Why Don’t We Write What We Teach? And Publish It?

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We teachers of writing should write literary nonfiction, assuming that that is what we teach, and we should publish what we write. That’s the thesis of this article. That not enough of us do this is the subtext. Writing regularly should be as much a part of the teacher’s activity as meeting class, and as unremarkable. If that were actually the case, I wouldn’t need to write this article. Although what I advocate is appropriate for any teachers of writing, freshman English included, it is particularly important that teachers of advanced composition write and publish literary nonfiction. Teachers of advanced courses are more likely than freshman English instructors to be experienced full-time faculty members, and what we do should provide an exemplary model—really, a variety of models—for novice and junior colleagues. If we don’t practice what we preach and teach what we practice, what credibility, what authority can we claim?

That creative writing teachers write poetry, plays, fiction, and short stories is a given, as it should be. In most places they’re expected to publish, especially if they’re teaching advanced students. So why not expect the same of teachers of parallel courses in nonfiction? Aren’t the experienced academics who teach advanced composition already publishing? Many are, of course—most likely, academic articles in professional journals. Well and good if, for instance, the professor teaching a course in science writing is publishing in scientific journals. But advanced composition is not necessarily a course in academic writing. Indeed, advanced composition is like love: everybody knows what they mean by the term, few can define it to anyone else’s satisfaction, and each practitioner has his or her own way of doing it. Recent surveys by Bernice Dicks and Priscilla Tate, for instance, indicate an extraordinarily wide range of writing in advanced composition courses, from the modes of discourse that populate freshman composition; to belletristic nonfiction; to fiction, poetry, and drama; to business, technical, legal, or medical writing in specialized courses on those subjects.

Diverse though they are, these courses nevertheless expect student writers to write and revise a great deal, to be able to write with proficiency in the modes of their discipline, and to become conscious stylists who regard style as integral to the work. In fact, the most commonly used textbooks in advanced composition courses, whose texts range from Homer’s Odyssey (in
translation) to Lewis Thomas's *The Lives of a Cell*, are books on style, Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* and Zinsser's *On Writing Well* being the most commonly used.

And it is on belletristic nonfiction writing in which an author expresses a distinctive and individual style that I wish to focus the rest of this essay. We teach a lot of these essays in freshman English—essays by Bacon, Swift, Orwell, Woolf, Baldwin, Didion, E.B. White, McPhee, and a host of contemporary others. We also teach a lot of these essays (or longer books by the same writers) in advanced composition when it is not focused on specialized writing in a single discipline. But although we write articles in academic prose, too few of us write essays in other modes, other language. Too few of us write one or another forms of belletristic nonfiction in a persona, an individual and recognizable style (or combination of styles) that is our own. Too few of us write in ways that engage not only the mind but the heart, that not only teach but delight. Yet if more of us wrote and published belletristic essays, we could enliven and enhance the genre, our teaching, and our profession. And we'd have more fun.

**On Writing Essays**

In a country where an aspiring intellectual can still grow up wanting to be a novelist or, rarer still, a poet, nobody wants to be an essayist. Why, indeed, should anyone aspire to write in "this slithery form," as Elizabeth Hardwick describes it, "wearisomely vague and as chancy as trying to catch a fish in the open hand" (xv)—especially when academic life, where many frustrated writers end up, predicates promotion, tenure, and status on the publication of academic articles? Our academic journals, with rare exceptions, have no space, make no room, for belletristic nonfiction writing. We put these constraints on ourselves; we have met the editors and they are us.

In his brilliant *Textual Power*, Robert Scholes points out that we English professors are terrible snobs. We divide the field into two categories, literature (good, important) and non-literature (trivial, beneath our notice). We can't produce real literature; only geniuses, working stiffs outside the academy, can do that, we claim. But, says Scholes, to link our academic activities to this 'real' writing, we "privilege consumption over production." We call "the proper consumption of literature 'interpretation,' and the teaching of this skill, like the displaying of it in academic papers, articles, and books, is our greatest glory." We can teach students to read this writing, this utilitarian prose which Scholes calls "non-literature." And we teach students themselves to write "unreal versions" of it, which we call "composition." This "pseudo non-literature," produced in an "appalling volume," is at the bottom of the academic totem pole (or scrap heap). And why not? It isn't valued by those who write it, by those who teach it, or by those who employ those who teach it (5-6).
Another way to improve the status of the currently lowly belletristic essay is to try to write it ourselves—though maybe we should wait until we’re safely tenured and can afford to take the risk. Literary nonfiction—the belletristic essay is essentially a short version of modes that could be book-length—is harder to write than it looks, because as with any other serious art form, there are no rules, no constraints except one: the work simply has to be true. That’s the essential difference between literary nonfiction and fiction. As Annie Dillard explains,

