

# Inkshed

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A Canadian newsletter devoted to writing and reading theory and practice.  
Vol. 3, no. 1. February 1984.

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This newsletter is offered to all educators in Canada interested in processes and pedagogies relating to language, language acquisition, and language use. A forum whose primary objective is to intensify the relationship between theory and practice, it serves both informative and polemical functions.  
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## A Short Defense of Student Journals

In 1975, James Britton, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen published *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)*. Suddenly, almost everyone concerned with promoting fluency and control in student writing was encouraging language in the expressive mode. This is language "close to the self" and "close to talk", and, as Britton and his colleagues' extensive study of British secondary schools clearly showed, it was a variety of language students were seldom called upon to use. Their convincing argument for the importance of expressive writing initiated a kind of revolution in the theory and practice of writing instruction. Researchers began to examine the process and product of students engaged in expressive language. Teachers began to search for expressive writing tasks. Unfortunately, since expressive language is "intimate" and requires a "shared context" between writer and reader, the classroom environment did not easily lend itself to many expressive language experiences. However, one forum for such language appeared promising: the journal.

The journal quickly became a hot instructional item. Articles and conference sessions about its value and versatility proliferated. Claims for its effectiveness were extravagant. Suddenly there were journals across the curriculum. Now, approximately eight years later, journal-mania appears to have subsided. While it is difficult to know what is happening in the privacy of classrooms, the decline in the journal's public prominence suggests a decrease in its use. If this is so, it is probably the result of a failure to define clear objectives for the journal or to integrate it into the total course. I would like to argue for the continued usefulness of the journal in the development of writing abilities.

At McGill, we consider the journal an integral part of our undergraduate writing course. While every other aspect of our course--textbook, assignments, evaluation policy, and so on--is subject to constant reassessment, the weekly journal is sacrosanct. It is the one thing about the course which receives near unanimous approval from students and staff alike. I believe there are two main reasons for our success with the journal.

The first is that we have tied the journal to one of our major course objectives--changing our students' attitudes to writing. The journal has helped us reduce the fear and loathing with which students approach writing. We do this by creating in the journal a threat-free and truly communicative environment. We do not correct grammar, punctuation, or spelling; instead, we simply respond, we write back. Topics for journal entries are selected by the students, but as often as possible we encourage them to write about the things they know. Foreign students write about their homes, engineering students write about computers, everyone writes about the trials and tribulations of life as a student. On the rare occasions when students divulge difficult personal problems, we resist the temptation to play Ann Landers and, instead, refer them to the appropriate counsellors or services on campus.

In the majority of cases, it is not necessary for us to feign interest. We ask questions, share experiences, swap stories. As experts writing to an interested and responsive audience, our students actually enjoy writing--a far too infrequent school experience. A number of our students have asked if they could continue submitting their journals after the course was over. Results of course evaluations consistently show the journal to be a popular and helpful component of the course.

The second reason for our success is the effort we have made to integrate the journal into our total writing program. We have done this in three ways. First, we draw students' attention to the relative fluidity of their journal language as compared to the often stilted and awkward "formal" prose of their assignments. Since many of the students write more naturally and correctly in their journals, we can encourage them to use in their assignments the same voice they employ in the journal. This is especially helpful for those students for whom English is a second language.

Second, instructors occasionally ask questions in the journal about the students' writing processes. By focussing their conscious attention on their process, we hope to provide the students with greater control in writing. In fact, this tactic has proven so successful that some instructors have students keep a writer's log separate from their journals.

Finally, we have taken seriously Britton and his colleagues' suggestion that expressive language is a "seedbed" from which other language functions grow. As a result, rather than allowing our students to ramble unchecked in their journals, we challenge them. We question, debate, argue, ask for explanations, definitions, descriptions. Our journal responses push students past simple narration to speculation, generalization, and theorizing. Even if the topic is the Expo's chances in next year's baseball season (a favorite among engineers), it is possible to challenge, to draw from them something more demanding than mere personal opinion.

Occasionally, some students--closet novelists or poets--will ask if they can write fiction in the journal. We enthusiastically agree. We criticize, suggest, and question. We ask how their writing process changes when they compose stories or poems. We point out that such poetic devices as similes and metaphors are useful in the transactional prose of their assignments.

