

BRENDA SPATT

Writing from Sources

WRITING FROM SOURCES

Brenda Spatt

*Herbert H. Lehman College
of the City of New York*

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To Instructors

The design of this book was developed in freshman composition courses at several colleges in the New York City area—Borough of Manhattan Community College, Montclair State College, the State University of New York at Purchase, and Herbert H. Lehman College—over a period of eleven years. Most of the students who tested these materials had completed (or been exempted from) a first term of freshman composition. Neither advanced nor remedial, they resembled the majority of freshmen today. They were intelligent, but more often than not, they had been poorly prepared for college work, were uncomfortable expressing themselves in writing, and lacked the skills to work with the disparate sources and abstract ideas encountered in college reading. Inexperienced in analysis and synthesis, such students often feel impotent and frustrated when confronted by the necessity to write term papers, whether in English courses or in other disciplines. The object of *Writing from Sources* is to provide students with the tools to do successful academic writing and thus to raise the standard of writing in all college courses.

Writing an essay based on sources depends on a complex group of skills. In most college courses, students are less often asked to do independent thinking than they are required to work with assigned sources—textbooks, lecture notes, and outside readings. The same is true of the professional writing that will be part of their future careers; they may be asked to initiate and develop original ideas, but far more often they will need to use skills of analysis and synthesis to explain, evaluate, and integrate opinions and facts taken from other sources. In eleven years of teaching composition, I have rarely encountered a student who could—at the beginning of the term—pinpoint and paraphrase the key ideas of an essay, evaluate a group of readings, or undertake the extended synthesis necessary for presenting research. Rather, the freshman research essay typically contains “anthologies” of quotations strung to-

gether with little indication of their relationship. Few students know how to determine where the author's thought leaves off and their own interpretation begins or how to combine disparate statements culled from several authors in a single paragraph.

Traditional methods of structuring the composition course have not been effective in teaching these skills. In the typical freshman course, as it was conceived when I was in college and as it is still taught today, the research essay is customarily regarded as a separate assignment, almost as an afterthought, to be saved for the end of the term. The skills required for working with source materials rarely get integrated into the first part of the course, which is often reserved for an exploration of rhetorical modes, with a single reading (or at most a comparison of two essays) serving as the basis of the usual assignment. At the end of the term, when the research essay is suddenly introduced, students find the switch to multiple sources frightening, an unfair test of abilities that they have not been given the opportunity or the means to develop. Moreover, when the research essay is at last assigned, what is generally emphasized is library research. The locating of sources, however, is largely a mechanical process, unlikely in itself to teach students much about the skills connected with thinking or writing about what they have read. It is pointless to teach students how to compile an impressive bibliography if, when the time comes to select materials and integrate them into a coherent essay, they simply produce the familiar string of end-to-end quotations.

Writing from Sources is based on the belief that the last few weeks of the term is not the time to begin showing students how to understand, collate, and present the fruits of their research. To make the research essay the natural conclusion to the composition course, the students' work should be structured around sources throughout the term, with the synthesis of ideas and evidence the paramount objective. This text assumes that students learn best if skills are presented gradually, in lessons and assignments of progressive difficulty. Thus, comprehension and organizational skills are broken into isolated units and presented in discrete stages. In this sequential approach, each technique is first considered as an end in itself, to be explained, demonstrated, and practiced in isolation, like the skills necessary for mastering a sport. For example, quotation is thoroughly taught and applied before the student learns about paraphrase. Simple operations get practiced again and again so that they have become automatic before the student goes on to attempt more complex variations.

The text begins with a review of the writing process (Part I) emphasizing the student's most immediate and accessible source—his or her own ideas and experiences. Using oneself as the source enables the student to gain practice in imposing order over a mass of accumulated ideas without having to cope with the difficulties of understanding and assimilating information taken from written sources.

In Part II (Chapters 2 and 3) students are introduced to all the skills essential to the presentation of written source materials—basic comprehension, including annotation, outlining a source’s structure, and summarizing; quotation; and paraphrase. After mastering the objective summary of a single source, students learn to incorporate quotation and paraphrase in their summaries.

In the first half of Part III students begin to combine the personal approach of Part I with the objective skills of Part II: Chapter 4 integrates source interpretation, analysis, and response in an essay composed according to the process steps detailed in Chapter 1. Chapter 5 introduces the synthesis of several sources in an essay controlled by the student’s own thesis and voice. This chapter on the multiple-source essay is followed by a large number of supplementary assignments and a wide variety of materials for synthesis taken from interviews, brief written statements by students, newspapers, and oral history. Since synthesis is the single most difficult skill in academic writing, the object here is to make sure that the student selects compatible source materials and presents them understandably and accurately.

Part IV consolidates all the individual skills presented in earlier chapters as students turn to the research essay. Both the writing process and the handling of sources have by now become so familiar that students can focus on the evaluation and selection of sources gathered through research and, finally, on the documentation of these sources and on other technical matters.

Because of its scope, *Writing from Sources* is necessarily a text, an exercise book, and a reader. Twenty-two assignments and sixty-five exercises—more, obviously, than any single class could complete—offer the instructor the latitude to reinforce the text as the needs of a class or of particular students dictate. Some hundred and fifty pages of reprinted material—from authors as diverse as Francis Bacon, Simone de Beauvoir, Samuel Butler, Frances FitzGerald, Sigmund Freud, Ernest Hemingway, John Holt, Christopher Lasch, Niccolo Machiavelli, Bronislaw Malinowski, Margaret Mead, A. S. Neill, Bertrand Russell, Lewis Thomas, and E. Bright Wilson—make supplements and handouts unnecessary.

