8 What Is Good Writing?

The truly knowledgeable person realizes that it is very hard to say
something simply.

—Diane

As we begin in earnest the process of reviewing the primary traits, Jerry
reminds us that the original purpose of the list was to help us as tutors of
writing, reflecting the order and priorities of our response to students'
writing: we read for a sense of the writer's perspective initially and then
for a sense of audience and the inclusion of appropriate evidence. But,
as Peter notes, "we've gotten quite a bit beyond this" since—beyond both
in the purpose of the document and in our thinking about its contents.
The traits still guide us as tutors, providing us with a structure and vocabu-
lary for response. But now they also serve a broader purpose and a more
inclusive audience: they represent to students and to colleagues what we
consider to be the qualities of competent writing.

In addition, much now seems left off the list, qualities that contribute
mightily to the power of a piece of writing. Jerry, for one, wonders whether,
in light of our discussions, we should include an awareness of multiple
perspectives when defining good writing. I wonder whether this is another
way of describing what the rhetorics used to call "acknowledging your
opponent's point of view." In order to bolster your own argument, the
textbooks told us, you need to recognize and counter the argument on
the other side. But that was done only to raise your own flag, triumphant,
at the end. Our discussion, on the other hand, has led us in another di-
rection: we have been saying that thoughtful writing has a polyphonic
quality, containing a tissue of perspectives as well as a range of voices. Good
writing lays bare a variety of perspectives not to explode alternative points
of view but rather to acknowledge the mingling of ideas or the
heteroglossia against which we voice our own perspectives (Bakhtin 1981).
Yet how can we articulate this quality in such a way as to make it a useful
tool for evaluating and responding to a piece of writing? It's a daunting
but fascinating task.

It occurs to me as well that in privileging a multiplicity of perspectives
as a quality of good college writing, we facilitate our students' develop-
ment as complex and synthetic thinkers. In the process, we would be ty-
ing students' writing to their cognitive development.

A practical manifestation of such development may be a writer's ability to use skillfully the words and ideas of another. Most if not all of us have felt frustrated by students' inability to write using texts other than their own. In our lab we have seen research papers that amount to nothing more than a string of quotations from barely read sources. Or we have seen students "borrow" wholesale a writer's words and ideas with no attempt to acknowledge a debt. For some of us, the difficulty may be tied to students' lack of familiarity with conventions of acknowledging and citing sources. For others of us—I include myself here—the difficulty goes deeper: students' naive notions as to how knowledge is made and expressed and their lack of experience in the kind of writing that calls for them to synthesize the ideas of others. How do we bring students to the point at which they can knowledgeably and skillfully weave expert testimony together with their own findings and perspective? How do we talk about the writing that emerges from that process? What, in other words, is that quality in writing that reveals the words and ideas of others while promoting the writer's own agenda?

Answers to those questions, if they come at all, are going to have to wait, because Peter has his own particular slant on what ought to be considered requisite for "good writing" and the group begins to engage him on that point:

> *Peter:* I think the ability to make the difficult simple, the ability to make the complex clear. . . .This is the hardest thing in the world to do . . . . Young writers think that difficult ideas must be expressed in a difficult way. They seem to think it's almost a necessity.
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> *Diane:* Can that be a technique to stimulate discussion? Sometimes when I don't understand the words, it stimulates me to research, when I realize that I'm not on the same plane of understanding. There are people who use those large words and they are perfectly clear to them.
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> *Howard:* It's true that when students come into our courses, they are so naive about the terminology that it becomes an extra challenge for the teacher . . .
>
> *Marlene:* But how much do you have to break it down?

Peter's insistence on the world "simplicity" (rather than clarity) throws us for a loop. Diane, Marlene, and I construe that word to mean language so reduced and simplified as to become something quite different from what it was. Quite possibly Peter might be speaking of an economy of expression. In a handout given to his writing and literature students on his own elements of style (and which he shares with us), Peter begins with "Say the most in the fewest words." "Write freely," he goes on, "and then cut." And yet there are moments in that same list when Peter seems to be

aiming for writing that has the accessibility of speech. "Use words from your everyday speech," he advises, "words you are comfortable with." Peter seems to be aiming for prose that carries, as he puts it, the "sound of sense"—an accessible and engaging style.

