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FORM AND SURPRISE IN COMPOSITION

Writing and Thinking Across the Curriculum

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Preface

In composing *Form and Surprise in Composition: Writing and Thinking Across the Curriculum*, we have had three aims. First, we wanted *Form and Surprise* to be a book about writing as process, informed throughout by the assumption that through language humans make meaning, just as through drafting and revising writers come to discover what they know. Second, we wanted our text to help students develop generic thinking skills essential for success in all disciplines: the ability to ask questions and pose problems, to conduct dialectic inquiry, to generate ideas, to create hierarchical structures of thought, and to argue logically and humanely. Finally, that *Form and Surprise* serve as an introductory freshman composition text particularly suited for institutions emphasizing writing-across-the-curriculum.

WRITING-ACROSS-THE-CURRICULUM

To appreciate the design of our text, readers should know something about our vision of writing-across-the-curriculum. In such a program, we believe, instructors across campus would require some writing in all their courses, and this writing itself would be regarded both as a process and as a mode of learning. The aim of writing-across-the-curriculum, as the faculty of Beaver College put it so well, is to enable students to join the ongoing conversation that characterizes an academic discipline. To enter this conversation, students need the ability to pose questions within the discipline and to conduct the kind of reasoned inquiry that the discipline demands.

To this end, *Form and Surprise* focuses on what educational psychologist William Perry calls the growth from dualistic "right answer" thinking toward more relativistic "issue-oriented" thinking. Our purpose in this text, therefore, is not to teach the styles and formats appropriate for different

disciplines but to show that at the core of all disciplines is a body of problems and issues that generates ongoing discussions. The text attempts to address two kinds of thinking problems common to most beginning college students: the problem of thinking of something to say, known variously as the problem of invention, discovery, or creativity; and the problem of organizing ideas into a structured discourse of generals and specifics.

These two thinking problems are reflected in our title *Form and Surprise*. By "form" we mean an essay's shape or organization; by "surprise" we mean its inventiveness, its newness, its capacity for disturbing or bringing pleasure. Of course, form and surprise are not separable qualities that can exist independently. But the habits of seeking form and surprise can be developed through the kinds of writing assignments contained in the text.

Based on our experiences in helping to direct the Montana State University Thinking Skills and Writing Project, funded in part by a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, we believe a writing-across-the-curriculum text should prepare students for the kinds of writing tasks they are apt to be given at an institution where writing is a mode of learning. Here are four expectations common at our own university:

1. *Ungraded writing*, particularly short in-class freewrites or journals. Wary of open-ended response journals popular in the sixties, some of our faculty have preferred guided journals in which students respond to daily writing tasks developed in advance by the instructor and aimed at increasing learning of course content as well as thinking skills. The guided journal sequences in our text introduce students to this kind of daily exploratory writing, enabling them to learn the value of "writing for self" as a means of discovery and clarification.
2. *Short essays*, usually two to three pages long but sometimes as short as a single paragraph (at our institution we call one- or two-paragraph essays "microthemes"), that have come to replace longer term papers for most classes at the lower division level. Instructors design the assignments to promote the kinds of learning and thinking valued in the course. Instructors can grade short essays rapidly, thus enabling them to assign more writing. Moreover, if all students are writing on the same topic, instructors can provide "models feedback" by discussing representative essays in class.
3. *Group collaboration*, wherein small groups of students work together on a research or problem-solving project, sometimes producing individual essays based on common research but often producing a single group report. Since group or committee writing is common in business and professional life, some instructors across the curriculum believe that undergraduates should experience the successes and frustrations of group writing. This text provides guidance for students asked to work together on writing projects.

4. *Peer review* at all stages of the writing process. Ideally, every essay submitted as final copy to an instructor, no matter what discipline, should have been read in various draft stages by fellow students. A freshman writing course must therefore train students not only to be writers but also to be courteous and helpful readers of their classmates' works-in-progress. Our text encourages a small group workshop approach to writing and provides specific guidance for peer-reviewing of drafts. The accompanying *Instructor's Manual with Sample Student Essays*, available to all instructors, provides considerable guidance in teaching students how to critique each other's work.

