

THE FICTITIOUS TERM PAPER

STEVEN C. SCHEER

Imagine that you are a student in a writing course where you receive the following instructions: Your task is to write a fictitious term paper. The catch is that the format of your paper must follow the style established by the *MLA Handbook* (Second Edition) to a tee. The paper itself must be seven pages long with six pages of text followed by a page listing your works cited. On the seventh page of your paper you must, in fact, list seven² works cited representing the following categories: two single-author books, two essays from collections of essays (that is, from books that have editors rather than authors), two articles from the same number of learned journals (I said learned journals, like *PMLA* or *Diacritics*, not *Time* or *Psychology Today*), and one work of literature of your choice (any work will do). In the text of your paper you should quote from the work of literature of your choice from time to time, varying short with long quotations, in order to make your paper look real even as you are careful to maintain the illusion that the work of literature of your choice is the subject matter of your paper. Interspersed with the quotations from the work of literature of your choice you should cite at least once from each of your other sources. Otherwise, the text of your paper should have nothing to do with either the work of literature of your choice or any of your other sources. You may write whatever you wish. Your writing, in fact, may be humorous, parodic, irreverent, or irrational—in other words, completely “off the wall.” Your grade will be based on the form of your paper and on the quality of your writing.

My students' initial reaction to these instructions is mixed. On the one hand, they seem delighted with the prospect of writing a nonsensical paper; on the other, they seem anxious about the apparently complicated requirements for the scholarly, professional format. To reduce their anxiety, I provide them with a sample fictitious term paper in which I myself painstakingly fulfill all of the requirements in question. In fact, in my sample fictitious term paper

I even cover all those little tidbits that forever bedevil our students, like the use of ellipses for omissions from and the use of brackets for interpolations within quotations, or the commonsensical distinction (which never strikes my students as commonsensical) between the author of an essay and the editor of the volume in which the essay in question appears, and so on. In addition to the sample paper, I also provide my students with a set of recommendations for the whole procedure. The instructions typically say something like the following: Go to the library and select the works you will cite in your paper. Pick up a work of literature (*The Scarlet Letter*, for example), two single-author books (such as Derrida's *Of Grammatology*), two collections of essays (*Reader-Response Criticism*, edited by Jane Tompkins, for example), and two recent issues of any two learned journals (*American Literature*, *Critical Inquiry*, what have you). Having recorded the necessary information for your list of works cited (author, title of book, essay, or article, publisher, date, and so on), flip the pages of each of your sources until you find a few sentences or paragraphs that strike you as worthy of being included in your paper. Once you have copied down all the quotations you think you will need, you will have completed your "research," and you may start working on the paper itself. Just give it a title and begin writing. Remember you may write whatever you wish (you may even use obscene language, for all I care)—anything goes, nothing matters, as long as whatever you write is well written.

Experimenting with this fictitious term paper requirement for approximately a decade now, I have learned a number of things, some of them pleasantly surprising. My initial motive for establishing this assignment was to spare myself the painful experience of reading terribly botched papers where the form was as badly mangled as the content. I figured that if I could just trade the content in for the form I would be able to insist on the form without appearing to be in mindless conformity to the letter of its law. At the same time, I also wanted my students to realize that the conventions of scholarly writing are simply the rules of the game. Since students don't mind the rules of baseball or basketball, why should they mind the rules of scholarly writing? Doesn't playing by the rules simply show them that they belong, that they know what they are doing, and that the penalties for breaking the rules are as much part of the logic of the game as the rules themselves? Furthermore, don't the rules of the game facilitate rather than hinder the players; don't the rules, in

fact, *make* the game? My students had no trouble with this analogy, nor did they begrudge the formalities of scholarly writing once it was clear to them that they didn't have to bother with its content.

I myself was very confident the first time I gave this assignment. I felt that my students could now concentrate on the "how" without worrying about the "what." I also hoped that not worrying about the "what" would free their writing of its customary constraints. I certainly expected it to flow with ease rather than meander aimlessly in the choppy current that usually passes for their expository or argumentative prose. I shall never forget the pleasure I felt when I collected the first batch of fictitious term papers. Every single one of them looked professional. So far so good, I sighed. Scanning the titles also made me realize that I would be in for a lot of fun reading. One of the titles, for example, was obviously a take-off on that time-honored assignment I am sure we have all struggled with when we were students: "How I Spent My Summer Vacation"—it was called "I was a Deconstruction Worker." Reading that first batch of papers made me discover a number of things.

