In *Preparing to Teach Writing*, James Williams argues that “almost all writing is inherently argumentative.” Certainly, this book supports that assertion. Although the book is primarily a methods text, it is political as well as pedagogical, for it explicitly advocates “a social view of language” and a rigid if not radical workshop approach to the teaching of writing—an approach that Williams terms *pragmatic*. As a result, the book is stimulating reading. I was thoroughly engaged and occasionally defensive as I read it. It is also informative. I found the chapters on grammar, stylistics, reading, and English as a Second Language especially strong. Furthermore, Williams writes well: his style is clear and direct, his voice personal and unpretentious. In general, this book is useful for anyone who wants to know about the workshop approach to the teaching of writing.

As a general methods text, however, the book has several limitations. Because the book is designed for both graduate and undergraduate students, one of its problems is with audience. Although Williams states that his intended audience is primarily “students pursuing a public school teaching credential,” he is clearly writing for college as well as public school teachers. Even though most of his examples are taken from or designed for elementary and secondary classrooms, the theories he addresses, the research he cites, and the methods he advocates are more appropriate, or certainly more feasible, for college teachers. For example, the chapter entitled “Assessing Writing” explains only two methods—holistic grading by the students themselves and portfolio grading which necessitates a group of instructors working together. I doubt that many public school teachers would be free to practice either of these options.

I suspect that Williams is really writing to his peers, trying to convince other composition instructors of the validity of his approach. For example, most of the research he cites and the scholars he challenges (a lengthy list including such notables as Ong, Moffett, Piaget, Vygotsky, Shaughnessy, and Hirsch) would be meaningful only to someone familiar with composition studies.

Another of the book’s limitations derives from its exclusive focus on the workshop approach. Although the book serves as an excellent introduction to this particular approach to the teaching of writing, Williams’ narrow focus limits the book’s usefulness as a general methods text. Similarly, it limits the information that Williams includes in the text. Because the book is essentially an argument for the workshop approach, Williams focuses on information that supports this method of teaching writing. As a result, although
Williams provides abundant and useful information about subjects such as language acquisition, reading theory, and stylistics, his discussion of argument (and of rhetoric in general) is cursory and idiosyncratic. His cavalier treatment of argument is especially disturbing since he insists that all academic discourse should be argumentative. I tend to agree with him on this point, if by argument he means simply writing that has a clear thesis, but most teachers of the type of course for which this book is intended will probably expect a more thorough and complex treatment of the subject.

In spite of its flaws, I liked this book and learned from it. I applaud Williams' emphasis on research throughout the book, his obvious enthusiasm for teaching and students, his willingness to confront difficult issues, and his commitment to what he believes represents the most effective way to teach writing. Part One, which provides the theoretical framework for the "pragmatic" methods that follow, is generally both well informed and informative. The second part of the book, "Toward a Contemporary Methodology," is a clear, useful explanation of how to structure a writing class so that it functions successfully as a writing workshop.

In general, I think most writing teachers will agree with Williams' basic assumption that "students will benefit most from a classroom environment that reduces the amount of error correction and that increases the level of social interaction and constructive feedback on work in progress." However, I suspect that many teachers, both experienced and inexperienced, will also object to his insistence that all writing assignments be argumentative, to his limiting all students in a class to the same writing topic, to his exclusion of writing as a way of learning, and to his idealistic assumption that teachers, even in the college classroom but certainly in public schools, are free to eliminate from their classes all direct instruction, rhetorical as well as grammatical.

I am glad I read this book, and I hope that many other writing instructors will also read it because Williams has much to teach us about how students learn to use language and how we can teach writing more fairly and effectively. But this book is clearly more appropriate as an argument for the workshop approach than as a general methods text.