



## *Good Enough Writing: What Is Good Enough Writing, Anyway?*

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Good enough student writing isn't bad, it isn't great. And although it ultimately isn't good enough, it's what many of us will settle for much of the time. Although many American colleges and universities claim to strive for excellence, they will be reasonably contented with Bs. For most have adopted a de facto standard for college-level writing: whatever is good enough to warrant (note that I do not say merit) a B in whatever course it is written for at that particular school is good enough writing. Yes, this definition is pragmatic, rather than utopian. Its contours are determined locally, rather than nationally, by individual teachers in individual classes—though more exacting teachers or “hard graders” may continue to measure against the ideal.<sup>1</sup>

Yet we can discuss the concept of good enough writing in general because B is the standard grade in American undergraduate education in general, and in composition courses as well.<sup>2</sup> It is widely based on the following characteristics. B-level writing is college-level writing that exemplifies the following characteristics judged according to local standards. B-level writing is good enough to satisfy first-year writing standards and to meet norms of acceptable writing in more advanced classes. It is thus good enough to serve as the lingua franca for writing throughout the writer's home institution, and presumably, to meet the standard for writing beyond that college—the larger community, and the student's future professional world. If this writing is also good enough to satisfy the student writer's own expectations, so much the better, but that's an unexpected bonus, not a given. Although

the following definition is embedded in a discussion of first-year composition, the features of good enough writing are equally discernable in academic writing required in any other college course up, down, or across the curriculum except for creative writing, which is beyond the scope of this discussion.

As I will explain in this essay, good enough writing is characterized by a clutch of Academic Virtues. These include: *Rationality*; *Conformity*, *Conventionality*—which is attained by using Standard English, following the rules, and otherwise maintaining proper academic decorum; *Self-Reliance*, *Responsibility*, *Honesty*; *Order*; *Modesty* in form and style; *Efficiency*, and *Economy*. When accompanied by *Punctuality*, turning the papers in on time, according to the demands of the academic schedule, a great deal of student writing that meets these criteria—perhaps most of it—should be good enough to receive a good enough grade, a B, in most institutions.<sup>3</sup> (Nevertheless, any teacher—and we have all met them—can override the norm using individual or idiosyncratic criteria, such as “Any paper with more than three spelling errors gets an F.”)

Many teachers would also insist on evidence of “the ability to discuss and evaluate abstract ideas” as crucial to college-level writing (Sullivan 384). Critical thinking is more variable than the tidier Academic Virtues, more dependent on the individual teacher’s expectations and frames of reference, and often difficult to measure. It will be addressed in the last two sections of this essay. Otherwise, my analysis assumes that although we say we value and expect critical thinking, when awarding the final grade we cave on this quality. If throughout the semester we have received a preponderance of technically and politically correct papers that reflect all the other Virtues, we will deem that writing good enough for a B.

Although composition studies handbooks and rhetorics hold out the Platonic ideals of excellence, particularly when their illustrations are from professional writers, classroom teachers perforce read these through the realistic lenses of “good enough.” The label, “good enough writing,” is an analogue of British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott’s concept of the “good enough mother,” neither negligent nor a smother-mother, but good enough

to provide adequate physical and psychological nurture that will ensure the development of a distinctive individual, a healthy child (17–19). Most of us tend to teach to the class average (or slightly above, but still within B range), yet oddly enough, given the tacit acceptance throughout the country of this pervasive concept, it has never been given a label that stuck.<sup>4</sup> Like Molière’s *Bourgeois Gentleman*, who was delighted to finally have a label to acknowledge that he had been speaking prose all his life, the label “good enough writing” tells us what we’ve been teaching our students to do all along. Now we know what to call the resulting work; if good enough writing is not the best outcome, it is certainly the normative practice that we tolerate.

## The Characteristics of Good Enough Writing

### *Rationality*

The academy purports to be nothing if not rational—a virtue as old as Aristotle. The academic writer, from student on up to faculty researcher, is constrained to write rationally, to produce non-fiction prose usually construed as expository or argumentative writing, critical or otherwise. This must be organized according to a logical plan or purpose and proceed by a series of logical steps from its initial premise to a logical conclusion. In pursuing this goal—the logical consequence of the five-paragraph theme construed as a heuristic rather than a template—the writer is expected and advised in all the *Handbooks*<sup>5</sup> to be reasonable, balanced, fair-minded, and “respectful of the feelings of [the] audience,” to “avoid rhetorical fallacies” and “learn from others’ arguments.” Thus the writer should be able to “distinguish fact from opinion,” “take a position” and “make claims” derived from “supporting evidence” based on “verifiable and reliable facts.” He or she should “respond to diverse views,” considering “at least two sides of the issue under discussion” (Glenn, Miller, and Webb 502–27).