The first discovery was a pleasant surprise. As I read paper after paper, I soon saw that the vast majority of the fictitious term papers were highly self-reflexive. Since self-reflection is not one of our students' habitual fortes, this was a welcome discovery indeed. And along with the self-reflexivity came a sense of fun, playfulness, even mischievousness. Many a fictitious term paper seemed enamored of mocking and teasing the assignment itself or the "crazy professor" who thought it up in the first place. Here is a typical quote from a recent paper: "You say this paper should be fun to write. Well, I am not quite sure I agree. In fact, I am positive I don't agree. Writing (any kind) is work for me and work isn't fun. In other words, you lied to me, in a sense." A few sentences later the student quotes a passage from a scholarly work which admonishes us against the disguising of the truth; then she comes back to the issue of the professor having lied to her. She writes: "Really, I am just kidding . . . I've always wanted to accuse a teacher of something. Now I have, so don't take it personally (doesn't the song "Personally" come to mind when you hear that word?)."

Note that in addition to the mocking/teasing "intimacy" between the teacher and herself which this student feels free to project in her paper, she is also manifestly writing by a kind of free association of ideas. Not only is the quotation which warns the reader

against disguising the truth sandwiched between the playful accusations hurled at the teacher who said that writing a fictitious term paper might be fun, but the word "personally," used in one context, suddenly becomes the title of a song, and so on. Obviously, the student's attempt to write nonsense merely to fill the gaps between the various quotations which constitute her "research" has backfired. It is clear that by merely playing with words, the student has begun to think on paper, so to speak. It is also clear that the quotations, which according to the requirements for the assignment do not have to be linked up in any way with the student's own text, have nevertheless become subtly intertextual with it. This same phenomenon appears in fictitious paper after fictitious paper. The quotations selected prior to the act of writing (or, perhaps, alongside with the act of writing, as the case may be) begin to influence the student's own "nonsensical" composition in such a way that a kind of context emerges in spite of the fact that this is precisely what the student seems to want to avoid or, at least, remain nonchalantly indifferent to, with the teacher's prior blessing to boot. In other words, not having to worry about what he/she is writing, each student seems to naturally and spontaneously worry about precisely what he/she is writing. Since there are no pressures on this process, though, since the process is "merely" a kind of play or game, since it is "fiction," the process itself unexpectedly takes on all the desirable qualities we ourselves try to project into or extrapolate from our own "real" writing.

Speaking of our own "real" writing, it is clear that the customary distinction between the real and fictive is vastly overstated. I take it that Robert Scholes is right when he claims that "[a]ll writing, all composition, is construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it. There is no mimesis, only poiesis. No recording. Only constructing" (7). I also take it that this same statement applies to reading as well. The only difference between writing/reading the real and the fictitious term paper, therefore, is that while the real is serious the fictitious is not. But no sooner have I made this distinction than I am troubled by it, partly because I cannot forget one of Derrida's curious and apparently odd remarks concerning this issue. "There is always a surprise in store for . . . any criticism that might think it had mastered the game." Speaking of a "hidden thread" in the text, Derrida goes on to say that

[i]f reading and writing are one, . . . if reading is writing, this

oneness designates neither undifferentiated (con)fusion nor identity at perfect rest; the *is* that couples reading with writing must rip apart.

One must then, in a single gesture, but doubled, read and write. And that person would have understood nothing of the game who, at this [*du coup*], would feel himself authorized merely to add on; that is, to add any old thing. He would add nothing, the seam wouldn't hold. Reciprocally, he who through 'methodological prudence,' 'norms of objectivity,' or 'safeguards of knowledge' would refrain from committing anything of himself, would not read[/write] at all. The same foolishness, the same sterility, obtains in the 'not serious' as in the 'serious.' The reading or writing supplement must be rigorously prescribed, but by the necessities of a *game*, by the logic of *play*. (63-64; italics Derrida's)

If the difference between the real and the fictive cannot be maintained in terms of the presence/absence of "mere" seriousness, then I think it would be helpful for us to distinguish the two in terms of intent. The intent of the fictitious term paper is to exemplify the student's mastery of the game or play of scholarly, professional writing. The fact that this kind of writing is "game" or "play" does not one whit detract from its customary/ordinary "seriousness." On the contrary, the fact that the assignment requires the student to play the game self-consciously "merely" guarantees that he/she is going to dis/cover the real in the fictive. And this leads me to a consideration of the second discovery I have made repeatedly during the history of my fictitious term paper requirement in the last decade or so.

