

THE EVERGREEN STATE COLLEGE

April 9, 1984

M E M O R A N D U M

TO: All Faculty
FROM: Basic Skills Study Group
RE: April 11 Faculty Meeting Agenda Item

DRAFT REPORT OF THE BASIC SKILLS STUDY GROUP

The study group would like to emphasize that this is a draft proposal. We assume that the faculty will make suggestions for revision at the April 11 faculty meeting.

THE PROBLEM:

A portion of Evergreen's students are unable to do college level reading and writing at entry. That proportion may be as high as 25% of the entering class. A larger proportion of our entering class is unable to do college level math. The Council for Post-secondary Education has ruled that 4-year institutions cannot award credit for precollege level work which will apply toward graduation. At present, when precollege math, reading or writing skills development is done either within programs or within the LRC or Math SPLU Lab, there is no transcript indication that the work is "precollege level." It is credited toward the 180 total credit hours required to graduate. To the extent that students earn credit at Evergreen for precollege level work and apply it toward graduation, we are at variance with CPE policy. Both nationwide and local assessments show a decline in the average ability of entering college students to read and write. At Evergreen, where students are asked to engage in a richer range of assignments than the typical college student, long-lasting basic skills deficiencies threaten the prospect of intermediate and advanced work. This study group was asked to propose an institutional policy in response to the CPE directive and to suggest strategies which would focus additional institutional attention on the development of basic skills. At the February faculty meeting, the study group was asked to expand its charge to include basic math skills.

DEFINITIONS:

The study group has defined college-level skills in reading and writing as the ability to read and comprehend text materials with an adequacy to allow organization and presentation of analytic essays and ideas in seminars, and, the ability to write coherent paragraphs.

The study group has defined college level work in math as intermediate algebra and beyond.

Operationally, these abilities can be defined by performance on a diagnostic instrument and through assessment by faculty.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

I. Policy Recommendations.

The study group recommends that

- (a) Students whose work in reading and writing is not at the college level as defined above will be awarded credit for basic skills development which will not count toward the 180 quarter hours required for graduation. This stipulation will not interfere with the full-time status of students nor the awarding of financial aid since it will be credited in the student transcript.

Credit earned by students in "arithmetic" or "introduction to algebra" also will not count toward the 180 quarter hours required for graduation;

- (b) Faculty are responsible for identifying precollege credit awarded through academic programs and for listing appropriate equivalencies in the transcript;
- (c) Staff in the Learning Resource Center and the math SPLU Lab are responsible for identifying precollege credits and for listing appropriate equivalencies;
- (d) Students receiving precollege credits must be notified of the number of precollege credits to be awarded prior to the end of the quarter for which the credit is awarded;
- (e) Precollege mathematics options available through the SPLU Lab will be labeled as "Precollege" and state clearly that credits earned through their completion will not apply to graduation;
- (f) The description of Basic Skills courses include notification that all or some portion of the credit awarded for the course may not be applicable toward graduation; and
- (g) The Academic credit section of the catalog and the Evergreen Times state that credit for precollege level work in math, reading and writing done at Evergreen will not apply toward graduation.

II. Recommended Assessments and Follow-up Measures

The study group recommends the following types and uses of skills assessments:

- (a) A reading and writing assessment for all entering students to inform faculty, academic advisers and the students of skills proficiencies; and
- (b) A math assessment at entry for all students for identical purposes.

Specialty area programs requiring math competency would have the option of listing a minimum score on the math assessments as a prerequisite for entry into a program. The study group believes this practice would clarify skills level expectations and assist students and academic advisers in planning a sequence of study at Evergreen.

- (c) The study group also recommends that a uniform reading and writing post-test be administered at the end of each Core program. Results would be used to inform students and advisers of progress made in basic skills development and to assist in refining models for teaching basic skills in Core programs

No math post-test is proposed by the study group. If the faculty decide that the College should ensure a certain level of math competency for all students, a math post-test should be considered.

III. Recommendations for Core Programs

Core program faculty will select one of two options for the development of basic skills in reading and writing.

