The Subject is Writing
Richard Gebhardt

The claim that "the subject is writing" probably prompts a bored, "So, what's new?" from serious writing teachers reading Journal of Advanced Composition. For you know that a writing class is not an excuse to study Navaho folkways or to train vest-pocket literary critics, any more than it is an invitation to unremitting workbook drill on usage and mechanics. You know that the subject of a writing course is writing--that, in Mina Shaughnessy's words, "the composition course should be the place where the writer not only writes but experiences in a conscious, orderly way the stages of the composing process itself." You know, too, that people write about things--they write articles about politics or novels about the perfect crime or texts about how to write well--but that they do not write about nothing (unless they are Existentialists, of course). Without a "subject" in this sense, crucial rhetorical tensions of writer/subject/audience go slack, and the productive pressure of purpose falls so that writing may not take place at all. As Donald M. Murray puts it in "Write Before Writing," the first two forces that lead people to write are "increasing information about the subject" and "increasing concern for the subject":

Once a writer decides on a subject or accepts an assignment, information about the subject seems to attach itself to the writer.... The writer becomes a magnet for specific details, insights, anecdotes, statistics, connecting thoughts, references.

...The more a writer knows about the subject, the more the writer begins to feel about the subject. The writer cares that the subject be ordered and shared.

In itself, Murray's interesting observation only suggests that there must be a subject for writing to take place. But another dimension of what I mean by "subject" in my title comes into play here. What one writes about, one tends to learn. "Writing is, after all, a learning tool," Mina Shaughnessy wrote. "It captures ideas before they are lost in the hubbub of discourse; it encourages precision; it requires...that the writer make judgments about what is essential; and finally, it lodges information at deeper levels of memory than can be reached by more passive modes of learning". (p. 88). Writing is, then, as Janet Emig has said, "a unique mode of learning." And this fact turns whatever we ask students to write about into sort of a "subject" they learn in a submerged curriculum in our classes.

A glance at your shelves of examination copies would show that the freshman writing enterprise has advocates for just about every subject--from anthropology to values clarification, from autobiography to career studies, from literary analysis to non-print composition. And why not? Freshman writing is a course intended to help inexperienced writers communicate more effectively, and if emphasizing a subject of personal interest to students can promote greater interest in writing, then that subject probably is appropriate. But the goal of advanced composition is to push beyond minimal effectiveness so that students make real gains in strategy, style, and substance.

With that end in view, I believe it makes sense for advanced composition classes to place writing itself in the submerged curriculum about which students
learn while they are learning how to write. Then, too, many students who register for advanced writing courses have personal or career goals—high school teaching, college professoring, journalism, writing the Great American Novel—that make it quite desirable for the process or teaching or professional practice of writing to be a "subject" they study while they are striving to strengthen and refine their writing abilities.

I first sensed this fact when I began to develop the undergraduate Teaching of Writing course I described several years ago in *College Composition and Communication*. In the course, I wanted to stress (among other things) the need for actual writing in composition classes, the importance of audience and the usefulness of having students write for their peers, the fact that writing is a dynamic process, the importance of positive instruction by teachers who themselves are writers, and the value of helping students become their own teachers and editors. Such ideas, I thought, should not be presented as abstract subjects removed from the act of writing. And so, as I wrote in 1977, readings, guest lectures, and class discussions about the ideas in the Teaching of Writing course “cannot be allowed to become ends in themselves.”

They are grist for the writers’ mills; they are substance for papers. To guarantee that students think of their reading as a prelude to writing, I ask them to maintain a looseleaf notebook with sections for "Writing Tips," "Teaching Tips," and "Reactions." I also ask students to write papers... that require them to develop their own perspectives on ideas contained in the readings. (140)

I have mentioned the Teaching of Writing course because it illustrates how a substantial topic connected with writing can be a "subject" students learn during advanced composition courses, and because information about how to teach writing is valuable to many of the undergraduates who take advanced classes. Such information is, of course, of immediate use to prospective high school English teachers, to graduate school bound majors needing teaching assistant­ships to underwrite their studies in literature or creative writing, and to future elementary language arts teachers. And as teaching jobs decline and the public grumbles about "the basics," the Teaching of Writing course will become increasingly valuable to future teachers in any field that uses essay tests, library papers, book reports, or the writing of business letters.

There is another clientele of advanced composition classes that can profit from studying the "subject" of writing—would-be professional writers who, throughout their careers, will confront rhetorical choices, stylistic challenges, and daily frustrations in front of their typewriters. But the distorted ideas commonly held about the writing process are very poor resources on which to rely while facing these choices, challenges, and frustrations. Witness, for example, the publishing professor who confessed to Donald Murray that “he had been ashamed of the way he wrote, that he didn’t know what to say or how to say it when he sat down to write. He had to write and write and write to find out what he had to say. He was embarrassed and didn’t want his colleagues to know how dumb he was.”* That kind of misunderstanding about writing, of course, is quite prevalent. And an advanced writing course with the composing process as its "subject" can be very valuable to undergraduates who hope to live off their pens and typewriters.