Although ethical and emotional appeals receive a nod (a paragraph apiece in this 876-page book), the emphasis throughout the *Handbook*, as in the course it sustains, is on the rational.

*Emotion* and *passion*—which might signal the operation of a host of nonrational elements—are not indexed; *play* refers only to the literary genre. The dead seriousness that dominates academic discourse, allegedly the epitome of rationality, must prevail. William H. Gass contends that the article (or essay) as a genre—and by extrapolation, most academic writing—is far less rational than it purports to be, that it is in fact a “veritable Michelin of misdirection; for the article pretends that everything is clear, that its argument is unassailable, that there are no soggy patches, no illicit inferences, no illegitimate connections; it furnishes seals of approval and underwriters’ guarantees” (25). In point of fact, as all researchers and writing teachers know, every piece of academic writing has a point of view and presents an argument, explicit or implicit, and evidence to reinforce the author’s bias. Just because a piece of writing sounds objective (including, say, the essay you are reading right now) doesn’t mean that it is; though one can—and should, in a rational universe—be fair, one can never be objective.

### *Conformity, Conventionality*

Conformity, conventionality, and their consequent predictability are the necessary hallmarks of respectable academic writing. Academic readers expect academic writing to exhibit decorum and propriety appropriate in style and thought to the academic universe in general and to their discipline in particular. Teachers expect students to use Standard English, and follow the rules (see, for instance, Sullivan 385); and maintain decorum of thought as well as expression. Thus, as will be clear from the following discussion, the authors of good enough papers must color—and think—within the party lines, however loosely or tightly they are drawn at any given institution. However clearly or vaguely these are spelled out at any given school, most students are acculturated to understand them. When they don’t—if, for instance, they are from another culture or their first language is not English and even if they know the words they don’t understand the music—their failure to conform may land them in big trouble, as the following discussion reveals.

### ***Adherence to Standard English and Rules***

No matter how informal or slangy one's speech may be 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 (again, creative writing excepted), reinforced by conventional grammar, mechanics, and spelling. Failure to follow the rules will result in papers that are not good enough, no matter what other virtues they exhibit. Although the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) manifesto on "Students' Right to Their Own Language"—a defense of nonstandard English, among other things—was promulgated in 1974 and is still on the books, teachers detest error and devote much effort to stamping it out, as Connors and Lunsford's research in "Frequency of Formal Errors" reveals. Likewise, Mina 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). Though Mike Rose's equally sympathetic work, *Lives on the Boundary*, identifies many pitfalls that must be overcome on the road to successful academic writing, he shares Shaughnessy's vision of the ultimate goal. And, as David Bartholomae argues in "Inventing the University," when entering students have learned to talk the talk, they can walk the walk.

So taken for granted is this normative view of language that it is manifested from kindergarten through college in workbooks, grammar and usage tests, and spelling lists. Standard usage and grammar are addressed today in college and admissions (and exit) testing and placement. But these are the end of the line that now—as a consequence of the highly problematic, very politicized No Child Left Behind legislation—begins with mandatory testing in the primary grades and continues as long as the child remains in school. Despite objections from individual teachers and profes-

sional educational organizations, the law of the land reinforces adherence to the rules.

### *Decorum*

Student writing must stay within the decorous boundaries of expression, and—for many teachers—suitable (however they define it) parameters of thought and ideas, even at the risk of hypocrisy. Sarah Freedman’s classic research reveals that students whose writing is seen as insubordinate—too friendly, familiar, casual, presumptive of equal status with the teacher—may be penalized with lower grades (340–42). Making academic and professional norms explicit, *Harbrace* emphasizes that “respectful writers do not use homophobic” or racist or sexist language, and are “sensitive to ability, age, class, religion, and occupation” (287–89). Although the advice is couched in terms of language—“avoid the stereotyping that careless use of language can create” (289)—its implications are clear: if the writer’s true sentiments are subversive or transgressive, they should be suppressed in the writing.

