

### THREE TIPS ON WRITING

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The title for this session was not of my choosing. In fact, it is probably harmful even to suggest that teaching writing can be done through tips. Teaching any subject is methodology and this is true of writing more than most. Some methodologies work better than others, but any particular approach to teaching writing must be rehearsed within a full intellectual context. Pure methodology—the reliance on tips or strategies devoid of a larger sense of discipline or purpose—can produce only empty, uninformed banal teaching. Unfortunately, that is what writing instruction has often been in the past.

To teach writing well, you need an accurate assessment of the discipline itself, and your own knowledge of it. If you are getting a degree in English from UT, the chances are good that you will be teaching writing as a regular part of your career from now until you can cash in your IRA. Teaching writing is an ordinary, respectable part of the discipline. If you can't accept that, I think you should bail out now. Let me put it more strongly. In my opinion, the teaching of writing and rhetoric is coequal with the teaching of literature. Always has been the case in Western culture; always will be. Aristotle wrote a poetic and he wrote a rhetoric.

If you believe in a golden age when English teachers did nothing but teach literature because the high schools were doing their job properly, you are simply indulging in mythology. There never was such a time. Even before there were departments of English in this country, students in college routinely took two courses in writing and communication. English as a college discipline had its beginnings in courses and programs in rhetoric. Colleges have always required instruction in college-level writing because writing in college is different from writing in high school. Always has been; always will be. Despite periodic and persistent efforts to eliminate freshman composition (and other writing courses), the course always comes back, has the endorsement of the culture at large, and indeed is single-handedly responsible for the size and numbers of English faculty on most college campuses. Without composition, English departments would probably be about as large as classics departments, maybe somewhat bigger. But surely not the largest departments on campus as they routinely are. Teaching writing is what college English departments do.

If you are offended by the thought of teaching "the basics" to college freshmen, then you perhaps you don't understand the nature of the course. In fact, you'll see very little of the basics here at UT. If some of our faculty saw a what a real "basic" writer looked like, their howls would be heard all the way to Waco. What you will see are students who need to be introduced to college-level writing and what that means. In part, that means instruction in a discipline, not a rehash of myths and old wives tales.

If you think you are qualified to teach writing just because you are, yourself, a good writer, you are wrong. You wouldn't consider yourself qualified to teach psychology because your mental condition was sound or teach medicine because you took good care of your health. There's much more to it than that, though the training in writing we give to undergraduate English majors headed for graduate school, for example, successfully conceals most of the intellectual bases for teaching writing. Most of you are far better prepared to teach E 316K right now than you are to teach E 306. Your background is stronger, your reading is wider, your familiarity with research and criticism in literature is vastly greater than it is in rhetoric and composition. Yet many of you will step into your own composition class in two weeks and begin teaching a college-level course in writing.

You see then the futility of offering tips at this stage. If I sound pessimistic, take this as consolation. You are no worse off than thousands of other novice instructors facing similar situations over the years; indeed, an orientation like this gives you more direction than most, more direction probably than just about any of the tenured faculty enjoyed before launching into their own writing courses for the first time. Indeed, you may not even have taken a writing class—placed out, didn't you? You'll have to learn on the job, a far from ideal situation, but that's the way we do it. No wonder Johnny can't write.

To teach this subject, you do need to know more about it than your students and here I do mean stuff possibly unrelated to actual writing instruction. Chances are excellent you are well-versed in grammar and conventions of language. But how do you make judgments about such matters in the writing you will be reading? Do you understand "correctness" as a matter of simple right and wrong, or can you face your students with a more complex and informed concept of "error"? And are you really as sure of your grammar as you think: "Let he or she who is without sin cast the first stone."

Do you know as much about informative, argumentative, and persuasive writing as you do about the novel, the sonnet, or the rondel? What do you know about discourse theories? About invention? Revision? How much do you know really know *about* something as seemingly elemental as paragraphing, its history, theory, current practice, current research? Can you speak with authority about the "sentence."

Indeed what are the issues, the problems a composition teacher faces in shaping a course. And I am not talking about whether a split infinitive is permissible. I mean the serious political, social, and ethical matters that theorists and teachers have been addressing for decades (centuries) that relate directly to what happens when you enhance the power people have to understand and operate in their worlds. What consequences flow from decisions about assignments and sequence and readings? Are we empowering students or merely socializing them, liberating them or controlling them? And to what ends?

