FRESHMAN COMPOSITION AS A MIDDLE-CLASS ENTERPRISE

Lynn Z. Bloom

[In good writing,] the words used should be the most expressive that the language affords, provided that they are the most generally understood. Nothing should be expressed in two words that can be as well expressed in one; ... the whole should be as short as possible, consistent with clearness; ... summarily, it should be smooth, clear, and short, for the contrary qualities are displeasing.

Benjamin Franklin, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 2 August 1733

Good prose, The [Freshman Composition] Books tell us, is a duty. Their conception of prose is utilitarian and moral. If language is the means of conscious life, then Good Prose, like Cleanliness, must stand next to Godliness. This perpetual moralizing about language haunts all modern writing about style [and all American composition courses].


INTRODUCTION

I used to go to parties in hopes of meeting new people, but now we live in a small town and everyone knows I’m an English teacher. Therefore I lack, shall we say, je ne sais quoi. No one ever says, “How wonderful that you are introducing my children to the discourse community to which they aspire.” No one ever says, “I myself always looked forward to those sessions on critical thinking.” No one ever says, “I was empowered by the opportunities for crossing boundaries.” Or, “emerging from my gender stereotype.” Or, “the

Lynn Z. Bloom has been immersed in the culture and folkways of middle-class academia from birth (at the University of Michigan Women’s Hospital) onward, the perennial student, teacher (currently, Professor of English and Aetna Chair of Writing at the University of Connecticut), scholar (*Coming to Life: Reading, Writing, Teaching Autobiography*, forthcoming), editor (*Composition in the 21st Century: Crisis and Change*, with D. Daiker and E. White, 1996), textbook author (*Fact and Artifact: Writing Nonfiction*, 1994), and, recently, autobiographer (“Teaching College English as a Woman,” *College English* 1992). When queried about her middle-class orientation she replies, as James Boswell said when Dr. Johnson accused him of being a Scot, “O, sir, I am and I cannot help it.”

*College English, Volume 58, Number 6, October 1996*
chance to revise.” Or, “finding my own voice.” Or, “inventing my persona of choice.” Instead they say, “I guess I’d better watch my grammar.” “Why, is she sick?” I have an urge to reply. A friend, also an English teacher, always tells strangers she’s a nurse.

Yes, freshman composition is an unabashedly middle-class enterprise, as this paper will demonstrate. It is not necessary here to rehearse the well-known economic (income levels) and educational (years of schooling) criteria that sociologists, such as Lloyd Warner, use in analyzing American social class in the mid-twentieth century. Nor is it to the point of this paper to reiterate the cultural manifestations of American social class in the 1970s and early ’80s (such as clothing, cars, house decor, and social behavior) identified in Paul Fussell’s snooty anatomization of Class, itself an American upstart relation of Nancy Mitford’s division of British culture into U and Non-U. Rather, my analysis will identify a number of the major aspects of social class that freshman composition addresses in its aims of enabling students to think and write in ways that will make them good citizens of the academic (and larger) community, and viable candidates for good jobs upon graduation.

Most of the time the middle-class orientation of freshman composition is for the better, as we would hope in a country where 85 percent of the people—all but the super-rich and the very poor—identify themselves as middle class (Allen). For freshman composition, in philosophy and pedagogy, reinforces the values and virtues embodied not only in the very existence of America’s vast middle class, but in its general well-being—read promotion of the ability to think critically and responsibly, and the maintenance of safety, order, cleanliness, efficiency. These qualities are manifested in a host of social and legal mechanisms intended to ensure an informed citizenry and knowledgeable voting public (Brown), safety on the job and on the road, cleanliness of air and water and food, reasonably reliable and uniform maintenance of public health and delivery of public services—phenomena that we tend to take for granted until they are missing, broken, or disrupted. Whereupon we can exercise our right to complain, and our energy to improve matters. Yet, to a lesser extent, as this paper will conclude, middle-class standards may operate for the worse, particularly when middle-class teachers punish lower-class students for not being, well, more middle class.

As American Studies scholar Richard Huber observes in The American Idea of Success, Benjamin Franklin was “a mirror to his own age and a tutor to succeeding generations” (16). Indeed, in addition to Poor Richard’s Almanac and The Way to Wealth (“industry” and “frugality”), Franklin’s posthumous rags-to-riches autobiography has for two centuries been the template for American ascendancy into the middle class. Here Franklin constructed a table of a dozen virtues guaranteed to lead to “moral Perfection,” if practiced consistently. These include Temperance (#1), Order (#3), Resolution (#4), Frugality (#5), Industry (#6, equivalent to Efficiency in its admonitions to “Lose no time. . . Cut off all unnecessary Actions”),
Moderation (#9, "Avoid Extreems.")

Franklin later added #13, Humility ("Imitate Jesus and Socrates"), at a friend's suggestion (148-50), though whether this is a matter of appearance or reality remains open to debate—artful persona or crafty hypocrisy?

Even as these virtues have been translated to freshman composition, their moral connotations remain. It is not surprising that the principles of classical rhetoric were transmuted into formulas by the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century rhetoricians, Franklin's contemporaries. However aristocratic its theoretical origins may have been, rhetoric as we know it was transformed by those rhetoricians—Adam Smith, George Campbell, Hugh Blair, and Richard Whatley—and translated by Alexander Bain, Adams Sherman Hill, and Barrett Wendell into nineteenth-and twentieth-century pedagogical practices and textbooks (see Brereton; summarized in Bizzell and Herzberg 645-65). As we will see, Strunk and White and Troyka and Trimmer and Marius and a host of others carry on this tradition to this day.

