

The Challenge of Cooking for Chefs: Writing in the English Major

**Archibald Leyasmeyer
Beverly Atkinson
Christine Mack Gordon &
Sally Nereson**

**Technical Report Series
No. 18 ♦ 2001**

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor

The Challenge of Cooking for Chefs: Writing in the English Major

**Archibald Leyasmeyer
Beverly Atkinson
Christine Mack Gordon &
Sally Nereson**

**Technical Report Series
No. 18 ♦ 2001**

**Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
Mesut Akdere, Editor**

THE CENTER FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES OF WRITING

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

227 LIND HALL

207 CHURCH STREET S.E.

MINNEAPOLIS, MN 55455

Director: Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Professor, English
Assistant to the Director: Ann Browning
Research Assistants: Mesut Akdere, Anita Gonzalez, Elizabeth Leer, Linda Tetzlaff

Policy Board: Thomas Augst, Assistant Professor, English; Terence Collins, Professor, General College; Darwin Hendel, Assistant Professor, Educational Policy and Administration; Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch, Assistant Professor, Rhetoric; Elizabeth Leer, Graduate Student, Curriculum and Instruction; Holly Littlefield, Teaching Specialist, Carlson School of Management; Carol Miller, Associate Professor, American Studies; Robin Murie, Program Director, General College; Rosemarie Park, Associate Professor, Education; Jim Perry, Professor, Forest Resources; Tom Reynolds, Assistant Professor, General College; Don Ross, Professor, English; Michael Seward, Graduate Student, Creative Writing; Geoffrey Sirc, Associate Professor, General College; Ruth Thomas, Professor, Family Social Science; Pat McCarty Veach, Professor, Educational Psychology; Art Walzer, Associate Professor, Rhetoric

Copyright © 2001 by The Board of Regents, University of Minnesota
All Rights Reserved

ISBN: 1-881221-44-X

The University of Minnesota is committed to the policy that all personnel shall have equal access to its programs, facilities, and employment without regard to race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sex, age, marital status, disability, public assistance status, veteran status, or sexual orientation.

Preface

The Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing offers research grants that have the potential to contribute knowledge about academic literacy in six areas: (1) curricular reform through writing-intensive instruction, (2) characteristics of writing across the curriculum, (3) connections between writing and learning in all fields, (4) characteristics of writing beyond the academy, (5) effects of ethnicity, class, and gender on writing, (6) the status of writing ability during the college years.

In 1993 the Center awarded Dr. Archibald Leyasmeyer a grant for a project entitled “Research on Writing in the Undergraduate English Major.” Beverly Atkinson from English Undergraduate Studies, Christine Mack Gordon from Creative and Professional Writing, and Sally Nereson as the research assistant assisted him in this project.

Their research was in the Center’s category of “connections between writing and learning”. The Department of English Undergraduate Studies wanted to gain a clearer sense of how its students and faculty viewed writing in this discursively-based major, with an eye toward answering the following questions:

1. What constitutes “good” writing to both of those groups?
2. How can faculty expectations best be communicated to students?
3. What do students feel they need to improve their writing skills?

Dr. Leyasmeyer received his bachelor’s degree from Harvard University, an his two master’s degrees from Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Princeton University, and his doctoral degree from Princeton University. Since 1968 he has been a professor of English in the Department of English at the University of Minnesota,

Minneapolis. Leyasmeyer has also been the Faculty Director of the Program for Individualized Learning. In 1994, Leyasmeyer was elected to the Minnesota Humanities commission. In addition, he was one of the first three recipients of CEE Distinguished Teaching Award in 1989 and he was also awarded the Gordon L. Starr award for outstanding service to students in the same year.