The essay can do everything a poem can do, and everything a short story can do—everything but fake it. The elements in any nonfiction should be true not only artistically, the connections must hold at base and must be veracious, for that is the convention and the covenant between the nonfiction writer and his reader. Veracity isn’t much of a drawback to the writer; there’s a lot of truth out there to work with. And veracity isn’t much of a drawback to the reader. The real world arguably exerts a greater fascination on people than any fictional one. . . . The essayist does what we do with our lives; the essayist thinks about actual things. He can make sense of them analytically or artistically. (“Introduction” xvii)

Yet, literary nonfiction can use many of the same techniques that fiction does. It can present characters, flat or round, in action, in dialogue (even interior monologue), in context, and in costume. It can play with time, with language, with points of view and narrative persona. Literary nonfiction can take many forms, as illustrated by the variety in *Best American Essays*, and in much *New Yorker* nonfiction: memoir and partial autobiography; character sketch; travel narrative; natural, cultural, or social history or criticism; interpretation of a scientific, economic, or political phenomenon for non-specialists; interpretive reviews that comment at length on the work, the genre, or the performance. Although we know one when we see one, a belletristic essay is hard to define. It has no fixed length and no predictable shape, and most essays, as Elizabeth Hardwick points out, “incline to a condition of unexpressed hyphenation: the critical essay, the autobiographical essay, the travel essay, the political—and so on and so on” (xiii). That’s why collections of essays are hard to find in bookstores, which seldom have sections devoted to “Essays,” but subdivide this amorphous genre into Travel, Biography—which invariably includes Autobiography, Social Commentary, and so on and so on.

William Gass, in a characteristically sparkling essay on Emerson as “an essayist destined from the cradle,” points out important differences between the essay and “that awful object, the article.” The essayist is “interested solely in the essay’s special art,” and is unconcerned with “scientific or philosophical rigor.” The essay “is unhurried”; it “browses among books; it enjoys an idea like a fine wine; it thumbs through things.” The essayist is more interested in the process of thinking about a subject than
in having the last word, "exposing this aspect and then that; proposing possibilities, reciting opinions" (25). "The essay," says Hardwick summing up Gass, "is a great meadow of style and personal manner," illuminated by an "individual intelligence and sparkle. We consent to watch a mind at work, without agreement often, but only for pleasure" (xv).

In contrast, says Gass, the article "represents itself as the latest cleverness, a novel consequence of thought, skill, labor, and free enterprise; but never as an activity—the process, the working, the wondering." I quote his definition in full, a single sentence that could appear only in an essay, where the author is having fun with the language, but not in an article, for reasons that Gass makes apparent:

As an article, it should be striking of course, original of course, important naturally, yet without possessing either grace or charm or elegance, since these qualities will interfere with the impression of seriousness which it wishes to maintain; rather its polish is like that of the scrubbed step; but it must appear complete and straightforward and footnoted and useful and certain and is very likely a veritable Michelin of misdirection; for the article pretends that everything is clear, that its argument is unassailable, that there are no soggy patches, no illicit inferences, no illegitimate connections; it furnishes seals of approval and underwriters' guarantees; its manners are starched, stuffy, it would wear a dress suit to a barbecue, silk pajamas to the shower; it knows, with respect to every subject and point of view it is ever likely to entertain, what words to use, what form to follow, what authorities to respect; it is the careful product of a professional, and therefore it is written as only writing can be written, even if, at various times, versions have been given a dry dull voice at a conference, because, spoken aloud, it still sounds like writing written down, writing born for its immediate burial in a Journal. (26-27)

In case you missed the tone of that sentence, Gass drives home his point: "Articles are to be worn; they make up one's dossier the way uniforms make up a wardrobe, and it is not known—nor is it clear about uniforms either—whether the article has ever contained anything of lasting value" (26). Of course, Gass is being personal, provocative, deliberately outrageous. That's just the point; he's writing an essay, not an article.

