

REVIEWS

Harris, Joseph. *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts.* Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2006. (ISBN: 0-87421-642-7)

Reviewed by Shirley K. Rose

At the outset, Joseph Harris explains his title and his intention for his textbook *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*:

My advice here is to imagine yourself as rewriting—as drawing from, commenting on, adding to—the work of others. Almost all academic essays and books contain within them the visible traces of other texts—in the form of notes, quotations, citations, charts, figures, illustrations, and the like. This book is about the writing that needs to go on around these traces, your own thinking and writing. This kind of work often gets talked about in ways—avoiding plagiarism, documenting sources, citing authorities, acknowledging influences—that make it seem a dreary and legalistic concern. But for me this misses the real excitement of intellectual writing—which is the chance to engage with and rewrite the work of other thinkers. (2)

Harris does not explicitly address whether he intends his book as a text for FYC courses or more advanced writing courses, but it is clear that the book is informed by his own teaching of the general education course “Writing 20” at Duke University, where he directs the University Writing Program. Although the book will be accessible to many first-year students, its high expectations of them may dismay them unless they have already developed some degree of confidence about their ability to engage in intellectual exchange. However, the book could be a good choice for advanced composition courses or other college courses that use

writing assignments. For example, I have recommended it to a colleague developing an introductory course for literature majors. In addition the book seems a good candidate for professional writing courses, which address writing for venues such as magazines. The book is attractively designed and well made; the font and layout choices contribute to ease of reading and the book stands up to intensive use.

I believe the book is also informed by Harris' editorial experience. His work as editor of *College Composition and Communication* from 1994 to 1999 and his subsequent service as editor of the CCCC's *Studies in Writing and Rhetoric* series have given him ample opportunity to reflect on what does and doesn't work in scholarly writing. Graduate students and their faculty, as well as editors of scholarly journals and presses and their reviewers, might find Harris' terms for describing intertextuality useful. I don't hesitate to suggest a book purportedly written for undergraduates to these more advanced writers because I know the guidance Harris has given is not self-evident. He is not so much making explicit "what everybody knows" as he is explaining a particular way of viewing and understanding intertextual practices in intellectuals' writing. In doing so he offers not a set of formulae for academic writing, but a vocabulary for analysis of such writing.

This set of terms is built around the metaphor of the writerly "move":

You move in tandem with or in response to others, as part of a game or dance or performance or conversation—sometimes toward a goal and sometimes just to keep the ball in play or the talk going, sometimes to win and sometimes to contribute to the work of a group. I hope in the book to describe intellectual writing as such a fluid and social activity and to offer you some strategies, some moves as a writer, for participating in it. (4)

Readers who are familiar with Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say, I Say* (Norton, 2006) will want to know how *Rewriting* is different, particularly because both books rely on this metaphor of the "move" to describe a writer's strategy for situating his/her own work in relation to that of others. As I read their text, Graff and Birkenstein describe, as their subtitle explains, *The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. Though they set out to make these "moves" explicit, they do not give as much attention as Harris gives to elaborating the theory that underlies their characterization of these moves or the sources that have influenced that theory, or to explaining the extent to which these moves reflect a set of rhetorical and ethical choices for writers.

Harris takes pains to explain which theorists have informed his explanation, and thus demonstrates what he is advocating. His sources are not only acknowledged explicitly in the text (another way he models the practices he is advocating) but also highlighted in shaded boxes labeled "intertexts" and placed inside the margins of the text. Further, Harris goes to some lengths to make clear how he has drawn on the notions of texts as "intertextual constructs" from Jonathan Culler, used Sylvia Scribner's notion of "practice," and chosen to "work in the mode of" J. L. Austin's exploration of uses of language performatives, a look at how people use words to "get things done" in *How to Do Things with Words*.

After the introduction, each chapter addresses and describes a particular "rewriting move," specifically *coming to terms*, *forwarding*, *countering*, *taking an approach*, and *revising*. Harris clarifies that these are not presented as a "fixed sequence" for writing, but that he has sequenced the chapters "to suggest a kind of ethics of academic writing, a sense that intellectual work both starts and ends in acknowledging the strengths of other perspectives. And so I begin with what might be called the *generous* aspects of working with texts before turning to more *critical* forms of rewriting" (5).