Composition is taught by middle-class teachers in middle-class institutions to students who are middle class either in actuality or in aspiration—economic if not cultural. Indeed, one of the major though not necessarily acknowledged reasons that freshman composition is in many schools the only course required of all students is that it promulgates the middle-class values that are thought to be essential to the proper functioning of students in the academy. When students learn to write, or are reminded once again of how to write (which of course they should have learned in high school), they also absorb a vast subtext of related folkways, the whys and hows of good citizenship in their college world, and by extrapolation, in the workaday world for which their educations are designed to prepare them. In this—as perhaps in any—middle-class enterprise, the students' vices must be eradicated and they must be indoctrinated against further transgressions before they, now pristine and proper, can proceed to the real business of the university. Like swimmers passing through the chlorine footbath en route to plunging into the pool, students must first be disinfected in Freshman English.

Although class, perhaps more than any other feature, forms the basis for much of what the profession as well as the general public expects of freshman composition, the term is virtually absent from the titles and key-word indexes of non-Marxist professional literature and—even with Marxism factored in (see France; Fitts and France)—seldom found in the composition data bases for the past quarter-century. Nevertheless, class is always with us. For instance, class has been embedded in the elaborate analyses of literacy that have abounded in the literature ever since Mina Shaughnessy threw up her hands at the mound of CUNY open admissions essays that formed the data base for Errors and Expectations. Class is a major determinant of much of Shirley Brice Heath's material in Ways with Words, where the population of her entire study, the inhabitants of Trackton and Roadville, is consistently
identified as “working class.” The first paperback edition of Mike Rose’s Lives on the Boundary is subtitled The Struggles and Achievements of America’s Educational Underclass. Class is a conspicuous feature of Rose’s examples and analysis, just as it undergirds Linda Flower’s The Construction of Negotiated Meaning. Yet as recently as 1993, as chair of MLA’s Division of Teaching Writing, I issued a call for program papers on intersections of race, class, and gender in composition studies, and received only one proposal on class—in comparison with a dozen on race and ninety-four on gender. Nevertheless, although the C-word scarcely appears in titles or subtitles until as recently as 1994 (see Hourigan), with the advent of multicultural concerns in the late 1980s came an explicit focus on race, ethnicity, and gender, and with this an implicit concern with class. Until very recently, if composition studies professionals and teachers in general saw class—whatever class we saw—we took it for granted.

Until I started dating boys my parents didn’t approve of, the concept of class was unacknowledged in the New Hampshire college town where I grew up. In Durham, site of the University of New Hampshire where my father—the double doctorate son of a German immigrant printer and his housemaid wife—taught, town was gown, at least from the perspective of everyone I knew. The town library was the university library; ditto the swimming pool, tennis courts, skating rink, greenhouse (with a pool of carp-in-residence), theater, concert hall, dairy (the UNH flocks and herds supplied eggs, milk, and celebrated ice cream to faculty and students) orchard, and woods. That all of these facilities—wholesome, clean, orderly—were maintained by a support staff (who didn’t live in expensive Durham) never registered on me, at any rate, for all the children who could walk to school were from faculty families.

Indeed, the main social distinction in elementary school was between the town kids and the “bus children,” who lived beyond the two-mile limit and couldn’t participate in extracurricular activities because they had to catch the bus home immediately after school. It was even cool to be a “bus child” because Weldon MacDonald, our class’s natural leader, was not only handsome and smart, but the best artist and the best athlete. That his boots sometimes smelled of manure and his clothes of kerosene meant it was all right for the other bus children to smell that way. That Weldon in sixth grade kissed older girlfriends in the cloakroom, seventh and eighth graders whose developed figures made them “bust children”—a joke I considered unrepeatably salacious—seemed incredibly suave. That Weldon did not go on to high school, despite the repeated urgings of the entire faculty, because he had to work on the family farm, seemed incredibly sad.

How could Weldon leave school at thirteen, when we town children knew we were destined for Dover High or prep school, and then college? At Dover High, where the Durham kids became “bus children,” Joan and Molly and Carolyn—Dover town kids—and I became best friends. We were dutiful daughters; although smitten with Elizabeth Taylor in National Velvet, we looked like dowdy versions of Sylvia Plath—pincurled hair, white
Peter Pan collars, and full skirts that reached to the tops of our bobby sox. We were chronic readers and I, at least, did all the extra credit as well as the assigned homework.

To say that we all spoke and wrote standard English, using good grammar, accurate spelling, and impeccable penmanship (except for the circles over the i’s) is to state the obvious. That none of us smoked, or drank, or kissed below the neck also goes without saying, but any extracurricular activity that lacked cachet was sure to find us: the Latin Club, the class play, the chorus, the school paper (The—what else?—School Spirit), in whose service we recruited replicas of ourselves. Why my boyfriend, a voc-ed guy who hunted, fished, built dories, said “ain’t,” wore too-tight jeans and dyed his suede shoes bright blue, invested two whole years in me I cannot now imagine. I could not at the time acknowledge the nature of his appeal, nor understand that my parents’ continual harping on his grammar embedded a very different rhetoric indeed.

A credit to our school, it is not surprising that my best girlfriends and I all became teachers. Two of us, in fact, continue to teach English: Carolyn (widowed at forty-two with four teenagers) returned to Dover High as drama and prize-speaking coach, and I, a card-carrying member of NCTE, CCC, MLA, and WPA, have taught at colleges and universities in the North, South, East, Midwest, and far West—all thoroughly middle class. Indeed, we—and thousands like us—could scarcely have found a profession that more thoroughly allowed us to preach what we had been practicing all our lives (my brief college engagement to an engineering student who spelled writing with two t’s was doomed from the start), for all of us knew right from the start how to function as middle-class teachers. There was no other way. And, by and large, there still isn’t for those of us teaching at high schools and colleges that aim to prepare their students to do mainstream work and seek mainstream careers.