What's In It For Teachers?
Okay, so Gass has a gas in writing belletristic essays, and Emerson's prose was his power (Gass 34); what's in it for us as teachers? A lot. Sam Johnson said of biography, "Nobody can write the life of a man, but those who have eat and drunk and lived in social intercourse with him." Approaching a work in any literary genre from the outside, as a reader or critic, is very different from living in literary intercourse—Johnson's well-chosen word of intimacy—with it as a writer. We don't really understand an essay, or any other form of literature, until we've tried to write it.
The most important thing we learn about belletristic writing from doing it is to think like a writer, an essayist in Gass’s sense, rather than as a critic, an article writer. If we think like writers, we will teach like writers rather than as critics.7 Compare, for instance, how an autobiographer, Annie Dillard, explains what happens during the process of writing an autobiography, with what a critic, Mary Jane Dickerson, says about the same process. In “To Fashion a Text,” Dillard explains:

My advice to memoir writers is to embark upon a memoir for the same reason that you would embark on any other book: to fashion a text. Don’t hope in a memoir to preserve your memories. If you prize your memories as they are, by all means avoid—eschew—writing a memoir. Because it is a certain way to lose them. You can’t put together a memoir without cannibalizing your own life for parts. The work battens on your memories. And it replaces them. . . . After you’re written, you can no longer remember anything but the writing. (70-71)

In a subsection of “On Writing Autobiography” titled “Constructing Self Through the Dialogic Imagination,” Dickerson says,

Autobiography’s origin as narrative that arises from a dialogue with the self and about the self in relation to others and a particular cultural landscape distinguishes autobiography and makes it especially appropriate for teaching advanced writing students about the subtle features inherent in the complex act of writing as social discourse. It is a dialogic system of speaking, writing, and reading in which the student writer addresses the self, others, texts, signs, and what goes on in the writer’s culture. The element of performance pervades texts as writers voice themselves into being by speaking and behaving from varied perspectives. (137-38)

Although Dickerson is telling teachers of advanced composition what autobiographers do when they write autobiography, I have never in my reading of some three-thousand autobiographies in the past decade seen an autobiographer explain the process in either the critical jargon or the concepts that Dickerson uses. Autobiographers usually claim that they’re telling the story of their lives, leaving out some things—Russell Baker says 99.5%—and shaping what remains artistically.8 They talk about what they do in the natural language that Dillard and Baker use, the same language in which they write their narratives. This is the very language that teachers who have tried writing autobiography would use to explain the process to their students.9 Teachers who write in the modes they’re teaching become natural allies with their students writing in the same modes, rather than, as Scholes says in Textual Power, acting as “priests and priestesses in the service of secular scripture” and expecting students to worship in critical jargon at the altar of the “verbal icon” (12).
Among the belletristic writer’s major concerns are form and style (those staples of advanced composition) and the endless possibilities of each in conveying the exact angle of vision, the precise nuance of meaning. Because belletristic writing is a more fluid medium than academic article writing, it is open to continuous experimentation with form. As Dillard says in “To Fashion a Text,” “No subject matter is forbidden, no structure is proscribed. You get to make up your own form every time” (74).

So you experiment. Here’s how a person, myself in this instance, might think about two writings—one academic, the other belletristic—on the same topic: the importance of friendship. In an academic article, I’d buttress an explicit thesis about the subject in general with references ranging, probably in chronological order, from Plato to Elizabeth Barrett Browning to George Bernard Shaw to Virginia Woolf, duly annotated. In pursuit of irrefutable logic, adequate development, credibility, balance, and fairness, I’d consult other published scholarly sources, too, from philosophy, psychology, sociology, women’s studies. My own views, as exposition and argument, would emerge in juxtaposition with those of my sources, and I’d come to an explicit conclusion. Because the overall form of an academic article is fairly circumscribed—its shape accommodating norms of the discipline and even of specific journals—the experimentation would probably be on a micro rather than macro level. I would move, expand and delete paragraphs, sentences, and phrases for variety, emphasis, and elegance, but I would not alter the larger structure unless it were illogical or couldn’t be supported.

