

# Inkshed

Newsletter of the Canadian Association for the Study of Writing and Reading  
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Surrounding us wordy animals there is the infinite wordless universe out of which we have been gradually carving our universe of discourse since the time when our primordial ancestors added to their sensations *words* for sensations. When they could duplicate the taste of an orange by *saying* "the taste of an orange", that's when STORY was born, since words *tell about* sensations. Whereas Nature can do no wrong (whatever it does is Nature) when STORY comes into the world there enters the realm of the true, false, honest, mistaken, the downright lie, the imaginative, the visionary, the sublime, the ridiculous, the eschatological . . . , the satirical, every single detail of every single science or speculation, even every bit of gossip—for although all animals in their way communicate, only our kind of animal can gossip. There was no story before we came, and when we're gone the universe will go on sans story.

Kenneth Burke, Letter to the Editor, *TLS* 12 August 1983: 859.

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# Inkshed

5.3. May 1986.

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A primary objective of this newsletter is to intensify relationships among research, theory, and practice relating to language, language acquisition, and language use—mainly (but by no means exclusively) at post-secondary levels. Striving to serve both informative and polemical functions, *Inkshed* publishes news, announcements, notices, reports and reviews (of articles, journals, books, textbooks, conferences, workshops); commentaries, discussions of events, issues, problems, and questions of concern to academics in Canada interested in writing and reading theory and practice.

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often unable to articulate it, employers and post-secondary instructors are really upset most about inability to organize information, subordinate evidence to generalizations, put together a coherent argument, and so forth. (on this level, of course, it is not just an "English" problem.)

A few technical terms are crucial because they focus attention, title key issues. If you don't understand the concepts represented by these terms, you will very likely have difficulty understanding testing and related issues. *Validity* (precisely what does this test really measure?) turns out to be a much more complicated (and interesting) question than one might expect; *reliability* (are various versions of the test comparable?) is a significant but secondary question. For our purposes, validity turns on how well the test measures control of the "domain" (i.e., writing ability, or the ability to do some particular type of writing). In practice, we usually must choose between *norm-referenced* and *criterion-referenced* tests. In part because the "norm" tends in practice to become the "standard," norm-referenced tests are generally to be avoided. Criterion-referenced tests are valid only if the criteria accurately correspond with what is really important in the domain.

Throughout, it matters that we remember the crucial issue is not *literacy vs. illiteracy*, but *what kind of literacy (and for whom)?* Discussions of testing should be treated as opportunities to help people understand language processes and literacy. Evaluation procedures (including tests) should reflect goals that are defined as people decide what types of literacy they need and want.

## Does the Appearance of Poetry Make Any Difference? A Report on a Modest Empirical Exploration

It was when I first began to be aware that other people (especially my students, but other people in general as well) did not all read the same way I did, that I began to try to discover ways to find out what the differences were. What was it that my students were doing with texts, I asked myself—and what were my colleagues doing with them, and what were J. Hillis Miller and Jacques Derrida doing with them? What, indeed, was I doing with them myself?

The question turned out to be a lot more complicated than I thought, and answering it has turned out to be a much bigger task. Whether I'm actually any closer to "the truth" now than I was six or eight years ago when I first began addressing the question seriously isn't very clear, but—largely because of what I've learned from my colleagues, especially Doug Vipond—I do ask much more specific questions now, and I am beginning to develop some strategies for answering them.

As part of one attempt to answer a couple of questions about how people read I shamelessly used the participants at the Inkshed II conference as guinea pigs, and promised, as an inadequate gesture of thanks for their help, to report on my results. This—not only inadequate, but also late—is my report on what happened: on what questions I was trying to ask and on why I wanted to ask them in the way I did. The particular questions I wanted to ask had to do with the "reality" of line endings in poetry. Does the placement of line endings actually make any perceptible difference to the way readers read poems, and, if so, what kinds of differences? Two subsidiary questions: in what situations does this text feature make any difference? And to what readers?

(I should make it clear right here, by the way, that I didn't actually expect to find out something earthshaking from the fifty-odd participants; my immediate aim was to demonstrate to the participants some things about reading and about the unspoken assumptions that govern much of our teaching of literature. More generally, I wanted to field-test some components of a research method.)

