

4 Diagnosis for Teaching One-to-One

It has been said that grading a paper at home without the writer nearby is like judging a golfer's talents and weaknesses by looking at his scorecard back at the clubhouse. Like many pungent metaphors, this too is an overstatement, though it does highlight the tendency to rely on the product or result for an analysis of the process that produced it. In the conference, however, we are able to look beyond products to the writers who produced them in order to determine the help needed. In conferences, in fact, products aren't even necessary to initiate the instruction, because we can begin working with the writer before words ever appear on paper and continue working as drafts develop. At every stage of interaction with writers we listen and ask about what is being written (or planned) in order to encourage the writer, to offer feedback as readers, and to diagnose writing skills problems in order to determine what, if any, our instructional help should be. William Irmscher asks us to consider what the basis of that help will be when he asks: "Does instruction in writing consist of telling students what we know about the process of writing or using what we know to diagnose their difficulties and helping them solve their problems?"¹ Diagnosis is the necessary basis for—and precursor of—instruction.

Diagnosis is a highly complex act because, like writing, it is a set of intertwining processes that can and do occur simultaneously. We must consider what the student is doing, what the writing reveals, what lenses we are looking through, and what is involved in the skills needed. Consider, for example, the following sentence:

Then I ate all three sandwiches very slowly as I stared at my mom
while I ate them she knew I wanted her to notice me.

To identify this as a run-on sentence is merely to label an error, but such a label is not a diagnosis because it doesn't consider the particular writer (what she knows, how she writes, and how she learns), the writing (what the context of the error is), the teacher (what our goals

for that student are), or the error (what is involved in being able to understand the appropriate grammatical rule).

In addition to considering all these aspects, we also have to be aware that, like writing, diagnosis is a process that unfolds, that requires backtracking as well as forward motion. That is, we may generate some ideas about what to help the student with, only to find as we progress, because of new information, that our suppositions were wrong, incomplete, or shortsighted. One problem may be masking another, deeper one that needs to be dealt with, or we may have thought the cause of a problem to be one thing when it becomes apparent later that another cause is more likely. Or a better alternative suddenly suggests itself. All this complexity, however, should not stifle our diagnostic efforts because, as with the process of writing, no one waits until every subprocess is mastered before plunging in. And, as with writing, the best way to get better at it is by doing it.

The Teacher

Evaluation Criteria

One aspect of diagnosis is to take a close look at ourselves and what we teach. Do we see our function as editing the paper or helping the writer develop? Do we react to certain writing problems more readily than to others? Is there a pattern to these reactions? For example, are we prone to reacting more strongly to grammatical errors because we have a low tolerance for surface error on a page, because grammatical error is easier to identify, or because we see our role as teachers of correctness? Does concern with sentence-level correctness block our ability to look beyond the errors to the ideas expressed? Or do we ignore grammatical errors, hoping they will disappear somehow because we don't know how to help students overcome them, because we find it tedious to teach grammatical rules, or because mechanical correctness is not a high priority in our evaluation of writing? Do we value style more than organization? Are we prone to rewarding the five-paragraph essay or recoiling from it?

Whatever criteria we use, we must be conscious of those criteria and how they influence and color what we see on paper and hear from the student. We also have to consider all the evaluation criteria our students have absorbed from previous teachers of writing and the degree to which those criteria may differ from ours. And, finally, as studies reported by John Daly indicate, we should acknowledge that

there is a tendency among teachers to expect better writing from students who are less apprehensive about writing than from students who are more apprehensive.²

Teaching Methods and Styles

We also need to consider *how* we teach, because that will influence how we gather information and what we do with the results of our diagnosis. Since we all have preferred modes of learning, it follows that we will present information and suggestions in accord with the ways that we ourselves learn or gather and process information. Matching, or mismatching, our preferences with those of our students is a major concern. If, for example, we tend to conceptualize visually, will our diagrams and drawings be a good way to help all students learn, or should we attempt to consider their preferences as well? Though we deal well with discrete units of information, does the student perhaps need more context? When learning styles are mismatched, the unfortunate result, as experimental evidence has shown, is that student understanding and retention drop markedly.³

Composing Styles

And then there are questions of our own composing processes. If we tend to do our planning in our heads, are we offering inappropriate advice to the student who prefers to write down every option on paper before crossing some out? If we use outlines in our own composing, do we therefore see a disorganized draft of a student paper as an indication of lack of direction—even if the student habitually needs discovery draft after discovery draft to begin defining the point of the paper? Or, conversely, do we diagnose an overconcern with editing skills in early drafts if we prefer to delay such practices until later? Do we insist on extensive prior planning and exploration with writers who are more comfortable with exploring as they proceed through free-writing drafts? If we remember some childhood embarrassment about our spelling mistakes, do we unconsciously assume the bad spellers we meet now feel similar embarrassment? Other possible interferences can be listed indefinitely. The point, however, is that we should not diagnose student writing problems or offer help using only ourselves as yardsticks or allowing our preferences to be imposed on our students. Of course, it will happen, especially when so little is known about individual differences in all these areas, but being cognizant of the problem may keep us from committing excesses.