THE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

The formal writing assignments that comprise the core of our text are aimed at developing patterns of thought useful for college writers. Appropriately for an introductory writing course, students are encouraged to write about personal experience; but they are also encouraged to regard their experiences from a "problematic" point of view that can be transferred to their academic course work. The main writing assignments for the text occur in Chapters 8, 12, and 13. They are arranged progressively in three categories: problem-solution essays (roughly equivalent to exposition), issue-defense essays (roughly equivalent to persuasion), and story-based essays (roughly equivalent to description and narration but composed in what James Britton has referred to as the "poetic mode").

The general logic of *Form and Surprise* can be seen in the text's sequence of ten formal assignments:

1. A short essay that proposes a solution to a problem (Chapter 8).
2. An essay that explains two or more alternative solutions to a problem (Chapter 8).
3. An essay that poses a problem, gives an expected solution, and then shifts to an unexpected solution (Chapter 8).
4. An essay that explains a contradiction or quandary that leaves the writer puzzled (Chapter 8).
5. An analytical essay that presents the writer's answer to a puzzling question about topics selected from different disciplines (Chapter 8).
6. An essay that sets forth reasons in support of a position (Chapter 12).
7. An essay that summarizes an opposing position and then shows weaknesses in that position (Chapter 12).
8. An essay that supports a position through the use of a Rogerian "listening" strategy (Chapter 12).
9. A longer argumentation essay that uses a combination of strategies (Chapter 12).

10. A story-based essay that uses narration and description to convey its "truth" poetically rather than transactionally (Chapter 13).

These assignments are supplemented by a series of short "microthemes" (Chapter 6) aimed at helping students understand principles of form. The microtheme assignments guide students to produce short essays that shift back and forth among several levels of generality. Students who warm up on a few of the microtheme tasks will usually develop the organizational skills needed for success in the longer essays.

A distinguishing feature of our text is the way it helps students discover ideas for their essays. In this text "invention" is more than "pre-writing." Rather, invention is a fresh way of regarding the world, a habit of problematizing experience, a predisposition to ask questions and find contraries. To this end the text emphasizes James Britton's "expressive" writing as a means of puzzling and exploring. The heart of invention in this text is the guided journal, which encourages students to develop new habits of thought. The four guided journal sequences are designed to make students more aware of their writing and thinking processes at a personal level.

Our emphasis on journal writing follows from our belief, derived in part from Michael Polanyi, that all knowledge, even the most abstruse and abstract knowledge, is ultimately personal. Either a person understands a concept in his or her own language or parrots it in another's. The journal sequences serve as self-instructional guides to a variety of discovery strategies ranging from freewriting to formal heuristics, from idea-mapping to Peter Elbow's believing and doubting game.

A COMPREHENSIVE RHETORIC

As a comprehensive rhetoric, the text also contains explanatory chapters aimed at providing theoretical background for the assignments as well as instruction in skills and concepts (exclusive of sentence-level skills normally treated in handbooks). Included within each chapter are ample "For Class Discussion" exercises suitable either for small group problem-solving tasks or for general class discussion. The major parts of the text can be briefly summarized.

Part I, "Some Basic Principles and Skills," explains the theory of language and cognition underlying the text, including composing as a recursive process, the advantage to writers of "problematizing experience," the way effective writing converts information into meaning, and various principles for achieving form and surprise in an essay. Part II, "Problem-Solution Essays," includes an extensive discussion of question-asking, both as an introduction to problem-solution essays and as a way of encouraging students to view themselves as active learners. Part III, "Issue-Defense

Essays," contains a discussion of argumentation that goes beyond both formal logic and Toulmin logic in its system for helping students generate arguments. Part IV, "Story-Based Essays," explains our view of narrative and descriptive writing as a way of creating story, the language where all disciplines converge. Part V, "Readings about Thinking, Writing, and Learning," provides a short anthology of readings related to thinking, writing, and learning. From these readings we have drawn much of the illustrative and problem-posing materials used in Part I. Finally, the book concludes with an appendix about working in groups that offers a rationale for using small groups and offers advice to students for making their small groups work.