I can see many more possibilities of form in a belletristic essay on friendship, which in fact I’m currently trying to write. My aim is to present an extended definition of friendship, illustrating general principles through specific details. The essay could contain a collage of vignettes, each illustrating a different aspect of a significant friendship I’ve had, long term and short, with women and men, with my husband and others, with children and grandparents. (Parents are tougher.) It could contain excerpts from personal letters, snatches of conversation (the remembered essence, not word-for-word), definitions formal and operational (perhaps from some of the same sources that I’d use in an academic article), brief analyses of others’ friendships, real and literary, to juxtapose with my own, epigrams, fragments of biography, autobiography. I’ll probably use all of the above and more that I haven’t thought of yet, with the vignettes embedded in a matrix of the other materials, like plums in a pudding. I would be less concerned with logic than with the essential truth. A chronological organization of material wouldn’t make much sense; maybe a psychological pattern would work best, from the least intense experience to the most profound. Or perhaps a framework that led from the more generally applicable to the most individual. Or some other way. As E.M. Forster says, “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?”
What about style? Every writer, except a committee or a corporate author, has an identifiable style, even an "opaque" style celebrating "the joys of obfuscation," in Richard Lanham's term. I'd write any academic article in a style compatible with the one I'm using here, though less breezy for a very stuffy editorial board. But that's because, unlike my professorial peers, I learned my literary style not from M. Derrida but from Dr. Spock, the Strunk and White of baby book authors. I'd try for a persona that appears knowledgeable, intellectually sophisticated, honest, positive, witty, and likeable—and hope that it also seemed credible. To the extent that I could get away with conversational language, I'd use it, varying the length and structure of sentences and paragraphs. I'd write in the first person, where it sounded good. I'd use contractions, sometimes. Even fragments. I'd break the rules, as Orwell advises, "sooner than say anything outright barbarous." Unlike far too many academic writers and journal editors, I'd eschew critical jargon, especially trendy language, which I do not wish to valorize, whatever the pretext, in texts, subtexts, or intertexts. I am egotistical enough to want the readers of all my writing to wish they'd thought of saying it my way, and I'd use a similar style, perhaps a tad more casual, in a belletristic essay. There, given the subject of friendship and my first-person point of view, I'd worry about sentimentality. As Dillard says in defense of nonfiction prose, like poetry, [it] can tolerate all sorts of figurative language, as well as alliteration and even rhyme. The range of rhythms in prose is larger and grander than it is in poetry, and it can handle discursive ideas and plain information as well as character and story. It can do everything. I feel as though I had switched from a single reed instrument [writing poetry] to a full orchestra. ("Fashion" 74-75)

Most of all, I'd listen to the sounds and the rhythm. If the writing didn't move, didn't read well, I'd do it over. And over again. (You are reading the twelfth draft.)

Finally, I'd have my husband, who is my best critic as well as best friend, read and critique it. Then a trusted colleague, or for a belletristic essay, a friend who is an avid and thoughtful reader. I'd revise the essay, let it sit quietly for awhile to ripen like a good camembert, then revise it again (would peach work better than camembert? fine wine? certainly not banana) and prepare to send it out for publication. But where? The New Yorker? John McPhee said he submitted everything he wrote to the New Yorker for over a dozen years before they finally accepted something. I know several superb writers who have been submitting their work in vain to the New Yorker for longer than that, and their lack of success scares me. Where else? Harper's or The Atlantic? Same story. Little magazines? Maybe. There appear to be enough to go around.
But I'd like to talk to my fellow teachers. I'd like to be able to pick up the *Journal of Advanced Composition* or *College Composition and Communication* or *Rhetoric Review* and find in them belletristic essays of the kind that we talk about in class and use as exemplary models. Would not the publication of literary nonfiction in the very journals devoted to academic articles on the same subject validate this kind of writing as no other sort of acknowledgment could do? To exclude such writing is again to reinforce the inverted values Scholes takes to task in *Textual Power*, values that reinforce consumption at the expense of production.