Option 1 - Four-Credit Hour Release for Development of College Level Skills

Faculty selecting Option 1 will guarantee a 4 credit hour release from a full 16 credit hour load for students in need of reading and writing skill development. Faculty teams selecting Option 1 will be required to plan a program which accommodates both full-time and three-quarter time student enrollment with actual reduced loads for three-quarter time students. The following uses of the 4 credit hour block are recommended: (a) enrollment in an LRC module, or (b) enrollment in a specific skills development course at Evergreen.

Option 2 - Skills Development Within Programs.

Faculty selecting Option 2 will guarantee that reading and writing development will occur within the Core program. Faculty selecting Option 2 will be required to develop a model for the development of reading and writing skills for students of all skills levels and to submit a description of that model to the Convener of Core programs prior to the beginning of the year. A model currently employed in a Core Program is appended. It is offered as an example; the study group assumes alternate models will be developed. Another model considered by the study group would include LRC staff in a component of the Core program for skills development.

Whichever option is chosen, core program faculty will be required to inform the Convener of Core programs of the option selected for skills development.

IV. An Option to Math SPLUs.

Should programs elect to include math assessment scores and college level reading and writing skills as prerequisites, the College creates an obligation to provide clear avenues for obtaining those competencies. Particularly in the area of math, those avenues are not provided other than

through SRIFUs. Some students need an alternative to self-paced learning. The study group recommends that the options for precollege math study at OTCC be publicized in the Evergreen Times and that academic advisers and faculty recommend that alternative to student when appropriate.

The addition of a math assessment and post-test for reading and writing skills will require additional funding. Existing staff would be unable to maintain current workloads and process the additional assessments without substantial increase in turnaround time. The recommendations for additional assessments should not be accepted unless the institution agrees to commit the necessary resources.

ONE MODEL FOR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN CORE PROGRAMS

[Note to the Basic Skills DTF and to Other Evergreen Readers:

This paper was written for external audiences; that's why it is more formally written than other writings you may have seen by me, and that's why it provides so much context -- unnecessary context for you, but maybe useful to non-Evergreeners. We are now using this model in the Great Books Core Program. -- L. D.]

Writing for the Real World: A Time-Tested Collaborative Method

I: The Problem Addressed by the Workshop

For any number of good reasons, the issue of stylistic norms has dropped some writing teachers' list of concerns. Various specific movements in literature have followed the general movement of Romanticism (and its doctrines affirming the priority of process, creativity, and personal expression) in liberating most literary forms and genres from the constraints of standard norms for written English.

Thus, there are really no longer any specific norms (except perhaps for spelling) governing the construction of poems, plays, or novels -- just as there are no longer such norms for a wide variety of other art forms.

This is not true, however, in the case of the essay.

Here, very tough norms at the levels of the word, the sentence, and the paragraph still obtain. First, the word must be spelled right, and it must be the right word for the right meaning (or at least it cannot obviously, noticeably, be a wrong one). Second, the sentence must conform to the norms of standard grammar. Third, the paragraph must be written in such a way as to lead educated readers to believe that the writer has been the beneficiary of some instruction in the criteria of (a.) unity, (b.) coherence, and (c.) adequate development -- and that he knows that most paragraphs have a better chance of succeeding if they contain topic sentences.

These norms of so-called "Standard English" do not get learned by people who do not get taught them. True, some people learn (or "internalize") most of these norms via the fortunate accident of being born into homes where lots of reading goes on -- if and only if they, too, do lots of reading when they are young. They learn to write by analogy. They are the people who always say, "I usually know how to write things grammatically, but I couldn't tell you any grammar rules, because I don't know any." These people's good fortune certainly qualifies as "getting taught." Other people, however, will usually only be able to learn these norms if they find their ways into classrooms where these norms are taught overtly. And when people get past a certain age -- 17 or 18, in my experience -- that overt teaching must unfortunately be structural, not analogical. That is to say, such students must (a.) study a structural norm; (b.) memorize that norm; (c.) work hard to conform to that norm in their own writing; (d.) work harder, still, to make that conformity a habit.