Students socialized in American high schools arrive in college with an understanding of the deep as well as surface meaning of many types of writing assignments. Most of them steer clear of the cultural undertow in which they might drown, even when to do so means evading the underlying moral issues—a potential breach of ethics far more serious than surface impropriety. The heated discussion of “Queers, Bums, and Magic,” a gay-bashing paper in which the Kuwait-born student author also confesses to urinating on and beating up a homeless person in “San Fagcisco,” makes it clear that students who violate the prevailing moral imperatives, whether by intention or in innocence, run the risk of incurring the teacher’s wrath or even legal sanctions that could get them thrown out of school, into jail, or both (Miller; see my discussion in “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly”).

### *Self-Reliance, Responsibility, Honesty*

Composition teachers, ever Emersonian in spirit, stress the importance of self-reliance, despite the constraints on independent

thought and language imposed in the interests of decorum. “Your work must be your *own* work,” we say, even in collaborative classrooms. “*Yours* is the most important voice in a paper that has your name on it,” echoes the *Harbrace* (264). Yet, paradoxically, teachers distrust the personal voice (except in narratives), which signals ownership of the subject. And teachers emphatically discount the unsubstantiated opinion. Indeed, the most elaborate discussion of a single topic in the *Harbrace*, 16.6 percent of the total, is devoted to finding, using, and citing sources responsibly (548–693); the most responsible writing, students might well infer, is that which is most heavily and accurately cited. The emphasis on citations is also intended to nip irresponsibility in the bud. From sea to shining sea, as proscribed by decrees and honor codes throughout American colleges and universities, plagiarism and piracy, now complicated and confounded by the easy accessibility of materials on the Web, are the writer’s cardinal sins. The *Harbrace* epitomizes and updates conventional wisdom, beginning with a harsh opening sally: “Taking someone’s words or ideas and presenting them as your own leaves you open to criminal charges” (597). This is followed by, “In the film, video, music, and software businesses, this sort of theft is called *piracy*. In publishing and education, it is called *plagiarism* or *cheating*. Whatever it is called, it is illegal” (597). The ensuing discussion again typifies the paradox of requiring students to be self-reliant in finding and using sources while simultaneously distrusting them to do this accurately or, more particularly, honestly: “Although it is fairly easy to copy material from a Web site or even purchase a paper on the Web, it is just as easy for a teacher or employer to locate that same material on the Web and determine that it has been plagiarized” (598–99). Gotcha!

## *Order*

Most arenas of the academy, except those encouraging artistic creativity, depend on order—in calendars and schedules, procedures, and written documents. The academic world runs better when the participants can know, respect, and follow a predictable, conspicuous pattern. Thus good enough writing is reason-

ably well organized. Writing that looks disorganized is as disreputable as disorderly conduct, for disorder implies mental laxity, if not downright confusion, and shows disrespect for one's readers. We even like to see the organizational scaffolding; witness the popularity of PowerPoint presentations that threaten to become caricatures of order, arrangement made explicit in a series of short sentences or sentence fragments. Five paragraph themes likewise serve as their own caricature.

Nevertheless, the late Richard Marius's views on order in *A Writer's Companion* represent the academic norm. He asserts that "A Good Essay Gets to the Point Quickly" and "Stays with Its Subject" (47–53). It is well integrated and does not drift without clear purpose from item to item. 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" (53). Marius's advice, the antithesis of postmodernism, is proffered more categorically than, for instance, that of Strunk and White, who say, "Choose a suitable design and hold to it" (#12) (15). Their realistic analysis accommodates both the necessity of good design and the vagaries of the procedures by which it may be attained: "A basic structural design underlies every kind of writing. Writers will in part follow this design, in part deviate from it, according to their skills, their needs, and *the unexpected events that accompany the act of composition*" [italics mine]. Writing, they say, "to be effective, must follow closely the thoughts of the writer, but not necessarily the order in which those thoughts occur. This calls for a scheme of procedure." However, they add, "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.

### *Modesty in Form and Style*

Good enough writers are advised to keep out of sight, even while taking responsibility for their own ideas. For good enough writing is moderate and temperate, its qualities of style, form, and tone quiet, steady, and inconspicuous. This is a pragmatic re-



sponse to the ethos of the academy, for academics expect papers to be written in the form, language, and style appropriate to their respective discipline. When they are reading for substance, they cannot afford to be distracted by departures from conventions of form, or language that calls attention to itself, what my agriculture colleagues object to as “flowery writing.”