As a result of our success, the journal remains central to our writing program. Naturally, reading and responding to our students' journals takes time--considerable time. In fact, if it were not for our conviction that keeping journals has a dramatic and positive effect on our students' writing, it would take too much time. Not only do we believe they are effective, however: we, like the students, find journal-writing enjoyable and refreshing. Besides, the fact that we too are writing in their journals establishes a unique bond between student and teacher and gives us much greater credibility. We are, after all, writing teachers.

Anthony Paré  
Faculty of Education  
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[Interested in reading more about using journals to teach writing? See Toby Fulwiler's "The Personal Connection: Journal Writing across the Curriculum," in *Language Connections: Writing and Reading across the Curriculum*, ed. Toby Fulwiler and Art Young (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982), pp. 15-31. J.A.R.]

## Higher Order Reasoning in Chicago

In November, the third of the University of Chicago's Institutes on Writing, Meaning and Higher Order Reasoning happened, and it was more An Event than just another conference. The response to these Institutes has been huge; we had made it only to the waiting list for the second one. The third Institute brought together over two hundred teachers, administrators, and writers from all over the United States and from many disciplines. The main intent of the four-day meeting was to explore the relationship between writing and developmental theories currently prominent in psychology, including particularly those of Piaget, Perry, and Kohlberg.

The Institutes are not designed for the person who likes to just sit back and soak up pearls of wisdom from the experts, although that learning process was part of the experience. The convenors also insist on input from and interaction among the participants. We were pushed, prodded, and challenged not only by the intensity of the schedule, but also by the carefully designed format. Each day began with lectures by the invited experts: English professors Wayne Booth, Ann Berthoff, and Joseph Williams; psychologists Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, Reed Larson, and Robert Kegan. They presented a diverse and sometimes controversial agenda.

Then the large group broke into smaller sessions for concurrent workshops. The most valuable of those I attended were one by Elaine Maimon of Beaver College on Writing Across the Curriculum, in which she generously shared a pile of material from her experiences; and a second by Paul Connolly and Teresa Vilardi from the Bard Institute for Writing and Thinking, during which we wrote following their innovative methods. Other workshops were on dialectical thinking, on the invention of the self, on civic issues of thinking and literacy, on William Perry's theory and on practical applications of his theory. Because the convenors use a price schedule that encourages institutions to send more than one participant, colleagues from the same place can attend different workshops and then exchange notes when they get back home. That way, it is possible to learn even from workshops one does personally attend.

From the theoretical to the practical the format then funneled down to individual participation. At the end of each day, participants broke into groups of fourteen and worked through applications of developmental theory to writing in three stages. First we tried to define "higher order reasoning"--no easy job and an issue the whole Institute seemed to have trouble reaching consensus on (which is fine with me: I think one weakness of developmental theory is the rigid stage hierarchy that deals only with composites and misses the individual's complexity). All participants had been asked to bring materials for the small groups: a sample paper which illustrated what we considered higher order reasoning to use in the first session and an assignment that would lead to higher order reasoning, which was the focus of our second session. The last group meeting was intended to develop institutional approaches to writing and higher order reasoning.

As my Colby College colleague who went to the Institute with me said, "Its strength was in its weakness." The convenors tried to do everything. The result was an invigorating experience for the participants, but it was not a meeting that could come to conclusions. On Sunday there was some sense among participants that we might have fallen

short of the convenors' expectations. I heard absolutely no one say that his or her own expectations were disappointed, however. The comment most often overheard was, "I wish we had more time to pause and think this all out."

The other great strength of the Institute was in the group which the University of Chicago had gathered together. We were an enormously diverse collection of experienced practitioners. At one meal I sat down with English teachers from California, Maine, and Kansas, and a philosopher from Florida. I was also lucky to be in a mixed rather than homogeneous small group with two chemists, a biologist-administrator, an engineer, a high school English department chair, business educators, a physical education instructor, a technical writing consultant, a workshop leader from Bard who was an historian, and a couple of fellow English teachers. We not only enjoyed a fertile interchange of ideas and a happy realization that we share many of the same problems despite different terminology, but we also formed a network within and beyond the group which I expect to be using for years. From the point of view of the convenors, I believe that they have succeeded in creating a ripple effect which will have an impact on education that will reach far beyond the immediate influence of the participants. The Institute did not impose solutions; it raised issues and offered possibilities. One of the issues which remains alive for me, for example, is whether writing in different disciplines differs in essential ways of approaching knowledge or differs only in superficial matters of terminology.

Joseph Williams, one of the University of Chicago convenors, claims, "We're going to keep doing this until we get it right!" If an announcement for the Fourth University of Chicago Institute on Writing, Meaning and Higher Order Reasoning reaches you, sign up quickly to avoid the waiting list.