What happened in the session, then, was this. Each member of the group was handed a text, asked to read it, and given a question to think about. There were four different texts. Each was made up of the same words and punctuation marks, but they were displayed on the page in four different ways. One was arranged like any bit of prose, with the words strung out from margin to margin—and, to accentuate that prosiness, with the right margin justified, like this (these aren't the exact line-endings, of course):

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard and made dust  
and dropped stove-length sticks of wood, sweet-scented stuff  
when the breeze drew across it. And from there those that  
lifted eyes could count five mountain ranges one behind the  
other under the sunset far into Vermont.

Another took the same text and began a new line after about every eight words, capitalizing the first word in each new line:

And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and  
Rattled, as it ran light, or had to  
Bear a load. And nothing happened: day was  
All but done.

A third began a new line (with a capital) at whatever I felt was an important phrase boundary, yielding something that looked rather like free verse:

Call it a day, I wish they might have said  
To please the boy by giving him the half hour that a boy counts so much  
When saved from work.  
At the word, the saw,  
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant, . . .

And the fourth preserved the original iambic pentameter lines of Frost's "Out, out—":

Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—  
He must have given the hand. However it was,  
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!

One of the difficulties with research into the "effects" of text features like these is that many readers, often precisely the ones we might expect to be those on whom such text features would have the strongest impact, are very sophisticated about what effects such things are supposed to have, and find it very difficult to attend to their own actual reading processes. To draw the attention of readers away from the form and toward the "substance" of the text, I created a "distractor." It was a statement to which readers were invited to respond (the statement was, roughly, "If all you're going to say is that these people are callous and unfeeling, you could dispense with a lot of these details." Most people reacted with some hostility to the Philistinism of this statement. More important, in responding to it no one mentioned formal issues like metrics or line lengths.

To find out whether there was any difference due to the form in how people responded to the text, my main strategy was the standard old psychological one of recognition memory. After a second task (which involved the sequenced, predictive reading of Ted Hughes' "The Thought-Fox"—a report on that task is forthcoming) I asked everyone to complete a 25-item

multiple-choice quiz in each items of which they decided which of four similar phrases was the one that had actually occurred in the poem. My hypothesis was that there should be two kinds of differences in people's ability to remember the specific phrasing of passages from the poem:

(1) If lines are perceived as entities, those who perceived particular lines should remember them better—e.g., those who read the second version should be more likely to recognize the phrase "rattled, as it ran light, or had to" as being a string of words that actually occurred in the text than those who read other versions (and who, for instance, might have actually encountered the string arranged this way:

snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,  
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.

(2) If Frost's original is the one which most effectively connects the display with the substance, and interferes least with the understanding of the text, it seems at least plausible that those who read the text in that version should not only remember the iambic pentameter strings best, but should also remember the exact words of the poem best across the board, regardless of the form in which they were presented.

Anyone with experience in empirical investigation will not be surprised that the actual numbers did not support my hypotheses. As usual, there are many soothing explanations for such a failure (the most seductive of which is that the number of participants was far too small to expect statistical reliability). Looking at the qualitative data—what people said in response to the distractor statement—one might expect to find differences (for example) between the responses of those who read what looked like prose and of those who read what looked like Frost's iambic pentameter. To be unashamedly honest about it, I didn't find that either. The only difference I found that seemed even possibly significant is that no one who read the margin-to-margin "prose" version mentioned poetry, imagery, emotions, or other "poetic" qualities, where most of the others at least alluded to such concerns.

Does this all mean that line-endings don't make any difference except to advertise, visually, that a text is "poetic"? (I should say that I've had similar results with an undergraduate class in reading poetry). I think that would be too strong a conclusion. Much here, and much in my undergraduate class, is dependent on the situation; and in no case are the numbers large enough to have much faith in (readers and situation both vary at least as much as texts—for more on this, see either Hunt & Vipond, 1986, or Vipond & Hunt, in press). What it does for me—and what I hoped it might do for those who took part in the exercise at Inkshed II—is to remind me how complicated and subtle a phenomenon reading poetry is, and, most important, to remind me never to discuss features of texts as though they automatically entailed any response in a generic "reader." What a poem means—and what it does, and what it is—is more dependent on who the reader is, and what situation she perceives herself to be in, than it is on any "text features" critics may agree characterize the poem.