To violate the normative literary conventions of the discipline in which one is writing is to mark the writer as either highly naive or very unprofessional. Or so the academy believes.<sup>6</sup> Thus *Harbrace* identifies the particular conventions and illustrates them with sample papers: “Writing about literature follows certain special conventions” (“Use the full name of the author of a work in your first reference and only the last name in all subsequent references”); “Reports in the social sciences follow prescribed formats to present evidence”—along the lines of introduction, definitions, methods and materials, results, discussion and critique; and “Writing in the natural sciences is impartial and follows a prescribed format” to ensure that the experiments can be replicated (694–703).

The sense of style conveyed in Polonius’s advice to Laertes (“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) (70); “Do not inject opinion” (#17) (79–80). 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 analogues 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 and White 69). This precept governs much of the normative 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).

The author’s individual, human voice is generally not welcome, particularly in papers written by teams of authors, as in the hard sciences, where convention dictates anonymity. Yet when

the first person is permitted, Gass observes that such writing must appear voiceless, faceless, “complete and straightforward and footnoted and useful and certain” even when it is not, its polish “like that of the scrubbed step” (25). This suppression of the self, that might otherwise be manifested in the individual writer’s voice and distinctive features of syntax and vocabulary, has the effect of making a given piece of academic writing sound like every other piece in the same field. For a single writer’s voice to speak out would be to speak out of turn, and thus be regarded as immodest—calling attention to the speaker rather than where it properly belongs, on the subject.<sup>7</sup> The emergence of the authorial self, a necessary attribute of personal writing, may be one reason curmudgeonly diehard academic critics dislike and distrust this genre.

### *Efficiency, Economy*

Good enough academic writers squander neither time nor words. Concepts such as George 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. In *A Writer’s Companion*, Richard Marius reiterates, “Write Efficiently. Here is one of the fundamentals of modern English style: Use as few words as possible to say what you want to say” (10). Efficient prose, direct, honest, and to the point, enables readers to be efficient, as well, “without having to back up time and again to read it again to see what it means” (11). Although this advice could be interpreted as designed to produce a svelte body of Word Watchers in, say, advertising or the sciences, it seems just as likely to meet good enough writers where they live—writing to fulfill the letter of the required assignment (forget about its spirit) and get on with the more engaging aspects of their lives beyond the paper at hand.

By this criterion, the writer’s ideal composing process would be equally efficient. I question how often the ideal is actually met, for it is antithetical to the unruly, wasteful, disorderly means

by which creation usually occurs, even in good enough writing. Thus, although Lunsford and Connors in the second edition of *The St. Martin's Handbook*, for example, accurately explain that the writing process is “repetitive, erratic,” recursive, “and often messy,” rather than proceeding “in nice, neat steps,” they hold out the hope that “writing can be a little like riding a bicycle: with practice the process becomes more and more automatic” (3–4). To the extent that process follows format, this may be true. It may be possible to write on automatic pilot if writers are working with predetermined forms of academic and professional writing, such as research reports, business memos, literature reviews, lab reports, and writing against deadlines where time is truly money. Nevertheless, by the fifth edition, Lunsford has abandoned this concept: “It is inaccurate to envision a single writing process. There are, in fact, as many different writing processes as there are writers—more if you consider that individual writers vary their writing processes each time they sit down to write!” (32).

Whereas economy and efficiency are subordinated, if not suppressed, in Lunsford’s commentary, these concepts drive *Harbrace*’s discussion of writing against real-world deadlines. In what is likely a reflection of the writing process of many good enough students, *Harbrace* considers the fact that “[i]t may sometimes be necessary to abbreviate the writing process,” and therefore to cut corners by narrowing “the topic to a manageable scope” and drawing on one’s store of academic or experiential knowledge—“but stay away, if possible, from a topic that requires much research” (482). Check the topic and approach with your instructor; do the best you can in the time allotted, emphasizing the main points and a strong conclusion; proofread. And “[s]ubmit your work on time” (483).

### *Punctuality*

The academic and business worlds must run like clockwork in order to function well. Only selected creative writers and major thinkers—Proust and James Joyce come to mind—are expected to meet Matthew Arnold’s criterion of “the best that has been known and thought in the world,” and allowed by the workaday

world (to which they are sublimely indifferent) to take their sweet time about attaining this standard of excellence. But for the good enough student writer this is irrelevant; a balance must be struck between procrastination and production. If the writing produced against deadlines is simply good enough to do the job but no better, that's all right for most people, most institutions, most of the time. When the Muse must report for duty on time, at least the work gets written.