Writing from Sources is also a research-essay handbook. Chapter 10 presents MLA standards of documentation and bibliography, and Chapter 11 includes five student research essays—two on Ernest Hemingway and three on the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. The sample essays illustrate a range of quality and effort and help students to appreciate the relative merits and shortcomings of different approaches to the same topic and to recognize achievable excellence. Appendix A provides a bibliography of useful encyclopedias, indexes, and abstracts for a variety of subjects, and Appendix B lists the basic forms for notes and bibliography entries.

As I suggested at the beginning, *Writing from Sources* has benefited

from the work of many students in several colleges over more than a decade. I hope that the book will now prove helpful to many new students. It is to all the students whose efforts helped shape the book that I am most deeply indebted.

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To Students

Every day, as you talk, write, and work, you use sources. Most of the knowledge and many of the ideas that you want or need to express to others originate outside yourself. You have learned from your formal schooling and, even more, from observing the world around you, from reading, from watching television and movies, and from a multitude of other experiences. Most of the time, your use of what you have learned from sources is casual, almost automatic. You do not consciously think about where you got the information; you simply go about your activities, communicating with others and making decisions on the basis of your acquired knowledge.

In college, however, using sources becomes more concentrated and deliberate. Each course bombards you with countless new facts and ideas, coming from many places and all competing for your attention. Your success depends on how well you can develop certain skills—understanding what you read and hear in your courses, distinguishing the more important from the less important, relating new facts or ideas to what you already have learned so that you can draw conclusions, and, especially, communicating your findings to others. This book is intended to help you build all of those skills, with particular emphasis on the last.

Most college writing is both informative and interpretive; that is, it contains in varying proportions both material you take from sources and ideas that are your own. Depending on the individual course and assignment, a college paper may emphasize your own conclusions supported by knowledge you have gathered or (more likely) it may emphasize the gathered knowledge, showing that you have mastered a certain body of information. In any case it will contain something of others and something of you. Therefore, if twenty students are all assigned the same topic, the resulting twenty papers will all be somewhat different.

The constant requirement to learn new material, to respond to it, and to present it to others is the essence of the academic experience. Instructors do assign papers to test your knowledge, but that is not the most important reason. The main purpose of college writing assignments is to help you consolidate what you have learned and to expand your

capacity for constructive thinking and clear communication—for making sense of things and conveying that sense to others. But these are not merely academic skills; there are few careers in which success does not depend directly on them. You will listen to the opinions of your boss, your colleagues, and your customers; or read the case histories of your clients or patients; or study the marketing reports of your salespeople or the product specifications of your suppliers; or perhaps even analyze the papers of your students! Whatever your job, the decisions that you make and the actions that you take will depend on your ability to understand and evaluate what your sources are saying (no matter whether orally or in writing), to discern any important pattern or theme, and to form conclusions. As you build on other people's ideas, you certainly will be expected to remember which facts and opinions came from which source and to give appropriate credit. Chances are that you will also be expected to be capable of drafting the memo, the letter, the report, the case history which will summarize your data and present and support your conclusions.

To help you see the connection between college and professional writing, here are some typical essay topics for various college courses, each followed by a parallel writing assignment that you might have to do on the job. Notice that all of the pairs of assignments call for much the same skills: the writer must consult a variety of sources, present what he or she has learned from those sources, and interpret that knowledge in the light of experience.

Assignment

Sources

For a political science course, you choose a law presently being debated in Congress or the state legislature, and argue for its passage.

debates
Congressional
Record
editorials
periodical articles
your own opinions

As a lobbyist, consumer advocate, or public relations expert, you prepare a pamphlet to arouse public interest in your agency's program.

For a health sciences course, you summarize present knowledge about the appropriate circumstances for prescribing tranquilizers and suggest some safeguards for their use.

books
journals
government reports
pharmaceutical
industry reports

As a member of a medical research team, you draft a report summarizing present knowledge about a specific medication and suggesting likely directions for your team's research.

For a psychology course, you analyze the positive and negative effects of peer group pressure.

textbooks
journals
case studies
interviews
personal experience

As a social worker attached to a halfway house for adolescents, you write a case history of three boys, determining whether they are to be sent to separate homes or kept in the same facility.

For a business management course, you decide which department or service of your college would be the likeliest candidate for elimination if the college budget were cut by 3 percent next year; you defend your choice.

ledgers
interviews
newspapers
journals

As an assistant to a management consultant, you draft a memo recommending measures to save a manufacturing company which is in severe financial trouble.

For a sociology course, you compare reactions to unemployment in 1980 with reactions in 1930.

newspapers
magazines
books
interviews

As a staff member in the social services agency of a small city, you prepare a report on the social consequences that would result from the closing of a major factory.

For a physical education course, you classify the ways in which a team can react to a losing streak and recommend some ways in which coaches can maintain team morale.

textbooks
articles
observation and
personal
experience

As a member of a special committee of physical-education teachers for your area, you help plan an action paper that will improve your district's performance in interscholastic sports.

For an anthropology course, you contrast the system of punishment used by a tribe that you have studied with the penal code used in your home or college town.

textbooks
lectures
articles
observation and
personal
experience

As assistant to the head of the local correction agency, you prepare a report comparing the success of eight minimum-security prisons around the country.