The Student

Differences in Personality Types

Attempts to identify individual differences among composing styles have produced a number of approaches and taxonomies, and while these may not yet have been sufficiently verified by large-scale research, they do offer windows into the differences we note among our students, differences that can be helpful in diagnostic work. One such system, developed by George Jensen and John DiTiberio, is based on the work of Carl Jung (later refined by Isabel Meyers) on personality types.⁴ This system differentiates four bipolar dimensions, each of which represents opposing psychological processes:

1. “extraversion” (to preserve Jung’s spelling)-introversion (ways of focusing one’s energies)
2. sensing-intuition (ways of perceiving)
3. thinking-feeling (ways of making evaluations and decisions)
4. judging-perceiving (ways of approaching tasks in the outer world)

To relate these dimensions to writing processes, Jensen and DiTiberio observed several groups of writers and concluded that writers who are extraverts tend to leap into tasks with little planning, relying instead on trial and error to complete the tasks. They think more clearly and develop more ideas while in action or conversation and need feedback and interaction. Introverts, on the other hand, anticipate and reflect beforehand, and they think best and develop more ideas when they are alone. Although they do need to plan, too much planning can cause them to block. Such distinctions suggest that we acknowledge some students’ increased need for conference time to plan their writing since the interchange can be productive. Jensen and DiTiberio’s description also suggests that, in addition, we need to watch for the possibility that other students are best left to work on their own, as conference conversation may not be an effective planning tool for them. We would also expect that some extraverts might need more drafts to develop effective products because their trial-and-error approach could require more rewriting and revising than that of introverts.

Sensing and intuition, the second dimension in this system, are personality types differing in that sensing types make more direct use of their perceptions. They are oriented toward concrete details, while intuitive types use impressions and their imaginations and are oriented toward ideas. In telling stories, sensing types use reality as their starting point, that is, what happened when, and so on; intuitive types, on

the other hand, are likely to start with what sensing types save for last, namely, the meaning behind events. To understand concepts, sensing types need concrete examples, and they write best when given explicit, detailed instructions, preferably step-by-step procedures. When they write, sensing types may find it easier when they are given a specific framework, and they attend closely to mechanics, often seeing revising as merely correcting. Intuitive types, on the other hand, write best when given general instructions from which they can create their own goals. They can become blocked by their need for originality, and their first drafts may contain only ideas and generalities unsupported by concrete examples. For diagnostic purposes these differences lend themselves readily to understanding what each type needs to work on. For example, we would focus on helping intuitive writers bring more examples and details to their early drafts, and we would want to be sure that we use concrete examples when explaining anything to a sensing type. Sensing types may also have difficulties in doing the large-scale "re-seeing" that is needed for revision since, as Jensen and DiTiberio have noted, they have a tendency to look more for mechanical errors to fix as they move to later drafts of their papers.

The third dimension in this personality type system, thinking and feeling, describes how one makes evaluations, judgments, and decisions. Thinking types, as described by Jensen and DiTiberio, prefer to make decisions on the basis of objective criteria and excel at the process of categorizing, whereas feeling types prefer to make decisions on the basis of subjective factors such as personal values. Moreover, thinking types need clear, objective performance standards, focus on clarity of content, usually follow an outline as an organizational pattern, and may need to enliven their writing with vivid personal examples when revising. In contrast, feeling types need to relate their personal values to topics. They tend to focus on how an audience may react, worrying that the audience will be bored or find the ideas inadequate. When revising, they may need to clarify their thoughts or improve their organization. They will be less likely to follow outlines, which may be constraining for them. In the conference setting, we would expect students who fall at either end of this spectrum to voice very different goals for their papers, with thinking types interested in clarity and feeling types more concerned about their readers' reactions. Thinking types might also want clear-cut assignment guidelines for what their papers are to be and how the papers will be evaluated, while feeling types may be more likely to handle open-ended assignments comfortably.

Finally, the fourth dimension is judging-perceiving. Judging types tend to be decisive, to limit their topics quickly, and to set manage-

able goals. Before writing they devote time to what Linda Flower and John Hayes call process goals (how to get things done).⁵ They make stylistic and organizational decisions quickly, so when they revise they need to consider the implications of their data or ideas and to expand their writing to clarify or qualify bluntly worded statements. They are also in danger of adhering to plans too rigidly. Unlike judging types, perceiving types tend not to limit their topics. Their first drafts are often long and thorough, but too inclusive. They tend to feel that they must write everything that could be written on a subject. Jensen and DiTiberio's distinctions suggest that revision will be a matter of seeing what to expand upon, for judging types, and what to chop out, for perceiving types.

Students will not, of course, fit themselves neatly at one end or the other of any of these spectra, but we can see from the range of preferences described above that we should expect great diversity in our students. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by the welter of differences we see, however, we can take comfort in knowing that the conference setting will allow us to offer more appropriate instruction than is available in the large-group setting of the classroom. Part of that instruction will be to help students understand how their preferences guide their composing. We can also help students work in ways unfamiliar to them, for, as Jensen and DiTiberio have observed, writers function best when their early drafts draw upon their preferred processes and later drafts on unpreferred modes to round out the writing. For example, intuitive types may need help in adding sensory detail, while feeling types may need more work on organization. We can also use an awareness of these personality dimensions to recognize that students' difficulties may be due to assignments which are structured in ways that will cause them problems, as when sensing types flounder when given the kind of general writing assignments that intuitive types can handle more easily. And these distinctions also help to structure the ways in which we help different students learn, working from example to concept for sensing types and from concept to example for intuitive types.

