

CONFORMITY AND ORDER: A GRAMMAR HANDBOOK CASE STUDY

Nicole Merola

Extant in a historical moment of national upheaval, the *Harbrace College Handbook* (hereafter *HCH*) works to produce student writers who conform to a particular kind of writing mastery. Published initially in 1941, reprinted in 1946, and contingent upon the wartime era of its publication, through strict grammatical exercise the *HCH* assures that one area of national production—the production of writers—will remain orderly and logical even if the rest of the country falls into disarray. Discussing the format and analyzing the content of the *HCH* illuminate the kind of literacy and student writer assumed and configured by this handbook. This case study, which attends closely to the 1941, 1946 version of the *HCH* and reads its exercises through a Foucauldian lens, extends the analysis begun by Debra Hawhee in a recent article.¹ I suggest that the exercises contained within the *HCH* discipline not only the student as writer, but also the student as thinker.

The *HCH* resides firmly within a traditional grammatical matrix that delimits students as always-already error-makers. A neatly ordered table of grammatical errors comprises the endpaper of the handbook, so that upon opening the book the student is immediately confronted with the errors he will surely make. Abbreviations for the grammatical errors the instructor will mark on the student paper are written in red lettering and the full names of the errors appear in capital, bold, black lettering. Each genre of errors fits neatly within a box, and the sub-errors

belonging to that genre logically follow the main heading in boxes of their own. The endpaper table is terrifyingly neat, suggesting that grammatical errors are themselves neat, orderly, and discrete. The precision of the table also suggests that correcting these errors will be a logical and orderly enterprise. As they are imagined visually through this table, grammatical errors do not spill over into each other's boxes; the language processes implied by the endpaper are processes that seem to have little connection to each other.

This tabular endpaper makes visible for the contemporary reader the dynamic at play between the teacher and the student, a dynamic in which the teacher is assumed to be the (grammatical) knowledge holder. The teacher possesses language keys literally, as he has the grammatical error abbreviation chart key, and metaphorically, as the figure who authorizes certain kinds of writing as proper writing. The list of error symbols alphabetically arranged contains abbreviations like: "cap=9 Capitals," "w=21 Wordiness," "u=23 Unity and Logical Thinking," "e=20 Exactness," "x=Obvious Error. Correct it." Abbreviation "x" has no corresponding number; the student is supposed to immediately know and correct the error. These abbreviations clearly speak to the ideological nature of this handbook—the student is someone who, in order to have something to say, needs to be exact and ordered about it, and should be constantly on the lookout for obvious errors. Concise logical sentences are valued, and the teacher's ability to mark this error, "ef=23-30 Effectiveness in the sentence," clearly suggests that a very particular kind of sentence represents the ideal. Aided by the *HCH* and the teacher, the student can produce proper writing through constructing grammatically correct sentences. Nowhere on the list of abbreviations does an abbreviation exist for praise or a job well done. This absence suggests there might *not* be anything to praise in the student's work, at least not until after the teacher has directed the student toward serious grammatical revision.

The note "To the Instructor" that begins the handbook clearly states its purpose, "[t]he *Harbrace College Handbook* is a guide to the

correction of student themes and also a text for use in class. It presents well-known subject-matter in an easily usable form, and thus lightens the instructor's load of grading papers" (*HCH*, iii). That the handbook begins with this note to the instructor, rather than with a note to the student writer, and that lightening the instructor's grading load seems to be a main emphasis illustrate the focus of the handbook. The student and the process of writing are left out of the note altogether. Instead, correction takes center stage. As the instructor corrects student themes, he also corrects the student, guiding him down paths to acceptable grammar and down attendant paths to acceptable ideas.

Use of the pronoun "him" is deliberate, as both the instructor and the student are male. The professional figures responsible for the exercises in the handbook are sixteen instructors, "representative instructors—*men* who have been trained and who have taught English in as widely scattered parts of the country as Massachusetts, New York, Illinois, Colorado, North Carolina, Texas, and California," men who have tabulated corrections of twenty thousand freshman themes (*HCH*, iii, my italics). These men, in gathering information from students around the country, have naturalized for all users a particular set of grammatical errors that arise from and apply to a narrow population. That is, both prior to the publication of this handbook and temporally continuous with its use, the population of students in college is mostly white, middle to upper class, and male. With the passage in 1944 of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (the first G.I. Bill), the college population begins to shift, a shift which registers in some of the example sentences in the text.² However, by taking their error sampling from this white upper and middle class male grouping, the pool of errors contained and corrected through this handbook has a fixed imaginary realm. Certain kinds of errors would not occur within the "representative" twenty thousand themes. As this handbook does not include them, it does not recognize as writers the kinds of students who would make them.

