HOW CAN A MAJOR IN COMPOSITION BE ESTABLISHED?

Arthur W. Shumaker

A major in composition can be initiated in a large number of colleges and universities as a successful and respected part of the curriculum. I base this contention on the experience of such a major at DePauw University for over seventy years; indeed, this major may be closer to a hundred years old, but the proof of its older existence is lacking because of the vagueness of the phraseology of the old college catalogues. Somewhat like the Word, it always was. At any rate, my purpose in this discussion is to demonstrate, through a presentation of the highlights of the composition major at this one university, the truth of my assertion. Probably similar experiences at several other colleges would lead to the same conclusion.

In order to show how a composition major can be established, I will first give information about the major as it exists today at this University; second, point out certain advantages or characteristics upon which a composition major can be built, as well as disadvantages of such a major, and finally, conclude by suggesting procedures for establishing the major.

DePauw University, essentially an undergraduate institution, consists of three schools—a College of Liberal Arts, a School of Nursing, and a School of Music—with the College of Liberal Arts being by far the largest of the three. The entire University has about 2350 students, 145 full-time faculty members, 14 full-time members of the English Department and six part-time members, with the full-time equivalent of 17 members. The six part-time members teach a total of 11 sections of composition.

One of the University requirements for graduation is in Expository Writing and consists of admission to what is called a W-course, either through placement or by earning a grade of C- or better in either Expository Writing (a course similar to what many colleges call Freshman Composition) or in Written and Oral Communication. W-courses are offered in several academic subjects, their enrollments are limited to 20, they give one course credit, and combine an emphasis on academic content with practice in writing. Students must attempt the W-course by their fourth semester. In practice most freshmen take the course in Expository Writing, where the enrollment is limited to 18, which is
taught primarily by the English Department. The W-courses in contrast are taught by faculty members of most departments of the University. A small number of freshmen who are found to be deficient in preparation are required to pass Basic Writing, a course with enrollment limited to 15, before being admitted to Expository Writing.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century English composition was taught but often was not separated from English literature and rhetoric. After 1896 English literature was separated from English composition and rhetoric, but until 1907 oratory was considered to be part of rhetoric and composition, when the Department of English Composition and Rhetoric was established as a separate entity. Interest in writing was increasing in the University, and the Department stressed the need for good, accurate composition in all the academic fields and for all the ordinary purposes of life. By 1916 eleven courses in composition were being offered with five of them lasting two semesters each.

Today the following composition courses are offered: freshman or beginning courses—Topics in Writing, Basic Writing, and Expository Writing; sophomore-level courses—Advanced Expository Writing, Creative Writing I, The Development of Modern English (a course more in linguistics than in composition), and News Writing and Editing; one junior-level course—Creative Writing II (which is divided into fiction, playwriting, verse writing, and the essay); and senior courses—Teaching Methods in English, English Grammar (the preceding two courses being directed only partly to composition), Independent Writing, Seminar: Theory and Practice of Criticism, and Seminar in Composition. In contrast to the course offerings and the requirements for a major in literature, essentially there has been rather little change in the course offerings in composition in some thirty or forty years. Perhaps this fact can be interpreted as indicating a lack of initiative and a failure to progress and change with the times; or, on the other hand, it may indicate that the Department thinks that there is little sense in jerking a winning team off the field and sending in what may prove to be second-rate substitutes.

The present requirements for the major in composition are as follows: Introduction to Poetry; either the Drama or Introduction to Fiction; three courses in composition above the freshman level; The Development of Modern English; two courses in elective literature; and the Seminar in Composition—nine courses in all (36 semester hours).

This senior Seminar has always been considered the capstone
course, and the student writes any of several types, particularly the short story, though he can also venture into autobiography, the expository article, or even begin a novel (which often is completed after graduation). Each student mimeographs a story or some other project and distributes it to other members of the class, who are then required to turn in written critiques of this work as well as engage in vigorous class discussion concerning it. Because of the repute of this seminar one sometimes finds enrolled students with majors in other fields, who have also studied advanced composition. They take the course by special permission and often doing surprisingly well.

