

THE A.P. DILEMMA: FORMULA OR PROCESS?

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I continue to have a disturbing experience while running inservice workshops for high school English teachers. At some point during the discussion following my remarks on composition theory or on the pedagogical possibilities of literature in the composition class, when I am eagerly anticipating lively dialogue on useful methods and texts, someone inevitably asks, "But how can we teach our students to score well on the A.P. exam? What exactly do the readers for the exams *want* and how can we teach our students to construct the required essay in the *right way*?" A chorus of justified complaints supports the questions, complaints directed toward local administrators, the school board, and parents, who predictably blame teachers (a recurring theme in the educational hierarchy) for their students' performance on the A.P. test. Hit from all sides, high school teachers become ultimately responsible, not only for achievement on the A.P. exam, but also for acceptance at a chosen college and success in the freshman year.

This last point—success during the first year in college—raises an equally disturbing concern emerging from discussions at inservice workshops. The question is disturbing because of its divisive possibilities, shown in this reaction many high school teachers receive from former students: "You didn't teach me to write for my college classes and now my freshman English professor tells me I have to 'unlearn' everything I was taught in high school English." This charge, as we might suspect, reinforces the age-old tension between high school and college teachers, making our students' grasp on writing all the more difficult to achieve, since they emerge from the respective classrooms with conflicting perceptions of the guidelines for ef-

fective prose. The concern expressed here by both teachers and students is very real and raises exactly the point I want to make in this essay. If we teach in our high schools only to the standardized A.P. test, students will be ill-prepared for the kinds of thinking, writing, and reading skills required of them in college (colleges that, ironically, carefully scrutinize test scores for entrance purposes and then scorn them in the classroom). But why must these goals be mutually exclusive? Why, that is, should we consider preparation for the A.P. exam and for college-level writing courses to be separate skills? I would propose that we can, indeed, conceive of them as related aims, reinforcing each other in requiring the same sort of critical and analytical thinking and writing skills.

To a certain extent, I suspect, our students (both on the high school and college levels) fall into the trap of trying to learn a *form* for written discourse. In other words, the achievement-oriented student is easily lulled into believing that learning the correct form for essays results in effective prose, effective in this case meaning well-organized, tightly structured, controlled, and as I've somewhat ironically suggested, "correct" (what the teacher *wants*, or perhaps, more precisely, what the student *believes* the teacher wants). Unfortunately, then, all too often form (whether one of the modes, the "five part" essay, the enthymeme, or the example) dictates meaning, or as Orwell might have put it, form becomes set to fit ready-made phrases, the writer no longer thinking but rather "plugging" in ill-defined, obfuscated, and misleading terms. It is one thing to teach our students to *recognize* logical relationships in statements (and this ability will, indeed, assist them in "exam-taking") and quite another to advance the notion that in order to write successfully one must *create* statements to fit into a preconceived logical form (for instance, assignments such as "write a description, a cause and effect essay, a narration," and the like).

This way of looking at form has significant consequences for the problem of writing. It does so for this reason: standardized tests, like the A.P. English test, promote a conception of knowledge based on a standard of correctness—there are right answers and wrong ones—and on essays measurable by means of a number. Given the weight such tests carry in a student's potential success in the academic hierarchy, this standard of correctness affects the way students perceive success "in English," including the successful creation of essays. When our students (especially our novice student-

writers who feel no little anxiety and discomfort at the very mention of prose writing) attempt to write to what they perceive to be some standardized and uniformly acceptable form (albeit mystifying to both student and instructor) and thus write *to that end*, their writing becomes *static*, an attempt to “display” what they have learned (read “memorized”) for the test. In writing to such an “end,” the student has no sense of dialogue, no sense of his or her own created *voice*, nor of an audience, other than the examining board, which in the student’s mind becomes increasingly dehumanized and objectified. It’s no wonder then that the entering college freshman becomes confused when we tell him or her to write to a “real” audience, to generate “original” ideas, and to create a voice appropriate to that particular audience and subject. Our baffled freshman has written for so long with a specific essay form in mind that he or she blocks in the face of the sense of strategic choice we want to foster in our student writers. Only if the idea dictates and generates the form of the essay will students see the connection between thinking and writing, the first step to writing effective prose and the bridge, I believe, between the high school and college English class.