Through the types of errors both present in and absent from this handbook, certain errors are normalized and others rendered

unthinkable. Unthinkable errors construe unthinkable writers, and those who would make the kinds of errors unimaginable in the logic of this handbook are those students who are excluded from the college and university settings where these kinds of handbooks are in use. That there is no English as a Second Language section in the handbook points to the absence of ESL speakers in the college population of the 1940s. Instead, the population of native speakers is taken as the representative population from whom errors will be culled for tabulation and to whom this handbook will be written. By ignoring errors outside the realm of tabulated themes, the *HCH* constrains the college writers it does address and excludes other writers for whom its sampling of errors is not sufficient.

Two more phenomena in the note “To the Instructor” are worth discussing, as they shed more light on the formulations therein. “Drill Material,” a sub-heading in the note, states, “This drill material bulks much larger than in most handbooks.” (*HCH*, iv) The handbook foregrounds its own usefulness by emphasizing the plethora of drill material; the presence of drills gestures toward the military and the disciplinary. The second phenomenon deals with sentence diagramming:

Diagrams are used here and there throughout the handbook to supplement the explanations. These diagrams have been made as simple as possible in order to hold attention on the immediate problem and to prevent the student from becoming more interested in complicated lines than in grammatical relationships.” (*HCH*, iv)

While this passage explicitly refers to keeping the student mind on grammatical relationships and not on the complex line drawings that result from diagramming, its implicit connotation is that student minds are wandering minds in need of the kinds of discipline—both grammatical and ideological—contained within the *HCH*. The content of the example sentences, an embodiment of simplicity and normativity, functions in this same disciplinary

way. Example sentences are kept simple in an attempt to focus the student on the grammar and not on thoughts about the representations of life generated by the actual word content. Holding student attention on the immediate grammatical issue at hand prevents students from becoming interested in systemic life issues that might prove disruptive to the classroom and ultimately to society; it trains them to think in carefully circumscribed patterns.

Since much of the commerce that occurs in the educational system does so through the medium of the written word, it seems reasonable to examine composition as a site of training. Deploying the word *training* here connotes both the ways students are trained to be better writers and the ways writing training is also a normalizing training that reaches beyond the written page. In other words, if it is the case that the kinds of discourse a student has at his or her disposal configure and constrain the ways he or she is able to envision the world, then composition and the kinds of writing styles allowed or discouraged play a major role in how and what the student reads and sees. Viewing through a Foucauldian lens reveals the *HCH* as an instrument for discipline; it is an almost seamless example of a methodology that trains a particular kind of useful body.

The kind of literacy figured by the *HCH* is a literacy of confinement and containment. Not only do the introductory materials, the endpaper, and the note “To the Instructor” configure the student as error-prone and in need of discipline, but there is also a sense in which the student is tracked down a particular path of conformity as he progresses through the exercises in the handbook. The example from the note “To the Instructor” pertaining to sentence diagrams illustrates the genesis of this point, but it is repeated drilling that trains the student. By examining some of the sample sentences, the extent to which the student is directed, both grammatically and intellectually, becomes apparent. The following examples speak to the ways in which composition is, in the Foucauldian sense, a disciplinary

apparatus. The racialized and gendered elements of this handbook reproduce white male privilege at every turn.

The general absence of minority figures in the sample sentences points to the naturalized assumption that college students are white. In the few instances where non-white figures appear, they are subordinated as objects (or objects of study). In an exercise on the proper use of commas, this sample sentence appears: "There were four Negro families to clothe feed and take care of" (*HCH* 118). The sentence content, which asserts that Negro families need to be taken care of, clothed, and fed, reinforces stereotypes of African Americans as incompetent and lazy, a burden on society. Following the directive from the introduction to concentrate merely on grammar, properly inserting commas as a way to make sense of the sentence, the student is guided to overlook the infantilization of the African American family enacted by the content of this sample sentence. Reading this type of sentence and inserting commas properly, the student not only demonstrates his mastery over the grammatical errors, but also over the African American family. Focus on grammar prevents the student from seeing naturalized assumptions concerning race and class. Rather than read a sentence like this to explore and interrogate the content, the student's intellectual energy is confined to producing consternation over comma placement. Continuous training to look in innocuous directions potentially results in a student who may be unable to do anything else.

