

RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION
AS INTELLECTUAL WORK 

Edited by Gary A. Olson

Southern Illinois University Press

Carbondale and Edwardsville

Copyright ©2002 by the Board of Trustees,

Southern Illinois University

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

05 04 03 02 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rhetoric and composition as intellectual work / edited by Gary A. Olson.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. English language—Rhetoric—Study and teaching. 2. English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching. I. Olson, Gary A., date.

PE1404 .R485 2002

08'.042'071—dc21

2001042057

ISBN 0-8093-2433-4 (paper : alk. paper)

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992. ∞

The Case for Writing Studies as a Major Discipline

CHARLES BAZERMAN

LITERATE ACTIVITY, directly and indirectly, occupies much of the day of people in modern society. Literacy—in its basic and in its more elaborated, specialized forms—is the cornerstone in the education of the young. Literacy and symbolic artifacts underlay the information age and its information economy. Literacy—with its enabling technologies and consequent forms of social, political, and economic organization—has long supported ways of life that distinguish us from humans of five thousand years ago. Literate engagement is also associated with forms of belief, commitment, and consciousness that shape modern personality. Yet, the study of writing—its production, its circulation, its uses, its role in the development of individuals and societies, and its learning by individuals, social collectives, and historically emergent cultures—remains a dispersed enterprise. Inquiry into the skills, practices, objects, and consequences of reading and writing is the concern of only a few scholars fragmented across university disciplines; such inquiry has no serious home of its own.

How is it that a subject of such enormity is the interest of a few linguistic anthropologists, a very few psychologists, an occasional sociologist, scattered cultural historians and scholars, some applied linguists, some education researchers, and an increasing but still limited number of people in the teaching of writing in higher education? It is as if, for example, universities had no departments of psychology—denying that cognition and affect were significant and worth organized energetic inquiry—or no departments of sociology—denying that society had any significant and regular impact on

our lives worth studying—or no departments of economics, mathematics, physics, or biology. These disciplines address fundamental issues in the constitution of our physical and social worlds. Yet, writing is also a fundamental matter of the constitution of our world—but the organization of research and of the university itself remains consistently blind to this fact.

The historical particulars of disciplinary formation determined that in the field of linguistics, spoken language became more primary than written; in English departments, literature gained dominance over literacy; in education, literacy came to mean reading (particularly in its beginning stages) more than writing. Only the relatively young field of composition has paid primary attention to writing, but our core attention has tended to be narrow: on students and classes in a few courses in universities in the United States over the last several decades, with particular attention to the underprepared student. However, we have had glimpses of how big our subject could be. Writing across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines have shown us that the first-year course hardly represents all the writing or learning of writing that goes on in universities. Areas such as technical writing, business writing, writing in the professions, writing in the workplace, and rhetorical studies of writing in the agora have reminded us that writing in universities is only a small slice of the writing that goes on elsewhere in the world. The national writing project and other forms of school/university cooperation have reminded us that students have writing lives before they get to the university, and that far from all students get to the university. Outreach programs have given us glimpses into the role writing can have for those who are elderly or those with disabilities, and other marginalized or transitional populations. Work in such areas as applied linguistics has helped us to notice the range of writing practices, pedagogies, and uses around the world. And historical studies of literacy, of writing instruction, of printing, and of the development of the book have helped us to appreciate the particularity of our set of literate conditions, the many forces and events that our literate practices respond to, and the monumentality of the literate accomplishment.

Of all disciplines, composition is best positioned to begin to put together the large, important, and multidimensional story of writing. We are the only profession that makes writing its central concern. What's more, the university—as central to contemporary society's knowledge, ambitions, and professions; as the heir to many of the literate movements of history; and as an international meeting place of global projects—is as good a standpoint as

any from which to view writing at this juncture in history. Yet, we as a field must be willing to lift up our eyes to this larger charge. It is time for us to rise above the accidents of disciplinary history that have kept our truly significant subject only minimally visible and that have blinded us to the enormity of the material we have taken to instruct our students in. It is time to recognize that writing provides some of the fundamental mechanisms that make our world work, and it is time to assert that writing needs to be taken seriously along with the other major matters of inquiry supported by institutional structures.