THE INSTRUCTOR'S MANUAL WITH SAMPLE STUDENT ESSAYS

The text is supplemented with a comprehensive Instructor's Manual derived from the pooled experiences of more than a dozen teachers who have used the text in various draft forms over a three-year period. The Instructor's Manual also contains representative sample essays for many of the text's assignments. These essays—both weak and strong—can be reproduced for use in class discussions and "norming" sessions of the kind explained in the Appendix to the text.

BACKGROUND AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The approach taken in this text to the teaching of writing has grown out of a major writing-across-the-curriculum project at Montana State University known as the "MSU Thinking Skills and Writing Project." Through interaction with faculty from across campus, aided by such influential workshop leaders as Ken Bruffee of Brooklyn College, Harvey Wiener of La Guardia Community College, John R. Hayes of Carnegie-Mellon University, Karen Spear of the University of Utah, Joanne Kurfiss of Weber State College and Will Pitkin of Utah State University, our vision of writing-across-the-curriculum has grown and changed. An early draft of the book was used in an experimental section of freshman writing in 1983, and over the next two years the 2,000 or so students who have used evolving versions of the text have had the greatest influence on its shape.

As those familiar with recent pedagogy will recognize, our book owes much to the ideas of many scholars. We would like to single out for special appreciation several major figures who have most influenced our thinking: Kenneth Bruffee, whose work in the philosophy of collaborative learning redirected our whole approach to composition; Ann Berthoff, whose NEH Summer Seminar in Philosophy and Composition introduced coauthor John Ramage to the rich body of scholarship relating language to thought; Toby

Fulwiler and Randall Freisinger, whose work at Michigan Technological University has done much to promote the value of expressive writing in the academic disciplines; Andrea Lunsford, whose research into the cognitive strategies of beginning writers has influenced our sense of assignment design; and Peter Elbow, who taught us the believing and doubting game.

We would also like to offer thanks and appreciation to the following people who contributed so much to the development of our text: to Stuart Knapp, Academic Vice-President of Montana State University, who has unflaggingly supported writing at our institution and who had the political courage to establish the university's Teaching/Learning Program, which has generously funded a whole series of pilot projects in writing-across-the-curriculum; to the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education for its major institutional grant creating the MSU Thinking Skills and Writing Project; to Jack Folsom, the director of the MSU Thinking Skills and Writing Project, and to our colleague from the School of Business, Dean Drenk, our copartner in the project, who is among the most influential voices for writing-across-the-curriculum on our campus; to Cheryl Roller, Adele Pittendrigh, Kathy Ramage, Carol Haviland, and Judy Keeler, the composition professionals who piloted our text in its earliest versions and gave us invaluable suggestions for revisions; to those faculty from Beaver College, SUNY-Binghamton, and Georgia State University who participated with us in a FIPSE-supported consortium on thinking skills; to Bob Morasky, Shannon Taylor, Paula Petrik, Glenn Lehrer, Ron Mussulman, Rita Flaningam, Nat Owings, Dick McConnen, Larry Kirkpatrick, Denny Lee, Steve Custer, Ken Weaver, Shirley Cudney, and other faculty from MSU who have been leaders in the writing-across-the-curriculum movement; to Paul Ferlazzo, the former head of MSU's English Department, for his understanding and generous encouragement; to the following external reviewers who gave us timely and often biting criticism of our early drafts—Roger J. Bresnahan (Michigan State University), Toby Fulwiler (University of Vermont), C. W. Griffin (Virginia Commonwealth University), David A. Jolliffe (University of Illinois at Chicago), Becky Kirschner (Michigan State University, Institute for Research on Teaching), Andrea Lunsford (University of British Columbia), and William E. Smith (Utah State University); to the following students who have provided the examples of student writing used throughout the text—Bonnie Abbott, Molly Weaver, Jeff Pentel, Tracy Williams, Catherine Clarke, Anita Foster, Judy Gehman, Marvin Drake, Mark Babb, Barbara Moore, and Wendy Foster; to Susan Didriksen, for whom we first began our work at Macmillan, and to Eben W. Ludlow, who well deserves his reputation as one of the best editors in the business; and finally to our families who put up with us throughout the ordeal of writing—Kit, Matt, Andrew, Stephen, and Sarah Bean; Kathy, Laura, and Chris Ramage.

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