Are the editors and review boards of composition journals competent to judge literary nonfiction? They'd better be. Such judgments are as sure as sin and error to teachers of composition (some of whom are journal editors), who make them all the time, in class and out, as they teach the published works of belletristic writers and respond to student essays. But wouldn't the publication of belletristic essays in our professional composition journals take up valuable space that should better be devoted to pedagogical theory and research? That's a matter of editorial judgment and policy. Every journal represents a competition for premium space. But it is equally true that journal editors are continually searching for high-quality submissions. It would be worth the risk for composition journal editors to solicit or encourage belletristic essays and see what they get, from teachers and their students. We ought to be speaking to each other through the witness of our writing.

The fact of publication not only validates the work, but professionalizes the writer as an author. Publishing authors learn what types of material editors of different publications are looking for, how the process of editing and revising for publication works and how rigorous it must be, and—eventually—when to accommodate an editor's suggestions and when to insist that their way is best. Through dealing with these concerns, over and over and over again, the publishing writer develops that self-critical facility so essential in enabling a novice, student or any writer, to move from amateur to professional status. Teachers who revise and submit their own work for publication have earned the right to expect their students to do the same.

*What's In It For Students?*

Isn't it our job, our mandate, as Bizzell (1982, but see also 1988), Bartholomae, and others have argued, to induct our students into the academy by teaching them to write academic papers in academic discourse? Isn't that why they have to take freshman English? And even upper level writing courses? If they can't write acceptable papers in their courses in other disciplines, won't it be our fault if we haven't taught them how to do it?

Yes and no. There is general agreement that we teach composition at any level to help students think, read, and write critically and well. We have an obligation, therefore, to fulfill this agreement, and if we don't we're at least partly responsible for the consequences. But there is considerable variation
in what those terms mean to the authors of the plethora of existing composition textbooks, and those that sprout like daisies on the publishers' lists of newcomers every spring, attesting anew to the fact that there is no single right way to teach writing.

W. Ross Winterowd, who is “Rediscovering the Essay,” says that “students should have the right not to be conclusive—as they must in formal essays—but rather to explore themselves and their worlds in informal essays” (146). Peter Elbow, among others, argues that it is undesirable to teach freshmen to write exclusively in academic discourse. “Life is long and college is short,” he says in “Academic Discourse and Freshman Writing Courses.” Students write academic prose only in college but very different kinds of writing on their jobs. Writing courses should encourage students to write what’s meaningful to them, so they’ll be “more likely to write by choice” outside of the courses, and able to do so. Chances are that voluntary writing won’t be academic discourse. Rather, it will be writing, perhaps autobiographical—the kind that Winterowd is talking about, that enables students to render experience, as most of the belletristic texts we teach in English courses do, rather than to explain it, the focus of nearly all other disciplines. Moreover, the ability to write good nonacademic discourse will help students translate the academic discourse of their textbooks “into everyday, experiential, anecdotal” language that they can understand and use (1-3).

Elbow expands his argument to say that it’s impossible to teach academic discourse anyway, because “there’s no it to teach. . . . Academics simply don’t discourse with the same discourse.” Biologists don’t write like historians, and even in English there is no single discourse community, but a variety ranging from “the bulldozer tradition of high Germanic scholarship” to the “genial slightly talky British tradition” (of belletristic essays) to “poststructuralist, continental discourse: allusive, gamesome—dark and deconstructive.” Add to these the discourse of quantitative research, qualitative research, psychoanalytic and psychological interpretation. What is central to all kinds of academic discourse, says Elbow, is “the giving of reasons and evidence rather than just opinions, feelings, experiences. Being clear about claims or assertions rather than just implying or insinuating. Getting thinking to stand on its own two feet rather than depending on who says it or who hears it.” And this is a major goal of schooling and literacy, “just plain good discourse in general—not good academic discourse” (4-9).

So we return to the possibility, as well as the desirability of teaching belletristic essay writing, “plain good discourse in general,” as well as doing such writing ourselves. Such writing enables our students to find their own voices instead of ventriloquist in an academic voice that lacks authority. We can see the results in the collections of Bedford prize student essays and other published student writing. Students take their writing seriously because they are invested in it; such investment makes them willing to write and
rewrite and rewrite again. They become, with us, members of a community of writers.