### *The Upshot*

If student papers meet all these criteria, are they guaranteed a B? Probably yes, for teachers oriented to the universe of good enough papers. But, as I indicated at the outset, not necessarily. Teachers for whom some criteria or types of error weigh more heavily than others, or who employ other local or institutional norms, may mark down or fail students who don't measure up. (As in the use of sentence fragments. Which I've now done twice in the same paragraph. So flunk me!) Teachers who value critical thinking, originality, discovery, experimentation, and other attributes of creativity—striking metaphors, dazzling language, a powerful individual voice—may also downgrade papers that are unoriginal, vacuous, faceless, voiceless, or otherwise bland. Let us examine why, for these teachers, good enough writing is simply not good enough.

### **The Consequences of Being Good Enough: What's Missing and What's Possible**

We get what we ask for, a plethora of procedural virtues. Thus we get student writing that is rational, well-organized, decorous, modest, and efficient; that plays by the rules of Standard English and academic discourse; that follows the disciplinary conventions of form and style, and is turned in on time. Handbooks, rhetorics, dictionaries, usage directives, study guides and checklists, tests reaffirm these academic values and virtues. Student writing that meets the letter of these expectations should, in many venues, be good enough to earn the B that all involved in the trans-

action—students, teachers, their institutions—will settle for. By and large, these are the qualities we can teach and reinforce. If, as a consequence, student papers—at least, on the introductory level—also seem predictable, pedestrian, perhaps boring, well, maybe we’re implicitly asking for this as well.

Beginning students can learn the conventions before they gain the knowledge and authority that will enable them to make genuine intellectual contributions to the ongoing dialogue in their field. Whether this writing could ever become better than good enough—supply the adjective—amazing, engaging, groundbreaking, earthshaking, or exciting in a myriad of other wonderful ways may be beyond our capacity to teach. But maybe not. Students may just have to cross the great divide between As and Bs on their own—but we would be remiss as teachers if we didn’t try to help them on the ascent.

Beyond this great divide are, of course, the characteristics missing from the list of those that constitute good enough writing. These include: evidence of the writer’s critical thinking; grappling with multiple, perhaps contradictory, sources and ideas; questioning both authority and one’s own convictions; experimentation with genre, language, and other attributes of form, style, persona, and voice. Any and all of these have the potential to transform a good enough paper into a great one. In the process, student writers must transform, transcend, violate, or ignore a number of the attributes of good enough writing. In this section I address some of the possibilities for writing that could change the meaning of “good enough” from the merely acceptable to the genuinely good.

Because these attributes of genuinely good writing are much more variable, they are more difficult to categorize and to define, although we—and our students—know them when we see them. Whether these can be taught to first-year student writers is debatable, but students can certainly be exposed to the concepts. Success depends in part on how automatically the students can deal with the essentials of good enough writing so they can concentrate on the more challenging and creative aspects of the assignment at hand. Success depends also on the teacher’s own appreciation of, understanding of, and ability to write with creative, confrontational, or otherwise original thinking and ex-

pression, for it's hard if not impossible to teach what one cannot do. All my life I have advocated writing in the genres we teach, for ourselves and our students (see "Why Don't We Write What We Teach?"). After writing a dissertation that was a critical analysis of the methodology of literary biography ("How Literary Biographers Use Their Subjects' Works"), I wrote the biography of America's best-known living author, Benjamin Spock, to learn firsthand what I could about writing biography (see "Growing Up"). It turns out that I learned a lot. Long experience as a teacher and author of textbooks convinces me that students write best about literature when they write as insiders, creators of texts in the genre, mode, and even the sensibility of the work they are studying.

Indeed, today many Readers, which are textbook collections of articles and essays, complement the readings with demanding assignments intended to "draw on students' creative imaginations and analytical skills to turn them from passive consumers into active producers of critical and creative texts" (Scholes, Comley, and Ulmer v)—an application of Scholes's theory articulated in *Textual Power*. Among the more thoroughgoing are Scholes, Comley, and Ulmer's *Text Book: Writing through Literature*, now in its third edition (2002), Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Ways of Reading*, the seventh edition also published in 2004, and my own books, including current editions of *The Essay Connection*, *The Arlington Reader*, and *Inquiry*, although it would be possible for imaginative teachers to create such transformative writing assignments from nearly any contemporary textbook.