Differences in Cognitive Styles

Another system for differentiating among writers is that of distinguishing various cognitive styles, that is, how people process information. Mike Rose's case study data for his work on writing blocks suggest to him at least three composing styles based on differences in cognitive styles:

1. The ruminative style (the writer is reflective, ponders linguistic and ideational choices, is given to lapses of thought, is easily captivated by an idea or by the play of language) [and “might tend to produce discourse slowly” (79)].
2. The analytic style (the writer is cautious, precise, prefers a focus on the particulars of language or process rather than on the entire writing task) [and “might tend to get caught up in sentence-level particulars at the expense of broad discourse goals” (79)].
3. The pragmatic style (the writer tends to make interpretive and compositional choices in light of the purpose of the task—the writer looks outward to audience).⁶

Writer’s Block and Writing Apprehension

For diagnostic work, Mike Rose’s studies of writer’s block are particularly helpful, for writer’s block can stifle seemingly capable writers and cause them great difficulties. “I don’t like to write” may be merely the surface expression of the real problem, “It takes me too long to write anything.” And that time element is really due to writer’s block, which Rose defines as “an inability to begin or continue writing for reasons other than a lack of basic skill or commitment” (3). As Rose explains, writers may block for one or more of a variety of reasons:

1. The rules by which such writers guide their composing processes are rigid, inappropriately invoked, or incorrect. For example, such writers will proclaim that “you must always put your thesis statement at the end of your first paragraph” or that “good writers never use the verb ‘to be.’”
2. These writers’ assumptions about composing are misleading. For example, they may believe that the best writing comes with little toil.
3. These writers edit too early in the composing process. Such editing can be premature and antiproduative when the writer tends to it unduly in early or rough draft stages. (Rose’s high blockers edited twice as often as low blockers.)
4. These writers lack appropriate planning and discourse strategies or rely on inflexible or inappropriate strategies.
5. These writers invoke conflicting rules, assumptions, plans, and strategies. For example, a high blocker may state that writers must avoid the passive and keep “I” out of reports. (For a study of such contradictory perceptions, misinformation, and half-truths, see “Contradictory Perceptions of Rules for Writing.”)⁷
6. These writers evaluate their writing with inappropriate criteria or criteria inadequately understood.

While writer's block can keep writers from writing, a related problem, writing anxiety, accompanies a number of ineffective writing habits and processes. In his survey of the research on writing apprehension, John Daly notes studies that show that overly anxious writers dislike writing, have little confidence in their writing abilities, fear evaluation of their written products, are less able than their peers to handle personal expressive writing such as narratives or descriptions, and produce fewer words. They also tend to infer less about their audience, engage in less planning, and spend less time planning sentences, editing, and reworking their writing. A case study done by Cynthia Selfe offers a close look at how writing apprehension affected the composing processes of a highly apprehensive writer who procrastinated, had a limited repertoire of writing skills, and was unable to attack academic writing problems successfully.⁸

Methods for Observing Writers' Composing Processes

To diagnose writer's block, writing apprehension, and other cognitive processing problems that can affect writers, there are several approaches. For writing apprehension there is a twenty-six-item questionnaire, the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Scale.⁹ A method for uncovering writer's block suggested by Rose (86) is to gather students' writing histories by interviewing them—asking about previous writing courses, writing activities, and attitudes—and by examining every scrap of paper they used for a recent assignment. Yet another method is to observe students as they compose, a technique that lends itself well to the conference setting, for even watching a student compose a brief paragraph can be illuminating. Several methods for observing writing processes, discussed in more detail in "Diagnosing Writing Process Problems,"¹⁰ are:

1. *Post hoc questioning*: Of the various observation methods, this is the least obtrusive, since it involves watching writers as they write and asking questions only afterward. Writers may not remember what they were thinking during various stages of composing and are prone to saying that they were engaged in what they think they should have been doing, but they still can report useful information about how they wrote.
2. *Stimulated recall*: This involves videotaping students as they write and playing back the tape as the writer comments on what was happening and responds to questions by the observer. As in post hoc questioning, the writer can forget or embellish, though the visual reminders on the videotape can help in triggering

more precise recall. (There is, of course, the problem of access to the necessary recording equipment.)

3. *Speaking-aloud protocols*: Here students are asked to verbalize aloud what they are thinking as they write. These protocols are taped and can be analyzed later. The intrusiveness of thinking aloud during composing is indeed a disturbance, and thinking aloud is, at best, an incomplete record because writers can say only some of what they are thinking. But despite these limitations, what is spoken is a very rich source of information.

In my work with speaking-aloud protocols used for diagnostic purposes, I have been able to observe students with a variety of composing process problems I would probably not have become aware of otherwise. In one case the student's well-written papers offered no clue as to why she found writing so difficult. Asked to discuss her problems, she could respond only with a symptom, that she spent many hours composing a few pages of text. Observation of her writing processes revealed that her difficulties sprang from indecisiveness—an inability to choose what to put on paper. Faced with options for content and word choice, she would generate yet more options and agonize over what to put on paper. Other students, asked to think aloud as they wrote, revealed other problems—of overdependence on the teacher's criteria rather than their own, of premature editing, of ineffective outlining, and of incessant rereading of the text being composed (these also are described more fully in "Diagnosing Writing Process Problems"). For those interested in using this method it is necessary to listen closely and to observe students' composing strategies as they write. Are the writer's strategies sufficiently varied, flexible, and complex? Do they help the writer complete the writing task appropriately? Are these strategies productive, or can we offer suggestions for improvement? Is there anything missing or inadequate in the student's composing processes? The answers to such questions can provide the kind of close, individualized help students need.

Cultural Differences

When our students are not members of the dominant American culture, there is yet another area of differentiation important for diagnostic work, that of culture. Students brought up in other cultures acquire habits, behavior patterns, perspectives, ways of delivering information, and other cultural filters that can affect writing in ways we often do not sufficiently attend to—and indeed are in danger of ignoring. For example, if another person's culture displays a strong

preference for conveying information indirectly, merely criticizing paragraphs written in English by that person as too diffuse, wordy, or unclear is not likely to produce improvement. Instead, we must first recognize that we are dealing with a cultural difference and then discuss with that person the appropriate rhetorical patterns for prose in English.