I would, of course, be overstating the case if I didn't admit that the self-conscious or self-reflexive papers my students keep writing for me are miraculously self-inventive or self-generative. My students usually "imitate" me. Not in the sense denied by Robert Scholes ("There is no mimesis, only poesis"), but in the sense of playful burlesque or mischievous travesty. I must further confess that the sample fictitious term paper I provide for my students is not only itself self-conscious or self-reflexive, but that it, too, fails to keep its own text from being contaminated by the quotations intertextualized with it. In other words, while my own fictitious term paper is itself humorous, parodic, irreverent, and irrational (that is, completely "off the wall"), it nevertheless makes a kind of sense con-

cerning the “theme” of (excuse this barbaric coinage) “fictitious term-paperality.” Not only do I extol the virtues of the “theme” in question in a variety of playfully mocking/teasing ways, but I keep quoting texts like “[b]oth the author and the narrator . . . maintain their sanity and discover truth by the creation of a rational lie, a fiction” (Dryden 37) or “[b]y the end of the story what appeared to be real but turned out to be fake appears to be more real than if it had been real in the first place” (Scheer 46-47).

My second discovery, then, has to do with an answer to the question: why is it that our students write terribly bad real papers when they are demonstrably capable of writing pretty good fictitious ones? As I have already indicated, the answer cannot be that the fictitious paper is not real. If anything, it appears more real than if it had been real in the first place. Perhaps the answer is hidden in the intent I have mentioned above. But why should the “intent” in question make such a difference? To answer this question I shall have to invoke my third discovery (and collapse it with my second still under consideration here). Judged by its etymological meaning, the word “school” once meant “play.” Perhaps the trouble is that we have managed to turn it into something altogether too “serious.” And that’s the problem, as I see it, with asking our students to write “real” papers. The “real” papers aren’t real in the first place. They are certainly not destined for publication, which renders their very ethos/etiology unreal. In other words, the “real” papers in question are written for the sake of learning how to write a real paper. They are real only in the sense that the students are required to go through the customary/ordinary procedures necessary for their production. Which is the same as saying that the “real” papers are not real since they *ipso facto* represent (albeit in a pretentiously disguised form) exercises in futility. This is precisely why they deprive the students of a voice just at the time when they have the greatest need for a voice of their own.

And this takes me back to the notion of “school” as “play.” The fictitious term paper requirement instantly restores the institution in which we, as teachers, ply our trade to its own forgotten intent. No wonder our students get confused when society distinguishes the schools they attend from the “real” world for the sake of which they attend schools in the first place. No wonder that they, along with society, tend to despise schools, the customary rhetoric of “lip service” to the contrary notwithstanding. To restore

its rightful importance we must re/cognize the school not as a place in which to work but as a place in which to play, that is, *pretend* to work. The fictitious term paper succeeds precisely where the real paper is doomed to fail. What is paradoxical is that in spite of the requirement for the professional format it does not impose on the student the stultifying burden of conformity. But perhaps this is not paradoxical at all. By making going through the motions the obvious game or play going through the motions has always already been meant to be, the fictitious term paper liberates the student from "work" so that in "play" he/she may master it. Furthermore, by playing the game seriously, we will also give our students an opportunity to experience for themselves that leisure is indeed the basis of culture (see Joseph Pieper's *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*) and that the human race is a naturally playful species (see Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*). Perhaps the time is ripe for re/cognizing that the school is not a place of stultifying "reality" but the arena of liberating "fiction."

Steven C. Scheer teaches English at Saint Meinrad College, St. Meinrad, Indiana.

NOTES

¹Slightly different versions of this paper were presented to the 10th Annual Mid-America Conference on Composition, sponsored by the University of Southern Indiana, on April 18, 1986, and to the 5th Annual Indiana Teachers of Writing Conference on September 26, 1986. My thanks to Thomas M. Rivers, editor of the Mid-America Conference proceedings, for permission to print it here.

²The number "seven" is just as arbitrary as the number of days in the week. Perhaps it is indebted to the Biblical story of creation. Don't we also have seven deadly sins? And doesn't the Catholic Church, for example, recognize seven sacraments? Writing a seven-page term paper, therefore, is surely an archetypal act.

WORKS CITED

- Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- Dryden, Edgar A. *Melville's Thematics of Form: The Great Art of Telling the Truth*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968.
- Scheer, Steven C. *Kalman Mikszath*. Twayne World Authors Series 462. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1977.
- Scholes, Robert. *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on the Fiction of the Future*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975.