A similar phenomenon occurs later in the text, where the subject at hand is the creation of a proper outline. In this example, "Indians," "Negroes," and "Immigrants" (*HCH* 344) appear as heading categories about which it is acceptable to write. Here the student is encouraged to use these peoples as objects of study, a move which implicitly privileges his subjecthood and defines it over and against their objectification. Action and agency reside with the white male student in this handbook. He is the audience, and therefore assumed capable of at least rudimentary reading and writing. As illustrated above, minority figures are not afforded these capacities; neither are women. Through general relegation

to the domestic space, female figures are also objectified by the text. Only once in the entire handbook does a woman appear as a college student, and then the emphasis falls not on her agency but on the uniqueness of her situation.³ For the most part, the women are acted upon as grammatical pawns to be rearranged, enclosed by commas, and otherwise properly punctuated. The realities illustrated through the sample sentences are pictures of a safe, white, “properly” gendered America, where the men write manly, logical, concise sentences and the women, when they appear, do so in the domestic space. Articulating traditional gender roles marks one way this handbook is ideologically useful. Male students see mirror images of themselves as powerful agents via their representation as action figures in the sample sentences and as a feature of their progression through the handbook itself.

In order to prevent chaos and ambiguity in student writing, the teacher and the handbook exercises provide mechanisms for examining student writing. Foucault speaks about the relation between examination, in his text “the examination,” and normalization: “The examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them” (Foucault, 184). Although no one culminating test exists in the *HCH*, the process of examination is the subtext for the entire handbook. The teacher examines student writing and marks errors that then generate student examination and correction. Cycling endlessly, this examination works to discipline and train the student’s writing and thinking processes. The students who interact with the teacher and his comments on an individual and discrete basis are subjected to being arranged in a hierarchy based on their performance. The handbook never suggests student peer writing relationships, so the power dynamic in place runs solely along the teacher-student axis, a line which separates and objectifies the student. This separating out and individuating allows for and encourages the development of conformity.

Students using the *HCH* are pressed into becoming conforming figures in myriad ways: students are kept busy with repetitive grammar exercises, ambiguity is ironed out of their language, the teacher dictates specific ways to format their papers, only certain themes represent permissible topics, and the student grammar errors are prescribed in such a way as to allow and guarantee the one acceptable result. In his chapter on docile bodies Foucault discusses the necessity for the disciplinary regime of imagining ways to constitute time that is totally useful. Describing the workplace, “an attempt is also made to assure the quality of time used: constant supervision, the pressure of supervisors, the elimination of anything that might disturb or distract; it is a question of constituting totally useful time” (150), Foucault could be describing the *HCH*, for its exercises schedule, structure, and delineate useful activities for the student writer. Through his abbreviated directions for correction the teacher is ominously present, even if his physical body resides elsewhere. Set up in such a way that the handbook constantly references itself, the student can waste no time consulting outside sources. His captive attention gets directed from one error site to the next via this self-referentiality and network of abbreviations. Because the student is assumed incapable of figuring out error relations for himself, the handbook explicitly tells the student only what he needs to know.

An assumed transparency of language ties into valorization of useful time and useful grammar exercises. Directing the student to properly utilize his time and telling him exactly how language elements relate to each other forecloses the possibility of ambiguity in language. That is, useful time and ambiguity exist in an oppositional and mutually exclusive relationship. The *HCH* implies that time spent deciphering the meaning of a sentence is time that has been wasted. The logic of this handbook imagines signs and signifiers that link concretely, in regular and always fully decipherable ways. Sentence level ambiguity equates with a kind of chaos anathema to the conformity-oriented, ordered, and naturalized writing (and educational and societal) system(s) advocated for in the *Harbrace College Handbook*.

NOTES

¹ Hawhee's piece examines the John C. Hodges book collection and papers housed in the University of Tennessee Knoxville Special Collections Library to discuss how the *Harbrace College Handbook*, and composition handbooks more generally, both write the discipline of composition and discipline the student writer. Her analysis focuses on the abstract manner in which writers are disciplined through composition exercises. I seek to ground my analysis by discussing the effects of such discipline on the kinds of writing and thinking allowed by composition handbooks and exercises.

² Two examples that represent the shifting college population occur in the section on comma splices. These sample sentences, "The company produces aluminum, this is still needed for airplanes" and "I am proud of my home town, it is the birthplace of one of our World War heroes" (HCH, 46) identify the war. Their presence in the text suggests that part of the college writing audience now includes the war-knowledgeable, who might be either veterans or other interested parties. Other examples are sprinkled throughout the text.

³ "Of all the undergraduates enrolled in the college, I happened to be the only girl enrolled in the course, as a result I was looked upon as an intruder" (HCH 47). This sample jumps out at the reader because the girl is portrayed as an agent. However, although she is assigned an intellect, the sentence also notes her intrusion into the male dominated college realm. More indicative of the usual treatment of women in the sample sentences are these examples: "The lightning and thunder terrified the women and children" (HCH, 10) and "Mary cooked and Laura served" (HCH, 114).

WORKS CITED

- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1979.
- Harbrace College Handbook*. ed. John C. Hodges. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946.
- Hawhee, Debra. "Composition History and the *Harbrace College Handbook*." *College Composition and Communication* 50.3: 504–523.