Whereas outsiders read and write as aliens trying to second-guess the teacher's understanding of unapproachable iconic texts, insiders are reading and writing "through literature," as Scholes et al. explain, to produce original texts of their own. Space does not permit here a comprehensive analysis of the scope, variety, depth, and level of difficulty of assignments intended to transform student writers from outsiders to insiders. There is room, however, to briefly illustrate this pedagogical philosophy with some of my own assignments from "Coming of Age in American Autobiography," a course I have taught recently to honors first-year students and (in a separate course) to upperclass undergradu-

ates. The central readings in each course are six canonical American autobiographies: Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, Thoreau's *Walden*, Annie Dillard's *American Childhood*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, and Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*. To enable the students "to identify some of the issues and problems of the autobiographers' art—as readers, critics, and writers" (one of the course aims), I ask them in discussion and in writing to "examine the ways autobiographers see themselves (and others) and shape their vision and self-presentation—as children in an idyllic or problematic era; as members of a particular gender, social class or ethnic, regional, or racial group; as people fulfilling particular destinies or roles; as individuals in family, occupational, or other group contexts." They do this, however, not as ventriloquists of high culture criticism, which would put them in the conventional roles of outsiders trying to unlock iconic texts and characters, but insiders trying to recreate these figures through interpreting the subjects' self-interpretations, central ideas, milieu; psychological, intellectual, and social growth and development.

Thus one assignment requires students to work in pairs to "[w]rite a dialogue between Franklin and Douglass in which they discuss, debate, and ultimately define the meaning(s) of one of the following concepts as it pertains to either coming of age as an individual or as a nation (or both): independence, self-reliance, defiance of authority, citizenship, maturity, contributions to/engagement in the larger society." Another assignment asks pairs of students to "[d]esign a 21st century house for Thoreau, in an appropriate setting. One of you (as Annie Dillard) is the decorator. The other is the environmental engineer and landscaper. Remembering Frank Lloyd Wright's dictum, 'form follows function,' this dwelling and its environment should reflect, be symbolic of the predominant values of the people involved. You may include a drawing, floor plan, sketches, photos, whatever, ad lib." Of course, to fully experience autobiography as a genre, it is essential for the students to write one on the theme of the course: "Tell a true story with yourself as the central character—of some experience; event; relationship with a person or group; recognition of a belief or value system; or other phenomenon that was pivotal in your coming of age and/or understanding of the world."

Other briefer writings involve keeping a Thoreauvian journal, telling a joke Dillard's family would appreciate, making a list in the style of Richard Wright, and constructing a Kingstonesque cautionary tale.

The students lit up when they read these papers—every single one—aloud to their primary audience, the class; their discussions were energetic, enthusiastic, and engaged. So it was not surprising that when I asked the students to evaluate each assignment individually, they loved “trying new modes of writing and getting into the heads of the authors we were reading.” With the exception of one paper, we all loved the results: varied, imaginative, on target, and—a bonus for me—virtually unparaphrasable because they are so specifically geared to the texts and context of the course. (Surprisingly, none of the twenty-four chapters in Buranen and Roy's otherwise comprehensive *Perspectives on Plagiarism* addresses writing assignments.) As one student commented, “I was pleasantly surprised with the assignments. I liked them a great deal more than the simple, mechanical, and stereotypical critical papers I was used to.” The autobiography, assigned two-thirds of the way through the class (I shared my own “Living to Tell the Tale”), was voted “the best paper of the year,” and further validation of insider writing: “It gave everyone a hands-on experience with the genre. While I found writing about myself exceedingly difficult, this assignment gave me a great appreciation of the subject matter of this course.”