That such differences abound is clear, for, as Robert Kaplan has noted, "Each language and each culture has a paragraph order unique to itself, and . . . part of the learning of a particular language is the mastering of its logical system."¹¹ In a later article Kaplan looks back at his earlier statements about the rhetorical structures of different languages and concludes that those earlier statements may have been too strongly worded.¹² But he still maintains that while all forms are possible in different languages, they don't occur with equal frequency. Such a statement reminds us not to form stereotypes about such cultural differences but, at the same time, to be aware of them as teachers, evaluators, and diagnosticians of writing. These students are not committing errors but employing a rhetoric and sequence of thought which are appropriate for them but which violate the expectations of a native English-speaking reader.

Kaplan's work on cultural thought patterns has defined for us the rhetorical structures of paragraphs and whole pieces of discourse—that is, how the text is organized and developed—for several languages. As Kaplan explains ("Cultural Thought Patterns," 4-9), English thought patterns are predominantly linear in development, allowing for little or no digression, while paragraph development in Semitic languages is based on a complex series of parallel constructions. Thus, maturity of style in English is often gauged by the degree of subordination rather than the coordination required in the extensive parallelism of a Semitic speaker's prose. In Karyn Thompson-Panos and Maria Thomas-Ruzic's analysis of Arabic, they note that coordinating conjunctions frequently appear at the beginning of Arabic sentences because of an Arabic predilection for emphasizing sequence of events and balance of thought, forms that favor coordination.¹³ We might, therefore, see Arabic students' attempts to write English paragraphs as riddled with excessive *ands* and *buts*, as evident in the following excerpt from an Arab student's paper developed by coordination and parallelism:

At that time of the year I was not studying enough to pass my courses in school. *And* all the time I was asking my cousin to let me ride the bicycle, *but* he wouldn't let me. *But* after two weeks, noticing that I was so much interested in the bicycle, he promised me that if I pass my courses in school for that year he would give

it to me as a present. So I began to study hard. *And* I studying eight hours a day instead of two.

My cousin seeing me studying that much he was sure that I was going to succeed in school. So he decided to give me some lessons in riding the bicycle. After four or five weeks of teaching me and ten or twelve times hurting myself as I used to go out of balance, I finally knew how to ride it. *And* the finals in school came *and* I was very good prepared for them so I passed them. My cousin kept his promise *and* gave me the bicycle as a present. *And* till now I keep the bicycle in a safe place, *and* everytime I see it, it reminds me how it helped to pass my courses for that year. (From Kaplan, "Cultural Thought Patterns," 9)

Since students from a Semitic culture will value this form of development, they need to learn not just how to subordinate in English but also why they should adopt patterns of expression they will not initially value as good writing.

Another difference in Arabic thought, noted by Edward Hall, is that history is used by Arabs as the basis for almost any modern action.¹⁴ The chances are that an Arab won't start a talk or a speech or analyze a problem without first developing the historical aspect of his or her subject. Here again, we can imagine the response of a composition teacher, unaware of such a propensity, to a paper whose topic would not seem (to a native speaker of English) to require a historical perspective in the introduction. We can also imagine the Arab student's response when told that such an introduction is unnecessary or not to the point. Such a student might also be told that his or her writing is wordy and repetitious and perhaps too prone to overstatement because of stylistic differences which also mark Arabic prose. Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ruzic (619) note that as part of the Arabic linguistic tradition main points are overasserted and exaggerated, thus calling for increased use of superlatives. Frequent rewording and restatement are also devices used for clarity of communication. Measured against the preferences of readers whose cultural conditioning leads them to favor moderation, understatement, and/or conciseness, typical Arabic structure and style may seem inadequate.

The prose of Oriental students, when evaluated in terms of rhetorical traditions taught in American schools, can appear deficient in other ways. After having taught in China, Carolyn Matalene warns us that some advice dispensed by Western teachers of writing is not easily understood by Chinese students learning English.¹⁵ As Matalene explains, students trained in Chinese traditions absorb a cultural heritage that emphasizes memorization of phrases from classical sources and that values working within given traditions, not departing from them. To such students our recommendations that they avoid clichés

and seek to use original phrases are counseling them “to write like uneducated barbarians” (792). In Kaplan’s analysis (“Cultural Thought Patterns,” 10), Oriental paragraphs are marked by indirection. The Oriental writer will circle around a subject, showing it from a variety of tangential views, but not looking at it directly. Development can be in terms of what things are not rather than what they are. For example, consider the following paragraphs written by a Korean student:

Definition of College Education

College is an institution of an higher learning that gives degrees. All of us needed culture and education in life, if no education to us, we should go to living hell.

One of the greatest causes that while other animals have remained as they first man along has made such rapid progress is has learned about civilization.

The improvement of the highest civilization is in order to education up-to-date.