Middle-Class Virtues, Values, and Freshman Composition

Although other models are possible, the middle-class pedagogical model, replete with Franklinesque virtues, has remained normative and dominant from the emergence of composition as a college course in the late nineteenth century to the present (see Brereton; Russell). As middle-class teachers of college composition, our courses are saturated with middle-class values, no matter what theories, pedagogical philosophies, or content we embrace. However sensitive we—and our students—are to race, gender, other current political issues, literary theories, and composition studies research, freshman composition in particular is an embodiment of middle-class morality. Here are some of its hallmarks.

Self-reliance, responsibility. Members of the middle class learn from the cradle to assume responsibility for their own actions, their own lives (“The Lord helps
those who help themselves”). Literacy is taken for granted; it sustains the ability to read and write well enough to function as a parent, a good citizen, a wise consumer, a capable employee, and more. We teach students that writing conveys power and authority. We teach them that it is the writer’s responsibility to control the language and consequently its message and its effect on the audience, lest that authority be dissipated. Peter Elbow informally divides Writing with Power, his manifesto offering writing power to the people, into “Getting Power over the Writing Process,” “Getting Power over Others,” and “Getting Power through the Help of Others” (4).

Middle-class composition teachers, ever Emersonian in spirit, stress the importance of self-reliance (“Your work must be your own work”), even in nominally collaborative classrooms. We are death on plagiarism. Every composition handbook I’ve examined, for whatever level of student, contains advice of which Troyka’s is typical: “Plagiarism is like stealing. It is a serious offense that can be grounds for failure of a course or expulsion from a college.” Ignorance is no excuse; “All college students are expected to know what plagiarism is and how to avoid it” (405). From sea to shining sea, as promulgated by American colleges and universities, the cardinal sin of plagiarism is a heinous affront to the middle-class value of honesty, manifested in respect for others’ property.

Respectability (“middle-class morality”). The middle-class concern with propriety and correctness is reflected in our rule-bound handbooks, whose precepts form the bottom line in even the most process-oriented teaching. Sharon Crowley argues, in fact, that current-traditional rhetoric, with its emphasis on forms, formulas, and rules, “maintains its hold on writing instruction because it is fully consonant with academic assumptions about the appropriate hierarchy of authority” (66). Indeed, she says, the process-oriented composing strategies that sprang up in the early seventies did not supplant current-traditional epistemology, they were grafted onto it and “were used to help students produce current-traditional texts” (65). A quarter century later, she sees no change in theory, strategy, or substance.

Moreover, no matter what kinds of writing assignments we give, as middle-class teachers we expect freshman papers—on whatever subject—to fall within the realm of normative discourse in subject, point of view, values implied. By and large, we get what we expect. But when we receive a paper that incorporates what Mary Louise Pratt calls “unsolicited oppositional discourse, parody, resistance, critique” (19) and—intentionally or unwittingly—transgresses these normative boundaries, we go to pieces. In the social space of the classroom, which Pratt defines as a “contact zone, where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34), as Richard Miller points out in “Fault Lines in the Contact Zone,” we are ill-prepared to deal with alien topics or points of view that are, say, racist, misogynistic, sadistic, or otherwise debased or debasing. Our
initial, middle-class impulse is to suppress the topic, to punish or try to rehabilitate the author, or to deliberately overlook the paper’s attempt to wreak havoc in the contact zone and comment only on its “formal features and surface errors.” But, as Miller says, “[W]ould changing the word choice/spelling errors/verb agreement problems/organization really ‘improve’ ” the essay that assaults or affronts? “Would such changes help inch it towards being, say, an excellent gay-bashing essay, one worthy of an A?” (393–94).

**Decorum, propriety.** When teachers do address an offensive paper, we maintain our middle-class decorum and phrase potentially confrontative comments in language that is tentative, qualified. As Straub and Lunsford’s analysis of the responses of a dozen exemplary composition studies teachers reveals, not one takes direct issue with the morality of the former street gang member who acknowledges without emotion “getting into trouble and fights,” “sucker punching” victims, and “beating someone up or vandalizing someones property” (101–3). “I surely would be glad to learn more about gangs” (Richard Larson); “There’s something intriguing or even moving about your low key tone here, but I’m also curious to know a lot more how you actually felt” (Peter Elbow); “I can’t really see the whole picture . . . why did you sucker punch these people? Were they other gang members?” (Chris Anson) (99). We have met these teachers and they are us, speaking in a double-voiced teacher code which embeds moral criticism so discreetly that we can’t be sure the students’ linguistic codes, let alone their codes of ethics, will recognize the horror, the horror.

Teachers, implicitly equating propriety with good character as well as good manners, also expect decorous writing from their students and penalize papers that strike them as insubordinate. Sarah Warshauer Freedman’s ingenious study teased out subliminal subtleties of response. She found significant differences in the tone of essays written on the same topic by students and by professionals, whose “writing seemed more informal and casual than the students’.” The professionals wrote as their readers’ peers, rather than as subordinate students, “and thus felt free to write informally and casually.” They frequently used the first person pronoun, I, and speaking familiarly and directly to their readers, “tried to establish closeness with their informality.” Their prose “took on the tone of a friendly letter, full of dashes, addressed to a reader of equal or lower status.” Although student and professional papers were intermingled for grading, the teachers believed they were all written by students and expected the writing to reflect subordination appropriate to the normative student-teacher relationship. When the papers didn’t use the “linguistic forms that show respect, deference, and the proper degree of formality,” the teachers, apparently affronted, reacted “against the professionals’ too familiar tone” and retaliated in their grading (340–42).
That the use of the first person, with or without any accompanying autobiography, continues to strike many faculty as indecorous, inappropriate in academic writing has been debated vigorously in professional literature throughout the past decade (Elbow, "Reflections"; Bartholomae and Petrosky; Hesse). That even novice teachers, innocent of the debate as well as the literature, begin their careers with this opinion was brought home to me the second night of my indoctrination class for new TAs. To shake up their sense of style, I always ask new TAs to write an essay in some variety of real-world language. So that evening, in preparation for their own essays on "Why I Write," we had discussed the crafted, constructed nature of an autobiographical persona, as illustrated in my own “Finding a Family, Finding a Voice,” a partly personal essay on teaching new TAs to teach writing by having them write substantive first-person essays of their own.

