WRITING FOR PUBLICATION IN AN ADVANCED COURSE FOR UNDERGRADUATES

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When I first thought of involving a "real-world" editor in my writing seminar, I envisioned a professional consultation on editing. Bold strokes of the blue pencil would slice across the pages of my students' manuscripts, leaving handwritten drops of brilliance to bleed forth in tight phrases and fresh metaphors. Having submitted the best prose we were capable collectively of producing, we would watch breathlessly as a real editor applied the finishing touches.

But when our editor arrived at the end of the semester with the sheaf of manuscripts we had sent him, he had not made a mark on any student's paper! He spoke to the class and then to individuals in conference about the importance of two things: (1) a topic that fits the publication and the audience, and (2) an enticing lead. He had seen no reason to mark on the papers because "the writing itself [was] of high quality."

Dan Chabot was on the editorial staff of *Insight* magazine, a Sunday supplement to the *Milwaukee Journal*. I was teaching English 303, Seminar in Expository Writing, a core course in a new writing minor. Serving students in both the technical/professional and the creative tracks of the minor, English 303 draws skilled, motivated writers who have completed prerequisites in freshman composition and sophomore expository writing. Our department had decided that the primary objective distinguishing a course for students of this caliber should be writing for publication.

Funded by a small curriculum development grant, I sought an editor who would read a manuscript from each student in the course and then visit the class to discuss the papers with us. It was important, of course, to find a publication that would provide a realistic market for my students and one that would consider pieces written in the *expository* mode. *Insight* magazine was our most likely target. It features essays about Wisconsin by Wisconsin writers, seeks autobiographical sketches with a philosophical twist, uses free-lance as well as staff-written articles in most issues, and includes, in some articles at least, the kind of prose we wanted to practice in the seminar. I contacted *Insight*, Dan Chabot agreed to the plan, and we sent him the manuscripts about one month before his visit to our class.

Knowing that an editor would actually read and discuss the papers with us added an exciting dimensions to this class. It changed *writing for publication* from an abstract, school-time exercise to a concrete real-world challenge. It energized the class, making students and instructor alike stretch and grow to a degree that would not ordinarily occur in a school-contained writing course. However, the first time I taught the course, problems arose that I had not been expecting. I was surprised to discover how limited the possibilities are for undergraduates attempting to publish in the expository mode. Even more surprising to me was the fact that my students' greatest challenge was not to polish style but, rather, to focus and shape the whole piece. I was sure that these students had practiced adapting material to specific audiences in many school assignments over the years. And yet, when substantive revision proved necessary now for real-world discourse, they seemed almost hypnotically disabled. In this article I will discuss the problems I encountered upon first teaching English 303, the changes I plan in future offerings of the course, and the reasons I will continue to involve a professional editor in this writing seminar.

Before focusing on the problems in the course and the impact of Chabot's visit, I would like to explain briefly how we organized the class. The first half of the semester was spent in preparing essays to send to Chabot. We analyzed the *Insight* issue every week for types of articles topics developed, varieties in style and tone. Each week students produced approximately four typed pages in response to an assignment meant to help
them identify a piece suitable for *Insight* (e.g., autobiographical incident, description of a place, personal opinion essay, biographical sketch). Weekly papers were considered drafts, and the writer was asked to note at the top of the paper what "stage" the draft was in (e.g., "free write," "taking shape," "nearing completion") and to specify to the reader what kind of criticism was wanted (e.g., "ideas for my best angle on this topic," "identify information gaps," "note boring passages"). By about the sixth week of class, each student had chosen one of these pieces to develop and polish. By mid-semester we had a pile of "finished" manuscripts to send off to Chabot. The remainder of the semester was devoted to informative, analytical writing, culminating in a professional article in the major discipline.

A key feature of the course was a system of peer critiquing which we adapted from John Trimble, author of one of our tests, *Writing with Style* (Prentice-Hall, 1975). From hearing Trimble at CCCC meetings and from visiting his classes in Austin, Texas, I gleaned a method of intensive evaluation whereby every student's weekly paper receives a written response from every other student in the class as well as a written critique from the instructor. In addition, each student, at least once during the semester, presents a paper for discussion by the whole class.

