Lewis College (now Lewis University) in Lockport, an old industrial town on the Illinois and Michigan canal thirty-five miles southwest of Chicago. My twenty-four classmates and I were the sons of tradespeople, clerks, bookkeepers, salesworkers, mechanics, teamsters, and small business owners. The professor, Jeff Stiker, was gruff, taciturn, acerbic, and insightful. He was a scholar of eighteenth-century British literature, but never intimated that he considered freshman English less significant than other courses in the department. He never articulated any particular critical vision of the subject, nor did he claim that success in his class would bring us any greater benefit than avoiding academic probation. He taught from the *Harbrace College Handbook,* and from Maurice B. McNamee's *Reading for Understanding,* which provided the springboard for

discussions and essays on the purpose of a college education, the order of nature, heroism, and the nature of logic and propaganda. I have no graded papers from that course, as Stiker recollected them before he would give us our final exam. When we asked him why he wanted them back, he commented with a wry smirk, "All the composition teachers gather them up. We make a big bonfire and dance around it to celebrate the end of the semester."[6] I suspected that reading the records and papers of people like Jeff Stiker would reveal an unembellished, unself-conscious view of this most practical of academic experiences.

After contacting English departments and college and university libraries throughout the region, a process much like panning for gold, I hit pay dirt in four places—the University of Illinois, both its original campus in Urbana as well as the one in Chicago; Wheaton College, in Wheaton, Illinois; and Northwestern University, in Evanston, Illinois. Each school had had meticulous people in its English department; their archivists had taken the initiative to gather and organize as much material as they could persuade their colleagues to deposit; and each possessed a distinct institutional identity. Although I had no way to predict the connections I would find among the four, the more I dug through the rich veins of "ore"—departmental minutes, committee records, annual reports, intramural publications, published and unpublished articles, and personal papers—the more I found common threads in the histories of these very different schools and in the experiences of the students and teachers of freshman English.

THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS is a prototypical midwestern public university. From the west facade of Davenport Hall, the original agriculture building, the words of founder Jonathan Baldwin Turner still remind students of his original vision for the school: "Industrial education prepares the way for a millennium of labor." Turner, much like his counterpart at Wheaton, Jonathan Blanchard, had come from the East with strong views about social inequality. He studied the classics at Yale until 1827, when he set out for the frontier with the notion of bringing intellectual and social enlightenment to the wilderness. In 1833 Turner established Illinois College at Jacksonville. Turner remained

there for fifteen years, until the town's proslavery forces demanded his resignation due to his fiery abolitionism ("Tradition at the University of Illinois" 3–4).

For Turner, "industrial" did not signify the merely mechanical, but suggested "a new sort of technological education which would assert the dignity and importance of the practical sciences—engineering and agriculture—that elite universities had traditionally looked down upon" ("Tradition at the University of Illinois" 4). His "Illinois Industrial Association" argued for publicly funded universities, open to the "industrial classes," not just the children of the privileged. The Association persuaded Senator Justin Morrill of Vermont to introduce the Morrill Land Grant College Act, which Lincoln signed in 1863. Turner's vision was realized in 1867 when Illinois Industrial University was established in Urbana.

The experience of Charles H. Shamel, who began his studies there in 1886, illustrates the nature of education at Illinois Industrial:

> [On] . . . Monday Shamel was successfully examined in algebra, philosophy, physiology, botany, and rhetoric. On Thursday, having paid the required fee of $22.50 and made an $8 deposit for laboratory expense, he began work in German, chemistry, geometry, and trigonometry. . . . Friday evening brought his first meeting of the Philomathean Literary Society. Together with required chapel and military drill, these experiences introduced Charles Shamel to the heart of American higher learning as it was practiced in a land grant university toward the end of the nineteenth century. (Johnson and Johanningmeier 3)

In 1885 the university changed its name from Illinois Industrial University, "which many interpreted to mean either a reformatory or a charitable institution in which compulsory manual labor figured prominently" (Solberg 3), to the University of Illinois.

In 1894 the university separated its rhetoric offerings into two departments: rhetoric, and oratory and oral rhetoric. The first head of the rhetoric department, Thomas Arkle Clark, followed a career trajectory that presages those of many other men profiled in *Practicing Writing*. He studied at the University of Chicago and at Harvard, but never completed a degree beyond the bachelor's in literature he had earned at the Uni-