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## Research Project in Wordprocessing and Writing

The title of our project is "The Influence of Wordprocessing on the Writing and Attitudes of Community College Students"; it is funded by the Ministries of Education and Colleges and Universities in Ontario. The following description is limited to purposes and procedures rather than results since the project is still in its early stages. The first stage is a trial in the current academic year (1985-86). The formal field study is scheduled for 1986-87, and the final report will be presented in September 1987.

The study is set at the Newman campus of Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology where, after a short period of experimentation, wordprocessing was incorporated into the English curriculum in 1984. Two classrooms with 30 microcomputers each are scheduled for formal class work, one of these almost entirely devoted to the use of English. A further 60 machines are available for students to use on a drop-in basis for up to 15 hours a day, and serve a total campus population of 5000.

Students taking wordprocessing as part of their English subject in first semester are the persons under study; we hope to test 600 students.

### Trial Stage 1985-86

The trial stage of the study has these components:

Establishment of an advisory committee from the faculty of the English and Communication Division. These faculty advise on method and materials used in the study, and have generously helped us in questioning their students.

Design and test questionnaires on writing habits and attitudes. We developed two short-answer questionnaires in the test phase, one for the beginning of the semester and one for the end. These questionnaires are in part modeled on attitude surveys developed during the 1970s in composition research. We were able to question 286 students in September 1985 and 144 in December.

Collection of writing samples from each student. Each sample, in the trial stage of the study, was written in one sitting (a class hour), by hand, on a topic of the classroom teacher's choosing. The samples were graded on a four-point scale, and compared against the survey answers.

Interviews of entering students. Fifteen volunteers from the initial test of 286 were interviewed. The interviews cross-checked the validity of the questionnaire and obtained free responses about writing attitudes and habits from the students. Most importantly, the interviews helped us get a profile of the students in a way that the questionnaire could not.

The trial stage of the study is nearing completion. We are now working on refining the questionnaire and examining the method by which we test the students' writing.

### Results So Far

In the middle of the research as we are, there are no results we can yet report. There are, however, many observations we can make on the context of the study and the experience of working in such a study with a committee of fellow teachers.

First, the teachers on the committee have embraced the chance to ask questions and seek answers about teaching writing and the use of the tool of wordprocessing in that teaching. In many ways, this is a pioneering experience for several of us. The insights the teachers offer one another, and the critical analysis their experience yields in the development of the questioning instruments are invaluable.

Second, the study appears to give both researchers and students rich insight into the act of writing. In some ways, students come to college with a strongly developed sense of the purposes and uses of writing. If we are careful in our study, we may be able to discover some exciting things about how students develop the skills they bring to the community college, with implications for our curriculum.

Third, there are apparent changes in the writing activity in the whole college where the study is taking place. The Microcomputer Centre makes available a writing tool that certainly is used by all sections of the College Curriculum.

#### Study Stage 1986-87

With the cooperation of the advisory committee, we are working to finish analysis of the information we have gathered in the trial period of the study. We have begun to modify the questionnaires used in the first stage, and will refine other aspects of the design in preparation for full-scale research in the fall.

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## News from Nova Scotia

/// Susan Drain

The Inkshed connection works, although it may not always be recorded in the pages of the newsletter. A recent pleasure was a visit from Patricia Campbell, Director of the Reading and Writing Development Centre at the University College of Cape Breton. During a trip to Halifax, she took the time to stop in and exchange notes—such contacts are invaluable.

Speaking of contacts, the Writing Instructors' Network has continued to meet over the academic year, co-ordinated by Fred Holtz of Queen Elizabeth High School. Meetings this year have been quite different from last: the group set itself the goal of devising some project that could be tried by and adapted to each member's classes. The project has not materialized; instead, it has brought out into the open real differences of philosophy and purpose that had hitherto remained masked by what we had in common. Thus the meetings this year have been perhaps more challenging than comforting, but at least we're still talking!