What do you know about the history of the discipline you are about to teach—its deep roots in authors like Isocrates, Aristotle, Plato, Quintilian, Alcuin, Augustine, Erasmus, Bacon, Locke, Nietzsche, Hiedeggar, Foucault, Burke, Weaver, Perelman? What do Corbett, and Shaughnessy, Lunsford, Lauer, Sommers, Witte, Faigley, Kinneavy, Hairston, Dillon, Berthoff have to say about composition that you need to know?

College level writing courses require college level teaching and that means instruction that is knowledgeable, researched, and carefully considered, not drawn piecemeal from a bag of tricks. Teaching by recipes, Anne Berthoff calls it, to teach students how to fill up muffin tins. My first tip then is not a tip at all; it is an imperative: become knowledgeable about the subject you are about to teach.

A graduate student last year wrote a paper for me with an especially poignant title: "Why I Should Not Have Been Allowed to Teach Writing." In it she reflected on her experiences as an eager graduate student in love with literature and writing who gradually discovered that she really didn't know what she was doing when she tried to teach composition. This young woman who had wanted to be an English teacher since she had been in the third grade realized, like Janet Emig almost twenty years ago in a classic piece of research, that the teaching of writing quite often was nothing short of a neurotic activity: "Teaching writing had . . . proved the most humbling work I have ever done." She felt the obligation to learn more about what she was teaching and was ultimately able to come to terms with what she was doing. Let me read a paragraph from near the conclusion of her essay.

Reading and talking about current composition theory and practice significantly changed my approach to teaching writing. I know, from rebuilding egos dashed by harsh commentary, that "the worst vice of the schoolmarm is to correct everything" (Hirsch 160) and I don't see red anymore when I spot a fragment or comma splice. I know not to overwhelm students with line-by-line commentary on diction, redundancy, syntax, and mechanical problems on their drafts, because if I am doing a good job, they will probably make changes extensive enough that the items commented might not even appear in the next draft. I learned through seeing too many angry and frustrated faces leave my office or the Writing Lab after giving them useless advice like "avoid plot summary and concentrate on exposition" or "better try this plan because Professor X likes it this way," that writing instruction "is a matter of showing, not telling, and learning is a matter of discovery, not obedience" (DILLON, 165).

I would like to instill in my students the sense that they compose in a community of writers, not of disciples timidly and perfunctorily following instructions at the feet of an expert. I learned that I didn't need to be the "answers" woman. What students need more than answers or even guidance in asking questions is a prompting to "feel the initial dissonance that will necessitate the process of inquiry and make assignments real writing experiences" (Aviva Freedman 8).

My second tip is quite simple: above all *teach writing*. Don't teach the history of the English language, or the significance of the great vowel shift, or what happened during World War II, or the prose style of Samuel Johnson or John Dryden. Don't teach your personal history or your pet peeves. Don't ride your hobby horse or belabor students with excerpts from your dissertation. Don't talk more than you have to. Have your students write, discuss the writing, have them rewrite. Measure everything you do in the class by how directly it contributes to improving your students writing.

My third tip is love your students. This may be the hardest thing of all to do—especially when you discover that they aren't like you at all. They don't know that Eisenhower was a Republican, who Jonas Salk is, who the Russians sided with in World War II. Some of my students this summer didn't know what a Protestant was—even though they were. They may not especially like to read. They covet riches. Many have had easy lives. Most would vote for Ollie North if he ran for President. But ultimately I think to do this job well—to teach writing—you must have a profound sympathy for those you would instruct. You must understand them, be patient with them, trust them further than they trust you, get angry at them for not living up to their potentials. The day you feel contempt for your students lingering in your heart, you must consider another profession. You cannot educate anyone you don't love enough to want to share with them knowledge and power.

Rhetoric—in its classical sense—thrives where freedom is greatest. Our responsibility at this public institution, then, is more than teaching about language or about literature. It is to give citizens the power to shape their world and live in it. That is the essence of the classical discipline; it is the essence of ours.