Briefly, these moves are characterized as follows: *coming to terms* is a set of strategies for "re-presenting the work of others in ways that are both fair to them and useful to your own aims in

writing”; *forwarding* strategies—the term is borrowed from email practices—are those a writer uses when “he or she takes terms and concepts from one text and applies them to a reading of other texts or situations” (6); in *countering*, a writer “aims less to refute or negate than to rethink or qualify” (6); in *taking an approach*, one draws on a writer’s “distinctive style or mode of working,” by “applying a theory or method of analysis advanced by another writer to a new set of issues or texts” (7). These four moves are all ways of rewriting the work of others.

The last rewriting move Harris identifies and discusses, *revising*, is a set of strategies for returning to and rewriting one’s own work in progress. Harris demonstrates how a writer can use the strategies of the first four moves to work with his or her own writing in a way that treats it as seriously as the work of other writers. He thus helps student writers develop the confidence to engage with the ideas of others.

Throughout all of the chapters, Harris has also inserted instructions for “Projects” or exercises that help direct a reader’s attempts to practice the moves and other strategies he is describing. Many of these are self-reflexive exercises serving to demonstrate the points he has made, and they are well-thought out and interesting. However, most of them are obviously intended for undergraduate student writers, and this is one aspect of the book that clearly identifies its intention to be an undergraduate text.

For example, the chapter on *forwarding* has a particularly interesting discussion of *illustrating*, in which Harris addresses the challenges of working with non-print materials and highlights a problem in dealing with others’ texts: “You need to make their work yours. Faced with the impossibility of rendering the whole of an image or performance in words, you can only instead point to what you see as its key moments or features” (41). Yet as he notes a few paragraphs later, “it is quickly becoming more practicable to insert audio and visual files into electronic documents.” To this end, a project suggested in this chapter is to incorporate a nonprint text as “seamlessly” as possible into one’s

own document—by cutting and pasting for example—then noting how that influences the way one chooses to comment on it. Harris further suggests experimenting with reformatting the nonprint text by changing color or shape as a way to further understand the moves of *forwarding*.

Some readers will wish that Harris had done more to address visual rhetoric and multi-media composing, for the book seems very print-oriented. I anticipate that a theoretical understanding of practices of building and positioning actual *links* between texts (that is, devices such as hyperlinks that can literally take a reader to different texts, rather than metaphorical connections constructed by linguistic representations of other texts) will become increasingly important and relevant as these links become more practicable in digital scholarly writing, and I am curious to know what Harris' rhetoric and ethics of intertextuality would make of these new practices.

The chapter on *revising* is very strong, and the use of student texts as example should go a long way toward convincing students they can do this kind of thoroughgoing reworking of their ideas. The suggestion that students write abstracts of their own work is one I can vouch for both as a teacher of writing and as a writer.

Harris' concluding chapter is an explanation of the ways he has taught these strategies in both composition courses and literature courses that "aim to help students imagine themselves as critics and intellectuals" (9). In "Afterword: Teaching Rewriting," Harris articulates some of what he considers best practices for teaching writing and explains how his book can support those practices: "ask students to write in response to complex texts and issues"; "bring student writing to the table"; and "sponsor revision." Teachers who are considering adopting *Rewriting* as a textbook might want to begin their review with this chapter.

That Harris is offering us not only a rhetoric but also an ethic of intertextuality is clearest when he explicitly discusses the choices he has made about what moves he will advocate and how he prefers to characterize them. Harris advocates a particular attitude toward writing, urging us to "approach writing with an active mix

of skepticism and generosity...” (27) and this is what makes his text an ethic of academic writing as much as a rhetoric. For example, in his discussion of *countering*, he writes: “...the sort of academic argument I most admire doesn’t look all that much like argument in the familiar sense—since it aims less to offer reasons behind competing positions than to suggest what such differences might point toward....I’m not pressing for a mere politeness, but for a style of countering that doesn’t stop at disagreement but instead pushes on for something more—that rewrites the work of others in order to say something new” (71).

Harris’ textbook has said something new. Whether teachers adopt it as a text for their writing courses or not, it can help them view the intertextual practices of academic writing anew.