The combination of anxiety regarding both the A.P. exam and college level writing courses coupled with our students’ adherence to formulae works against the dialectical process we want them to demonstrate. Instead of understanding writing to be a kind of dialogue with an audience, or better yet, an internal dialogue (that is, the weighing of diverse options before taking a position) as the means for thinking through ideas, students come to regard not only the essay but the written word itself as static. In my experience, when students seek the formula for success in essay writing neither the *process* of writing nor the finished *product* has any relation to thinking or to the kind of writing one does professionally or for enjoyment. What we mean, I suspect, by the process of writing is, in fact, a kind of dialectic, a way of thinking through the idea behind the essay, a process of making *choices* regarding strategies, structures, and techniques for the particular essay. Writing should involve a *coming to terms* with the ideas for a particular essay. As students write they “try on” different stances, different ideas, different forms. In the process of revision, they discard some and refine others. And, of course, perceiving one’s writing in this active way necessitates the attention to an audience, a reader who responds to the text. In other words, a writer makes choices regarding diction, syntax,

use of examples, and the like, choices based on audience and aim, the effects that the writer wishes to create through his or her use of language.

This strategic approach to composition, I have found, assists our students (both on the high school and college levels) in constructing arguments for which they must generate topics on their own and in writing analyses of texts or selected passages (the kind of exercise characteristic of the A.P. exam). It does so because the very process of determining options and making choices engages student-writers in the unfolding and development of their ideas. Instead of stock topics and forms to learn, students construct their own design for the work and so are able to “hear” their individual voices in the texts they create.

One way to help our students with this kind of active engagement in writing (and in reading as well) is to teach them how to “open” or “enter” texts, whether they are texts of their own or those written by someone else. Perhaps the most useful way to do so is to *ask questions* of the text, or of the subject at hand, and thus get a handle on the focus, tension, or problem for the particular essay. This is not easy for our novice writers, especially when they are seeking the “right” answers. Students who become effective and critical readers and writers must be able to move from the simple question of “what?” (which measures comprehension) to more analytical questions of function and intended effect. That is, I tell my students that the most fundamental way to understand and respond to literature and to develop their own prose is to ask the following questions:

What?

How?

To what end?

These three basic questions, asked in this order, assist students in determining the work’s structure and meaning. One must first understand *what* is being said in order to examine *how* it is conveyed (how the various parts of the discourse *function* in the text), and finally to analyse its *effect*, the intended *ends* or *aims* for the work. This approach, much like the process of solving problems and arriving at careful decisions, moves the student away from the absolute authority of the text, thereby providing a somewhat easier transition into the kind of writing which will be required in college.

These same questions are useful not only in the analysis of readings but in the construction of one's own prose, as suggested below:

What do I want to say?

How can I most effectively say it?

(What are the means and strategies available to me?)

To what end? What *effect* do I want to have?

(What actions or attitudes do I want my audience to accept?)

The following lists, set side by side, may make this distinction somewhat clearer. The first, more traditional approach primarily addresses reading comprehension. The second set of questions seems to me more helpful in combining reading and writing skills and in preparing our students for college and professional writing.

1

What is the theme?

What is the content?

What is the form?

What examples are used?

Where is the description, narration, and the like?

2

What is the intended effect?

What is the writer attempting?

What are the available means and strategies?

How do the parts of the essay progress?

Who is the audience?

Is the work effective? Why?

Questions that address *function* and *ends* come somewhat closer, I believe, to engaging students actively in *thinking*, an ability which improves both their reading and writing skills. No longer an "academic exercise," the essay forms and expresses our students' thoughts. There is good reason for teaching the essay in our high school classrooms: *not* only because it is the skill students will have to master on the A.P. exam and for their college-level assignments, but because it also reflects their *thinking* and *reasoning* skills most clearly. We want our students to achieve on the A.P. exam, to get into the college of their choice, but we don't want them to fail in their first year. Nor do we want our students to come to fear English, to feel that writing is something one must learn (since required) to get on with the "real" stuff of education. Finally, and perhaps above all, we want our students no longer to say to the English teacher: "You did not give me the *right* answer" but to take responsibility

for their own education—to learn to *ask* questions of the authority of the text and of their own suppositions and beliefs.

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