Peter apparently sees little use for difficulty. In some ways, his students (those "young writers") may have a more realistic view of writing in college than Peter himself does. They know that the reading assigned by their teachers has meaning for their teachers; it speaks to them. And in order to succeed in those courses, students must master some of the conventions of those courses or, we might say, those discourse communities.

Diane raises the point that difficulty may have a purpose, a justification. Language may challenge us because ideas challenge us. "There are things," she reminds us, "that aren't that simple." "The truly knowledgeable person," she observes, "realizes that it is very hard to say something simply." As far as communicating knowledge to others is concerned, if our audience shares our assumptions and terms then we have little need to provide a glossary.

Marlene shares Diane's view that the language that we use in our classrooms has a genuine purpose. Her question, however—"But how much do you have to break it down?"—suggests the pressures that we all face to "break it down," that is, to simplify our materials (some, more cynically, might call it "dumbing down" our teaching). At the community college, where the expressed mission is to produce not merely historians or physicists but generally educated citizens, should not our language be less the specialists' and more the generalists'? Should open access refer not only to our admission policy but also to the words that we use in our classrooms and require students to read in our texts?

As I ask these questions, I am struck by how often discussions of this kind themselves become reduced to meaningless dichotomies. At the community college, the question often is raised: Are we training our students for the academy or for the workplace? Rarely do we consider the option of doing both. In "breaking down" the rich complexity of our subject areas, might we not be undermining our mission to educate generally a literate citizenry?

I engage Peter on his notion of "simplicity" by asking whether for our students the reading of poetry would be considered "simple." In doing so, I am offering the reading and critiquing of a poem as a specialized, discipline-specific mode of inquiry, with its own assumptions and apparatus. Diane chimes in by saying that many people ask, "Why can't [the poet] say it so that I can understand it?" Her point is not that poetry has little use at our college, but rather that poetry has its unique demands, which

to those outside the poetry-reading community appear terribly complex. Peter responds by turning to Frost:

> When I say simplicity I mean simplicity beyond complexity. I don't mean simplemindedness. . . .Simplicity lures you into something, it coaxes you. . . . Take someone like Frost. . . . He gives you something simple that lures you in and he has something at the end that doesn't quite work as a cliché. You begin to pull it and the poem begins to unravel. And it becomes something profound.

Diane, when hearing this, admits "I'm not even sure what simple means anymore." "You talk about a simple poem," she adds, "and yet you have to reread and reread it: what is clarity then? what is simple?" Trying to make himself understood, Peter turns to Jerry, a mathematician, and asks whether a similar concept applies in his field. "Don't mathematicians refer to a theorem's 'elegance,' a stripping away of the extraneous to get to the heart of a theory or problem?" he asks. Jerry agrees but notes that there are several specialties of mathematics and if the theorem is "not in your field it may not be clear."

Trying to explore Peter's claim further, Pat, very interestingly, draws upon her own field, as well as Diane's, to shed light on the problem. Perhaps reading a poem, she says, is similar to the way people in her own field and in Diane's view the human body: the works are hidden but knowable. In other words, our experience and training allow us access that is denied to those without such a background.

Marlene, clearly attracted to the idea that students should write economically, wonders whether we could include economy of expression to our traits. Students are not saying what they mean simply and clearly. Peter, borrowing from Thoreau, refers to an "economy of spirit," a precise and economical expending of energy that invites "layers of richness and . . . gives body to simple prose."

Granted the complexity of Peter's call for simplicity and economy, nevertheless such a call runs counter to what people in composition have been saying for some time: that students so often are uncomfortable with written expression that they may need to be given confidence and fluency before we ask that they achieve conciseness of expression. In a certain sense, Peter's message is contradictory, seeming on the one hand to call for a kind of fluency or conversational quality in student writing while at the same time arguing for an almost poetic economy.