Such a course could require students to write summaries, analyses, reviews,

No doubt, some of the prospective professional writers in our classes would chafe at the academic or theoretical nature of the sort of course I just described. So, while I agree with *Nancy Evans* and *Judith Appelbaum* that "tips on technique and on industry mores, and gimmicks and shortcuts and nuggets of knowledge can be no more than peripheral aids" to would-be professional writers, it makes sense to give the advanced composition course for prospective writers some degree of focus on professional work habits, strategies of submitting articles, the operation of publishing houses, and the like.

Students interested in writing fiction, for instance, could be given any number of challenging non-fiction assignments based on what *R.V. Cassill* calls "Reading as a Writer." Such reading requires awareness of “how the story, its language, and all its parts have been joined together,” and understanding that “the story exists as it does because the author chose his form from among other possibilities.” Writing assignments intended to focus attention on the organic relationship of story, language, and structure would, of course, confront students with all manner of questions about rhetorical strategy, structure, and style. And students interested in writing non-fiction of fiction could profit from writing assignments based on several of the "Finger Exercises" Cassill describes in the fifth chapter of *Writing Fiction*:

- "Practice writing short, medium, and long descriptions. Remember that the grand objective in any description is to distinguish a particular and concrete thing from all that resembles it."
- "In practicing fragments of narrative... you ought to test your power to generalize and summarize an extensive action or period of time."
- "Try converting a story told mostly in author's prose to one made up mostly of dramatic dialogue.”(pp. 35-41)

To foster the creative search for article ideas and the discipline to research and write on various topics, the advanced composition course can encourage students to begin the "pack-rat process which involves hoarding printed materials that interest them along with scribbled notes about ideas, snatches of conversation, and nuggets of information they find provocative"-- a process Evans and
Appelbaum have found used by most professional writers (p. 12). For example, I have required students to keep an Idea File of notes, clippings, and ideas, and to write weekly Spin-Off Writings stimulated by different items in the file. Later in the term, I have asked students to select a promising Spin-Off Writing and work toward an article for a magazine they consider a likely market for the piece.

Selecting specific markets to which to submit articles is another subject for advanced courses—one that makes quite clear the complexities and significance of rhetorical choices. Students can analyze the contents and styles of various publications and prepare magazine reviews for in-class publication. They also can draw information from Writer's Market, Literary Market Place, and the guidelines for writers that many magazines mail out on request.*

An even more powerful assignment is the query letter, a specific inquiry about an editor's possible interest in an article or an article idea. Since a query must, briefly, clearly, and impressively, convey the substance of a project to a real and critical audience, composing several query letters to different editors can be a challenging rhetorical exercise, as well as a powerful heuristic for students to use once they are fairly well immersed in a topic. And since advice about how to write query letters is abundant in monthly issues of The Writer and Writer's Digest, and in the plethora of how-to books for aspiring authors, the assignment to write query letters can be preceded by other assignments, such as summarizing articles or evaluating the advice in different sources.

A similar type of assignment—papers based on information in various resources—is a final approach that can be taken in advanced composition courses stressing professional writing practices. Using How to Get Happily Published as a common text, for instance, you could assign papers on topics introduced in the book. For example:

- How Good Are Mail Order Writing Courses?
- What Do Readers Look for When They Read?
- How Do Subsidy and Vanity Publishing Differ?
- What Happens to a Manuscript after It Is Accepted?
- How Can I Publish My Own Book?
- Money, Taxes, and the Writer.

Since How to Get Happily Published includes a fifty-page annotated bibliography keyed to its main sections, students can move out from this book into challenging individual assignments from which they can learn about their future profession at the same time they are increasing their effectiveness as writers.

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NOTES

4. I realize the oversimplification of this sentence—sort of an academic equivalent of the Aim Toothpaste commercial that says, "If she likes the taste, maybe she'll brush longer." The key word in both sentences, of course, is if.

6. "Internal Revision," in Research on Composing, ed. Charles Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana: NCTE, 1978), p. 87. Similar misconceptions about the writing process are clear in student attitudes and writing strategies that Nancy I. Sommers has outlined in two unpublished papers: "Revision Strategies of Student Writer and Experienced Writers," MLA, 28 Dec. 1978; and "Understanding Student Assumptions about the Composing Process," CCC, 5 April 1979. These papers are being revised for future publication in College Composition and Communication and Composition and Teaching. In the meantime, Professor Sommers will send copies to interested people who write her at the English Department, 760 Van Vleet Oval, Room 113, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73069.


9. The notes on publications in Writer's Market can help you locate such guidelines. Quick, postcard requests to fifty assorted publications a month before you need them in class would net you two or three dozen sets of editor's suggestions in time for class use.

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**ATAC Constitution**

Rita Sturm will send a copy of the proposed constitution of the ATAC to all members during the Spring of 1980. This is a very important document, not only for the legal incorporation of the ATAC, but also for defining the proper aims and goals of our organization. Please read the draft of the constitution carefully and make as many comments as you can when you return your vote to Rita Sturm, Vice President of the ATAC.

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**Research and Innovation in the Teaching of Advanced Composition**

Michael Stugrin of the Editorial Board will provide an introduction to articles on "Research and Innovation in the Teaching of Advanced Composition" which are now called for by the editor. If your article is focused on this topic, please indicate this fact in the title of your article or attach a note to the manuscript indicating that it belongs to this category. Mail papers on this special topic to the editor.

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