So college education is very important thing which we don’t need mention about it. (From Kaplan, “Cultural Thought Patterns,” 10)

It is not uncommon in writing labs for Oriental students who have written such paragraphs to appear with notes from teachers asking for help in learning how to get to the point and to use more concrete details and examples. But merely giving these students such advice is not likely to effect much change if they continue to see the direct approach as rude. As one Oriental student admitted to me, “I would rather not offend my readers.” Similarly, the Japanese preference, noted by Edward Hall, for going around and around a point can be frustrating to an American while the American preference for getting to the point so quickly is just as frustrating to the Japanese, who do not understand why Americans have to be so “logical” all the time.¹⁶

While Kaplan’s analysis of cultural thought patterns concentrates heavily on Semitic and Oriental methods of development, he also notes that writers in French and Spanish exhibit much greater freedom to digress from their subjects than do writers in English. Kaplan offers the graphic representation in figure 1 of the movements of paragraphs from five different cultures.¹⁷

Although Kaplan reminds us that “much more detailed and more accurate descriptions are required before any meaningful contrastive systems can be elaborated” (“Cultural Thought Patterns,” 15), his work can serve as an important reminder in our evaluation and diagnostic work that we cannot merely label as errors or problems those characteristics in the discourse of non-native speakers of English

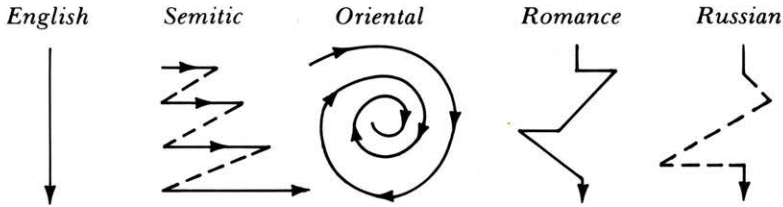


Figure 1.

which they bring with them from the rhetorical traditions of their own languages. Instead, we must realize the difficulty these students will have in trying to learn—and to accept as appropriate—cultural perspectives that may overturn or upset many of their unconscious assumptions about the world.

The depth to which cultural differences influence the content and development of written communication can also be seen in another factor, the degree of reader/writer involvement assumed by writers in different cultures. As explained by John Hinds, the concept of reader versus writer responsibility considers the degree of involvement the reader will have, a degree which will depend on the language being used.¹⁸ In some languages, such as English, the writer (or speaker) is the person primarily responsible for effective communication, for making clear, well-organized statements. In other languages, however, such as Japanese, the reader (or listener) is the person primarily responsible, meaning that if a breakdown in communication occurs, it is the reader who assumes the burden of responsibility because he or she hasn't exerted enough effort. Muneo Yoshikawa's explanation for the Japanese view of reader responsibility is that because the Japanese mistrust verbal language what is not verbalized counts more than what is verbalized.¹⁹ The Japanese reader/listener, who is supposed to know by "intuition" what is not said aloud, is therefore aware that what is expressed and what is actually intended are two different things. Similarly, Carolyn Matalene's study of Chinese rhetoric leads her to conclude that to be indirect, to expect the audience to infer meanings rather than to have them spelled out, is a defining characteristic of Chinese rhetoric.

A related perspective on the same cultural distinction is offered by Edward Hall, who differentiates between high-context and low-context cultures. It is typical of people in a high-context culture, Hall notes, to communicate less directly than do those in a low-context culture because they assume that much of what they think and mean can go without saying. This is possible in a high-context culture because of an extensive information network among family, friends, coworkers,

and clients, who keep each other informed and reduce the need for context (or background information). Hall lists as examples of high-context cultures the French, Spanish, Italian, peoples of the Middle East, and Japanese. Examples of low-context cultures, notes Hall, are Americans and northern Europeans such as the Germans, Swiss, and Scandinavians. Thus, in intercultural communication, explains Hall, a German would seek detailed, explicit information, while a Japanese would be likely to feel uneasy if he or she were being too direct.²⁰ Because international business can suffer unless adjustments are made for different cultures, businesspeople are training themselves to become more aware of such differences. Similarly, as we read written communication from writers of other cultures, we too must be aware of such differences as we offer instruction and evaluate and diagnose papers. It is best, of course, to start by presenting these writers with the rhetorical information they need to write English prose, explaining not just the syntax and grammar of the language but its rhetorical standards and its readers' expectations as well. And we must be patient and realize that learning the intricacies of English verb tenses is still far easier than learning the role of the English-speaking reader.

The differences in reader/writer responsibility will also affect writing skills other than development and amount of information, since the distinction also impinges upon the unity of a text. English-speaking readers will, as Hinds explains, expect transition statements to be provided by the writer so that they can piece together the threads of the writer's logic. In Japanese discourse such landmarks may be absent or attenuated because it is the reader's responsibility to determine relationships between any one part of an essay and the essay as a whole. Transition statements do exist in Japanese, but Hinds characterizes them as more subtle and requiring a more active role on the reader's part, since it remains the reader's responsibility to create bridges. Edward Hall finds the same cultural perspective evident in the Japanese use of space, which illustrates what Hall describes as the Japanese "habit of leading the individual to a spot where he can discover something for himself." Hall also notes that in Arabic thinking, the conveyor of information is not responsible for building bridges because one is expected to connect widely separated points on his or her own, and very quickly too.²¹

Yet another writing skill, revision, can be affected by differences in reader/writer responsibility, for the inference drawn by Hinds from reader-responsible languages is that there is greater tolerance for ambiguity and imprecision of statement. While English-speaking writers go through draft after draft in order to produce a clear final

product, Japanese authors frequently compose exactly one draft, which becomes the finished product. While this can hardly be equated with all reluctance to revise, Hinds's inference does serve to remind us that more generalized attitudes toward the world around us in different cultures can impinge upon writing processes. For example, Edward Hall notes that American Indians, who have a different sense of time, exhibit an indifference to finishing tasks all at once that is translated by whites as indolence. This is particularly true when the perceiver is a member of what Hall calls a monochronic culture, characterized by schedules, punctuality, and a sense that time forms a purposeful straight line. Typical monochronic people, says Hall, are Germans, Swiss, some other European cultures, and Americans. Rather than doggedly pursuing one task, as a person from a monochronic culture is likely to do, people in polychronic cultures, such as Hispanics, are comfortable with multiple tasks going on simultaneously and do not feel as constrained by deadlines and schedules.²²

