

WRITING TEACHERS CAN'T WRITE EITHER

VIRGINIA WHITE ORAM

After reading a writing teachers' professional journal, I began to feel an urge to shriek, like Archimedes, "Eureka!" (Archimedes, as you may remember, was supposed to have shouted "Eureka!" meaning "I have found it" when he figured volume as displacement in bath water.) This exclamation would have been especially appropriate because I always read these journals in the bathtub so that I cannot easily escape to exchange them for more palatable fare. I have noted, by the way, that these journals do not float, but sink heavily. But this observation was not the cause of my exclamation. My "Eureka" meant that I may have found why Johnny can't write.

Remember the joke about those who can, do; those who can't, teach? Well, I'm about to propose the theory that those who can't write, teach writing. But perhaps I'm too hasty. A more nearly correct axiom may be that those who can't write, write for writing journals. Or maybe those who can't write right, write for writing journals.

George Orwell in the famous essay "Politics and the English Language" urges us to write simply and to avoid clichés and prefabricated expressions. One page of a recent journal has "arduous, never-ending job," "here to stay," and "unanswered questions." No Orwell here.

Orwell also advises against jargon. In the same article as above, we read "students' writing competencies." Why is "competency" plural? Why isn't the word "competence" in the first place? I suspect this plural nonsense has crept over from the colleges of education which use such plurals as "understandings," "outcomes," and "behaviors." (I remember with delight an education professor's correcting a project of mine by moving some qualities I had called "Skills" into a column called "Understandings." His column headings, not mine, of course.)

The profession that should be fighting clichés and jargon is actually increasing their use — I almost said "by leaps and

bounds." If you are not a professional writing teacher, you might find yourself unable to understand our journals. How do you like "holistic scoring"? This has a saintly sound, but I think it means rating the whole paper. Words like "cognitive" and "experimental" are popular. Did you know that "High Cognitive Demand" calls for "evaluation" while "Low Cognitive Demand" calls for "interpretation"? Did you know that "High Experiential Demand" asks the writer to use personal experience while "Low Experiential Demand" allows students "to respond impersonally"?

Consider such words as "meta-conference" or "heuristics" or "paradigm." No one in the real world uses these terms or wants to. What about "recursive dimensions?" Two of our authors try to help their colleagues with "An awareness of these intra- and extra-levels of recursion should cause us as teachers to reevaluate the way in which we teach writing." Yes, indeed!

Recently I received a letter rejecting a manuscript in which I had explained why I felt writing centers should be more than record-keepers of computer-assisted instruction. The editor of the journal wrote that he appreciated the "warmth, humanity, and compassion" of my essay but found it inappropriate for a writing teachers' journal because however "comfortable" the writing, the "intellectual context" in which "that audience operates" would find warmth, humanity, etc., insufficient. He meant they needed something to chew on, some cognitive dissonance or experiential phenomena.

Of course we all know that to get tenure or promotion, we have to write intellectual stuff. The only problem is that as a writing teacher I must write like this:

The generic term *research* suffers from conceptual synecdoche in that, for many, the part has become mistaken for the whole: the single species of empirical research is treated as the entire genus . . . As to *paradigm* — a term as useful as it is currently modish — I will, like so many others, pluck one definition from Thomas Kuhn and call a paradigm an explanatory matrix. An inquiry paradigm then is the explanatory matrix for a systematic investigation of phenomena.

Writing teachers not only have to write "intellectual" stuff like this to satisfy each other, but they have to impress their more secure colleagues in literature, who run most English departments.

As everyone who has spent any time around a university English department knows, the writing arm is generally crippled, really quite shrunk, while the literature arm is supposedly healthy. The insecurity in the writing discipline comes from lack of tenure, lack of salary, and lack of status of any kind.

At most universities the literature faculty scorns the writing faculty to such an extent that the writers would despise themselves if it were not for their seeking succor outside. It is my notion that the writing teachers have fallen into the arms (if you will pardon all these "arms" metaphors) of what should be the enemy of writing teachers: the social scientists and the educationists. Sadly, the writing teacher has now *become* a social scientist or a professional educationist, and now he writes like one. He measures, calculates, evaluates, tests, quantifies, qualifies, and writes up his results in an impenetrable prose.

A recent English conference in Waco, Texas, divided the program into sessions on "Literature" and sessions on "Pedagogy." The writing teachers' sessions were called "pedagogy" as if there were no content in what they teach. (In the educational lexicon, a "content course" is a real course like science, math, etc.) You can see also that there is presumably no pedagogy needed or exhibited in literature teaching.

I am trying to demonstrate that as writing teachers become less supported by their natural allies in literature, they think less about *literature*, about words and coherence and metaphor and wit and charm. As G. W. Bonham writes in an article on academic jargon ". . . the more insecure educational theorists have become. . . the more they have retreated into their special pseudotechnical language" (24-25).

I wonder whether we should not insist that teachers of writing be judged by practicing writers. Shouldn't they be able to write essays understandable to all educated people, not just faddish jargon for each other? How can I even read the rest of a sentence that begins: "As we coded the protocols . . ." in an article entitled, of all things, "A Writer's Awareness of Audience"?

Perhaps even more serious than the quality of writing in teachers' studies for each other is the ponderous quality of most writing texts. No one would ever read most of them for pleasure, or information either, unless he were forced to. The great success of William Zinsser's *On Writing Well* ought to show us that students respond to a well-written text. Zinsser is a writer, you see, not an educator or social scientist. I used a

conventional text as well as Zinsser's last semester, and my students unanimously preferred Zinsser. When I sent the author of the stuffy, conventional text a student paper comparing his text with Zinsser's, he wrote back that, yes, Zinsser's was a good enough book, but it really wasn't a *text*. Apparently he believes that text equals dull and unreadable.

In his book, Zinsser gives such advice as "you just can't assume that people know what you think any boob knows, or that they still remember what has once been explained to them" (115). Unfortunately I don't think Zinsser would be allowed to write for any writing teachers' journals. And I don't think E. B. White or Russell Baker or Art Buchwald would either. They write too well. Besides they wouldn't want to. They are too inventive, too lucid. They have too much to say. I find that the less the writer has to say, the more dense the prose. "Invention" is a jargon word in the writing racket just now, but I notice that the writing teachers who push the word are often not very inventive themselves. What we need is a Zinsser editing these journals and texts. All kinds of well-written models, and practical advice based on them, make sense for students and teachers of writing.

Now back to the bathtub where I am reading these weighty journals. How can writers of such prose examine, correct, and guide our youth? We have all noticed that our youth can't write. I propose that their teachers can't either.

Virginia White Oram is a freshman writing instructor at Southern Methodist University (Dallas, Texas). She is also a free lance writer.

Ed. Note: Although she wrote that she was "delighted that [I was] courageous enough to admit that the emperor has NO CLOTHES," I have deleted her five notes that give the publishing data behind the examples of what she calls "poor writing," an act that may not be delightful or courageous but keeps the issue — I submit — an open issue and not a closed invective.

WORKS CITED

- Bonham, G. W. "The Academics' Mockery of Language." *Change* 10 (1978): 24-25.
Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. New York: Harper-Row, 1980.