Does adherence to these norms have anything to do with real grammar? Rarely. These norms amount to a kind of social etiquette and are probably best understood-- especially by students! -- when dissociated from the serious contemporary study of syntax. Some of the norms are functional, but the majority is probably not. One learns them only to acquire sufficient credibility to be thought by educated readers to have the right to state a serious argument, or to recount one's responses to (or impressions of) something. The learned ability to adhere to them amounts to little other than a social grace. Unfortunately, the learning of that social grace is necessarily prefatory to anything having to do with the successful writing of final-draft essays -- although not, to be sure, with either thinking about or talking about the sorts of things usually written about in essays. (This is so only because the very writing that essays are done in is tightly governed by the norms of Standard English which, when learned, are the social grace -- whereas thinking and talking, especially if the talk is private talk, are governed by no heretofore-codified set of norms.)

Does the ability to write in conformity with these norms have anything to do with Truth, Beauty, or Virtue? Various philosophers and teachers have argued over the years that they do, but it is very difficult today to accept those arguments, and it is equally difficult to find or construct new ones to replace them.

Does conformity to these norms advance the cause of Clarity? (I capitalize it because it is a bit of a sacred cow in some compositional/rhetorical ideologies.) Insofar as it helps one's writing to meet the rhetorical expectations of educated readers who have themselves been habituated to these norms, yes. Otherwise, my best guess is, Probably not.

Is working toward adherence to these norms at odds with a writer's creativity or freedom of expression? If one grants that students should work toward being able to produce final drafts of essays, and if one grants that such final drafts are necessarily under the control of these norms, the answer can only be that the student's general creativity and general potential to express himself or herself freely will be more narrowly channeled and "contained" by these norms than would be the case if the norms did not exist. (It is worth mentioning, however, that this amount of channeling and containment probably amounts to very little in a world in which a piece of writing must be expressed in only one language anyway; the loss of imaginative freedom necessitated by a writer's being held to only one

language per piece, even if he or she knows other languages, is undoubtedly immense -- and theoretically perhaps even infinite. Monolingualism curtails more creativity and freedom of expression, in both writing and speech, than any other single factor. Yet even if one knew all the languages, Frederic Jameson's "Prison-House of Language" would still be an incarcerative fact of human life: humans are tragically both able and unable to "speak their minds" freely.)

Is the teaching of students to conform to these norms in any way at odds with the educational needs of persons of color or other representatives of cultural diversity who have any need at all to communicate in Standard English? I don't see how it could be. When it comes to the writing of essays, Standard English is the only game in town, and one either learns to play or one does not. Some advocates of Black English have claimed that major differences exist between Black English and Standard English; this is a true claim, insofar as it goes, but it is almost totally a claim relating to speech and to the various genres of imaginative writing. There is no black Expository Writing; there is only expository writing of Standard English. This is a tragic state of affairs. But it is a true state of affairs. Should persons of color and other American minorities learn the norms of Standard English? Ultimately, it is up to them, but I personally believe that they should learn them, if they plan to live their lives in an English-writing country, because failure to learn them can only exacerbate the disenfranchisement regularly experienced by cultural minorities.

* * *

My main point in saying all of the above is that the question of basic skills -- in any area of expertise -- is a meaningless question unless one is asking that question about one's competence (at least) or mastery (at best) of the norms governing these skills: Skills are always about norms.

Thus, it makes no sense to speak of remedying/building/developing basic skills unless one is talking about helping people learn the norms which define the skills.

If one takes the point of view that there are no norms, then all talk about basic skills is idle: Skills are always about norms.