In "Finding a Family, Finding a Voice," I explain how, as the consequence of an existential crisis—I believed my husband was dying of a malignant brain tumor—I decided to risk everything as a teacher, for I could not be more vulnerable, by writing and reading to my students the assignment I'd asked them to do, a personal essay on "Why I Write." Through seeing how much I cared about writing they, too, became committed to the hard work and continual rewriting that this demands. As they wrote in their writers' notebooks:

All over [town] I run into Lynn Bloom's students moaning about their papers—they all want to put a lot into it.

Damn you, Lynn Bloom. Have you let me in for a life of writing, for a life of struggle to create, to express, to move from a state of knowing less to a state of knowing more or less what I want to say?

Here I am on a dismal rainy day, with my family life falling apart (and yes that makes me cranky, yes that makes it harder to get something done) and this class cheers me up and helps me believe I am a writer.

Having learned from Scholes how to teach literature and from my students, once again, how to teach writing, I taught last winter a graduate seminar called "Autobiography as a Literary Genre." Students could write either critical or autobiographical term papers. When Ted, ordinarily articulate and self-possessed, had finished reading his, he began to sob—the first time such a thing had occurred in my thirty years of teaching. The rest of the class waited in respectful silence until our colleague had regained his composure. Then he led an engrossing discussion on his paper, which depicted his complex and painful relationship with his father. Instead of talking about belletristic writing, he had chosen to write it—and to understand it in his bones, and in his heart. As he did, so did we.

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Notes

1One could argue that the plethora of little magazines, on campus and off, provide plenty of opportunity for publishing belletristic writing. That argument is beside the point unless we subscribe to these and read them regularly. C'mon now, fess up! How many little magazines do you read—regularly? How many have you read in the past
five years? Have you ever submitted an essay to one? (Of course, one could ask the same questions about PMLA and expect the same dismal answers.)

Scholes's solution to this problem is not to invert the hierarchy, but to deconstruct the binary oppositions between literature and non-literature, production and consumption, real world and academy. Ultimately this will result in teachers enabling students to respond to literary texts with texts of their own. We must, says Scholes,

help our students unlock textual power and turn it to their own uses. . . . We must help them to see that every poem, play, and story is a text related to others, both verbal pre-texts and social sub-texts, and all manner of post-texts including their own responses, whether in speech, writing, or action. The response to a text is itself always a text. Our knowledge is itself only a dim text that brightens as we express it. That is why expression, the making of new texts by students, must play a major role [in freshman composition]. (20)

Scholes, Comley, and Ulmer's Text Book demonstrates the range of texts the students can write, empowered by this philosophy and creative latitude.

Chris Anderson defends this position: "As someone struggling to gain professional accreditation, someone with a desire to write, someone trying to understand the important—and exciting—questions generated by contemporary criticism, someone who has published some scholarly articles and had others rejected, I find the essay an increasingly compelling model. The acceptance of second-class citizenship in exchange for freedom of movement is beginning to strike me as a pretty good bargain" (307). Anderson's ideas are first-rate; he shouldn't settle for "second-class citizenship."

The five-paragraph theme is not an essay, except in the state of New Jersey, where the five-paragraph theme is required writing in mandated testing of senior high school students, whose scores are lowered if they do not follow its rigid format of an introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. In practice, this format is really a heuristic device, a formula to elicit an allegedly linear thought pattern. Students (and teachers) who confuse format with form imperil their writing, as we know from reading formulaic, often inane, papers which use it. What's a "body paragraph," anyway?

Of course, I could have summarized this in a phrase or two, but that would have defeated the purpose.

The example from Gass's essay should, in that single sentence, dispel two objections faculty often voice against teaching (or allowing) students to write belletristic essays. Isn't all such writing personal narrative? Obviously, not narrative. Obviously not personal in the sense of autobiographical. Just as obviously, all writing, articles and essays alike, is personal inasmuch as it expresses the mind and passion of the writer. Isn't belletristic writing intellectually soft, much easier to do than intellectually rigorous academic writing? No more than figure skating is easier to do than hockey, impressionistic painting easier than hard-edge realism.