We believe that his study will provide new insights for faculty and researchers in the field of English Language. We invite you to contact the Center about this publication or any others in the series. We also appreciate comments on our publications.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
Mesut Akdere, Editor
January 2001

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Summary of Research Activities	3
The Reading Factor.....	4
The Reader Factor.....	9
The Time Factor.....	13
Closing Remarks.....	16

Appendix A. Interview Questions

Appendix B. Chart Summarizing Responses from Phone Interviews with Faculty at
Other Schools

Appendix C. Draft of reader's guide from the Survival Kit for English Majors

INTRODUCTION

The remarks of the President of Harvard to a board of overseers in 1939—”From all sides, academic and nonacademic, we hear complaints of the inability of the average graduate to write either correctly or fluently” (qtd in Berlin 91)—reflect the sentiments of a number of people today and in all the years intervening. And while no one—students included—would assert that graduates from any discipline should be without solid writing skills, an expectation exists that English majors should have not only solid but even exemplary writing skills and language skills in general. Most people who have studied English have had friends or relatives say, “I’d better watch my grammar around you.” Many English majors are gainfully employed based upon assumed (and often actual, of course) writing skills. The Director of Undergraduate English Studies at another large university estimates that “The bulk of our people (70-75%) go into business or public service. Their writing skills are what get them their jobs¹.”

Based on the more or less reasonable premise that practice makes perfect, English majors could be expected to write pretty well. An English class is likely to require at least a paper or two, an essay test or two, maybe some in-class writing; it isn’t going to be just a couple of machine-scored tests. (Despite the inroads made by Writing Across the Curriculum, students in some disciplines can still avoid writing in the form of extended prose, at least at the undergraduate level.) And someone who’s explicated a poem from another century (written in what looks to some people like another language) should be

¹ Appendix B summarizes responses from phone interviews conducted with faculty at several other institutions. Most of these institutions were selected because they, like the University of Minnesota, belong to the Alliance for Undergraduate Education.

able to make short work of a business proposal. For those who haven't attempted it—and for many who have—writing about literature seems a daunting task. It involves being able to read critically and write for one of the most critical audiences imaginable: the English Professor. This seems to be a widely-held perception of the English major—arrived at unscientifically, to be sure, but recognized by those who work with undergraduate English majors and by the students themselves.

The Department of Undergraduate Studies in English at the University of Minnesota (Twin Cities) proposed to study the writing done by its majors because its staff and other concerned faculty noticed a number of serious problems in student essays, ranging from matters of mechanics (sentence fragments, lack of agreement, poor editing) to unsupported statements and “clichéd, conventional, jargon-filled prose, mushy and without much muscularity.” The proposal identified good communication more generally as free of euphemisms, circumlocutions, and professional rhetoric—“just the most direct and clear communication possible One might reasonably expect as much, we think, and more, from members of the University, especially English majors².” A director of Undergraduate English Studies at another university described the problem with student writing in the English major as “not primarily a matter of technical, mechanical skills, though obviously there are some of those. It's more students not knowing how to write extensive, sustained expository prose in the kind of way you'd like to see English majors writing. Even beginning English majors.” And finally, as a University of Minnesota faculty member expressed it in this excerpt from our interview³:

² This material is quoted from the Undergraduate Department of English staff's request for funding from the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies in Writing.

³ The interviewee's responses are in standard typeface and my questions/remarks are italicized.

It would be nice if every English major wrote well enough to earn her living at it when she got out.

There does seem to be that expectation that if you're an English major you're a good writer.

That's exactly right.

And you don't find that with other majors, except for journalism. It seems to be treated as a given in the English major.

But you know, there's something to it. If we send people out with a B.A. in English from the University of Minnesota and they can't write a good five-paragraph essay, then we should take a good look at ourselves.

This research project was designed to find out how students and faculty perceive undergraduate writing in the English major by simply asking them. This paper's rather modest goal is to participate in the ongoing discussion about student writing by relating perspectives articulated by those students and faculty who were kind enough to participate in interviews and, of course, by at least a few of the many people who have published their opinions on the topic.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

The following chart summarizes research activities undertaken in order to get a clearer sense of writing in the English major.

Source	Method	Objective
faculty at other institutions (sample size: 12)	telephone interviews	Find out how faculty at other schools feel about and assess the quality of student writing in the major.