A student, sweet and sincere, asked if he could confer with me privately in my office after class. “Of course,” I said, and after he deposited my books on the desk and shut the door, he said, obviously embarrassed, “I want to ask you a personal question. You don’t have to answer it if you don’t want to.” He paused, gathering courage. “Did anyone ever attack you for writing in the first person?” “No,” I answered, surprised. “Why do you ask?” “Because your essay is so,” he hesitated, clearly thrown off balance by the discovery of personal pronouns in the grove of academe, “so, so confessional.”

Although personal, that essay is not in the least confessional. This characteristic point of view, it should be noted, is epitomized in Marguerite Helmers’s confusion throughout chapter 6 of Writing Students, where she mounts a personal attack on personal writing. From that perspective she lambastes writing represented by Nancy Sommers’s Braddock award-winning “Between the Drafts” for its “self-help,” “confessional,” Oprah-like qualities. Helmers concludes—wrongly—that “The personal . . . is at root an anti-intellectual gesture, unlikely to generate either renewed intellectualism or disciplinary respectability for composition” (148).

I explained briefly why the terms are not synonymous, but by then it was nearly 10 P.M., too late to belabor the point. The TAs’ weekly teaching journals continued to indicate a growing comfort with multiple modes of discourse, inspired less by my example than by another TA’s stunning paper on “Why I write in a language my mother does not speak”: “I find my old voice, reconnect with the family lore and my tribe’s habits, and slip back into my native tongue as naturally as I switch back to English at the border. My self may be divided, but the separation between my French and English sides is as thin as a layer of skin” (Genevieve Brassard).

Moderation and temperance. The Golden Mean, where else would the middle class roost? Freedman’s research on non-normative student papers, actual or presumed, and the responses they elicit, genteel or retaliatory, illustrates one major area in which these values are manifested. Another emerges in considerations of style.
Although free spirits have been known to ridicule Polonius’s advice to Laertes as a model of bourgeois sententiousness, that teachers continue to assign it as a set piece for students to memorize attests to its embodiment of the values we honor. The sense of style contained in these values (“rich, not gaudy”; “familiar, but by no means vulgar”) is reiterated today in the rules of Strunk and White, who together constitute the American Polonius: “Place yourself in the background” (#1); “Do not inject opinion” (#17).

It would be as hard for anyone educated in American schools in the past thirty-five years to escape the influence of advice embodied in The Elements of Style (itself a direct descendant of conventional eighteenth-century advice) or its equivalent (see also Russell, chapter 4) as it would for any post-World War II American baby to escape the influence of Benjamin Spock’s Baby and Child Care. “The approach to style,” say these books, “is by way of plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity” (Strunk 69). This precept governs much of our stylistic advice to students: “Be clear (#16); “Prefer the standard to the offbeat” (#21); “Avoid fancy words” (#14); “Use figures of speech sparingly” (#18). And be patriotic: “Avoid foreign languages” (#20) (70–81). Among textbook authors, only Richard Lanham in Style: An Anti-Textbook takes issue with the premises of prevailing advice, “clarity, plainness, sincerity,” pronouncing them “incomplete and seriously misleading” (ix). Lanham’s critique of American advice is a perceptive critique of American values as filtered through freshman composition: “Good prose does not come from a one-time inoculation [in freshman composition]. It has to be sustained by the standards of a society, by that society’s sense of style. It has to be encouraged, appreciated, rewarded.” But nowhere in American society does this happen any more, asserts Lanham; students asked to read prose aloud become “acutely uncomfortable” at having to pay attention to their language (7). Thus his Anti-Textbook satirically—but eschewing references to Deconstruction—extols “The Uses of Obscurity,” “The Opaque Style,” and “The Delights of Jargon”—joy and jouissance—in playing with language. Nevertheless, Lanham’s own subsequent textbooks, videotapes, and CD-ROMs, especially his elegant Analyzing Prose, commend the classic clarity and simplicity they themselves illustrate.

Thrift. The middle-class virtue of thrift in domestic economy (“waste not, want not”) is likewise reflected in the precepts of stylistic economy. Concepts such as Orwell’s “Never use a long word where a short one will do” and “If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out” (176) and Strunk and White’s “Omit needless words”—“A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences” (23)—govern American textbooks and much of our red-penciling.

To make the point economically, I will cite but a single example from a single, representative volume, Joseph Trimmer’s tenth edition of James MacCrimmon’s venerable Writing with a Purpose. Trimmer’s advice is itself short and to the point:
“Economical prose achieves an equivalence between the number of words used and the amount of meaning they convey. A sentence is not economical because it is short, or wordy because it is long.” Nevertheless, continues Trimmer, “Wordiness—the failure to achieve economy—is a common writing problem.” The two most common ways to eliminate wordiness within sentences are—shades of Strunk and White—“deleting useless words and phrases and substituting more economical expressions for wordy ones” (236–37).