An immediate problem in such a course is to find an expository form in which undergraduates are marketable. In one of our course texts (*The New Strategy of Style*, 2nd ed., McGraw-Hill, 1978), Winston Weathers and Otis Winchester discuss discriminating features of five types of publishable exposition: the popular article, the professional article, the personal essay, the formal essay, and the critical review. We soon discovered that the popular informative articles in *Insight* were usually assigned to staff writers (as are critical reviews in most magazines). My students did not have the means to follow a new Wisconsin representative during his first five days in Washington or the time to interview bank and shopping mall executives, horticulturists, owners of a green-plant renting corporation, and secretaries in lush tropical offices to do a story on the business of renting exotic plants in Milwaukee. Besides, these popular articles begin to sound like feature stories—which, at our school at least, are to be assigned not in English courses but in feature writing courses in the Journalism Department.
The formal essay is normally written by an established authority who, according to Weathers and Winchester, is not concerned primarily with information or scientific conclusions but is permitted "judgments and ideas designed to influence or change the reader's intellectual perspective." Coming from an undergraduate, this kind of writing would be rejected as "unsupported generalization." Formal essays are written by people like Joseph Wood Krutch or Harvey Cox of the Harvard Divinity School on lofty topics such as "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Welfare" or "Understanding Islam: No More Holy Wars." My students have not gathered the wisdom needed to soar at these heights, nor have I.

Professional articles are almost as unrealistic for undergraduates. The professional journals publish articles by professors and researchers, and occasionally by graduate students. In our course we spent half the semester on professional writing, as an important type of prose for students to know how so they might produce "sometime in the future," but although I encouraged students to submit their articles to the journals, I don't know of any who did. It is rare for an undergraduate to have the expertise necessary to inform a professional article.

This leaves the personal essay, "a fragment of autobiography . . . inevitably self-revealing," according to our textbook writers. Here my students were authorities, and this was the kind of material that Insight sought from the free-lancers. However, the personal essay is only one kind of expository prose. The limitation on the kinds of exposition accessible to students wishing to publish remains a problem as I develop this course.

When Chabot arrived with our manuscripts just before final exams, he spoke repeatedly throughout the day about leads. Introductions which we had thought were interesting as well as literate, Chabot found dull and slow. One paper began with a passage from Wordsworth. "It has become a cliché to start an article with quoted poetry. Try something fresh," Chabot recommended.

I had praised John for the following lead in his article on investment gemstones:
The 1.45 carat stone attracts light and bounces it back in vibrant bands. It radiates with a fiery green intensity. The emerald-cut, natural garnet gem measures 5.35 x 7.74 x 3.86 millimeters. Moderately flawed, its estimated worth is $5,800.00.

Chabot asked for a more appealing lead. I defended it for specific diction: bounces, vibrant, radiates, fiery green. "Yes, but then read on. All those digits. The Sunday morning reader won't take the time to process that numerical information." Well, of course, we suddenly saw what he meant.

In writing for a popular audience, one must remove all obstacles, make the way smooth and inviting. Chabot liked the following lead in Melissa's paper and so did we:

As I wake it is there, it has grown up around me in the night without my knowledge, and I am seduced by it. It makes me want to abandon my day's activities to contemplate the stitching on my quilt, explore the recesses under my bed.

(from "Stillness")

Aside from lethargic leads in many of the essays, Chabot liked the style of the writing itself. This matter of style had been my first surprise in the course. I had expected that the greatest need in a class at this advanced level would be to work on style, and that the students would need to be coaxed into careful editing in order to "tighten, sharpen, and brighten" the page, as Trimble put it.