* * *

It can seem odd that one would need to defend -- or feel that he or she would need to defend -- the teaching of writing expository final drafts for the "real world." Yet this is strangely the case. The 1960s' emphasis on "process" (instead of "product" or "artifact"), tied in with folkloristic and McLuhanist emphases on the virtues of orality and the evils of print ("linearity"), permeated the writing-teaching profession for a good while (specifically influencing, for example, the National Council of Teachers of English), and the dust has still not settled. Based on any number of conversations with writing teachers over the past thirty years, my belief is that the embracement of McLuhan & Co, coupled with the flight from final draft expository "product"/"artifact," was caused more by the collective wish to stop correcting mountains of student compositions over lonely weekends than by a mass conversion to any ideological position. (The method described here does not eliminate the need to read, and to marginally comment upon, the students' essays. But I think it does change for the better the way in which one reads them.) Today, the real world is in some places taking matters into its own hands, in reaction against what it sees as the ivory-towerism of the English teachers, by suggesting that writing skills aimed at the real world should be taught not by English teachers

but by other people -- people from the real world.

This is an idea with much merit, but also with much hidden difficulty. The main difficulty has to do with nomenclature. The norms of Standard English have names, and English teachers know those names better than others -- even others who are themselves successful writers. In other words, you will have trouble teaching students to avoid writing problems generally going under such names as the dangling participle, the split infinitive, and the passive voice if you do not know those names and if you cannot cite, on very short notice while standing in front of a class, precise examples of the problems to which those names refer. Still, I believe that most college teachers can learn enough about the nomenclature in a one-quarter-long workshop -- or even in the trenches while teaching (without benefit of such a prior workshop) a basic expository writing course for the first time with students -- to be able to teach expository writing successfully to students needing work in the building of basic skills.

II: Nuts and Bolts

1. A class is divided into continuing groups not to exceed ten students per group. (I explain to the students that ten is about the maximum size for a writing workshop group's effectiveness. I let them do the grouping from the start to finish, including the figuring-out of how to do it, and I leave the room while they do it.)

2. At the beginning of the first day, I quickly scribble a chart on the blackboard. Spaces are numbered from 1 to 10 going downward and from 1 to 2 or 3 going right. (The 1-to-10 spaces are for class meetings per quarter; there would of course be 1-to-20 spaces if the class met twice a week for a ten-week quarter. The 1-to-2-or-3 spaces going right are for the number of workshop groups necessitated by the overall size of the class one teaches; if I have over twenty students in that class -- even if only twenty-two or so -- I make three groups, because it really is true that groups in excess of ten don't work very well.)

The spaces are for students to write their names in. Each space is a date on which a particular student will bring ten xeroxed copies of his required weekly essay for his group to read and respond to. I tell students to go to the board and put their names in the spaces. (They get the space they want on a first-come, first-served basis; ~~thus~~ it is sometimes a thundering race for the most distant dates. It is a good idea to bring a box of chalk to class on the day you do this, as it is not all that pedagogically useful to have the members of your thundering herd reduced to fighting over a single stub of chalk once they reach the front of the room.)

It is important to make a copy of the filled-in chart on a piece of paper, in order that you will have a permanent record of which students in which groups are supposed to have their xeroxed copies ready on which days. (It is a good idea to give each student a mimeographed copy of the copied chart, so that everybody will know who is to be "up" when.) If you forget to copy your blackboard chart, there is some cause for lamentation: you will probably find that you have to do this whole boring thing over again.

During the remainder of this class session, explain to the students in detail how the group work will be done. (See #4 et seq. below, in which I explain it to you.)

3. Ideally, you should have as many rooms as you have groups. If you can't get the rooms, try positioning the students around tables in the farthest corners of your classroom. If this does not work, because of the room's being too noisy or otherwise too busy, you probably cannot use this strategy.

4. At the second class meeting, two (or more) students will have brought ten xeroxed essays each. Divide into your two (or more) groups. Begin work. (In what follows below, I speak of only one group; this is because what happens in both groups (or all three groups) is identical.)

5. The person who wrote the paper passes out the xeroxes to the other students in his or her group. This writer then reads the paper aloud to the group. This is the last time the writer gets to speak. As the other students critique the paper in detail, the writer can say nothing. This rule drives the point home to every student in the group that public expository writing must stand on its own -- that the writer cannot be there when it is read to say, "You aren't understanding me at all," or "What I MEAN by those words is not what you are getting from them." You should stress to your students that expository writing's main purpose in the real world is to get the writer's ideas or impressions across to someone who not only does not love him or her (as a mother does), and who not only is not paid to read his or her essays (as a teacher is), but also does not even know him or her. The writer's ideas and impressions must be in the words on the page.