**Efficiency** is a related middle-class virtue, for the prudent middle class squanders neither time ("time is money") nor words. As Richard Marius advises students in *A Writer's Companion*, “Professional writers are efficient. They use as few words as possible to say what they want to say. They use short words rather than long ones when the short words express their meaning just as well. They get to the point quickly” (10).

To do so implies an efficiency of process, as well as product. The advice on writing process that pervaded the 1980s—including much of my own—was concerned with enabling student writers to attain an efficient, and therefore by definition effective, writing process. Linda Flower’s widely used *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing*, like many of Flower and Hayes’s protocol analyses, embeds a model of industrial efficiency. Flower advises writers to eschew wasteful methods, such as rigid rules ("simple-minded and inadequate for more complex problems") and trial and error ("expensive in terms of time") in favor of heuristics, "efficient strategies or discovery procedures" that are powerful because "they have a high probability of succeeding" (44–45). Today the concept of efficiency remains operative even when the writing process itself is identified, as Lunsford and Connors explain in *The St. Martin's Handbook*, as "repetitive, erratic," recursive, "and often messy" rather than proceeding "in nice, neat steps." Nevertheless, "ideally," say the authors, "writing can be a little like riding a bicycle: with practice the process becomes more and more automatic" (3–4). "Effective writing," reiterates Trimmer, "emerges from effective decision making" (4).

**Order.** The middle-class value of "A place for everything and everything in its place" implies that life, society, and households run better—and indeed are more virtuous—when the participants can know, respect, and follow a predictable, conspicuous pattern. Disorganized writing is as disreputable as disorderly conduct, for it both implies mental laxity and shows disrespect for one’s readers. In preparation for writing the *St. Martin’s Handbook*, Lunsford and Connors “analyzed teachers’ global comments on three thousand student essays, a stratified sample of twenty-one thousand marked student essays gathered from teachers throughout the United States” in the 1980s (I–1). They found, not surprisingly, that in addition to being spelling and grammar sleuths (see Connors and Lunsford, “Frequency” 400–1),
teachers are organization police, in search of “clear and logical organization of information”—in format, overall structure, and in the structure of individual paragraphs and sentences (St. Martin’s I–7). Consequently, Lunsford and Connors devote four chapters and numerous subsections of the Handbook to these matters—about par for most current handbooks.

Likewise, one of Marius’s cardinal principles is that “A good essay is well-integrated; it does not drift without clear purpose from item to item,” but rather, meets “the requirement” (emphasis mine—whose requirement Marius does not say, but the implication is of a cultural or professional norm) “that an essay have a single guiding purpose and that it be clear throughout.” Thus, says Marius, “A good essay will march step by step to its destination. Each step will be clearly marked; it will depend on what has gone before, and it will lead gracefully to what comes afterward” (55–56). Marius’s advice, the antithesis of postmodernism, is proffered more categorically than, for instance, that of Strunk and White, who even while saying “Choose a suitable design and hold to it” (#12), acknowledge that “in some cases the best design is no design, as with a love letter, which is simply an outpouring” (15). Nevertheless, academic necessity puts most teachers in Marius’s camp; students write no love letters on our watch.

Cleanliness is next to godliness in the middle-class pantheon. Dirt, like disorder, is a privilege of the filthy rich and the slovenly poor. Some teachers, reflecting popular prejudices and community standards, patrol for clean language and a suitably respectful authorial stance and persona (see Decorum, above). No matter how informal, slangy, even profane our speech outside of class, teachers and textbooks and college standards concur on the importance of Standard English as the lingua franca for writing in the academy. So taken for granted is this normative view of language that it is rarely stated overtly, although it is manifested from kindergarten to college in workbooks, usage tests, and lists of words commonly misspelled and mispronounced. It undergirds the college and admissions placement and testing industry and the English Only movement; its spectre looms large over the myriad attempts to write and enforce state and national standards, whether these emanate from parents, politicians, psychometricians, or other professional groups.

This normative view underlies much composition studies research, as well. For example, Shaughnessy’s sensitive analysis of the “stunningly unskilled,” error-laden writing of thousands of open admissions students in Errors and Expectations leads ultimately to the expectation that sensitive, insightful teachers will assume that their students are “capable of learning” what they themselves have learned, and what they now teach—standard English (292). Three semesters of basic writing will, if done right, give students standard English facility with syntax, punctuation, grammar, spelling, vocabulary, “order and development,” and “academic forms”
(285–86). And, as David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University” argues, when entering students have learned to talk the talk, they can walk the walk.

Moreover, like middle-class housewives, teachers require “cleaned up” papers—free of the detritus of drafting, bearing no smudges of the labor required to transform a messy manuscript into a model of elegance and propriety. At the level of freshman composition, neatness and cleanliness—spelling, mechanics, MLA and APA documentation styles—preoccupy teachers marking student papers, as reported in Connors and Lunsford’s “Frequency of Formal Errors.” Composition handbooks, requisite reading for every freshman, abound in good housekeeping rules; in their Handbook, Lunsford and Connors’s research translates into ninety-nine pages of rules, about 12.5 percent of its total volume. A plethora of housekeeping tools exist in the form of computer spell checkers, style checkers, a programmed thesaurus, and error detectors (Trimmer 466–67). Interestingly, the closer the author comes to professional status, the higher are the cleanliness stakes and the thicker the manuals of advice on the minutiae of technically precise papers. Strunk and White, Marius, Joseph Williams’s Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace, and Lanham’s Revising Prose are skinny books; the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, intended for English majors and graduates, like most manuals, has bulked up from the svelte 30-page MLA Style Sheet of 1951 to 155 pages in 1977 to 298 pages in the fourth edition (1995). The current edition of the publishers’ bible, The Chicago Manual of Style, is 921 pages long.