Sometimes the talk seems endless. Among the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Post-Secondary Education in Nova Scotia, released last December, is the institution of common university-entrance examinations in English and mathematics. A committee has been struck by the Halifax universities to discuss the "feasibility and desirability" of such entrance testing. The committee is chaired by Donald Betts, Dean of Arts and Science at Dalhousie. The mathematics representatives came from the Technical University of N.S. and the English reps are Kenna Manos, from N.S. College of Art and Design, and me. Several meetings have taken place, but no decision has been reached about either desirability or feasibility. The subject will not, it is fair to say, go away, and promises to offer rich material for the proposed session to be sponsored by the Canadian Caucus at next year's 4 Cs.

Finally, something in the Nova Scotia air these days—and it sure isn't summer, which is as notoriously reluctant as ever—is "advanced composition". Dalhousie and St. Mary's already

have such courses, which follow from first-year "literature and composition" courses. Kenna Manos has introduced an advanced composition course at N.S.C.A.D., to build on the already existing "freshman composition". At the Mount, too, the instructors of the first-year composition courses are trying to define the goals and scope of one or perhaps even two advanced courses. Perhaps then we can genuinely say we have a writing programme on our campus.

## An Advanced Composition Syllabus

/// Kenna Manos

After a decade of working with remedial and basic composition, I'm finally teaching an advanced composition course. The students are in their third and fourth years (Fine Arts, Art Education, and Visual Communications), with a fairly strong liberal arts background.

I'm indebted to Neil Nakadate for his model of having students mark their classmates' work and revise their own in light of this marking. Although I've often had students mark each other's in-class writing assignments, I had not thought of their doing this with more formal papers until hearing him describe his Advanced Composition course (CCCC 1986). For Nakadate, "the most important reading in the course is students' reading of other papers." At first, I'll try to incorporate Nakadate's practice on two papers only, but I hope that even this modest beginning will help counteract the "I'm-going-to-write-for-the-teacher" model.

I'd appreciate comments on the assignments I've listed here. As well, I'd be grateful for suggestions about additions to, or deletions from, the readings in language which are intended to provoke class discussion and lead to short in-class writing assignments each week.

### Course Requirements

All out-of-class assignments are to be done on a single author, chosen by the student in consultation with the instructor.

1. (10%) Choose a descriptive paragraph from your author's work; then, compose your own paragraph which, though different in content, follows the same structure, imagery, phrasing, and/or diction.
2. (10% + 5% for revision) Closely examine one passage by your chosen author and discuss how it exemplifies the larger work in style, characterization, setting, and/or theme. (or? Take two passages from your journal, copy them out, and rework them as public pieces of writing. Explain why you made the changes you did in moving from private to public voice.)
3. (10% + 5% for revision) Write a review of work by your chosen author.
4. (10%) Give a ten-minute presentation to the class, attempting to persuade your classmates to read your chosen author.
5. (10%) Compile a working bibliography for your final paper.
6. (20%) Write a research paper on a topic of your own choosing.
7. (10%) Read, comment on, and copy-edit two papers (assignments 2 and 3) written by your classmates.
8. (5%) Make up a question, based on the regular reading assignments, to present to the class each week.

The remaining 5% of the grade will be based on class participation.

Provisional Reading List

George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language." E. B. White, "Calculating Machine." George Steiner, "Humane Literacy." Joe Gold, "A Word to the Wise." Dorothy Lee, "Codifications of Reality." Richard Hoggart, "Talking to Yourself." Gordon Allport, "Linguistic Factors in Prejudice." Introduction to the *Dictionary of Euphemisms*. Haig Bosmajian, "Dehumanizing People and Euphemising War." Maurice Elliot, "Respecting our Organs." Peter Lubin, "The Language of Sympathy." David Reid, "At Home in the Abyss: Jonestown and the Language of Enormity." Casey Miller and Kate Swift, "One Small Step for Genkind." Donald Hall, "The Insides of Words." William Zinsser, "Words." Harry Bruce, "The Passive Voice." Peter Elbow, "On Freewriting." Mary-Kay Wilmers, "The Language of Novel Reviewing." Marine Vaizey, "Art Language." Isaac Asimov, "Bettering the Good Book." V. S. Pritchett, "The Finalised Version." Stevie Smith, "Smudgers and Meddlers." Wilson Follett, "Sabotage in Springfield." Randolph Quirk, "Third International." Richard Rodriguez, "An Education in Language." E. B. White, "An Approach to Style."