Of course, the Department also has a major in literature, but all the Department members teach each semester at least one section of some sort of composition, and four members teach two sections of composition out of the usual teaching load of three courses. The student-teacher ratio for the entire University is 15 to one, but each full-time English teacher carries a combined load of about 75 to 80 students. In fall, 1981 the combined enrollment for the Department was 1025 students, about equally divided between courses in literature and courses in composition (including all courses in freshman composition). This total Department enrollment has been increasing in the last four years; and English is fourth in the number of majors in the College of Liberal Arts, being surpassed by Communication Arts and Sciences, Economics, and Psychology. Although there used to be more majors in literature than in composition, particularly when significant numbers of school teachers were being trained, now about half the student majors are in composition. At present there are 16 men and 25 women, a total of 41, majoring in literature and 26 men and 28 women, a total of 54, majoring in composition.

But, you may ask, just what kinds of students take the major in composition? Four main types, I believe. First, the very talented student, who really wants to learn to write and who quite possibly comes to college with notebooks full of poems, stories, descriptions, and the like that he or she has done in high-school classes or outside class either in high school or college. This student wants to become a writer, and on the road to that goal displays both ability and dedication. The chances are at least fair that following graduation the student will get a job with some sort of writing task. In the second place, we have many students who want to enter journalism. They vary much in ability, but most of them will work hard enough to achieve their goal even if it means that they become low-salaried reporters on newspaper beats. Third, students who are only average—or
less—in ability but who have so much motivation that they revise and revise to the point that they have a chance of doing something in writing after they graduate—although they may very well end in going into their fathers' businesses after all. Fourth and last we have our own quota of deadheads—deadheads either because of lack of ability or lack of motivation. In either case they neither graduate with laurels, nor do they publish later the great American novel. I often wonder what becomes of them. In the last two years the teachers of advanced composition have been screening candidates for the major by interviewing them before agreeing to become their advisers.

And what do the majors in composition actually do after they graduate? First, they go into professional writing and journalism, as indicated above. We are glad to see that a number have become novelists or writers of various kinds of expository materials and even of children's books, plus a large group go into professional journalism and some have achieved eminence. Also the majors enter a wide variety of activities, such as graduate school, law school, teaching, advertising, publishing; and a surprising number find places in business and industry. It is not always clear to me exactly what type of work in the business field they do, but at least some do writing or editing, as in connection with trade journals. As a matter of fact, business employers often appear eager to get these students because they seem to be able to adjust to many different types of work. And, of course, for many years colleges have heard that business has a great need for people who can write.

Having now considered various facts about the University and the Department of English and the major in composition, let us next turn to certain characteristics of the composition major.

First, it has always aimed principally at composition for the ordinary purposes of life. Therefore, the skills and habits fostered have been useful in many other academic areas and in non-academic areas as well.

Second, the sheer drudgery of attaining mechanical accuracy, using outlines, and revising continually has always been stressed.

Third, the program has never been a lock step affair. It has always been designed to fit the needs of the individual student.

Fourth, the Department has never promised anything to the student.
If after graduation he or she wishes to become a successful writer, journalist, or whatever, it is up to the student to achieve success.

Fifth, a long tradition of an independent college newspaper has encouraged students and has provided an immediate outlet for their writings. Also, another outlet is a magazine edited and published by students featuring creative writing, such as short stories and poetry, and also including student art work. In addition, a second student newspaper, launched two years ago and partly subsidized by the University, has achieved a certain amount of success. It concentrates more on student opinion and less on news. Scholarships for aspiring journalists are available, and the Kilgore Counselor Program provides for two professional journalists in the course of a year to spend two weeks each on the campus and help the staff of the student newspaper by offering professional advice.

Sixth, if the student shows promise in journalistic or creative writing, he or she may be granted an apprenticeship for a semester in the junior year to appropriate journals, newspapers, and editors through programs called the New York Arts Program and the Philadelphia Urban Semester.

Seventh, as before noted, the seminar in composition has sometimes admitted properly prepared senior majors from other departments, and this fact has attracted some attention to the major program in composition.

Eighth, we have found that a major in composition may well come to understand himself or herself better, because often the student has to turn inward in search of subjects and insights.

Ninth, a curious aspect of this major lies in the fact that new members of the English Department have not tended to want to make changes in the composition major in the same way they have desired to tinker with the major in literature. This is one reason why we feel that the composition major stands up rather well.

Tenth, since there is so much writing going on among students, the faculty members of the English Department are placed in the position of having to keep up with the students.

Eleventh, the faculty of other University departments, and also persons outside this University, have long tended to recognize that
composition has considerable value in their own fields. Several years ago
the dean of the medical school at Indiana University had a bronze plaque
placed in the University library in appreciation of the value of a thorough
training in English composition, such as that being given in the University,
to medical doctors.