**Punctuality.** The middle class ideally “runs like clockwork,” arranging time efficiently on a tight schedule, as symbolized by bulging filofax datebooks and computerized calendars. Freshman composition, with its recurring expectation of work to be turned in on time—including intermediate drafts of work-in-progress, with penalties for non-performance, for lateness, and for other evidences of haste or sloppiness (read error and sin)—is the university’s efficient means of indoctrinating new students in the ways of the academic world. Even the Muse must report for duty on time.

**Delayed gratification.** “All things come round to him who will but wait” (Longfellow, Student’s Tale). It is a middle-class virtue to work and scrimp and save in the present for long-term gains in the future—such as the fruits of an education or an insurance policy. It is the collective belief of the American educational enterprise that freshman composition will help students do better in their other classes, and beyond college in the life—almost assuredly middle class—for which their education has prepared them. How could they fail to benefit, given all the middle-class virtues embodied in the course? Why else would freshman composition be the single required course in nearly all American colleges? As we have seen, to ensure the attainment of responsibility, respectability, moderation, thrift, efficiency, order,
cleanliness and punctuality, in one’s writing and in one’s life as well, are among the principal aims of freshman composition. Introducing students to belles lettres or Great Books or the tease of theory (notwithstanding the delights of Derrida and the charm of Cixous) is almost incidental.

_I read the penultimate version of this paper at a departmental colloquium with the usual trepidation that comes from having to live with the colleagues—and the consequences—afterward. “In your concern with style and proper academic behavior,” said my astute critics in spirited discussion, “you left out the most important aspect of what we do in freshman composition. We don’t conceive of writing as the vehicle of bourgeois indoctrination, even though Standard English and what that implies is every college’s lingua franca. We use the course to teach and encourage students to think for themselves, to read and write critically. Put that in.” So, in the spirit with which Franklin added the thirteenth virtue, “Humility,” at the suggestion of friends I append the principal virtue of freshman composition as we know it today—a latecomer to the course, which accounts for its tardy appearance here._

**Critical thinking.** Self-reliance and the assumption of responsibility underlie the notion of critical thinking and reasoning, historically the essence of American democracy. Historian Richard Brown points out the necessity for citizens in the revolutionary era to “acquire sufficient knowledge of history, law, and politics to be able to recognize and confront the approach of tyranny.” Later, in the early republic of Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison, “that meaning was augmented by the idea that voting citizens should be sufficiently informed and critically minded to be able to choose public officials wisely. Education and experience should enable them to see through the seductive rhetoric of demagogues and rise above parochial self-interest” to “elect wise men of good character to carry out public policy” (205).

However, the spirit of critical inquiry implied in the history of the republic was largely absent from freshman composition—philosophy, syllabi, textbooks, and writing assignments—during the first century of that subject in the American college curriculum (roughly 1870–1970). The primary documents Brereton proffers in _The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875–1925_, reflect an overriding concern for grammatical and linguistic correctness, “accurate” reading and understanding of literary texts, and an appreciation of style—but scarcely a trace of critical thinking. David Russell’s curricular history, _Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870–1990_, corroborates this emphasis on “sivilizing,” in the Huck Finn sense.

Until the writing across the curriculum movement began in the early 1980s, says Russell, students throughout American colleges and universities “wrote primarily to demonstrate knowledge, not to discover or communicate it” (234). There were three major exceptions, curricula developed (but not promulgated because of
the onset of World War II) by I. A. Richards (257–58); the University of Chicago’s Great Books program; and Santa Fe’s experimental St. John’s College, where students were expected to produce writing that “bears traces of struggle” with great ideas (196, 191). These, along with Louise Rosenblatt’s Literature as Exploration (first edition, 1938) would appear to be the intellectual forebears of our contemporary concern for critical thinking—so pervasive in most freshman rhetorics, readers, and writing assignments that we tend to take this relatively recent orientation for granted.

The dramatic post-World War II transformation of American higher education from an upper-middle-class enterprise to a mass enterprise is signaled in a variety of ways, from open admissions programs to multicultural curricular emphases. Paulo Freire’s revolutionary Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1969) offers a compelling political rationale for these changes; liberatory pedagogy can and should encourage critical thinking, among other things (see Conclusion).

A single, conspicuous manifestation of this pervasive philosophy should suffice to illustrate the rationale of critical thinking, Bartholomae and Petrosky’s Ways of Reading. The teacher’s Preface explains: “We wanted selections that invite students to be active, critical readers, that present powerful readings of common experience, that open up the familiar world and make it puzzling, rich, and problematic. . . . that invite students to be active readers and to take responsibility for their acts of interpretation.” So the editors avoided “short set-pieces” that “solve all the problems they raise,” maintaining reading as the educationally conventional “act of appreciation.” Instead, students must grapple with such intellectually and rhetorically difficult essays as Adrienne Rich’s “When We Dead Awaken,” Michel Foucault’s “Panopticism” (from Discipline and Punish), and Jane Tompkins’s “Indians” and learn to construct coherent readings “by writing and rewriting” (vi–vii). Indeed, Bartholomae and Petrosky sock it to the students with their opening paragraph: “Reading involves a fair measure of push and shove. You make your mark on a book and it makes its mark on you. Reading is not simply a matter of hanging back and waiting for a piece, or its author, to tell you what the writing has to say. . . . We’d like you to imagine that . . . you are in a position to speak back, to say something of your own . . .” (1).