<p>faculty in the English Department at the U of MN (sample size: 8)</p>	<p>face-to-face interviews</p>	<p>Find out how faculty here feel about and assess student writing. What are their expectations?</p>
<p>faculty from several other departments at the U of MN (research conducted in 91-92, sample size: 9, representing 8 other departments)</p>	<p>face-to-face interviews</p>	<p>Get some comparative data on faculty perceptions about writing in other disciplines.</p>
<p>papers written by students before admission to the English major</p>	<p>document review using two different scoring sheets including narrative comments</p>	<p>Get a sense of how students construct this discourse and the problems they encounter in constructing it.</p>
<p>students currently in the program (sample size: 10, 6 from 3960 [working on senior papers and finishing their degrees]; 1 from a 1000-level literature course and 3 from a 3000-level literature course)</p>	<p>face-to-face interviews, document review</p>	<p>Find out what they feel is involved in writing in this major. What do they think faculty expect? How well do they think they understand what's being asked for? What difficulties or confusion have they experienced? What experiences in reading and writing do they bring?</p>

See Appendix A for the questions asked in interviews with the various groups. The data gathered provide bases for discussions on academic literacy and the role of cross-disciplinarity, standards and assessment, and student construction of writing in this discursively-based major, among other topics. This paper touches on these issues as it discusses three factors that influence student writing: the Reading Factor, the Reader Factor and the Time Factor. That these elements influence student writing is not exactly a revelation; potential significance lies 1) in the way these elements are perceived and dealt with by students and faculty in this particular field of study and 2) in the ways an increased awareness of how these elements operate might affect both the production and the reception of student writing.

The Reading Factor

Eating good food doesn't necessarily make you a good cook, but it does educate your palate.

Until very recently (Fall 1993), students applying to the English major at the University of Minnesota had to submit an essay on why they wanted to major in English. In 30 randomly selected essays, 90 percent of the writers gave "love of reading"—or at least having read a lot—as a basis for their decision to major in English. Oddly enough, most of the students interviewed could name few books they'd read either for school or for leisure through junior high and high school. One student listed books that he classified as "not always great books. Trashy novels and stuff like that. I think I read just about every Tarzan novel, and a lot of science fiction. Mickey Spillane." Several students noted that they do little reading outside of assigned readings and perhaps the newspaper when school is in session—for lack of time rather than lack of inclination. The

Undergraduate Studies Committee recently stated in a report to the Department of English that “to undertake a major in English requires much more than merely enjoying reading or appreciating the vastness of human experience” (two things some of the essays treated as causally linked). It makes sense to express a love for reading if one is trying to get admitted to study in a major where lots of reading will be involved, but with all of the different things there are available to read and the myriad reasons for reading them, a statement like “I enjoy reading” is hopelessly vague.

There are at least two key reasons for reading in any particular discipline: reading for examples of writing in that discipline and reading for a wider knowledge base. There are, of course, dilemmas associated with each.

Reading for Example

Directors of Undergraduate English Studies at two other universities were among several interviewees who described a very direct link between reading and writing:

. . . [students] basically don't read enough. I'm not convinced that one can be taught how to write without simultaneously reading a lot. I think a lot of one's sense of how to write well comes from reading things that are well written.

* * *

I think it's incredibly difficult to teach many writing skills to students who have no ear or no developed sense from reading literature about what their writing ought to sound like. Without a lot of reading you're really swimming upstream to develop writing skills at any level at all.

There are certainly skillful writers who don't read much and people who read all the time yet can't write very well. But it's difficult to find someone who will argue against the potential value of reading -- you certainly won't find that person in this study's transcripts. It's easy, however, to find people who will argue about what a person

should read. The next section deals with that issue in more detail, but in the meantime, here are some faculty remarks on valid reading models for student writing:

I ask [my undergraduate students] where they find good models for the kind of writing that they're expected to do. And many of them have never thought of it. Those who have go to the library. But my point is that the style of writing that books represent is not a good model for undergraduate papers. Frankly, newspapers are better than published books. Journalistic writing makes you focus on structure, getting important things in at the beginning, that sense of strategy. Look at that rather than a 400-page book.

* * *

Samples of quality undergraduate writing. That's the writing they should be looking at as models.