Jean Sanborn  
Colby College  
Waterville, ME

## The Troubled Connection

On the last page of this issue you'll find repeated the call for proposals for the *Inkshed* working conference. Having given *Inkshed* subscribers the first chance to propose, we are now advertising the conference more widely, with slightly-extended deadlines for proposing and registering. If you had wanted to propose a session but could not meet the earlier deadlines, please send something to us now.

The conference will run from Friday evening (after the last plane in from the west) and end before noon on Sunday (well in time to register for CCTE). More details will of course be announced in forthcoming issues of this newsletter. (R.A.H. & J.A.R.)

## News from the Provinces

### Composition Courses at the University of Manitoba

/// Murray J. Evans

Professor Karen Ogden (English) at the University of Manitoba has sent the following report on their composition courses:

The Department of English at the University of Manitoba began offering two writing courses in 1975-76. Both English 4.091 Remedial Composition and English 4.092 Introduction to Literature were one-term remedial courses. In 1975-76 eight sections of the two courses were taught. 4.091 and 4.092 still enroll the largest number of students in the writing program. This year there are nine sections of 4.091 first term and six sections second term. 4.092 is taught only in the second term. For the spring of 1984, we have planned eight sections. They are already full so we may have to open additional sections. All sections of 4.091 and 4.092 are limited to twenty-five students.

English 4.091 offers remedial help to students with fundamental problems in writing. The course focuses on basic matters of grammar, paragraphing, essay construction, and style. Students write ten papers ranging in length from one paragraph to three pages. English 4.092 is designed to complement and supplement 4.091, but it may be taken by itself. The course provides an introduction to short stories and poetry and gives the student extensive practice in writing about literature: ten papers, all three to five pages long.

In the fall of 1981, we began to offer English 4.200 Intermediate Writing and Research. That year we taught one section; now we teach three. There were seventy-three students in 4.200 in September. The course is designed for students who wish to improve their writing ability. They write twelve papers during the course of the year; read widely, particularly non-fiction prose; and develop and use their skills in research. We expect students who enter 4.200 to be fluent in English and able to write papers free of basic errors in grammar, diction, and sentence structure.

### Nova Scotia: Writing Competence Testing

/// Susan Drain

At a meeting last fall, the Faculty of Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax called for the institution of a university-wide test of English Writing Competence, and requested the Vice-President Academic to look into the matter further. The request followed, but did not arise directly out of, an investigation into and subsequent report to the Senate upon the writing proficiency of the Mount's students. A statement prepared on behalf of the English Department in support of the proposed test read in part as follows:

'Mount Saint Vincent University believes that all its students should develop, and that its graduates should possess, a minimum competence in writing. At present, however, it is clear that students do not appear altogether to share our estimate of the importance of being able to write well. Although we declare [in every course

outline] that 'correct use of language is one of the criteria used in evaluating written assignments', we are all painfully conscious that incompetent writing persists. Furthermore, when in previous years first-year full-time students wrote the College English Placement Test, we found that of those who failed, very few sought the help available through the English department's 001 course, unless they were required to do so by their programmes. To judge by student performance, then, writing competence is not universally perceived as valuable or worth striving for.

'The purpose of imposing a writing competency test is to make it unmistakably clear to students, and to remind ourselves, that writing is genuinely important. By setting the test as a graduation requirement, we would declare (in terms that students readily comprehend) that writing counts. By setting the test as an examination upon entrance, we declare that the test is not punitive. Students will be told immediately whether or not their present skills are adequate to the demands that will be made upon them. (At present, students may have to wait to find out until their first mid-term or essay is returned; depending upon her course selection, a student could conceivably accumulate several credits before anyone assessed her writing competence.)

'It is not our intention to establish an admission test to screen students out of Mount Saint Vincent. Instead, we recognize that students who have been admitted to the University and subsequently identified as poor writers must be given not only time but also direct help and encouragement to improve. It is our contention that, just as the whole University should subscribe to the importance of writing, so the whole University should share the responsibility for the improvement of writing. Instituting a writing competence test will supplement, not supplant, other writing improvement programmes and initiatives in the University. As a formal, University-wide, and meaningful requirement, it will uphold the importance and reinforce the improvement of writing.'

I have been commissioned by my department to investigate the ways and means of instituting a writing competence test. My immediate reaction is to call upon my fellow readers of *Inkshed* to help me in one or all of the following ways.