**Conclusion**

American autobiographical literature is full of success stories, emblems of the American Dream. Autobiographies depict immigrants, ethnic and racial minorities, poor and working-class youth rising in status, income, reputation, and self-esteem through the practice of these middle-class virtues, from Benjamin Franklin to Frederick Douglass to Richard Rodriguez and Maxine Hong Kingston. The latter three are powerful literacy autobiographies, as well.
John Trimbur reads Mike Rose’s autobiographical Lives on the Boundary as “a kind of pilgrim’s progress, from his struggles as a high-school student who arises, miraculously, from the slough of Voc-Ed despond, through college . . . to his redemptive work as a teacher of the neglected and underprepared.” Trimbur fears that readers will read Lives on the Boundary exactly as most teachers do, and that they will love this book for what Trimbur considers the wrong reasons, as “another comforting American success story of an individual who, through the power of education and the guidance of more experienced teacher-mentors, takes the predictable road to self-improvement and upward mobility, from the mean streets of Los Angeles to the halls of UCLA” (238).

Such an interpretation reinforces the “literacy myth,” says Trimbur, “the moral consensus” that since the mid-nineteenth century has erroneously represented “the ability to read and write as a social explanation of success and failure in class society, a token of middle-class propriety, and a measure to divide the worthy from the unworthy poor”—or students, as the case may be (238). Trimbur quotes J. Elspeth Stuckey’s The Violence of Literacy to illustrate the argument that “literacy is a system of oppression that works against entire societies as well as against certain groups from within given populations and against individual people” (Stuckey 64). From this point of view, says Trimbur, “to speak of the transformative powers of literacy for the individual, as Rose does, at best is naïve and at worst reproduces a discourse of equal opportunity and predictably unequal results, thereby turning systematic inequality into the result of differences in individual effort and talent, not of social determinations” (250).

Thus whether these canonical American autobiographies and Rose’s Lives represent a dangerous middle-class myth or present true and thoroughly inspiring success stories is as much a matter of one’s politics as of one’s social class. The views of Trimbur, Stuckey, France, and other academic Marxists notwithstanding, such stories embody what American education has historically been dedicated to—not putting the “finishing” veneer on an elite class, but enabling the transformation and mobility of lives across boundaries, from the margins to the mainstreams of success and assimilation on middle-class terms.

For there are other stories behind these stories. Trimbur’s ambivalent critique allows for multiple readings of the dominant story: “If professional practices and discourses,” such as those in Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University,” Shaughnessy’s Errors and Expectations, and Rose’s Lives on the Boundary, typically represent the dispossessed as a client population in need of the intervention of expert benefactors, the political valence and cultural meaning of professional work nevertheless cannot be guaranteed in advance as an accommodation to the dominant culture. . . . Professional expertise, as I believe Lives on the Boundary demonstrates, can also articulate a sense of solidarity with the aspirations and purposes of the dispossessed. It all depends on practice. (249)
As Freire points out, education does not necessarily have to enact the “banking concept,” with students “storing the deposits entrusted to them” by oppressive middle-class teachers bent on suppressing their “critical consciousness.” Freire claims, as I and many teachers—middle class and otherwise—would agree, that “the oppressed are not ‘marginals,’ are not men living ‘outside’ society. They have always been ‘inside’—inside the structure which made them ‘beings for others.’ The solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves’” (61).

Such Freirean transformations are the thrust of the narratives of education research, teachers’ tales, and autobiography after autobiography. These are the stories that engage the hearts, minds, lives, and commitment of most of us middle-class teachers in the hope (whether or not validated by contemporary conditions) that our students will have equal opportunity access to the middle-class life. This includes the authority and power to “become ‘beings for themselves’”—not only in the accommodationist mode of Booker T. Washington, but in the transformationist mode, varied and vigorous, of Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Pauli Murray, Anne Moody, and Maya Angelou (see Royster 35ff).

Thus even with a Marxist reading of Lives on the Boundary, Trimbur allows Rose—and all of us middle-class teachers—a way out of inextricably attaching literacy to “the reproduction of class relations in advanced capitalist society.” Literacy does not necessarily have to have the “locked-in . . . class character” which so repels Stuckey and other revisionist critics. For, as Rose and innumerable teachers like him understand, literacy “is not only a tool of a class-based ranking system, but also a cultural resource embedded in and persistently available” to all through popular culture and nontraditional materials. Neither the educational process nor its goals necessarily have to result in cultural deracination. As works by Zitkala-Sa, N. Scott Momaday, Maxine Hong Kingston, Gary Soto, and Judith Ortiz Cofer (among a host of authors) reveal, autobiographers don’t need to repudiate their class or ethnicity to write memorably about it—even if they do so “in a language my mother does not speak.” Indeed, with authority, dignity, humor, and anger, works such as The School Days of an Indian Girl, The Names, Woman Warrior, Small Faces, and Silent Dancing demonstrate the power of autobiographies to promote an understanding and appreciation of the lives, values, and cultures they represent. Thus contemporary popular autobiographies, among other materials, reveal that standards of literacy can be reconceived, in and out of the classroom, “to serve popular aspirations and democratic goals” (Trimbur 250–51).

Teaching materials can be similarly reconceived. In 1972 the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication implicitly acknowledged these “popular aspirations and democratic goals” when it adopted the policy statement “The Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” a succinct affirmation of “the students’ right to . . . the dialect of their nurture or whatever
dialects in which they find their identity and style.” The statement continues, “The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans.” It concludes, “We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language” (CCC, fall 1974, inside front cover). The Fall 1974 special issue of CCC, devoted to amplifying this statement, encouraged teachers to develop teaching materials diverse in dialects and in the cultures such dialects represent, including “examples of writing which is clear and vigorous despite the use of non-standard forms (at least as described by the handbook). . . . We do not condone ill-organized, imprecise, undefined, inappropriate writing in any dialect; but we are especially distressed to find sloppy writing approved so long as it appears with finicky correctness in ‘school standard’ while vigorous and thoughtful statements in the less prestigious dialects are condemned” (8–9). “Common sense tells us that if people want to understand one another, they will do so,” concludes the Committee on CCCC Language Statement, “And humanity tells us that we should allow every man [sic] the dignity of his own way of talking” (18).