* * *

. . . we've shifted in our writing courses from not wanting to use readings at all and just let students write out of their own experience to now feeling that reading is quite important in our writing courses, but *not using it in the old way where we examine rhetorical devices in finished products of professional writers*. (Emphasis added)

This last remark calls for some further discussion. Fahnestock and Secor's observation that "literary scholars convey their ethos through the artistry of their language, demonstrating virtuosity with the very medium they analyze" (93) is echoed by a faculty interviewee's remark that English majors will ideally "care enough about the language [to] try hard to look for the right word." This suggests that English majors -- and their writing, even though professional caliber isn't expected—might benefit from a better grasp of the rhetorical features of literary argument. However, there is a fine line between examining particular features or conventions of form and overemphasizing them. A student interviewee experienced the drawbacks associated with this: "When I write a paper I tend to fixate a little too much. I focus on the writing and not enough on the ideas. I end up with a wastepaper basket full of pages . . ." Knoblauch and Brannon,

discussing students producing “persuasive” essays, caution against . . . attaching an inappropriate importance to certain preferred textual features—let’s say, topic-sentence paragraphs, the use of examples, and a “personal” tone of voice—as though these constituted being persuasive. And [teachers] are confusing [students] as well by implying that a knowledge of the features leads to an ability to compose “persuasion essays”—which is like asking someone to bake a cake by pointing to a finished cake and explaining that it is devil’s food rather than angel and two-layered rather than three. (29)

It’s agreed that students aren’t expected to write like published literary scholars or professional writers, and that what they have to say comes before how they’re going to say it. But there’s still much to be gained from reading such work, if not as a model for their own writing then as a way of knowing more about how ideas are advanced in a particular realm and how they might work with those *ideas* if not those forms. Further, even if familiarity with textual features doesn’t equal facility with them, it doesn’t seem like it would hurt as long as the features aren’t viewed as rigid or immutable ideals. Further still, because, as a faculty interviewee pointed out, “there are certain rhetorical features that one expects in a written conversation between experienced readers and writers,” students may want to know what those features are and what’s needed to become an “experienced” reader. While there isn’t an invariable list to distribute on either of these issues, there’s likely to be slightly more agreement on the list of features than on what to read.

Reading for a Wider Knowledge Base

Fahnestock and Secor identify allusive density as a key feature of literary criticism, describing the “importance of demonstrating familiarity with the subject matter

. . . through allusive density, glancing references—in fact, we seem to prize the very casualness that reaches out to a wide range of knowledge and pulls it into significance, creating the ethos of an alert and well-stocked mind” (91). A faculty interviewee felt that this textual density was “an allowable but not essential” aspect of literary criticism:

It’s not necessary for good literary criticism to have that density. If it’s there I think it’s important that it be controlled and it be acknowledged. And it tends to occur at a level that’s considerably more sophisticated than student writing.

This is a point well taken in a couple of respects. First, students really aren’t *expected* to pepper their writing with allusions. Second, there are several approaches and styles of literary criticism, and, as mentioned earlier, it should not be viewed as a composite of inflexible features. However, students do read allusive material and they recognize that this kind of reach can add a valued dimension to their writing:

Has the quality of your written work changed while you’ve been in college?

Yes, quite a bit. . . . When I look back at the stuff I did when I started, it’s not as good as the stuff I do now. Not just in terms of writing style, but what I look for. How much does it have to do with just knowing more now than when you started?

A lot. A lot. Quite often I work in allusions to other places I think having a background in a lot of different things helps my writing a lot.

Students are also exposed to allusion in class discussion:

In high school we didn’t read much. . . . Such a limited background is a big disadvantage sometimes. Professors will start talking about Hawthorne and things like that. They’ll start quoting passages and looking at you like you’re supposed to know what they’re talking about. But I’ve never read a word of Hawthorne. They ask questions about novels that they assume students will have background in, and I don’t have it.

J.F. Powers, an award-winning writer and a member of the English faculty at St. John’s University, identifies one of “the calamities of the day” as the literary shallowness of the young: “People in college don’t read because they didn’t learn as children, the way

we did. Reading was like breathing to us. Today you can mention someone like Evelyn Waugh to students and no one will know of him” (qtd. in McCarthy). Hmm. Perhaps Powers would have better luck if he mentioned Stephen King. We find ourselves now in the thorny thicket of what exactly has to be in a person’s mind for it to be “well-stocked.” A person can’t read everything, after all. Far too many writers have expressed their views on the literary canon—either defending a Great Masters version or listing many, many alternatives to it—to be mentioned here, but Carolyn Heilbrun, herself both a teacher of masterpieces (until recently she was on the English faculty at Columbia) and a producer of “garbage” (she writes mysteries under the name Amanda Cross), describes a way that newer work might co-exist with the “classics”:

. . . if we cease to think of the canon as creationists think of the Bible, that is to say, as a text that must be not only “privileged” but isolated and reified, we may even allow some popular and “emerging” literatures into our most conservative classrooms. We shall do so, not because we must turn to popular works, as the only literature people are willing to read, but because the masterpieces have become so newly vital that they will continue to dazzle beside works more easily encountered.

This reasonable stance would seemingly allow for a much broader definition of a well-stocked mind (and LOTS more reading), but it also means smaller subsets of readers will “get” the allusions in a given piece. It’s not particularly frustrating to miss referents when you don’t realize you’re missing them, but many students feel (or have it brought to their attention) that they’re lacking background that others have. They’re at a disadvantage. A faculty member described his own writing as “highly allusive.”

To read what I write, it pays to be well read. Because there are a lot of jokes and a lot of allusions and a lot of other things that are in there that you can pick up if you have the frame of reference of world literature.

And if you don't share that frame of reference? This is a problem with no easy remedy (apart from a complete shift in the way allusions are used, wherein writers carefully explain each reference). However, the English Department, sensitive to students' needs to work toward some background if they don't bring it, has recently assembled a Survival Kit for its majors. This includes a reading guide (essentially a bibliography) organized developmentally into three sections:

1. "Essential Resource Books" for the beginning student of literature and language
2. "Anthologies and Other Resources: Tools of the Trade" for the intermediate student of literature, language, and critical theory, those taking broad survey courses
3. "The Cosmic Syllabus" for the advanced, committed English major who wants or needs to read for more extensive background in particular historical periods, genres, criticism, language/linguistics, and critical writing.

(See Appendix C for a draft of the complete bibliography.)

The Reader Factor

Serving the discriminating dinner guest.

The social-interaction model of writing views the creation of meaning through writing as "a unique configuration and interaction of what both writer and reader bring to the text . . . the writer's problem is knowing just which points need to be elaborated and which can be assumed. This in turn depends on what readers already know, or more specifically on what the writer and reader share." (Nystrand 299) The reader's role in the context of the English course is particularly important because the reader is not only the evaluator/grader, but also most likely a skilled writer and most certainly someone who knows a good deal about the topic to be addressed. Students' writing papers for faculty

(and the faculty reading those papers) must contend with what David Bartholomae identifies as the central problem of academic writing:

. . . a student must assume the right of speaking to someone who knows more about baseball or “To His Coy Mistress” than the student does, a reader for whom the general commonplaces and the readily available utterances about a subject are inadequate. (140)

English professors are seen as tough customers, accustomed as they are to reading some pretty elaborate writing. However, they also read a lot of student papers, and surely they have a range of expectations and responses based on who’s doing the writing. According to interviews not only with English Department faculty but faculty from other departments, clarity and precision are the main things faculty look for in student writing, regardless of the field of study. While the more elusive things like eloquence, grace, and originality of both thought and expression did come up in talking with English professors, not a single interviewee “expected” these things -- though they were delighted when they got them.

Still, there may be something to the perception that English faculty, because they’re skilled writers themselves, are more picky. For example, a faculty interviewee from another discipline describes the tie between his writing and his response to student writing this way:

I’m a lousy writer, so I’m more tolerant toward other lousy writers . . . a writing style, having gone through the perverse experience of getting a Ph.D., is terribly dull. D-U-L-L. Exclamation mark, exclamation mark!