It is clear that whatever revisions we make to our document, we will emphasize the "sound of sense," as Peter puts it. That is, we will need to acknowledge the power of writing that has the immediacy of the human voice. Marlene is clearly taken by Peter's "write as if a human voice is speak-

ing." Diane offers this caveat, however: "It depends on whom you're speaking to. You can speak to a group of historians and use one voice. If you're speaking to a group of students you might use another." In other words, "voice" may indeed be a construct shaped in part by the demands of the rhetorical situation, including the audience whom we are addressing.

Marlene complicates things further by noting that, even as we struggle to speak with the same language, abundant differences exist within departments and disciplines. In her own department there are "big differences," reflected most obviously in the textbooks assigned. "If I had to use the one book that everybody was using," she says, "I might quit." Although she does not say this, I suspect that she is referring to ongoing battles over revamping the old Western civilization course in favor of a more diverse or pluralistic perspective on history.

In hearing Marlene speak about the lack of standardized or stable knowledge within disciplines, Peter observes that much of that difference may be due to the differences of background and training among community college faculty. He notes that in the English department there may be colleagues with master's degrees in professional writing and others with Ph.D.'s in English literature. Put those people together and you may see disagreement about the way we teach the use of evidence or logic in our writing courses, he says.

Of course, these differences might very well account for much of the disagreement that Marlene sees within departments at the two-year college. And given the inevitable aging of community college faculty and recent initiatives to hire more and more young faculty (among them Ph.D.'s), even greater rifts may develop among faculty on matters of pedagogical and disciplinary expertise.

A case in point might very well be in the habit of some faculty in English and beyond to insist on writing as bound to a clear and unequivocal thesis. That term, which has suffered through much abuse since the days of the process movement (so aligned was it with the five-paragraph theme), was left out of our earlier document simply because it might be misunderstood and be taken as producing formulaic writing. "Can't we say," asks Marlene, "that good writing must have a strongly worded thesis—even in a narrative?" Peter, relying on a rhetorical tradition, replies that a narrative might not, strictly speaking, have a thesis. We may have to make a distinction among argumentative, expository, and narrative writing in order to retain "perspective" (and its component term "thesis") as a broad, generalizable quality of "good writing."

And yet, having said that, Peter agrees that the writing that we require students to do ought to reveal the writer's way of seeing the world. That said, we all agree that "perspective" ought to be highlighted in our docu-

ment. But what is the relationship between "perspective" and "point of view," and "voice," for that matter? Peter offers, in writing, his take on all of this:

> I believe "perspective" means a way of looking. . . . Perspectives cannot be stated, strongly or otherwise. . . . "Voice" is the personality of the writer on the page. "Point of view" is the attitude, the inclination, with which the subject is approached. "Thesis" is the arguable opinion.

To render the discussion more concrete, Peter takes the subject of abortion:

> A perspective would be the moral landscape of abortion. My voice is the person writing this. The point of view is the place where you stand and look, where you're coming from, your preconceptions—whether I'm a born-again Christian, a Catholic. . . . What I'm going to say about it, that's my thesis.

Leaving aside the problems implicit in linking "voice" with "the person writing," we do feel that Peter's analysis makes a great deal of sense, especially in its separation of conceptual framework (point of view) and the position to be argued (thesis).

Our discussion of perspective leads naturally to consider the matter of evidence, since, we can infer from Peter's gloss, "where you're coming from" shapes what you see. Now, in our earlier document, we had assumed a unanimity of opinion about the nature of evidence, not taking any pains to problematize it: ". . . good writing must marshal evidence or support." What is evidence, anyway? Is what passes for evidence in one field the same as what is accepted in another? If so, what would account for evidence in the narrative about Lou's death? So often we assume (as do the textbooks) that evidence is used to buttress an argument, a means of persuasion. Can a narrative—or this particular narrative—be considered persuasive? Diane, for one, feels that it can. Speaking of our student writer, she says: "He was trying to persuade us that he had an experience that was profoundly affecting and he persuaded [us] that that was so."

Peter, in response, asks, "Why not say the purpose of narrative writing is to move? Of argumentative writing to persuade?" In these terms, narrative detail may support the writer's intention to move readers in a powerful way.