1. Tell me if your institution has or has had a testing program for its students. All details would be greatly appreciated: What test did you use? Who administered it? Who evaluated it? What was the intended purpose? What did you do with the results? How is it or has it been working? If you had the choice, would you do it over again?

2. Tell me if you know of any other institution which has experimented with such testing, and, if you can, tell me the names of people there who might be able to tell me more about it. Not everyone reads *Inkshed*, alas, so I might miss some interesting experience unless one of you alerts me to it.

3. What is your reaction to the English Department's statement above? What are your views on the whole matter of the wholesale testing of university entrants? What purpose, if any, do you see it serving? What are your arguments for or against it? What theoretical or practical pitfalls would you foresee?

Please note that nothing official has happened at the Mount, nor is it likely to happen for some time yet. My request to you through *Inkshed* is as informal as the telephone calls I would make if I knew you all by name. The whole issue is a complex one,

but at the heart of it I see an extremely important point. The entire Faculty has affirmed the importance of writing and has accepted that the responsibility for its improvement is not to be fobbed off on the schools, or the English Department, or Student Services. Now we need to decide upon the best way to share and carry out that responsibility. Your suggestions will help us make those decisions as wisely and as usefully as possible.

## Cohort Reports

### McGill University's Discourse Processing Laboratory

Robert J. Bracewell, Carl H. Frederikson, Janet D. Frederikson

The Discourse Processing Laboratory is concerned with (a) research on the cognitive processes and knowledge structures that allow the comprehension and production of discourse, (b) the interaction of such processes and knowledge with the structure of text, and (c) the development of literate types of discourse competency from a basis of oral language competency. The Laboratory is the centre for a number of research projects having both methodological and theoretical orientations. The methodological emphasis is placed on the development of a comprehensive system of discourse analysis that can be applied to texts to reveal aspects of text structure and conceptual structures that can be derived from text structure. The theoretical emphases include (a) the development of a theory of knowledge integration based on comprehension of story and expository school-type texts in students in elementary and secondary schools, (b) description of the relation between cognitive processes and knowledge structures common to comprehension and composing activities, (c) the characterization of composing competence for story and instruction genres in elementary and secondary school students, and (d) the relationship of discourse competency to comprehension and composing in a second language. Members of the research team are associated as well with research projects on the development of discourse skills in the deaf and hearing-impaired, the application of discourse analysis to skill in medical problem solving, and the effects of schooling and literacy training on subsequent performance in work settings.

The address: Discourse Processing Laboratory  
Department of Educational Psychology and Counselling  
McGill University  
3700 McTavish Street  
Montreal, PQ H3A 1Y2

|| *But to avoid more Ink-shed in these Tales of Blood-shed, let's fall on some that are of a Jocular Humour.*  
W. Hughes, *Man of Sin* (1677).



*(In the December 1982 issue of W&R/T&P Newsletter our colleague at Concordia, Harry Hill, reported that his university had instituted a writing requirement--at the insistence of the students. Following is an update on the situation there.)*

### Report on the First Session of the Concordia University Writing Test

In November 1983 sixty-four students (59 English, 5 French) sat the Concordia University Writing Test at its first session. Although the session was widely advertised in advance of the session, the turnout can be considered poor. So can the pass rate. Of 59 English-speaking candidates, 22 passed.

This failure rate is not serious, as almost all candidates sitting this session of the test are in their first year of university study and have much time to remedy their situation by registering for the recommended writing courses or sitting the test again when their writing ability has had the time and opportunity to improve.

The readers of the papers were sessional lecturers in English Composition and part-time lecturers in the French Department, coordinated by H. Hill and G. Taggart respectively.

In the case of the English papers, six samples were taken, representing a cross section of the possible scores. This was done by two people scoring the papers independently on a four-point scale. Their scoring was as follows. (The two scores out of 4 are added to make a final score out of 8.)

PAPER	Pre-reader 1	Pre-reader 2	Score/8
1	3	3	6
2	4	3	7
3	2	2	4
4	1	1	2
5	1	1	2
6	3	4	7

(A difference of one point is not significant, and the agreement in grades here is worth noting.)

These six samples were read again by the assembled graders the following day, as a safeguard against prejudice, bad opinion, looseness, tiredness, unnecessary strictness, and other causes of lapses in judgement. The papers were read holistically, using accumulated years of experience in grading written work at the university level and referring to the criteria announced to the candidates at the examination:

1. Is the thesis statement (the main point you are making) developed?
2. Is the sentence structure sound?
3. Are there relatively few errors of grammar?
4. Are vocabulary and usage appropriate and correct?
5. Are spelling and punctuation correct?

