Let's Continue to Take It from the Top:  
A Response to Richard Haswell

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In "Prose by Any Other Name," I tried mainly to encourage teachers of courses where writing plays a large part to get their students to do three things: to realize that attention to titling could well facilitate composition; to become familiar with the main types of titles that successful writers have employed and to experiment with them in their own creations; and to utilize fully the help toward understanding and reading enjoyment that published writers have provided through their thoughtfully conceived titles.

In his provocative critique, Professor Richard H. Haswell appears to address directly only the first of these objectives, the one having to do with the value of titling as a heuristic aid. If I understand him correctly, Mr. Haswell holds that time and effort spent teaching titles is largely misspent because constructing titles does not make students write better and because titles are not as important or necessary in the outside world ("society's game") as many of us teachers, especially of English, like to believe.

What is Mr. Haswell's principal basis for concluding that the process of assigning titles to themes does not foster better writing? A small study of 160 essays written both by students and by employees. Of these, sixty-three percent of the student essays came in without titles; the same was true of forty-four percent of the pieces by the "competent workplace writers." According to Mr. Haswell, the essays headed by titles "proved distinctly weaker" (received lower holistic ratings) than those not possessing them. Moreover, half of the essays with titles lacked appellations that would fit into "good English-teacher titles," like the varieties included in my "normative" category. That is, half of the pieces with titles had headings like "Conduct Codes" or "Essay B"—essentially non-titles.

I would not question Mr. Haswell's evaluation of the compositions that had titles. But I do question his implicit assumption that they were poor because they had titles and, conversely, that most of the good essays were that way because they lacked titles. Perhaps this overstates the case, but it does not appear that Mr. Haswell has in any way demonstrated a cause-effect relationship between those compositions with titles being generally poor and those without them being generally good. Couldn't the outcomes he discovered be the result of chance or of an insufficiently sized sample?

That students frequently resist titles is a given to experienced composition teachers. (Students often find writing uphill work, period.) Accordingly, it should occasion no surprise that in Mr. Haswell's sampling most
writers affixed no titles at all to their pieces and many that did tacked on "factory-made titles," presumably a kind of conditioned response to what Mr. Haswell terms "the prompting of a teacher for some writing the student sees no rhetorical need for." It seems to me that Mr. Haswell's study actually buttresses my point that inscription of given titles can well be "an integral part of the writing process." Unless someone who is in a position to help others improve their writing actually dwells on the consciously creative construction of titles—and there is no indication that this was done in Mr. Haswell's experiment—one might well anticipate that pieces with titles would not be superior to those without them.

Mr. Haswell emphasizes strongly that much writing outside the classroom does not carry titles. Accordingly, he seems to be implying that we teachers may be misleading students when we require titles on their themes. Many of the examples of non-titled writing that he mentions, such as letters to the editor, back matter in record albums, and columns like "Talk of the Town," have special conventions of their own. (These discourses do not necessarily communicate better because they are void of titles, however.) Titles, nevertheless, are almost always a requisite for both fiction and nonfiction in the world beyond the classroom for which students are presumably being prepared. Titles are customarily used for reports in business, the professions, and the military. Memorandums and letters in these areas are frequently headed by what are essentially titles following *re* (or its variant *in re*). It certainly is in order for an instructor to teach "the rhetoric of non-titles"—that is, to apprise his or her charges that titles are not customary in some contexts. But to minimize on this account the need for students to develop skills in creating titles, as seems to be the main element in Mr. Haswell's causerie, would do them a serious disservice.

Mr. Haswell appears to feel also that apprentice writers should be largely relieved of responsibility for bothering about titles, since writers in the field do not always have control over their own titles. But even when someone other than the author supplies a title, that person assumes an important responsibility, and it behooves him or her to exercise both care and skill in devising a name for a work. For example, readers of one of my own essays had to overcome a real obstacle in order to register its import after the editor of the quarterly that published it changed the title. The thrust of the essay was that in Washington, D.C., the city *par excellence* of monuments and memorials, there was not a single statue of the author of our National Anthem and very few memorials of other kinds to him. Yet, Key lived in the Federal District and was a distinguished member of the capital scene, both as an attorney and as a civic leader, for nearly forty years. My original title was "Francis Scott Key—Memorials Enough in Washington?" The editor changed the caption without consulting me to the innocuous and even misleading, "Francis Scott Key: He Gave the Nation Its Anthem." The editor did not otherwise change a word of my manuscript. Why he altered the title, I do not
know, but I was certainly frustrated and disappointed that he had done so.

Thus, I still believe that titles are very important to both writer and reader because they perform highly useful functions, which include one or more of the following: naming the subject, providing readers some insight into a work on their first contact with it, indicating its genre, suggesting its mood, or highlighting its leading motif. Because titles have such valuable uses, writers usually prefer to create their own as one vital part of the composing process; and, having labored long and hard over their titles, authors often feel quite proprietary about them. In this connection and at the risk of offending Mr. Haswell, with his apparent pique against "the glossy world of big-time fiction publishing," I cannot help recalling an episode concerning Ernest Hemingway, who after all began his writing career after high school as a lowly reporter in the Kansas City Star. In 1953 Hemingway complained bitterly to a friend that almost a quarter of a century earlier 20th Century Fox employed his title Men Without Women for a film about submarine warfare—a film that had nothing to do with his collection of short stories brought out under that title by Scribners in 1927. The fact that the studio had paid him at the time $500 for rights to the book did not mitigate for its author the heinous offense.

Finally, in my view, Mr. Haswell's dictum that "something essentially superficial adheres to titles" applies only to cases in which their composers have superficially scripted them. While I agree with Mr. Haswell that student resistance to making titles is neither a mystery nor a crime, the crime may well be ours if as teachers of composition we neglect to provide meaningful instruction in the rhetoric—or rhetorics, if you please—of titles. If we do not insist on the relevance of titles, the punishment may well fall eventually not on us but on our charges.

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