diversity and excitement that characterize the meetings attended and journals read by composition teachers are not shared by faculty who don't teach writing, or by the culture at large, all of whom persist in defining freshman composition as a course in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and usage.

Northern Arizona University
Flagstaff, Arizona

No Title: A Response to Sam Meyer

RICHARD H. HASWELL

In “Prose by Any Other Name: A Context for Teaching the Rhetoric of Titles” (JAC 8), Sam Meyer offers a “context for teaching the rhetoric of titles.” He recommends that students take titles not as “a necessary evil or a mere convention,” as “decoration,” but rather as “an integral part of the composing process” (71, 80). But is this the rhetoric of titles? Do other contexts suggest other rhetorics? Meyer looks chiefly at the glossy world of big-time fiction publishing, of Ernest Hemingway and Maxwell Perkins. What happens when we look at different contexts—for instance, the equally big-time worlds of nonfiction or of working-world prose? That recommends for our small-time world of writing classrooms and writing research a different pedagogy, what might be called teaching the pragmatics of titles or, alternately, teaching the rhetoric of non-titles.

I used to believe in Meyer’s rhetoric. Then about ten years ago a student taught me a lesson—one that took me about eight years to learn. I had sent half the class back to their seats to finish the in-class essays they thought they were ready to hand in. “No title,” I had said. “You don’t have a title. Ever see an essay without a title?” As usual, they had looked dumbfounded and then had resumed work, largely by sitting and staring at their essays—leaving me to sit and stare at them and wonder again about the reluctance of students to make titles. (Sometimes they end up asking me for one.) Later, I found in the stack of papers a title I certainly would not have proposed but one that proved memorable. Secured with inverted commas, aggrandized all in caps, it was placed exactly in the middle of a cover sheet, just where students imagine titles should stand: “NO TITLE.” At the time, I was a little irked and a little amused, thinking the student was challenging me with a logical paradox on the order of “I always tell lies” or “This sentence is false.” I figured the title was making some adolescent point about obsolescent rules for writing essays. But it set me to thinking, in off moments, whether it wasn’t
Meyer does not ask why students resist titles, but it is a worthwhile question. Such resistance was a mystery to me then. Practically everything in print, I assumed, has a title of some sort: books, textbook chapters, record albums, magazine articles, news items with their headlines, advertisements with their leaders, memoranda with their trident headings, scholarly articles with their funky colons. To want to name one's essay seems a natural, creaturely urge. And to name it well, the way Meyer prefers and I still prefer, seems if not a natural at least a workable task. I didn't have Meyer's wealth of rhetorical technique (that is one value of his essay). But I did teach students a simple praxis of titles: a proper title is a sign announcing private property, a declaration of ownership. Whether a focus or a gist or a guide to the reader, it shows that the work it fronts has something of the author's own to it—own focus or own opinion or even own arrangement. Genuine titles deserve to be called proper (Latin, proprius: one's own). But in the real world any title, proper or improper, was better than none.

To disabuse me of all this took more than one small student title. What it took, in fact, was a little proper research—I mean my own, of course. Still puzzled by the unnatural reluctance of students to attach a handle to their writings, I decided to make a small study of titles, using a set of 160 essays I had at hand. Four-fifths of these pieces had been written in class as a diagnostic essay by a random selection of college students. The rest, for comparison, had been composed under comparable circumstances by employees in business, industry, and social services—though these writers could not be termed average since they had been especially tagged by their supervisors as "competent" writers (for a full account of this research, see Haswell). Since all of the pieces had been analyzed by means of a liberal spectrum of rhetorical measures, I thought I could confirm what seemed a common-sense hypothesis: that when a student doesn't title an essay, it is because it isn't a complete essay. Either the writer hadn't had a finished essay in mind while writing it or had just never finished writing it. My assumption was that of Meyer: that titles "give identity to a developing text at any stage of the writing process" (72). In my set I expected essays without titles to be incomplete and poorly written; essays with titles to be complete and better written.