This philosophy—notwithstanding its unwitting sexism—governed several textbooks of the 1970s, such as Friedrich and Kuester’s It’s Mine and I’ll Write It That Way; respected sociolinguist Geneva Smitherman remains its witty spokesperson. This philosophy epitomizes the attitudes of literacy researchers, such as Heath, Flower, and (in his later work) James Berlin. Shirley Brice Heath’s Ways with Words, for example, implicitly affirms every manifestation of literacy among the working-class people of Roadville and Trackton, of whatever age or occupation. However, despite the recent work of Berlin, Flower (“Literate Action,” “Negotiating”), and Heath herself, these studies have not yet been translated into classroom practices, and Flower encounters student resistance when she tries (see “Negotiating,” especially 82–83). I have been unable to find any post-1970s college or university policies, curricula, or textbooks that advocate marked deviations from the standard lingua franca; “the books,” as Lanham calls them, remain bastions of middle-class linguistic morality.

Like it or not, despite the critiques of academic Marxists, we are a nation of Standard English. Indeed, students themselves want and expect their work to be conducted in Standard English; their own concept of the language they should use reflects the linguistic standards of the communities in which they expect to live and work after earning their degrees. Characteristically, students resent—as Linda Flower acknowledges and explores in “Negotiating the Meaning of Difference”—the attempts of well-meaning liberal academics to legitimate Black English Vernacular and other grammatically coherent but “nonstandard” Englishes. Student Drena, for instance, has grown up understanding that BEV is “yet another racist
stereotype identifying the ‘natural’ language of Black people (as a group) with the language of rural life and Southern folklore or rough, urban streets and poverty—in either case with a language regularly attacked and ridiculed as improper, substandard, and ignorant” (76). Although she and her peers in Flower’s Community Literacy Center ultimately engage in “a hybrid discourse of talking and testifying, conversation analysis and argument, list and story” that Flower sees as the basis for the “discourse in intercultural collaboration” to which she is committed, there is little evidence that American culture at large, despite increasingly multicultural classrooms, will grant equal opportunity for “different voices, different signifying systems, and interpretive styles” (86) to be valued on a par with Standard English. As Flower herself observes, “multicultural contact in classrooms does not erase the history that lives in students” (44), or the values of their teachers and the school systems that determine the curriculum.

Nevertheless, as teachers we, like our students, are citizens of the world; all of us have an ethical as well as a cultural obligation to respect the world’s multiple ways of living and of speaking. Academia is pervaded by so many policies, curricula, and textbooks evincing respect for cultural diversity that this concept scarcely needs illustration; characteristic is the “President’s Policy on Harassment” promulgated at my own institution, the University of Connecticut, which reads in part:

The University deplores behavior that denigrates others because of their race, ethnicity, ancestry, national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental disabilities. . . . All members of the University community are responsible for the maintenance of a social environment in which people are free to work and learn without fear of discrimination and abuse. (Hartley)

The exceptions are the aberrations. As teachers, we can and do acknowledge what students already know from their own experience—that there are innumerable other contexts where alternative dialects are appropriate. We can make those who speak the dominant language sensitive to the multiple codes, cultural referents, and dialects in the speech and writing of respected public figures and writers, such as Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Adrienne Rich, and Gloria Anzaldúa. Respect for the students’ right to their own language extends to not penalizing students for using it, even while they are also learning the dominant standard. Critical thinking can occur in any language.

Whether informed teachers, acting through professional organizations such as NCTE and CCC, will succeed in influencing current attempts to mandate national standards (and consequently, national testing) so they reflect the diverse plurality of actual practice nationwide remains to be seen. Is it utopian to strive to make public policy ethical as well as culturally responsive? Jacqueline Jones Royster, like other CCC and NCTE Chairs in recent years, argues that such transformations can and must be effected. In her address to the 1995 CCCC meeting, “When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own,” she says, “The challenge is to teach, to engage
in research, to write, and to speak with Others with the determination to operate not only with professional and personal integrity, but also with the specific knowledge that communities and their ancestors are watching,” setting “aside our rights to exclusivity in our home cultures” in the interests of sustaining “productivity” in the contact zones (33).

My own writing is invested with the same values as my teaching. In aiming to delight as well as to teach, I will rewrite and rewrite and rewrite (parts of what you are reading have been written two dozen times, and more) to bring order and clean, well-lighted prose from a fragmented and chaotic universe of discourse. If these characteristics mean I am middle class, so be it; I’d call them manifestations of my professional concern for clarity, and of respect for my readers. When we moved into a house with an herb garden, I planned to keep each species within prim bounds. When I bought a capacious new desk I vowed to keep it uncluttered. When I get—oh rapture—a real letter, I aim to answer it within a week. That the garden harbors volunteers and chipmunks, that my desk overflows with books and papers and stray computer disks, pretty weeds from the garden, and unanswered mail is a visual reminder that some middle-class priorities are more important than others in this mixture of chaos and order, confusion and certainty, the place where I live.

Works Cited

Allen, Irving Lewis. Personal communication to author, U of Connecticut, 28 Feb. 1996


Olson and Dobrin 132–42.


“Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” *College Composition and Communication* 25 (Fall 1974): 1–32.


