PREPARING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE COMPOSITION

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Before teachers can have effective composition programs, they must first decide what primary and secondary goals are to be achieved by the programs. In 1979, I constructed the Senior English Program at Greenfield-Central High School in Greenfield, Indiana. My primary goal was to allow each student to develop confidence in his or her writing ability. My secondary goal involved the establishment of a program in which fifty percent of my students would attain the ability to be exempted in some fashion from at least one freshman college English course and the other fifty percent to receive a grade of no lower than a "C" for any freshman English course in college. Both the primary and the secondary goals were to be achieved within a five year period of time.

With these ends in mind, I had to establish what at the time seemed to be astonishingly high standards for a high school writing class. A basis for these standards came from interviews with college writing program directors, from locally published composition criteria sheets and "limiter systems," and from college composition handbooks and rhetorics. In addition I invited a number of college composition directors to speak to my classes, defining and illustrating what was to be expected in my students' first college writing course. I then adjusted this information to best serve my students and to accommodate realistically the abilities of my students and the curriculum at Greenfield Central.

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What I discovered was of no surprise. Traditional criteria for evaluating essays at the freshman college level were almost evenly split between emphasis on execution (arrangement/development) and style (grammatical and syntactical accuracy). Some writing program directors stressed the "writing process" more than others; some content, purpose and the contextual. But for the most part, the ultimate evaluation of a finished product was limited to the textual: form and syntax. As is the case at most educational institutions, rigid consistency in the intensity of paper evaluation fluctuates as instructors wield different philosophies concerning their approach to the evaluation of compositions.

Nevertheless, after putting together this seemingly solid foundation from which to work, I then had to design the direction that my program would take. The one issue that I found myself thinking about most often was the varied pedagogy of *all* college composition instructors. This became an important issue with me as I had the responsibility, as *one* high school English instructor, to prepare my students for different college English programs. My responsibility was to get my students to a point where they could easily adapt to any professor's philosophy of composition. If a professor were content-oriented, my students needed the ability to adapt to this situation; furthermore, if a professor were surface structure-oriented, my students needed the ability to compose papers free of mechanical errors.

To resolve this issue, I had to decide which type of professor a student could more easily adjust to. After speaking with many of my former students who had gone through freshman composition courses at various colleges and universities, I found that the professor who valued content was the easier one to perform for; therefore, the emphasis of my program had to anticipate the one who stressed above all else language conventions. Consequently, my role as an English instructor on the high school level was becoming more clearly defined.

My next decision concerned the types of themes that my students would write. I wanted my students to have an introduction to the various rhetorical and developmental modes they would most likely encounter in elementary composition at the college level. To find the answer, I once again contacted my former students, and with their input I

decided upon the following types of themes to be presented in the following order:

Theme	- Type of Composition
1	- Analysis
2	- Narration
3	- Description (Character or Landscape)
4	- Classification
5	- Definition/Abstract
6	- Comparison/Contrast
7	- Process
8	- Argumentation
9	- In-Class — Analysis
10	- Cause/Effect
11	- In-Class — Definition/Abstract
12	- In-Class — Analysis
13	- In-Class — Description
14	- In-Class — Comparison/Contrast

With my Fourteen Theme Program established, a theme process was needed to complete this program in such a way that my students would experience as many writing processes as possible. Once again, after speaking with my former students, I constructed the following five theme processes:

Process 1
Day
1	- Assignment and Invention
2	- Invention and Rough Draft Development
3	- Student Evaluation of Themes
4	- Final Copy Day — Teacher Evaluation
5	- Discussion of Theme Problems by Teacher
6	- Rewrite Day and Student Evaluation of Themes
7	- Final Copy Day for Rewrite — Teacher Evaluation

Process 2
Day
1	- Assignment and Invention
2	- Invention and Rough Draft Development
3	- Student Evaluation of Themes
4	- Final Copy Day — Teacher Evaluation
5	- Discussion of Theme Problems by Teacher

Process 3
Day
1	- Assignment, Invention, and Rough Draft Development
2	- Student Evaluation of Themes
3	- Final Copy Day — Teacher Evaluation
4	- Discussion of Theme Problems by Teacher

Process 4
   Day
   1   - Assignment, Invention, and Rough Draft Development
   2   - Final Copy Day — Teacher Evaluation
   3   - Discussion of Theme Problems by Teacher
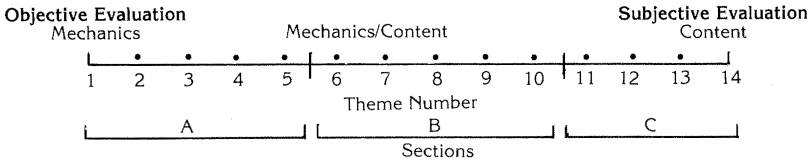**Process 5**
   Day
   1   - Assignment and Final Copy Day — Teacher Evaluation
   2   - Discussion of Theme Problems by Teacher

   At this point, my role as a Senior English instructor on the high school level was becoming extremely clear to me. With goals for my course established, the emphasis of my course placed, the types of themes selected, and the processes for writing themes designed, my next responsibility was to develop an evaluation program that would allow my students not only to become fully aware of their strengths and weaknesses in composition but to know under which type of college instructor they could best perform. To achieve this task, I developed the following Evaluative Continuum:

Evaluative Continuum

Objective Evaluation   Subjective Evaluation
   Mechanics   Mechanics/Content   Content
   1   2   3   4   5 | 6   7   8   9   10 | 11   12   13   14
                          Theme Number
            A | B | C
                                   Sections

   To prepare my students for *Section A* of my Evaluative Continuum, I always inform them of the pressures that I apply in the long process of getting them more confident in their understanding of the grammar and mechanics used in writing. This confidence will not come as a direct result of the instructor lecturing about grammar and mechanics but will develop as a result of the interaction among my students that takes place automatically during the theme process. Students are permitted to come to me for answers to their questions concerning grammar and mechanics *only* after they have examined their grammar books and after they have asked at least five other classmates for the answers. If the answers to their questions cannot be found through either of those two sources, then I will answer the questions; if the answers can be found through the two sources, then I

will not answer the questions, and I will send the students back to start over again their search for the answers.

When the time comes for me to evaluate the themes in *Section A* of my continuum, I use a format that is patterned after a traditional "limiter system." Students are given copies of this format with explanation about which chapters in the grammar book relate to the specific errors. Also, I have found that if pressure is applied to students to improve spelling on a theme, that pressure will also help that student reduce other grammatical and mechanical errors. To get my point across to my students, I simply tell them that an "A" theme never contains a spelling error. To speed up the grading process, I use the symbols (A1, A3, B3, B4, etc.) from the Format for Evaluation of Themes (below) when marking the themes. A listing of the items included in this format used for the evaluation of themes one through five follows:

Format for Evaluation of Themes
Part A: Organization and Development
      1. Inadequate focus
      2. Unsatisfactory organization of theme
      3. Lack of paragraph unity
      4. Inadequate paragraph development
Part B: Grammar and Mechanics
      1. Sentence fragment
      2. Fused sentence
      3. Comma splice
      4. Subject-verb disagreement
      5. Pronoun-antecedent disagreement
      6. Spelling error

I then transform these criteria into a kind of "limiter system," freely borrowed from an Indiana university. Any one of the above errors "limits" the grade of a theme to one no higher than a "C"; any two to a "D"; and any three to an "F." Sometimes I use a double grade format (content/mechanics) within this system.

In preparation for *Section B* of my Evaluative Continuum, I inform my students of the gradual changes in my evaluation of their themes. Perhaps a point that was noticed during the *Section A* group of themes was that I did not totally ignore content; I just did not emphasize it. In *Section B*, I reduce my classroom attention to grammatical and mechanical errors as I begin to introduce a new emphasis on content (Part A). Basically, the deficiencies of student writing listed in the above format remain as the central criteria. The difference lies in my more stringently applying the

standards of Part A. The limiter system changes to reflect the new emphasis: a single error now assures the writer of an "A"; two errors limit the theme to a "B"; three errors limit the theme to a "C"; four errors limit the theme to a "D"; and five errors limit the theme to an "F." During *Section B,* major work is done to improve the general quality of a theme. Also, because of the tremendous pressure exerted on the student to eliminate grammatical and mechanical errors during *Section A,* most of these problems have been eliminated by the time my classes are prepared to start *Section B.*

As my students approach *Section C* of my Evaluative Continuum, most of their theme writing is grammatically and mechanically perfect. I inform my students of the changes in my evaluation of their themes during *Section C.* During this section, content (Part A of Format) is emphasized the most; however, grammar and mechanics (Part B of Format) are not totally ignored. Once again the items in the format remain the same, and the difference lies within the standards of evaluating the themes. These standards are as follows: (1) an "A" theme represents no errors in Part A and Part B; (2) a "B" theme represents minor problems with Part A and limited errors in Part B; (3) a "C" theme represents only one error in Part A and up to three errors in Part B, (4) a "D" theme represents two errors in Part A and up to four errors in Part B; and (5) an "F" theme represents three or more errors in Part A and four or more errors in Part B. As mentioned earlier, I have found little need for me to worry about the errors in Part B as most of these errors have been eliminated.

When I finish my theme program, my students know what their strengths and weaknesses are in writing. They have confidence in those strengths, and they know how to overcome any weaknesses that they may have. My students also know how to write the various types of themes, and they have an example of each type. Finally, my students know exactly under what type of college English evaluation they will best perform.

The validity of my program is not established until my students have gone through the freshman college English programs. I do have the results for my first two years of using this program. For the Class of 1980 — through letters, telephone conversations, and other means of contact — I have found that at least twenty percent of my students were exempted in some way from at least one course in freshman

English. For the Class of 1981, using the same methods of research, I found at least thirty percent of my students were exempted from at least one freshman English course in college. From my research, I have not been able to locate a single student in either of my previous two classes who has received lower than a "C" grade as a final grade average for freshman college English.

My program works, and the results that my students are getting prove that it does. My students are invited to return to my classroom during a designated week of the school year to tell my present seniors what is presently happening in the freshman English courses at the various colleges and universities and to say whether or not my program is effective in preparing them for what is happening. I take notes from what my former students say, and I make the appropriate changes in my composition program so that my present group of seniors continue to receive a contemporary English program.

MERRILLVILLE WRITING PROGRAM