That is one premise of Scholes's Textual Power and Text Book. It is also a major premise of Donald Murray's beloved book on how to teach writing, A Writer Teaches Writing. If Murray's book had been conceived as A Teacher Teaches Writing it would not, could not, have had the same impact. Other beloved books on writing and on
teaching writing have been written by people whom Stephen North calls "practitioners," classroom writing teachers, themselves clearly expert writers, who "by virtue of some combination of eloquence and influence" have attracted "a considerable following" (22). Their "eloquence and influence" derive in large part from their engaging books: Walker Gibson's *Persona* and *Tough, Sweet, and Stuffy*; Ken Macrorie's *Telling Writing*; Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle*; Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*; and the book that would seem the ultimate abdication of authority, Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers*.

8In explaining how he wrote *Growing Up*, Russell Baker says:

All the incidents are truthful. A book like that has certain things in common with fiction. Anything that is autobiographical is the opposite of biography. The biographer's problem is that he never knows enough. The autobiographer's problem is that he knows much too much. . . . He knows the whole iceberg, not just the tip. . . . So when you're writing about yourself, the problem is what to leave out. And I just left out almost everything—there's only about half a percent in that book. You wouldn't want everything; it would be like reading the *Congressional Record*. (49)

Dickerson herself uses much clearer, simpler language in the questionnaires she gives to her students (144-46). Might she herself have written autobiography? Her article, with its strict focus on teaching, gives no clue.

My friends and students who have read what used to be the ninth and final draft of the essay say that the most intriguing part is about my thirty-five-year friendship with a married man who is not my husband. They want to know more about how it's possible to have such a deep and enduring friendship without wrecking or even threatening my own marriage of thirty-one years, or his of equal longstanding. I'm reluctant to write more about this. To emphasize that friendship would throw the essay off balance. To analyze how Joe and I get along, and why, would make formal and deliberate what has been all these years casual and spontaneous. As Reynolds Price says of his memoir, *Clear Pictures*, I do not want to violate the trust of old friendships. I get uncomfortably self-conscious when I try to anatomize such a precious relationship. The public be damned. For now, anyway.

In fact, I'm writing this article in a more casual, insouciant style, signalled by the two rhetorical questions in the very title, than I'd usually employ in academic writing because I want to make the point that it can be done. And that an academic journal will publish it. But that's risky—maybe they won't.

Why Benjamin Spock? Because, "having written a doctoral dissertation on biographical method, I wanted to try practicing what I was preaching, and chose Dr. Spock because he was an interesting major figure accessible when I was at home rearing small children. Writing this biography knocked the dissertationese clean out of my style. Spock writes the way he talks, and since I included many quotations from interviews and from his writings, my own style had to be compatible with Spock's or the disparity would have been too disjunctive for readers. Spock himself is a conscious stylist. . . . He writes with absolute clarity, no ambiguity (especially when a child's health and safety depend on it), careful but nontechnical explanations of terms, friendliness." ("Why I Write," 32-33.) My own writing departs from Spock's principles only to incorporate the intentional ambiguity of literary wit.
This could have the same legislating effect on belletristic essays as would happen if *PMLA* were to publish an article on composition research. Likewise, every professional meeting devoted to composition, such as CCC, WPA, the Penn State conference, the national and regional conventions of NCTE, and the like, ought to have sessions devoted to the reading of belletristic writing, not just by literary superstars, but by members of the organizations.

"To render experience is to convey what I see when I look out the window, what it feels like to walk down the street or fall down the street or fall in love—to tell what it's like to be me, what it's like living my life" (2).

This alternative anticipated Spellmeyer's position in "A Common Ground: The Essay in the Academy," in which he argues that we as teachers should "permit our students to bring their extra-textual knowledge to bear upon every text we give them, and to provide them with strategies for using this knowledge to undertake a conversation which belongs to us all" (275). Exactly.

**Works Cited**


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**Call for Papers**

Walter Beale, Lester Faigley, Linda Flower, Winifred Horner, Kathleen Jamieson, Lee Odell, and John Trimbur will be among the featured speakers at the ninth Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition next July 11-14.

Proposals are invited for papers, demonstrations, or workshops on topics related to rhetoric or the teaching writing, including composition, rhetorical history and theory, basic writing, technical and business communication, advanced composition, and writing across the curriculum. One-page proposals will be accepted through April 15. Contact John Harwood; Department of English; Pennsylvania State University; University Park, PA 16802.