6. During the first half of the scheduled period, the students work on the norms of word and sentence. They note spelling errors and vocabulary errors. They also note any grammatical errors. (Each student should have at hand a good paper-back dictionary and a very recent grammar handbook.) They also comment on paragraph construction. In the case of the paragraph, however, the students should have received previous instruction to the effect that reader-response is here much more subjective and less norms-based (there being no clear norms, save that of the "requirements" of the topic sentence, itself sometimes breakable or at least bendable) than with words and sentences.

During the part of the work, it is best to proceed sentence by sentence -- with one student having been chosen in advance to read one sentence at a time, from the top. (This reading of course repeats the writer's own reading. It helps the group to have papers read aloud twice, as its members will be confronting each paper for the first time.)

Groups have been told in advance to stop this line-by-line work when their time for the session is half over. If the students are doing the work well, they should not have proceeded much beyond a page and a half (assuming typed, double-spaced pages) in 45 minutes. If they are going faster than that, you should work with them for one session to give them an idea of how much they are missing.

7. During the second half of the session, the group will work on three questions I call What?, So What?, So What?, and Now what?*

The What? question means "What is the paper's thesis or conclusion?" I tell the students that this thesis or conclusion should be locatable in one sentence (and rarely in two sentences, but never in more). This sentence should be a statement which subsumes most (or, optimally, all) of the other sentences in the essay, but which is itself subsumed by no other sentence in the essay.

I tell the students that if they find such a sentence, then what they have found is called an explicit thesis or explicit conclusion.

I also tell them, however, that they may find that such a sentence is not locatable on the page, but that such a sentence is clearly and unmistakably implied by most (or, optimally, all) of the other sentences in the essay. And I explain that such a not-there sentence is called an implied thesis.

I also tell them that a paper may contain neither an explicit thesis or an implied thesis. In that case, there is nothing more to be done with the paper, because . . . all papers used in these workshops must have theses or conclusions.

8. The So What? question asks, "Is the thesis or conclusion of significance, or of interest? Or is it banal, or obvious, or trivial?" (If your class is studying elementary logic, the So What? can usefully ask if arguments are valid and sound. Particularly useful within this context is asking if arguments fall prey to such standard logical fallacies as begging the question, presenting false dilemmas, pushing hasty generalizations, and so on.)

Doing So What? (and also Now What?, described in #9, below) demands that students receive a good, clear mini-lecture from you on the meaning of "constructive criticism," as the phrase is used in this work. I tell my students that "constructive criticism" is criticism aimed not at judging an artifact (though it uses the xeroxed artifact-of-the-day which the student writer brought) but at the betterment of the writer's future writing. I tell them that "constructive criticism" is criticism which always points forward, not backward. I tell them that it can never have as even a tiny part of its purpose the self-aggrandizement of the person making the criticism. It can only have, as its sole rationale, the aim of helping the writer improve his or her writing. There should be as little ego in it as the student critic can manage -- and as much care and concern for the writer's development. Constructive criticism always talks about the future, not the past.

9. Having explained the way in which the phrase "constructive criticism" is understood by people using this teaching method, I need to say very little about the Now What? question here, because the way it works ought to be obvious at this point. Because students-critics have done their line-by-line analysis for at least one page of the student-writer's essay, and because they have worked hard at finding the essay's thesis/conclusion (i.e., answering What?), and because they have worked hard at answering So What?, their answers to Now What? will simply be their suggestions for making the Thesis/conclusion clearer, stronger, and more focused -- and for making the thesis/conclusion, plus all the supporting writing which makes up its context, more interesting.

* I owe the wording of these questions to my friend and colleague Richard M. Jones of The Evergreen State College

Two Special Notes About Now What?

9-A. I need to mention that although most of this method focuses on rather cut-and-dried real-world norms for expository writing, there are some parts to it which are admittedly, necessarily, and desirably subjective. Two examples among many will suffice.