Adopting a "Life-Span" Perspective

So what would be parts of such an inquiry? Fortunately, we do not need to make this up out of whole cloth. Fragmented but numerous publications dispersed across such disciplines as anthropology, linguistics, history, classics, cultural studies, psychology, sociology, science studies, education, and composition suggest major outlines of the inquiry. "Writing" as the subject of scholarly investigation has such power that when people begin inquiring into it, they immediately are drawn into stories of great importance and their studies become motivated and extensive—even though they may not necessarily find continual institutional support for such work.

The greatest energy, both in the field of education and in rhetoric and composition, has gone into studies of learning to write, whether through anecdotal descriptions of individual students, ethnographies of classrooms, or quantitative studies of the efficacy of various pedagogies. Scholars have tried many pedagogies, have observed many students at all levels, have documented their observations through many methods, and have analyzed their data using many theoretical and disciplinary lenses. From such work, we have learned about the trajectories and success of various paths of learning, in various circumstances, with various students, for various purposes. Because learning to write will remain a major imperative in education and society for the foreseeable future (even though forms and occasions of writing may shift rapidly with the introduction of information technologies), such studies must remain a major concern. Since writing is developed and supported throughout one's life span in every new occasion of writing for every new purpose—as any writer, no matter how experienced, is constantly reminded—we need to go further in extending our full range of studies from

the earliest years onward, in school and out, as part of the continuum of learning that for only a transient period alights in the university but that then moves out into the workplace and agora and continues into the retirement years of reflection and renewed social engagement. There are now studies in all of these areas, but they would benefit from greater dialogue and from an entire life-span perspective. The scholars who study emergent literacy in pre-school years have much to say to those who teach eighteen-year-olds, as do those who study the writing of the socially powerful and those who study the writing of the powerless. Also, since our life spans of writing are now being supported through technology, we need to understand more fully the ways in which technologies are reshaping these writing experiences, how the technologies may provide new kinds of support, and how people move through various supportive literate technologies throughout their lives.

The life-span perspective on writing development also leads us to take even more seriously the great variety of writing engagements that individuals address in schools and outside of academia, for it is through the socially distributed and socially organized forms of writing that people develop as writers and form their literate consciousness. Understanding that writing is deeply integrated with our development as individuals and as social collectives necessitates that the study of writing be deeply embedded in psychology, sociology, political science, and history—just as those fields need to attend to writing as deeply constitutive of their subjects of inquiry.

Examining writing within the complex of our unfolding lives also suggests that research in writing across the curriculum, writing in the professions, writing in the workplace, and writing in the public sphere are far more than studies of instrumental exercises in the conventions of getting things done. They are studies in how people come to take on the thought, practice, perspective, and orientation of various ways of life; how they integrate or keep distinct those perspectives in which they are practiced; and how we organize our modern way of life economically, intellectually, socially, interpersonally, managerially, and politically through the medium of texts.

The particularity of our current literate arrangements is highlighted by comparative international, cultural, and historical studies that indicate how literate practices and their consequences vary. Historical studies reveal the emergence of our current practices, and the underlying assumptions and choices embedded in our current forms, distribution, and uses of writing. Historical and comparative studies also reveal how the introduction of

literacy or a change in literate practices reshapes the various spheres of human endeavor.

In short, the study of writing is a major subset of the study of the history of human consciousness, institutions, practice, and development over the last five millennia; and composition—the learning and teaching of writing—is in the middle of all that. It appears, then, that composition is a *serious intellectual endeavor*.

Three Syntheses

To give a bit of concrete substance to this broad intellectual charge for the study of writing, and to suggest how I came to see the field in such sweeping terms, let me outline my own work. In teaching writing to underprepared first-year college students so that they could address the demands of their undergraduate career, I found myself focusing on how students could use, respond to, and criticize the materials they were reading in their classes. This issue of intertextuality led me to examine those intertextual fields of disciplines that undergraduates were engaging in, the ways in which they could engage with those fields, and what happened to them as they developed particular forms of engagement. Pedagogically, these concerns led me to write about reading and writing across the curriculum. In research, they led me to study the discourses of the disciplines, in particular the sciences, focusing on the emergence of forms of experimental reporting. Theoretically, I turned to theories of genre as a social construct, intertextuality, and activity. But underneath these were a wider range of theoretical sources in language, sociology, and psychology that treat human language, personality, activity, and interrelations as historically emergent through the purposive actions of individuals within social fields.