Only a few cultural distinctions that should concern us as writing teachers have been mentioned here, but it is clear that we need to be aware of such differences in our teaching and in our responses to students from other cultures. Yet much is still unknown about such differences. Hall estimates that the cultural systems that have never been made explicit probably outnumber explicit systems by a factor of one thousand or more.²³ The best we can do, then, is to be aware of how much we need to teach students from other cultures about the rhetorical expectations and standards of English discourse. And when their writing does not immediately seem to improve, we also have to realize the difficulty involved in adjusting to the mental frameworks that go with such new standards. It is not likely that these students can even verbalize for us the standards they have been using, for each system consists largely of what Hall calls "out-of-awareness" characteristics, the unconscious level of cultural norms. Every culture has a system, but the people who live by the system can tell others very little about its laws. As Hall points out, they can only tell you whether you are using the system correctly or not (*Beyond Culture*, 165-66). When someone is not using the system in English discourse, we can see from this discussion how that person's writing might be labeled as wordy, lacking in coherence, unfocused, unclear, or any of a number of other terms denoting writing problems at the rhetorical level. It is a challenge to our instructional skills to help these writers learn "the system" in English. The conference is a helpful place to do so, since we can keep probing and asking as we go to see how much each student understands of what we are explaining. The conference is also an

excellent place to invite such students to discuss their feelings of bewilderment, confusion, and even embarrassment, as they try to conform to standards that are even more foreign than English vocabulary or the bewildering system of prepositions in English syntax.

The Written Product

Having considered two major components involved in diagnosis, the teacher and the student, we come now to what is the most familiar source of diagnostic information, the paper and the specific errors on the paper. Assessing written discourse is also an easier task because of the training many of us have had in analyzing prose and reviewing English grammar. With these tools we have the means to label strengths, weaknesses, and errors in student writing. Then, by listening, questioning, and observing the student, we can arrive at a diagnosis that determines what he or she needs to know.

For weaknesses in what Reigstad and McAndrew call “higher order concerns”²⁴ such as thesis, tone, organization, and development, or for other rhetorical concerns, such as purpose and audience awareness, we need to find out what the student intended and whether he or she has composing strategies adequate for the task. With this information, we can begin to formulate a plan of instruction suited to the particular student. A way into sorting through “lower order concerns” at the sentence and word levels is to hear the student read the paper aloud and separate out what the student can and cannot self-correct orally. For errors that the student recognizes and corrects, help with proofreading and editing is needed; for errors that the student corrects orally but doesn’t recognize, help is needed in seeing what has been transcribed on the page. And, finally, for errors students cannot correct, we need to sort out patterns behind the labels, because mere labeling (“comma splice,” “misplaced modifier,” etc.) is relatively useless to students. Definitions of error can vary, and even if we were all to synchronize our definitions and labels, students would not suddenly learn to master rules that have evaded them for so long. What is needed, instead, is a sorting system that helps students look for types, systems, or groups of errors so that they can get a handle on what to do about them.

Error Analysis

This sorting of errors into types, known also as error analysis, can be illustrated in the following example of a student paragraph:

Mealtime

(1) Monday I ate in the cafeteria for the first time. (2) I was not real sure what to do or where I should sit. (3) I only new one friend and he was getting a salad. (4) I wondered around for a few minutes and acted like I knew where I was going. (5) I finally asked him where he wanted to sit. (6) I also did not know how many servings I could take. (7) Eating the food was an other story. (8) Some things taste real good and other things are terrible. (9) The main course is usually alright but the side dishes need a little help. (10) The desserts are usually good though. (11) One thing I was not sure what to do was making a peanutbutter and jelly sandwich. (12) My friend said there was peanutbutter out there but I did not know where. (13) I also didn't know where the dishes where for the jello. (14) I know where most of the food is know but I am not planning on eating alot of the choices.

—John F.

A conversation with John, the author of this paper, might begin with his reading it aloud. While we cannot predict what he would correct on his own, it would be useful to hear if he stumbled over sentence 11 or tried to reword it. I suspect he would not correct any of the spelling errors or add any punctuation. In a writing lab, an opening question might be to ask John what his assignment was, to hear him verbalize the question he was answering in this paragraph. "We're supposed to write about something familiar" is the kind of unfocused response that would indicate why the purpose and point of the paper are so vague. An alternate question from John's classroom teacher would be a more direct question asking for his purpose and his point. Is John describing his first day in the cafeteria, giving a description of the cafeteria, or perhaps telling us how he learned to cope? This confusion may also exist in John's mind and would account for the sudden verb tense shift in sentences 8, 9, and 10 and the seeming digression on the general quality of the cafeteria food. At the sentence level, John's reliance on his spoken dialect probably accounts for the adverb/adjective problem in "real sure" and "real good." The various comma errors are all ones of omission, and we would need John's help in diagnosing the problem. Does he habitually ignore punctuation as unimportant, but if prompted could supply some needed commas? Or is he so unfamiliar with the rules that he cannot offer any suggestions for where to place commas? It would seem that John primarily needs to know how to punctuate compound sentences, but since he also needs to learn how to vary his sentence structures some sentence combining that included punctuation for the more commonly used patterns would solve two problems at once. Finally, John's spelling errors are mainly of one type, a confusion in

transcribing his oral renderings. The type of spelling instruction to be provided would be aimed at helping John distinguish *new/knew*, *an other/another*, *know/now*, *wondered/wandered*, and *where/were*. The errors in "alright," "peanutbutter," and "alot" are also a matter of how to transcribe these sounds on paper. In addition, there is an unstressed vowel error in "cafateria," but since it is the only error of that type, a review of vowels seems unnecessary.