How wrong I was. I simply had not been prepared for the enthusiasm with which these students pursued style. They copied out striking images from prose they admired. They used transparencies on the overhead projector to study sentences they had modeled on the sixty-four stylistic patterns provided by Weathers and Winchester. While editing one another's drafts, they slashed through verbiage without mercy, determined to "tighten" the page into compact prose. They were enamored of the precise word, and several had the gift for fresh imagery. Melissa's still summer afternoon was accentuated by "warm, warm concrete, like bathwater, warm enough to place a cheek
against.” Tracy’s instructor, dedicated to dance but eschewing the flashy clothes and brilliant make-up of many of her peers, was “a pigeon in a nest of peacocks.” Indeed, I would agree, on the basis of students in this course at least, that William Stone was right in observing recently that the more advanced the students, the more able they will be to approximate the skill of experienced writers (noted by Nancy Sommers) in “rewriting at the sentence level.”¹ And I do believe in the accuracy of Chabot’s judgment: with words and sentences, my students had talent, which they enjoyed exercising; with regard to diction and syntax, they could produce publishable prose.

Our problem it turned out was with the more global matters—focusing on the topic to interest the reader, finding a structure to unify the piece, shaping to create momentum. “Remember, these readers are not teachers paid to finish your article,” my students would remind each other, and yet they couldn’t seem to accomplish what they knew intellectually had to be done.

And this was my biggest surprise in the course. I was expecting students who could reorganize material when necessary to accomplish a purpose with a specific audience. I soon discovered, however, that on this point my class did not follow the pattern suggested by Stone in the article noted above: that 300-level writers can handle organizational problems when rewriting more easily than they can solve sentence-level revision problems.² Indeed, although my class relished the game-like calisthenics of editing for style, they were often confounded by the fundamental work of revision, in the sense of re-seeing, re-shaping the whole piece as Donald Murray and others have explained it.³

In examining their drafts, students had great difficulty in identifying an angle on the topic that would truly interest the general readers who purchase Insight. And nothing had prepared me for these students’ rock-ribbed resistance to reshaping a draft into a structural whole once an appealing angle had been identified.

Benjamin’s article on earth-sheltered homes was full of dimensions, weights, BTU’s, and dollar savings. But the reader would also want to know how it feels to live in an earth-sheltered home.
Nancy described "The Joynt," a unique saloon near our campus which features cultural stars of the stature of Ahmal Jamar and John Ciardi, even though only 150 patrons can squeeze into the place at one concert. Nancy described the place and the owner, but readers would want to know how it feels to be at a concert there and why Woody Herman or the Herd, Odetta or Donald Hall would decide to perform in this small place.

Susan's piece on her first parachute jump was hilarious. "What sane person would abandon a perfectly good airplane?" But although we laughed, we asked, "So what?" What was the point? Susan labored, found a focus (the growth of the human spirit in meeting and overcoming danger), and embedded new sections into her original essay at various points. But now the contrast between tones of light humor and philosophical wisdom was jarring.

Dana wrote several drafts on abuses in the financial aid system. Her examples of outright abuse alarmed us, but deep within every draft we detected a contradiction. She would write cogently on the unfairness of subsidizing the lives of some young people and not of others. Suddenly it didn't seem right that twenty-year-old factory workers should pay taxes to supply grants and interest-free loans for twenty-year-old college students. But then she would suddenly allude to the legitimate claims for support by a "student who would be unable to attend college without financial aid." Are needy students entitled to financial help, or not? Dana could never decide. Her inability to clarify basic assumptions created a snag for the close reader, attempting to follow her analysis of what constitutes "abuse" in financial aids.

My students' problem was not intellectual but rather psychological. Benjamin knew he needed to visit two or three earth-sheltered homes, interview the residents, and reveal the experience of living in such homes. Nancy needed to interview Ciardi and Odetta, who both appeared at the Joynt while our course was underway. But neither of these students could muster more than a half-hearted effort at revision. They had worked too hard on polishing their pieces as originally shaped.
Dana wrote with passion on financial aid abuses, and as a stylist she was the most talented in our class. But she could never achieve a clarification of her basic premise—even though we had made her aware of the contradiction in her essay. Susan loved her sky-jumping story, and she was pleased with the theme which our critiques had prompted her to discover. But she could not bring herself to reopen the paper, to begin a completely fresh draft so as to weave the two threads of her essay into one whole cloth.