First, consider the So What? If one is teaching logic while using this method (employing, for examples, such texts as Cedarblom and Paulsen's Critical Reasoning, or Monroe Beardsley's Thinking Straight), the answers to So What? can be fairly cut-and-dried and "objective." But, obviously, if logic is not being explicitly taught, then answers to So What? will be more personal. Some student-critics will talk to the student-writer as a tough editor of a big-city daily would. Others will give ideological responses to the thesis. Others will talk to the student-writer as surrogate loving mother, "trying to help, trying to let you know I care," and so on. Opinions will vary. Subjective aesthetic response can well rule.

Second, consider the simple paragraph. Here, we have supposedly possess some norms, and those norms are regularly taught in school; but all good teachers of writing know -- although they are sometimes loath to say to their students-- the norms of the paragraph are so very flexible that they are almost more trouble than they are worth to teachers and students. The usual norms taught are: (a.) Unity; (b.) Coherence; (c.) Adequate Development -- plus the first and foremost one which states that a paragraph should contain a so-called "topic sentence." The way it is supposed to work is as follows: the paragraph should contain a sentence -- usually its first sentence -- which says what it is about; then, all the other sentences in that paragraph should support the topic sentence (and certainly should not stray from it), and this is Unity; moreover, all the other sentences in the paragraph should flow easily and naturally from each other and into each other, and this is Coherence (because the sentences should literally cohere, should "stick together"); moreover, there should be just the right amount of other sentences -- not too many and not too few -- to develop the topic talked about by the topic sentence, and this is Adequate Development.

These paragraph norms were of course made up by a writing teacher -- Alexander Bain by name -- who got sick and tired of trying to teach his students paragraphing by the old "model" method of showing them paragraphs by Bacon, Montaigne, Hobbes, and so on, expecting them to pick up the tacit "rules" by induction. His students couldn't do it -- almost no students before Bain could do it, apparently -- and so he just made up the norms and stuck a nomenclature on them. The paragraph chapter in almost all present grammar/rhetoric texts is the result. (Bain's in the public domain, as the saying goes.)

But a nomenclature does not a set of real norms make, and so the so-called norms of the paragraph are admittedly, necessarily, and desirably open to subjective compositional application and critical response.

You should openly tell you students all of this. Help them to understand what things, in the real world of Standard English, are cut-and-dried, and which things are open to subjective interpretation (including those which are supposedly, for pedagogical purposes, normative). TELL them, too, that if all the excellent writers of English essays decided tomorrow to follow Bain's paragraph rules completely and absolutely, the state of the English essay as written by masters would decline markedly -- but that if most of the student-writers in writing classes were somehow enabled tomorrow to follow those same rules competely and absolutely, the state of the English essay as written by students would improve by a quantum jump. Ask them

if they can understand how and why this could be the case.

9-B. TELL your students that your special role is that of resource person who possesses expert knowledge of the norms of written Standard English. Tell them that most of your Now What? feedback to their work will be normative.

Tell them also, however, that you will be trying at all times to teach them real-world norms, not ivory-tower or grammar-book or hipalutin norms which are adhered to by English teachers but by nobody else. It will be important for them to understand that your normative standards are those of the street (although admittedly the white-collar street), not of the schoolroom.

Tell them also that you will always make clear to them which of your pieces of feedback are cut-and-dried normative (e.g., spelling, subject-verb agreement, comma-splicing), and which are more subjective.

But, last, explain to them that even your subjective pieces of feedback are based on your expertise regarding the likely receptivity (or lack of same) of educated readers to pieces of text in student essays. Explain that this may vary from what you personally think. Explain that you will be glad, during an office hour or over a cup of coffee, to give them your personal responses to what they have written. But emphasize that the class itself is about the norms of standard written English and that your role is that of an expert on these norms. (They may shout out, "We don't care about the norms! We care about what you think!" You should respond that the real world's expectations of them is likely quite the reverse -- fortunately or unfortunately. And you should respond that once they have upped their skills-levels to the point of meeting the norms, they can then work on the development of their personal writers' voices as a regular part of the classwork, and that you will at that point be glad to give personal and detailed responses to that development as part of the classwork.) In my own classes, this point is reached with the majority of students after about six months of hard work -- granting a good bit of maturity and self-motivation.