As it turned out, more than half of the students had indeed turned in their essay without a title (sixty-three percent), but then again so had many of the competent workplace writers (forty-four percent). Even more shocking, I could find no measure of writing showing the essays without titles to be worse written than those with. As far as titling went, the real difference in quality was not between no title and title, but between proper title and given title. This needs an explanation. Half of the essays with titles had genuine ones; that is, they were good English-teacher titles, homemade, original, fitting Meyer's category of "normative": "Are Men Vain?"; "What is an Opposite Sex?"; "It's Just a Matter of Time." The other half with titles did not have
On second inspection, their names turned out to be ors filched from the topic ("Conduct Codes") or the topic itself ("Why Are Conduct Codes Created and Maintained?") or, in a telling displacement, the title of the topic ("Topic A"). Indeed, "Topic A" was not even a proper title originally but rather a label I had pasted on for my convenience, like "Coffee and Nuts" over a grocery aisle. The writer who called his essay "Essay B" allotted it the subservient fate of a puppy whose owner decides to name it "Dog." (Upon occasion, when students acknowledge given titles by putting them in quotes, the teacher will then berate them for quoting their own titles. They aren't. My student who put "No Title" in quotes may have been quoting me.)

The first point is that it was not the essays without titles but those essays with given titles that proved distinctly weaker. As a group, they received the lowest holistic rating, organized their ideas by the least complex and adventurous logical schemes, introduced themselves the least surely, summed themselves up the most rotey, connected internal paragraphs the least often, developed these paragraphs the most weakly, and spoke with the least adroit or sophisticated style. Such a profile may explain why students iron on factory-made titles at the top of their essays. Their action may be a perfunctory strategy to obey the prompting of a teacher for some writing the student sees no rhetorical need for. Or it may be a matter of self-prompting, analogous to the habit some students have of doing their prewriting by staring fixedly at the instructor's forehead. James Britton and his associates, who noted that British school children are put off when asked to find their own titles, also suggest that a title may play a part "in finding a way to begin" (33). Indeed, most of my students who picked their title from the topic promptly pocketed it in the first sentence of the essay (title: "Physical Appearance"; first sentence: "Physical appearance plays a big part in the cosmetics and clothing industry"). Here, inscription of given titles may not be "an integral part of the composing process," as Meyer would wish, but it does serve a practical composing function, the same function as lining up pens, filling in all the o's on the topic sheet, scribbling outlines, and other fidgets needed to get one going.

Second, the fact that null titled essays generally are otherwise no worse written than properly titled ones encourages us to think again about titles—all kinds. Many things in print, come to look at them, have no titles, from letters to the editor and back matter on record albums to items in The New Yorker's "Talk of the Town." Is "Talk of the Town," in fact, really a title or what I have called a label? In fact, many of what look like titles don't fit Meyer's classifications. They are more like handshakes, accolades, genealogies, name-tags, heraldic logos, self-advertisements, catch-eyes. And some of the rest which look like legitimate titles won't weather a title search very well. Newswriters usually don't write their own headlines, nor do subscribers title their letter to the editor if it does get titled. Meyer describes Hemingway sticking to Green Hills of Africa over the wishes of his editor, but in the less
exalted realms of publishing, certainly in in-house publishing, authors much more often discover that the final choice of title to their book belongs to the house—and ultimately not even to it, since titles cannot be copyrighted. Not only legally but also rhetorically, titles possess the least entitlement of any part of an essay. Even students know, intuitively, that information in the title must not be treated as given. (When they break the rule, the effect can be startling: title, "Do these Conceptions Cause More Benefit or Harm?"; first sentence, "Harm.") What's in a name, anyway? Something essentially superficial adheres to titles, something like the bad odor of advertising, as though they cannot shake their kinship with those "titles of nobility" which the U.S. Constitution forbids and which Thomas Paine called "a sort of foppery."

So when when Meyer says it is unfortunate when composition textbooks "give the impression that assigning titles is a necessary evil or a mere convention," it is worth pointing out that in the quotidian world, unfortunate though it may be, assigning titles is often exactly that. Only a quarter of my competent working-world writers crafted the homespun kind of title for which teachers look, Meyer pleads, and I still yearn. The implication for teachers is clear. All things considered, the trust—or behest—that student writing will always have proper titles may be an artifice, like expecting a title on a letter from grandmother. It was my rhetorical mistake when I asked students, rhetorically, "Ever see an essay without a title?" They should have answered, "Sure." The resistance of students to make titles is not a mystery. It's not even a crime. The lesson it teaches English teachers is one we have been learning a lot recently: that we ought to think not in terms of the rhetoric but of rhetorics. That not only means making our particular classroom rules clear (I require a title for this kind of essay). It also means rethinking all our rules concerning titles and non-titles, and indeed all elements of a piece of writing; it means adapting our teaching games more to society's games; it means taking care not to allow students less play than everyone else gets out of the classroom.

Washington State University
Pullman, Washington

Works Cited