Twelfth, many of the majors in composition have also qualified for
high-school teaching licenses, and for several generations we have had the
satisfaction of seeing them hired by school officials expressly to teach
composition. Then these teachers, in turn, tend to kindle in their high­
school students an interest in writing which leads them to enroll in
DePauw University or in some other school offering advanced com­
position. Thus, the writing program tends somewhat to perpetuate itself.

Thirteenth, although the stress has never been on composition for
professional writing, still many of our graduates have gone directly—or,
indirectly—into professional production. However, we should hasten to
warn any person interested that we would not claim that any Shake­
speares, Melvilles, or Hemingways exist among our alumni.

Fourteenth, and last, the staff has been alert to recent developments,
such as using writing skills in the electronic media, like screen and
television. Also, one section of the Advanced Expository Writing is
slanted toward business writing.

Now, after giving such a long list of characteristics, or, advantages,
of the composition major, I should hasten to point out at least a few
disadvantages of it.

First, as I have indicated before, we do get some deadheads in this
program. Either they are conscientious and simply don’t have what it takes
to succeed, or else they hope that this is an easy major. Sympathy
and as much help as possible—perhaps more of the former than the
latter—is about all that we can give these people.

Second, occasionally composition majors tend to try to avoid taking
literature courses, evidently thinking that they prefer not to be influenced
by a dead past, but that rather they want to become geniuses by feeding
upon themselves. Of course, they fail to recognize the fact that good
writing is composed at least 50% of good reading. It is for this reason that
we require a minimum of four courses (one-half of the total) in literature as
Third, sometimes a major in composition has trouble in finding a vocation. If he does not go into teaching or journalism, the only alternatives are either to risk starving in a garret while collecting rejection slips or else to try something like advertising or business or to work in a publishing house. Of course, some of these majors end up in lines of work that have little or nothing to do with writing.

Having examined the advantages and disadvantages of the composition major, as my last item in this discourse I would like to offer a few suggestions to any schools that are considering trying to establish a major in composition.

First of all comes the necessary desire on the part of an English Department really to establish such a major. If too many members of the Department are afraid of the idea because they think that neither they nor anyone can really teach writing, or, if they feel that it would possibly prove to be a threat to entrenched courses in literature, obviously no major will be created.

Second, once the commitment to establish this major has been made, sufficient staff qualified to teach composition must be provided. Unfortunately, the usual training of undergraduate majors in literature has too often been a single, rather frustrating and not too successful course in Freshman English, if that much. And many persons who today hold the Ph. D. have been exposed to only that one course. Probably such a professor is not the best of all prospects to teach advanced composition courses in writing. Perhaps the best teacher of advanced composition courses is one who as an undergraduate took such courses himself and excelled in them and who also preferably has an interest in, and some experience in, such writing, both expository and imaginative. Sometimes professional writers make good teachers of advanced composition, but often they prove to be strongly incommunicative orally and impatient with students, whom they have little desire or ability to understand.

Third, once a college has the suitable instructors, it would probably do well to edge into such a program gradually if at present it has few or no courses in advanced composition. Perhaps a course in (advanced) expository writing, one in imaginative (or creative) writing, and one in journalism would be good points of departure. If a school now has a few
such courses, it might be wise to add more only as the interest and need develop, being sure that they increase in difficulty and in introducing distinctive literary types, such as poetry, drama, and the essay, and culminate in a seminar.

Fourth, as we all know, inviting successful, articulate writers to lecture to your composition students and perhaps, if arrangements can be made, to address university convocations is a useful manner of giving the composition program a series of shots in the arm.

Fifth, and last, see whether, by means fair or foul, you can secure better recognition on the part of colleagues in other departments of the need for good writing. The introduction of a university-wide emphasis on composition is a goal to be hoped for.

In conclusion, I should point out that what all this discussion boils down to is that several colleges, such as my own, have established a seemingly successful major in composition and have produced a number of writers of all degrees of merit, high and low. Undoubtedly some of the wretched writing of today has had its genesis in such majors, and I suppose that composition majors from my own school have had their share in such an unfortunate production. But also a large amount of what most people seem to agree is quality writing has been produced, and I hope that we have had a share in this happier contribution. In addition—and this is our main point—other colleges and universities of different sizes and types can also establish such majors if they have sufficient desire and means to work at the project. In such a possible endeavor I wish you the best of luck.\footnote{This article has been adapted from a paper read at the session on Advanced Composition: Research and Pedagogy at the meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication at Dallas, Texas, on March 27, 1981.}

DePauw University
Greencastle, Indiana