In David Bartholomae's classification of systematic errors, he notes three categories: (1) errors that are accidents, slips of the pen, as the writer's mind rushes ahead faster than his or her hand, (2) errors that are evidence of an intermediate system, a system being used by a student who has not yet acquired the accepted shorthand system of written English, and (3) errors of language transfer, or, more commonly, dialect interference, where in an attempt to produce the target language the writer intrudes forms from the first or native language (often a spoken dialect).²⁵ In John's paper we can see that many of his sentence-level errors fall within Bartholomae's third category of error, intrusions from spoken dialect, which would include John's spelling errors, overuse of coordination, and adverb/adjective confusion. That such errors are caused by the tendency of unskilled writers to resort to spoken language inappropriately is illustrated in James Collins's discussion of this major source of error in "Dialogue and Monologue and the Unskilled Writer."²⁶ Collins illustrates the problem with the following excerpt from a student paper:

Pep rallies are supposed to build up school spirit to get the energy flowing through the blood and your Body. You get siked for the sport events for the foot Ball, Swimming, etc. You must be mentally and phisicly prepared for a sport event.

Then every Body runs of the bleacher and runs around and yells alot. "Were the Best" etc. then every Body goes home and then the sports events start and Nobody else cares but the jocks.
(84)

Many of the errors noted by Collins in this paper are similar to those in John's paper in the previous example. In both, spellings are accomplished through sound or through analogy with similar-sounding words, and in both students' writing the sentences are juxtaposed, run together, or connected loosely with overworked conjunctions such as "and" and "but." An additional characteristic that Collins notes in the second paper, that meaning is abbreviated (as in the use of "etc.") as if the reader were a partner in a dialogue, is not quite as evident in John's paper, but is certainly a problem there too.

Another cause of error at the sentence level, identified by Colette Daiute, is the limitation of short-term memory during composing.²⁷

In Daiute's study of the relationship between performance on short-term memory tests for sentences and the ability to write grammatical sentences, the results showed that writers with relatively low scores on tests of short-term memory ability for sentences wrote more sentences with errors than did subjects with higher short-term memory scores. Daiute's taxonomy of errors, the result of her analysis of 450 syntax errors written by college students, includes twelve apparently different types of syntax problems. These errors occur immediately after a previous clause has been encoded on the page, on the average after about eleven words have been written. As an example, Daiute includes the following sentence:

I really enjoyed flying in an airplane that I understand how it works. (8)

In Daiute's analysis, the first sentence the writer composed, "I really enjoyed flying in an airplane that I understand," overlapped with "I understand how it works." This overlapping occurred, explains Daiute, because the writer did not hold the first clause in mind exactly as it was worded, so the memory of its syntactic form faded as the second clause was encoded. Other errors that Daiute notes as due to performance constraints on memory include the following:

1. Fragments ("Because the type of training a child gets from the computer is nothing compared to playing.")
2. Distant modifier sentence ("The children were driven away in buses with big windows laughing and singing.")
3. Nonparallel sentence ("The main purpose of government is representation and to protect the rights of citizens.")
4. Gapped sentence ("Mechanical devices have tendency to lose student's attention.")
5. Repetitious sentence ("Your achievement in life can be very good in life but every American does not want to do a lot of work.")
6. Multi-error sentence ("Most important to me is self-satisfaction of myself and the family that I have, without one is not successful.")

Another type of error, one that occurs with great frequency, appears in the following example, offered by Robert de Beaugrande: "You see I'm trying to avoid another scrambled egg breakfast. Basically because I hate them."²⁸ De Beaugrande's explanation of the type of fragment in the second sentence is that it is formulated as an adjunct whose core is in an adjacent sentence, generally the preceding one (as it is

here), but sometimes the following one. De Beaugrande speculates that such fragments may occur because of time lags as conceptual or phrasal chunks are returned by memory search, because their format roughly resembles a sentence, or because they are long and complex (248–49). In “Mending the Fragmented Free Modifier” I’ve offered another possible cause for this very common form of fragment, that it occurs as students reach for more mature sentence patterns, including free modifiers and modification before and after the main clause, but are unaware of the correct punctuation for such patterns.²⁹ Asked why they inserted periods in such sentences, students have told me, “The sentence was getting too long” or, “I know it needed some punctuation because I could hear the break.”

As for another frequent sentence-level error, comma splices, de Beaugrande suggests that they be remedied in view of their causes. One cause, explains de Beaugrande, is the relatedness of two statements, with the second usually giving support or elaboration to the first. Another cause can be the confusion between clause-linking junctures and adverbials.³⁰ Helen Ewald also notes that comma splices tend to occur when the subject of the second clause is a pronoun.³¹

One of the challenges of error analysis is for the researcher to gather together seemingly disparate errors which can be explained (and treated) by reference to a common cause. Such is the result of a study done by F. J. Sullivan and Donald C. Freeman, who concluded that when writers lack a sense of agency (who or what is acting on someone or something else), the writing can suffer from a whole list of difficulties, including passives without clear agents, infinitives and gerunds without clear underlying subjects, vague pronouns, subject-verb agreement errors, faulty parallelism, and misrelated modifiers. As an example of an unclear gerund, Sullivan and Freeman offer the following sentence and a revised version which clarifies the agent:

Example: Editing, cutting, and being able to alter the finished product are only a few examples of the technical superiority that a movie has over a play.