Kathy, concerned that we are forgetting the obvious function of writing to express and produce "good thinking," is afraid that we are reducing the complex purpose of writing to a few categories. In addition to moving or persuading, writing, she says, allows us to monitor our own learning. It is an excellent point because it forces us to include the effect

of writing on the writer as well as on the reader. Peter, helping to craft our consensus, suggests this statement: "Good writing makes use of detail to persuade, to move, or to inform." How far we have come from the tentative and partial version of our earlier document ("If the intent is to persuade the reader, good writing must marshal evidence or support").

As far as the other traits are concerned, a broad consensus already exists on the matters of "logic" and "correctness." However, at Carol's request, we remove the rather condescending description of "correctness" in our earlier version (with its qualifier "generally" and the reductive quotation marks around "correct") and produce a much cleaner statement: "Good writing displays competency in grammar and punctuation and accuracy in spelling." Added to this, by insistence of the group, is a caveat about acknowledging sources: "The use of another's words or ideas must always be cited."

That last addition reflects the concern of many that students are not using sources responsibly or thoughtfully. My own feeling is that the issue goes much deeper than citation of sources—to the complex process of synthesizing source materials. Marlene, for one, identifies this as a problem that cuts across all disciplines: "I see students who can't synthesize the material. It's like a beaded necklace that they string along. A paragraph on this one, a paragraph on that one. And they can't put it together." Kathy insists that the ability to synthesize ought best to be handled in our particular fields and departments. As far as our students are concerned, they need to recognize the need to cite sources, which is indeed a matter of "correctness" or technique. Her view carries the room. I can't say that I'm especially happy that we have "ghettoized" the problem of using sources, but perhaps this is just a start of a discussion about the process.

Although we agree to relegate the discussion of synthesizing sources to departments and programs, we nevertheless continue to maintain the usefulness of establishing generalized or primary traits necessary for competent college writing. We decide to keep the five broad categories from our earlier list: perspective, audience, evidence, logic, and correctness. However, we see fit to alter dramatically the descriptors for each term. Here then are the revised traits:

Primary Traits

The writing lab staff has come to a consensus about good writing which establishes usable criteria to evaluate the writing that we will read in the lab.

A consensus as to what makes good writing should begin with this qualifier, however: *writing is contextual.* By that we mean that writing depends on the disciplinary context and the situation in which it is done. Each discipline does have a distinct set of assumptions about the way knowledge is made and expressed. A student who writes an

essay for an English literature course may be ruled by conventions and assumptions quite unlike those that guide the student writing for a history course.

Nevertheless, we have come to a consensus on those qualities in writing that cut across areas of expertise and knowledge. These are considered "primary traits," usable criteria to evaluate the many kinds of writing that may come our way.

Perspective: Good writing has perspective, a way of seeing. Perspective is expressed through point of view, voice, and thesis:

point of view reveals the experience, the knowledge and the inclination of the writer;

voice expresses the writer's personality on the page;

thesis establishes the writer's main idea.

Audience: Good writing is appropriate to the reader, the purpose, and the occasion.

Evidence: Good writing makes use of detail to persuade, to move, or to inform the reader.

Logic: Good writing is coherent from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, beginning to end.

Correctness: Good writing displays competency in grammar and punctuation, and accuracy in spelling. The use of another's words or ideas must always be cited.

No doubt such a list runs the risk of abuse, that is, of being employed as a bare-bones checklist and reducing the complexity of any writing task. But we feel it important at least to try to articulate, in language that crosses disciplines, a consensus on what constitutes competent writing at our college. Significantly, our new list argues that all writing expresses a perspective, whether that writing be an argumentative essay in English or an observer's notebook in astronomy. Moreover, the evidence that marks competent college writing may move as well as persuade an audience. In other words, powerful narratives may lay claim to offering evidence as much as do analytical, argumentative, and expository writing. Distinctions between transactional and expressive kinds of writing therefore become blurred. Expressive writing is not without its own purposes, agendas, and supportive materials. It has, in other words, a legitimacy equal to other kinds of writing currently privileged in the classroom.