The only question on 'passing standard' the graders were to ask themselves was this: "Is this paper literate enough for a university graduate in that it would definitely receive a grade of C- or higher in ENGL C212?"

They were reminded that the UWT is not an entrance test but a graduation requirement. The results of their scoring the six sample papers was as follows: #1, 6; #2, 7; #3, 4; #4, 2; #5, 2; #6, 7. Significantly, their scores were exactly the same as those of the two pre-readers. It was, therefore, safe to continue without any further discussion, although of course the six papers were discussed as the scores were read out. A thorough consensus on the standards was therefore reached, and grading proceeded.

What is the pass-mark on the University Writing Test? When we are using a 4-point scale (which encourages decision), converted to an 8-point scale for diagnostic placement purposes (so that appropriate remedial activity can be clearly recommended to candidates who have sat the test, and specific course-levels indicated), the pass-mark is set at 6. This can be understood by the following table:

SCORE	LEVEL OF ABILITY
8 PASS	Clearly good writing.
7 PASS	Good writing: no remedial work needed.
6 PASS	Passable writing, but more work recommended.
5 FAIL	Not good enough to receive C- in ENGL C212, and not yet of a quality expected of university graduates. ENGL C212 and C213 recommended.
4 FAIL	
3 FAIL	Not up to the entrance level of ENGL C212. C205 & C206 recommended.
2 FAIL	Very weak writing, sub-C205 level, or needing ESL training.

Of the students whose writing is not up to the graduation standard, the scores break down as follows: twelve students scored 5, twenty scored 4, five scored 3, and two scored 2. The largest of these categories is obviously 5 & 4 combined, with a total of thirty-two students whose writing is judged not good enough to achieve a grade of C- or better in ENGL C212. On their UWT reports, therefore, these courses are recommended. It is only to be expected that this group of thirty-two will improve in writing ability, most probably within a year, and that when they sit the UWT a second time they will pass it. The seven students whose scores are 3 & 2 will have to work harder than the rest.

The readers of the first session of the UWT expressed their admiration for the spunk of those who were the first candidates for the test, and noted that there were few extremely bad papers and some truly excellent ones. So impressed were they by the quality of the best work that their faith in testing is renewed and they anticipate that the UWT will indeed encourage literacy. That is why it was created.

For more information, write:

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English Department  
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7141 Sherbrooke Street West  
Montreal, PQ H4B 1R6

A Call for Proposals

## Composition and Literature: The Troubled Connection

A Working Conference Sponsored by

*Inkshed*

and

St. Thomas University  
Fredericton, New Brunswick

Friday evening through Sunday morning, 17-19 August 1984

*Six one-hour sessions + "inksheddings"*

*Deadline for proposals: 1 March 1984*

*Limited to 40 registrations*

*Deadline for registration: 15 April 1984*

*Registration fee: \$85.00 (includes a midnight chowder, a lunch, a dinner and a party)*

### Kinds of proposals:

Most important, we will welcome proposals that promise to involve participants in active and constructive ways. That is, sessions should do more than present the products of inquiry; they should also engage participants in the processes of inquiry. (For instance, sessions on the history, the politics, the economics, the ethics, or the pedagogy of the relationship between composition and literature at secondary and post-secondary levels could begin with, or include, inquiry into those relationships at participants' own institutions--or into those relationships in their own secondary and post-secondary educations.) Although we will ask session leaders to make available some kind of text that can be distributed and studied before the conference sessions, we will expect those texts to be texts-in-process rather than publishable artifacts. (For ideas, see *W&R/T&P Newsletter* 2:5, pp. 6-8, and Kay Stewart's "Suggestions...", in 2:4, pp. 6-7.)

In addition, we will welcome demonstrations of methods of, and approaches to, inquiry --i.e., sessions that show participants how to conduct their own inquiries into the relationship between composition and literature.

We will welcome talks that present the contexts for inquiry, and that identify the tools and materials of inquiry. Who are the people to read, and what are the documents to read? What should researchers be looking for, and looking at? Where should they be looking?

We will welcome, in every case, proposals that address these questions and issues as they occur in the context of Canadian education, society, and culture.

*Proposals should include name, address, phone numbers; title of proposed session, brief (200 words) description or abstract, brief description of method, and a statement of the aim or purpose of the session. Write to:*

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