Suggestions for Comments on Student Papers

(adapted from Nakadate's instructions to his students)

1. As you read the papers of your classmates, remember who you are. You're the kind of reader you envisioned for your own paper when you wrote it. That is, you're a reasonably well-informed and intelligent person. You're a fellow writer—in fact, one who has just been confronted by some of the same problems as the writer of the paper you're reading—and you're willing to read attentively and thoughtfully. But you're not simple-minded or gullible, and you don't get bored any less easily than anyone else.

2. Read each paper at least twice. First, get a general sense of its message and approach; then, read as a critic and copy editor.

3. Be specific in making comments and suggestions.

4. Don't be afraid to ask questions, including questions about what's not in the paper but perhaps ought to be. For example, if the paper raises questions it ought to answer, or makes assumptions that aren't explicit but ought to be, then ask the writer about them. If opinions are inadequately supported, generalizations not illustrated, or points not convincingly developed, then ask the writer what happened.

5. Don't be afraid to make suggestions, including suggestions for additions or deletions, for alternative ways of developing points, or for discussing aspects of the subject which you believe ought to be treated. Don't assume that the writer of the paper "already thought of that" (did you think of everything when you wrote yours?).

6. Make both marginal comments and a summary comment at the end.

7. Do your best to ensure that the comments you make on others' papers could be classified as "constructive criticism," "positive reinforcement," or "useful suggestions."

Please send comments, questions, or suggestions to:

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## Changes

/// Jim Reither

You might have noticed that **Mike Moore's** name is no longer on the masthead. Well, he's still among us. It's just that circumstances have forced him to rearrange priorities. Mike has not published a lot in the pages of *Inkshed*, but, let me tell you, he's been very important behind the scenes. One of the most deeply committed of us all, he's given many of us moral, emotional, and intellectual support when we needed it. Want an example? Well, Mike's almost single-handedly responsible for the creation of the Canadian Association for the Advanced Study of Writing and Reading (CAASWAR), the "organization" (with its title now slightly modified) for which *Inkshed* is the "official" newsletter. Lots of us owe you, Mike. Thanks.

Canada is losing a deeply respected, energetic, and generous scholar and teacher—deliverer of the best keynote speech I've ever heard (at the 1984 COTE conference here in Fredericton) and, among many other things, a prime mover in the Canadian Society for the History of Rhetoric. *Inkshed* is (perhaps) losing a frequent participant in its conversation. **Andrea Lunsford** has resigned her position at the University of British Columbia. She will be moving to Ohio State University. I know many of us will still be in touch with her (her subscription renewal form was among the first received when I ran the new form in March), but it was nice having her *here*, and we're going to feel the loss of her presence. We owe you, too, Andrea. Thanks.

## Notes

If everything goes right, I should be leaving Fredericton on the first of June or so. From then until late August, my mailing address will be

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Our little lakeside cabin is specially built for a "vacationing" academic like me—its office is as large, comfortable, and well-equipped as any other room in the place. I'm set up there for reading and writing as well as those other sorts of renewing we tend to do in our summers. I hope many of you will keep in touch. Any pretext will do.

I'm planning again to take in the Wyoming Conference on English, scheduled for the University of Wyoming, Laramie, from 23-27 June. The major consultants this year are Sharon Crowley, Joseph Langland, Frank Lentricchia, James Moffett, and James Slevin. In addition, several who served as major consultants in previous years are returning to conduct an on-going "special seminar." Among those who will be involved in that: Andrea Lunsford, James Raymond, Linda Flower, and several others. It looks like dynamite, to me.

Have a good summer.  
Jim Reither

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Again, here's the deal: If you wish to continue or begin receiving *Inkshéd*, please fill out and return to me the following subscription form. Current subscribers who do not return the form before the first issue in the fall (scheduled for publication 15 September) will be taken off the subscribers' list in September and will receive no issue of the newsletter published after April 1986 (unless, of course, they later re-subscribe). New subscribers will be mailed the first issue published after I receive their completed form.

Please also pass on a copy or copies of *Inkshéd*—your copy or photocopies—to colleagues and acquaintances who might share our interests enough to join our community. We can't remain vital except through taking part ourselves and through bringing new participants into the community's conversation.

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