Encompassed daily by the creative energy and upbeat spirit of the students in this class, I was baffled by their unwillingness to undertake substantial revision—even when we were quite confident that we had identified changes necessary for turning a piece into a publishable article. Perhaps since the students had worked so hard to impress an editor with stylistic flair, they hadn’t enough energy left to solve basic problems. Or perhaps writing for a real audience beyond school created complex demands that they had never had practice in meeting.

At any rate, when Chabot came, he did not, as I have already indicated, edit manuscripts for us with a dazzling professional sweep. Instead, he showed students, as indeed I had been trying to show them all semester, that they must solve basic problems before indulging themselves in the delights of stylistic embellishment. He told Benjamin and Nancy to interview key people to bring life into their essays. He told Dana that she must clarify her thesis. He complimented Susan on her use of humor. “It’s the light touch. Not many writers can make that work.” He asked her to smooth out the piece and resubmit it to him.

Of all the papers in the course, Melissa’s essay on “Stillness” came the closest to being published. It was a collection of exquisite images, organized more like a poem than an essay. In class we had pressed for some conceptual framework, some point. But even Melissa couldn’t round out the structure to bring this very fine piece to completion. Chabot liked it enough to take it back to Milwaukee to the articles editor at Insight. But within two weeks Melissa had it back, with a note from this second editor: “It needs a rallying point, some event or action around which to develop a solution to a problem or a special insight. The manuscript needs dramatic structure.”
Like all instructors who stand back after teaching a course the first time, I now have a clearer view about what to emphasize in the class the second time around. What I must do above all is find ways to help students keep a piece open until fundamental rhetorical problems have been solved. To illustrate the fruitlessness of working hard without solving basic problems, I will, of course, be able to draw many examples from my first English 303 class. From the outset, I will be able to demonstrate for students that, to avoid rejection by an editor, they must become willing to delay closure until the piece is truly working to accomplish their purposes.

To teach students how to develop an essay while delaying closure, I must become more efficient in suggesting practical ways by which they can benefit from the relevant insights abounding in current composition theory and research. The research of Linda Flower and John Hayes, for example, will help me emphasize that the primary task of a writer is to analyze the rhetorical situation. Flower and Hayes have shown that the most striking difference between good and poor writers is the ability of the former to analyze the topic in terms of the audience and to plan ways to write so as to affect that audience in the desired way. ⁴

Then, even as the students are clarifying the purposes of the written piece, I must show them strategies for developing the essay before they feel a sense of closure on the piece. For some writers, jot listing on different days over a long period of time—before attempting any drafts—is the most efficient way to discover the shape and central meaning of an essay. According to Howard Gardner, a psychologist researching artistic capacities, this “top-down” approach—selecting a ready-made schema or planning one before filling in the details—is a common method of composing among musicians as well as writers. ⁵ Other writers thrive on the “bottom-up” method, experimenting with freewrites whereby they approach the topic in completely different ways at different times, letting the right-brained imagination explore possibilities before the left brain begins to select details and arrange material into an orderly pattern. Freewriting calls to mind the French tradition of the brouillon (literally, a scrambled mess) to which Elaine Maimon alludes when exhorting writing instructors to encourage students “to produce these
scrambled messes as a part of the composing process. Some writers spend hours, days, on the lead, using the opening of the piece to force their own decisions about thesis, tone, and shape. Addressing area teachers in our writing project recently, Lucy McCormick Calkins elaborated on this method in which a carefully developed lead determines the shape of the whole essay. Thanks to Linda Flower, we now have a whole textbook for teaching strategies whereby writers can proceed to accomplish their goals with regard to their intended audiences.