Several kinds of related syntheses have continually guided my work. The first is an emergent historical picture of writing practices, genres, systems of circulation, and related institutions and social systems. That is, in the same way as I saw the emergence of science related to its emergent forms and systems of written communication, so I began to see all aspects of the modern world in relation to the emergent infrastructure of written communications that shaped, regulated, and provided ongoing matters of attention. Although my studies seem to spread all over literate history—from early letters in the Near East to political Web sites in recent elections to the rhetoric of political

activism in the last half of the twentieth century—I see them simply as elaborating different spots on the same four dimensional map. My recent book, *The Languages of Edison's Light*, although overtly concerned with just the literate actions of a small group of individuals over a few years of the late-nineteenth century in the New York area, places those written communications in the multiple worlds of unfolding literacy in this country and worldwide over that century. This project gives a bit of the flavor of the larger historical synthesis I have striven for.

A second synthesis is a theoretical one that has attempted to re-see rhetoric from the perspective of writing and to place writing within some of the major strains of twentieth-century social theory and social science. I have tried to integrate, from the point of view of writing, the following: Vygotskian and neo-Vygotskian theories built on a Marxist-Hegelian history of consciousness; utterance-based linguistics of a Bakhtinian sort; phenomenological sociology emerging from Schutz; the American pragmatist tradition leading to symbolic interactionist, structural, and structurational sociologies; linguistic anthropology; and interpersonal psychiatry. All these theories point to an historically emergent sense of the human in social settings, mediated by communications. While theoretical issues inform a number of my earlier studies, and especially *Shaping Written Knowledge*, I more explicitly foreground theoretical issues in several essays in *Constructing Experience*, including “Whose Moment? The *Kairotics* of Intersubjectivity” and a long introduction, “Sketches Toward a Rhetorical Theory of Literacy.” Several essays on genre theory and activity theory have further helped articulate this synthesis. I am currently working on a multivolumed rhetorical theory of literacy.

The last kind of synthesis has been from the perspective of the individual—both as a writer and as a learner of writing. While this synthesis has been informed by my studies of the practices and development of several historically prominent scientists and rhetoricians—A. H. Compton, Isaac Newton, Otto von Guericke, Joseph Priestley, Adam Smith—it has been tied most closely to my own reflection on my students, on my pedagogical practices, and on myself as a constantly (I hope) developing writer. While this work is very much about the craft and technical choices facing writers, it is deeply tied to writers' socialization into communal activities; the forms of engagement, positioning, and goals within those communal endeavors; and their emergent identities, commitments, and accomplishments as literate

social beings. This synthesis guides my daily struggles with writing, and my daily practice as teacher and friend working with students or teachers of students from early childhood through graduate students and working professionals. The most public and practical expression of this synthesis is in my textbooks, such as *The Informed Writer*, *The Informed Reader*, and, most recently, *Involved: Writing for College, Writing for Your Self*.

To me, these three syntheses—the historical, the theoretical, and the practical—tell the same story, for the theory is an attempt to understand how we live our lives at the unfolding edge of history, using literacy in the ways that make most sense for us in our lives, to continually make a future from our own skills and choices as writers. While I have been pursuing these visions—trying to ground myself within the realities of historical evidence, the best wisdom of contemporary social science, my own experience, and the learning of my students—others interested in writing have been engaged in their own inquiries. Writing is powerful along many dimensions, various in its manifestations, and composed of many elements and processes. There is much that we can and ought to know, and I can hardly delude myself that the subject is exhausted by the work that is close to mine. We need a thousand flowers to bloom, but it would help if these plants got a bit more regular support, if the harvesting were a bit more coordinated, and if the various cultivations were institutionally recognized as part of a significant cooperative endeavor.

Perhaps to some the study of writing is just too interesting and too much fun to be called a serious endeavor, but I certainly believe that composition is a serious intellectual endeavor and that it is time for our own field and for the university to take it more seriously.

Works Cited

- Bazerman, Charles. *Constructing Experience*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1994.
- . *The Informed Reader: Contemporary Issues in the Disciplines*. Boston: Houghton, 1989.
- . *The Informed Writer: Using Sources in the Disciplines*. 5th ed. Boston: Houghton, 1995.
- . *Involved: Writing for College, Writing for Your Self*. Boston: Houghton, 1997.
- . *The Languages of Edison's Light*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999.
- . *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1988.