Revision: Because a film director can edit, cut, and alter the finished product, a movie is technically superior to a play.³²

Their revision restores the agent, the film director, to the sentence, for it is the director, not the movie, who edits, cuts, and alters. Similarly, the subject-verb error in the next sentence is removed when the agent is clarified:

Example: The finished movie with all its corrections and adjustments help to make the movie as perfect as possible.

Revision: As the director corrects and adjusts in finishing the movie, he can make the final product as perfect as possible. (146)

One more example, of faulty parallelism, indicates how lack of an agent can create errors and vague writing:

Example: The camera can fool the human eye, and in conjunction with make-up and costuming makes for a much more enjoyable performance.

Revision: We enjoy movies more than we do plays because of the greater visual effects of make-up, costuming, and camera techniques, which can fool the human eye. (147)

Second Language Interference

For students learning English as a second language, there is another source of error included in Bartholomae's taxonomy that we need to be aware of, namely interference from another language, the carrying over of patterns and forms from the student's first language into English. Although contrastive analysis, the comparison of the systems of one language with those of another, is no longer used as a foundation for instructional programs, it can be a useful tool for understanding typical sentence-level mistakes and problems that occur among students acquiring English. For example, the particular difficulty Oriental students have with remembering to use articles is due, in part, to the lack of such markers in their language. Similarly, the tendency of Spanish-speaking students to write overly long sentences in English can be understood in light of the length of typical sentences in Spanish. Among Arab students, Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ruzic (615) have noted the omission of forms of "to be" (as in "My teacher angry") because the surface structure of Arabic has no such copula. Arab students are also likely to experience difficulty with relative clauses because there is no relative pronoun in Arabic. And Arabic- and Hebrew-speaking students may omit vowels in their spelling because in their languages vowels are often omitted in written transcriptions of words. We may also notice that some non-native students are not good dictionary users and will need help in becoming familiar with how English dictionaries work. Arabic dictionaries, for example, are difficult for users because words are entered under their roots. Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ruzic (613) compare this to looking up the English word "misconceived" under the root "cept." Other languages interfere in other ways, and while we cannot be expected to be aware of all the differences and similarities between the

languages our students speak and English, it is helpful to stop sometimes and ask the student how his or her language compares to English for whatever matter is under discussion. It may give us an insight into the difficulty the student is having or may serve as the springboard for a more useful discussion about how the student can acquire the English rule needed. Typically, we can expect students learning English as a second language to experience difficulties with the errors noted by Mark LeTourneau: inflection of nouns, verbs, and adverbs; count and non-count nouns (those which can be counted and have plurals and those which cannot); prepositions; tenses; definite articles; and word order.³³ But we can also expect that every language has the potential for interfering in unexpected ways with attempts to master English.

Learning Disabilities

Another area for diagnostic consideration, one beyond the scope of this book, is that of learning disabilities, particularly dyslexia. Dyslexia is a condition too complex—and some would say as yet too little understood—to deal with briefly. But we need to consider the possibility that some of our students need more help than we are able to provide and that we might need to refer them, if possible, to professionals in the field of learning disabilities. Symptoms to watch for include poor handwriting in which the writer tends to fuse adjacent letters into one and several types of spelling errors, including two types noted by Andrew W. Ellis in *Reading, Writing, and Dyslexia: A Cognitive Analysis*.³⁴ Some errors in the writing of dyslexics, Ellis notes, are phonic, as in “gowing” for “going” or “ecode” for “echoed,” but a great many others, when pronounced, would not sound like the target words. Included in this second category would be letters in the wrong order (“thrid” for “third” or “pokr” for “park”) and spellings which indicate retrieval of only partial information from the speller’s graphemic word production system (“mechinal” for “mechanical”). An example of such writing might look like figure 2. Other identifying features of dyslexic students, described by David Taylor, include oral reading which is hesitant and inaccurate, with inattention to punctuation, mispronunciation of known words, omission of short words, and substitution of incorrect words for others with similar configurations. Taylor also notes that dyslexics’ written vocabulary often seems limited because of an inability to spell all the words they know.³⁵ We can offer such students help with spelling, proofing, and general transcription skills, but we cannot expect that their progress will equal the effort they expend.

after he get in a little
^{so will call you names}
 trouble ~~and~~ well of be mad
 go so you put a mattress ~~one~~
 in his room and record all
 that he ~~says~~ ^{says} and when ~~he~~ you
 tell him make sure you make it
 sound worse than it is and ~~it~~
 you say ¹⁵ for 500 you want tell
 mom: but if he disagree ~~ceasing~~
 taking up his room and soon
 you will ~~of~~ having a new TV.

Figure 2.

Conclusion

Diagnosis, like writing, is a bit of a juggling act, for we must keep numerous considerations in focus simultaneously. As we seek out what it is that will help the writer progress, we should keep in mind our own propensities and preferences, the student's individual makeup and history, and the array of symptoms on the page. And, like writing, diagnosis is an ongoing process as we keep exploring with students what is best for their development. One-shot attempts at diagnosis are usually no closer to successful end products than are first drafts of writing, but the exploration process is not—as in writing—performed by one person. Both the student and the teacher work together to move forward, and it is in the conference conversation that all of the back-and-forth motion, discussion, questions, and suggestions come up. This kind of diagnosis, so much richer than the mere act of labeling error (which we call “paper grading”), is a complex, but rewarding, aspect of what conferences can offer students as they develop their writing skills.

Notes

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