10. At the end of the session, each student-critic writes the student-writer a letter which begins on the back of the last page of the student writer's essay. This letter states explicitly (but briefly) the student-critic's feelings about So What? and Now What? Time permitting, the students can write these letters in class and give them to the writer as a closing ritual. If this is not possible, they can write them overnight and give them to the writer the next time the class meets.

It is important, at the end of each session, for the teacher to thank the student-writer for sitting through the process -- usually, at least at first, with a degree of self-conscious (and silent) fear and trembling. (This feeling abates very quickly). Whenever possible, the teacher should spend a couple of minutes in talking with the student-writer-of-the-day following the process, just to make sure that everything is okay; but this is really only necessary during the first couple of weeks of using the method.

III: Issues, Questions, Odds & Ends

It remains only to talk about two or three issues and questions (which you should also talk about with your students) and to tell you about a couple of

additional things I do while using this method.

First, the idea of behavioral modification. There is no denying that there is a bit of behavioral modification going on here, nor should there be. Norms are best taught through redundancy, whether by culture in general or by a single teacher or friend in particular, and this method stresses redundancy -- particularly in its teaching of the norms of the word and of the sentence. But it is also true that the response of the student-critics constitutes "feedback," and that this feedback will undoubtedly "modify the behavior" of the student writers. Right now in America, "behavioral modification" is a rather perjorative term to some people in education, but "feedback" is an honorific one to those same people -- particularly with respect to the teaching of writing. (This may be in part because my former colleague Peter Elbow has done such a good job of popularizing "feedback" among writing teachers.) But the point needs to be made that feedback has as its main (sole?) purpose behavioral modification -- always and without exception -- whether it be "peer-feedback" or feedback from Henry VIII or someone like him.

Second, the problem of "peer-feedback" vs. "correctness." Obviously, all of the peer-feedback about norms will not be correct. Bite your tongue and do not correct the erroneous correcters. What is left incorrectly corrected today will be correctly corrected tomorrow -- in my experience, anyway. If you correct the correcters, you will stifle the feedback. It is more important that the feedback go on in an unfettered way (given that it is always "constructive criticism") than that it always be right.

Third, "But what if the student-writer, as a result of getting incorrect normative feedback, is led to believe that cat is spelled kat and that a sentence with a dangling participle is really worthy of Samuel Johnson?" Well, remember that I noted above somewhere that this method will not eliminate the necessity of reading and marking themes, and it won't. You'll be reading and marking each student's essay each week (optimally) -- again for purposes of redundancy -- and that reading and marking will include the essay of the student-writer-of-the-day. So: You will have given him or her all of the correct normative stuff at the level of the word and the sentence -- or as much as you want to give, or believe desirable to give, to a given student-writer. For you, the two (or more) essays-of-the-day are ordinary essays, to be treated as any others, when it comes to your reading and marking.

Fourth, "Okay, I understand that I'm supposed to function as an expert on the norms of written English, but don't those norms change with time?" Of course they do, and I use the term Contemporary Stylistic Norms (CSN) to describe these norms precisely. They are norms because they are norms. They are stylistic because they have to do with the physical structuring of writing on the page (beginners should note that this is probably an oversimplification and that there is a vast theoretical literature on the form/content dualism in writing -- as there is in any mode of expression in which there is a supposed "style" and a supposed "content" -- with some theorists claiming that the form/content dualism is itself ridiculous, i.e. that form is content and vice-versa). They are contemporary because they are norms of today, not of a hundred years ago or even ten years ago.

The point is that your expertise is taken to include changes in norms. This expertise is usually gleaned -- given a sound education in literature, language and the teaching of writing -- by keeping up with the norms through reading the

most influential of contemporary periodicals. (By "influential," I do not necessarily mean "the best," because who knows what the best is? I mean, plainly and simply, those periodicals which have clout with educated Americans; examples are Harper's, The Atlantic Monthly, Esquire, The New Yorker [usually cited by experts as the best-edited magazine in America, although it has its detractors], Scientific American, National Review, and even Rolling Stone.)