There are other types of real-world writing assignments so thoroughly embedded in innovative course material that they require extensive original investigation and very careful writing and revising—much of it conducted in groups. Linda Flower in *The Construction of Negotiated Meaning* and Thomas Deans in *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition* explore a variety of writing courses and projects that ask students and teachers to situate their work and their writing in disciplinary as well as wider nonacademic communities with which the classes form partnerships (Deans 9). The writings thus become reports, bulletins, brochures, operating manuals, position statements, case studies, and a host of other materials described in the four programs Deans examines in detail, as well as in the appendix of courses offered in sixty-one other schools (219–44; see also



Deans's textbook, *Writing and Community Action*). The students are described as highly invested in their work, which is perforce original and usually takes a great deal of time, because the students have to learn to understand the subject to which it pertains and the contexts in which it will be read. Much of it, intended for business, professional, or community audiences, has to be technically proficient. Whether it is intellectually innovative as well, or essentially only good enough is beside the point of Flower's and Deans's research, though the students have considerable incentive, encouragement, and models to make their writing clear, accurate, and to the point.

## Truly Good Enough Writing

It should be apparent by now that in the final analysis good enough writing may not really be good enough at all, even if, as realists, we're willing to settle for it. If we're good enough teachers, are we only good enough to help students navigate the upward (and sometimes slippery) slope, but not good enough to get them to the summit? Should we, dare we, ask more of ourselves—as teachers? As innovative writers who understand from the inside out how to break the mold? If not, can we ask more of our students? If so, if we do fulfill our escalating demands on ourselves, perhaps our students still won't want to scale the peak. But, with creative assignments and latitudinarian pedagogy, we can set that vision before them, point them in the right direction, coach them for the climb, and expect the best. When we get it, that writing will truly be good enough.

## Notes

1. For instance, in "What Is 'College-Level' Writing?" Patrick Sullivan reports that his informal survey of community college faculty and administrators reveals their common understanding that what is "'college-level' at one institution [is] clearly not college-level at others" (383).

2. *Evaluation and the Academy*, Rosovsky and Hartley's thoroughgoing survey of the research literature from the 1960s through the mid-

1990s provides comprehensive evidence to demonstrate that large-scale surveys show that “the number of A’s increased nearly four fold” during this time, from “7 percent in 1969 to 26 percent in 1993, and that the number of C’s declined 66 percent (from 25 percent in 1969 to 9 percent in 1993)”; that “across all institutional types GPA’s rose approximately 15–20 percent from the mid-1960s through the mid-1990s,” by which time “the average grade (formerly a C) resided in the B- to B range. More recent research [1995] across all types of schools shows that only between 10 percent and 20 percent of students receive grades lower than a B-A” (p. 5 includes the authors’ extensive citations).

3. Some portions of the discussion below are adapted from my analysis of “Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise,” though here the orientation is different.

4. A literature search reveals only a single, fleeting use of the concept, likewise derived from Winnicott, by Peter Elbow: “By ‘good enough writing,’ I do not mean mediocre writing with which we cannot be satisfied. But I do not mean excellent writing, either. . . . In my view, the concept is particularly appropriate for required writing courses where many students are there under duress and are more interested in satisfying the requirement acceptably than in achieving excellence. (Can we hold that against them?) Yet in elective writing courses, ‘good enough writing’ is also appropriate because students there are more ready to develop their own autonomous standards” (87).

5. I am using as the source of normative advice *The Writer’s Harbrace Handbook* (Glenn, Miller, and Webb), the 2004 descendant of the ubiquitous ur-Harbrace, with thirty-nine editions 1941–98, a status warranted by its longevity and ascendancy in the market for years.

6. For example, to claim in a paper of literary criticism on Shakespeare that “Shakespeare was a great writer,” though true, is considered a mark of critical naiveté, for everyone (however that is determined) knows this. Nevertheless, if a noted critic were to make that claim, the cognoscenti would attribute this apparent banality to extreme sophistication—since the critic couldn’t possibly be that naive—and try to puzzle out what arcane meaning she or he intended by making such an obvious statement.

7. *Harbrace*, surprisingly, says that “The first person is typically used” in literary analyses (718), though a brief survey of the industry standard, *PMLA*, reveals that of eight substantive articles in the January 2003 issue, only three (by John Carlos Rowe, Lori Ween, and Michael Bérubé) used the first person, Rowe and Ween very sparingly and impersonally: “I admit there is a tendency” (Rowe 78); “I will mention

only" (Rowe 83); "I extend to the marketing of novels James Twichell's observation" (Ween 92). This seemingly idiosyncratic advice is not borne out by other widely used handbooks, Lunsford's *St. Martin's Handbook*, fifth edition (2003); Kirszner and Mandell's *Brief Handbook*, fourth edition (2004); or Hacker's *Writer's Reference*, fifth edition (2003).

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