The trick is to help each student identify methods that are most efficient for him or her—methods of working (without procrastination) but yet remaining at the same time open to changes until the best reconciliation is achieved between the writer's intentions and their fulfillment. Understanding the revision process as Nancy Sommers describes it may help students develop a greater tolerance for the discomfort they experience until the piece is finished. According to Sommers, revision for experienced writers is "holistic" (they consider needed changes in both the parts and in the whole simultaneously) and "recursive" (they remain open to needed changes of all kinds throughout the writing of the piece even though giving more attention to the shape of the argument in early drafts and more attention to style in later drafts). Sommers emphasizes that experienced writers can recognize dissonance, "the incongruities between intention and execution." In contrast with beginning writers who resist deviating from an original plan, experienced writers are willing to exploit this dissonance to discover new possibilities while they are revising. And they have the ability to stick with a piece until harmony between intention and execution is finally achieved.

Utilizing such insights more effectively, I will be better prepared to meet my students' needs the next time I teach English 303. Even so, I doubt that I would be able to accomplish the objectives of the course fully without the help of a professional editor. I have discovered that the contact with a real-world editor effects students profoundly and should be retained as a key element of the course. I say this even though none of my students has as yet sold an essay to Insight magazine. In fact, I am beginning to believe that rejection by a real editor is what will help students at this level the most.
Rejection by Chabot jolted my students into a sudden realization of the great difference between writing for school and writing for publication. In school, they had evidently been permitted to ride along on pockets of excellence, even when deficiencies were apparent. Benjamin’s information on earth-sheltered homes was so detailed and technically accurate that a pleased instructor in a typical writing course would have marked it “A+,” obviating Benjamin’s need to act upon the suggestion, perhaps added by the instructor as an afterthought, to consider ways of increasing in the article’s appeal to the average reader. Dana’s writing was consistently imaginative and dynamic.

Need—a word that forever changes color. When I was a freshman I needed a stereo; a sophomore, I needed to go to Daytona during spring break. My father needs a snowblower. My mother has always needed a vacation. I am receiving $7500 in interest-free loans because I am a student and “need” the money. Others are paying for my use of these funds because they are not students. Something doesn’t seem right.

Persuaded by the energy of her style, students and instructor would have awarded her highest honors in most writing classes, as we did. She would never have felt the need to act upon the suggestion to resolve the contradiction hidden within her essay.

In school, writers are rewarded for pieces of excellence. But to publish in the world beyond school, they must achieve both excellence of the parts and harmony of the whole. This is what Chabot really taught my class. John had worked hard and enthusiastically for eight weeks on an article on gemstone investing and was rejected in one breath, “Not appropriate for Insight. Our readers are not the wealthy elite.” Melissa had revised the diction and chiseled the imagery with painstaking effort. “You need a rallying point, some dramatic structure to hold the piece together.” The teacher praises the strengths to encourage learning and growth. The editor notes the flaw which makes the piece unusable. Perhaps writers need this kind of abrupt rejection from the professionals before they will believe how essential it is to stay with an article until it is truly finished, and what an utter waste of time it is to attempt anything less.
The encounter with Chabot recharged the students in my class. By semester's end, Nancy was planning to interview the next celebrity booked at the Joynt, and Benjamin, with renewed zeal, had made appointments to interview families in two earth-sheltered homes. Other students began completely new pieces. A few weeks after the course ended, Dana asked me to critique a new essay aimed at Insight. "People must learn to lie more." Chabot would like the lead. "People must recover from the current obsession with honesty and openness; some discretion is needed to protect our relationship with those we love the most." Perhaps the idea had that "ring of truth" that would effect Dana's break into print.

I recognize that not all the students in English 303 will have the talent and drive to publish. I am confident, however, that the course as we are developing it will provide all students in this seminar with a taste of what writing for publication actually involves.

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NOTES


2 Stone, p. 76.


6 Elaine Maimon, "Talking to Strangers," *College Composition and Communication*, 30 (December, 1979), 367.

7 Effective leads grace the many articles (in *Language Arts* and other journals) in which Lucy McCormick Calkins has described the composing processes of young children.


9 Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," *College Composition and Communication*, 31 (December, 1980), 378-388.