The biggest single cause of norm-change, in my own view, is the changing stylistic practices of the American editors of the most influential periodicals. These changes can be "liberal," as in the grudgingly slow acceptance of the rare comma-apostrophe sentence or sentence fragment inserted for emphasis into otherwise impeccable writing, or as in the rapid acceptance in the late 1960s and early 1970s of "Its." But they can also be "conservative," as evidenced by the national editorial retreat on "Its." which began around 1975 and still continues.

Fifth, "What if a student wants to take an ideological stand in opposition to a national norm? What, for example, if a student insists on such usages as 's/he' and so on?" The answer is that you have a good chance here to disabuse students of the notion that the schoolroom is one place and the real world quite another place. Tell the students that you don't care what they do in such cases. Tell them that your job is to inform them of the norms -- and to inform them that not adhering to them will bring some consequences to them in the real world, no matter whether the failure to adhere is rooted in ignorance about a norm or informed ideological resistance to a norm. Tell them that, having told them this, your work in the matter is at an end and that you will in no case penalize them for taking an anti-norm ideological stand. You should stress, however, that it is the height of hypocrisy for college students to stage ideological protests in tolerant college classrooms and then to "change into suits and ties" immediately upon graduation: writing 's/he' in the classroom in May and then writing 'he' on the job in the following September (right after graduation, say) is probably not going to have all that much a liberating effect on society's victims. You should try to get the students to practice in the classroom those norms which they honestly believe they will be writing toward in the real world when they get there.

Sixth, what about textbooks? I have my students read a standard syllabus of materials aimed at helping them with norms. At first, I worry about word-level norms (spelling and vocabulary use) and sentence-level norms (grammar and so on). At the level of the word, I currently use Hodges and Whitten's Harbrace College Handbook (9th ed.) and Funk and Lewis' Thirty Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary. Both books can be used on a self-paced basis (especially if exercises from the companion Harbrace College Workbook are assigned simultaneously with chapters in the Handbook, although I do not mark these exercises and do not think anyone should -- or should have to). Both are tried-and-true favorites. Both have their flaws, of course, and Harbrace in particular does not lack for critics. (It is, however, the most widely used text of its kind.) I also use Harbrace for sentence-grammar and sentence-level rhetoric; I believe it to be excellent for both. Additionally I use Strunk and White's Elements of Style (3rd ed.).

During the second term, I phase some of the above out and phase in Cedarblom and Paulsen's Critical Thinking, an excellent new basic text in logic which contains chapter-sections on the materials' application to essay-writing.

Later (if there is a later), I try to get students to concentrate on the development of their personal writers' voices while adhering to STN and (at times, depending on an individual student's purpose) to the principles of logic. I have found good texts to be Gertrude STEIN's How to Write, George Orwell's Politics and the English Language, Henry Miller's Henry Miller on Writing (ed. Thomas Moore), and Peter Elbow's Writing With Power. (Stein and Miller should not be ordered or assigned to students until you have read them carefully; they may teach things about the development of personal voice which you do not wish to teach or aid in the teaching of.)

IV: This Essay's Thesis

Readers of this essay who would like to read more about the rationale for this method can take a look at my "The English Grapholect and the First-Year Composition Class," which appeared in College Composition and Communication (Spring, 1979). That essay ties the method in with the linguistic theories of M. M. Guzman and E. D. Hirsch, Jr., although the method is not necessarily grounded in those theories.

The heart of the 1979 essay and of this essay is that the ability to write in adherence to Contemporary Stylistic Norms is almost strictly a class-bound phenomenon and that it remains so wherever CSN is not overtly taught to those adults (defined here as anybody old enough to go to college) who did not learn CSN prior to reaching adulthood.

My thesis is that this class-bound phenomenon should not remain a class-bound phenomenon. Period.