However, there’s no guarantee that faculty in other departments will share this tolerance; another interviewee from a more technically-oriented discipline noted, “I have an undergraduate degree in English and I’ve written a number of books on writing, so I have very high expectations.” Well, I guess that puts us back at square one. With a couple

of exceptions involving specific faculty from other departments, several of the students interviewed felt that their English professors were toughest to please where papers were concerned. They didn't necessarily think this was a bad thing, however, and one student was even disappointed when he earned a B+ on a paper that he felt was mediocre. (This student felt that "standards should be a little better [more strict] for me and everyone else. Sometimes I feel I've gotten away with stuff that shouldn't have been accepted. At college level. I know that.") The following excerpts from student interviews show their perspectives on their reader's expectations and on their expectations of their readers:

With some professors I might get an A on this, but he's pretty tough. He really looks close. I've had him before. [Indicating that toughness isn't necessarily a deterrent]
[Same student talking about a paper for another English class he was taking at the same time]

I expect to have better luck on this one, because I don't think the prof is going to grade it. I have better luck with the TAs. I've gotten A's on papers that, well . . .

* * *

I knew what was being asked for. I don't usually have a problem figuring out the assignment. I pretty much know what they're asking.

* * *

I have a problem with a reference in here. I should have been clearer here. . . But overall I think [the paper is] clear, though not extremely poetic or beautiful. Sometimes I tend to want to be more literary with my papers . . .

Would you rather do it that way, if you had time? Do you think it might make for a stronger paper?

In some ways it would be stronger, but the people grading these things have a thousand to look at and are probably more worried about clarity than well-composed eloquence.

* * *

Are you usually pretty tough on yourself compared to other people?

Yes, oh yeah.

Would you expect the things you feel should be rephrased to be marked by the prof as well?

I'd expect it, yes, but I know from past experience that a lot of those things will pass right by. It depends on how meticulous the instructor is.

* * *

When you look at the assignment sheet for this, do you have a pretty clear understanding of what to do?

Um, yeah. But I think it's because I've had [the prof] before, and he's pretty thorough when he explains the assignment. He pretty much tells you exactly what he wants. And you can get a sense of what he wants just by what he discusses in class.

* * *

It sounds like you're really good at figuring out what's being asked for in a given situation.

Oh, yeah, that's called learning through mistakes. I'll ask other people who've had the prof. And most classes will have two or three papers. The first paper I give myself some leeway for mistakes.

And are some of the instructors fairly specific about what they want?

No, no. I've never had anybody say exactly what they want. Yet a lot of people who grade my papers have an idea of what they want. They just don't articulate it to the class. I pretty much believe from experience that what can be an A paper for one prof will be a B paper for another.

* * *

Would you say you're pretty good at figuring out what the faculty is looking for?

Most of the time. I can tell when I'm not going along quite in synch. But I can correct that and write what they want to hear.

* * *

What would you say are the strengths of your writing?

Boy, I don't examine my writing much. I just write. But I try to get involved in my writing, make it a little more flowery. Sometimes the faculty is looking for something pretty clear cut, just the facts, but I don't do that. I try to make it a little more crafted.

The Undergraduate Studies Department in English at the University of Minnesota has been collecting and will soon make available to students for reference examples of successful student writing. While some agreement among English faculty as to what constitutes a successful paper could reasonably be assumed, organizing the samples by professor might accommodate the subjectivity that students perceive. Some dinner guests are more discriminating than others and some may have allergies to particular dishes -- the very dishes that other guests relish.

The data suggest that most English professors attempt to make their expectations clear. They also hold office hours to discuss coursework and even review papers/drafts with students. Many try to build opportunities for writing practice and feedback into their course design, often including peer review sessions to give students a sense of how other readers respond to their writing. (Peer review sessions also give students a chance to compare notes on what the professor is after.) The data also indicate that students (those who kindly volunteer to participate in writing research studies, anyway) feel they're pretty good at determining what's called for, want to do well, and have experienced firsthand the value of writing about literature to improve both their writing and their level of thinking and understanding. Most of the students interviewed had some confidence in their writing skills, based in part on favorable academic response to their work in the past. So what gives?

The Time Factor

Sometimes macaroni and cheese will just have to do.

A faculty interviewee, when asked what helped him grow and develop as a writer that he felt would transfer to students, answered, “Practice.” And certainly we’ve established here that English majors—or pretty much anyone, student or not—could improve their writing by reading a lot and writing a lot. Both time-consuming, albeit rewarding, activities. As the following excerpts from conversations with students about their papers show, even those students who have a keen sense of what their audience is after make concessions based on how many hours there are in a day and how many things compete for those hours:

How long did it take you to put this paper together?

Well, let’s just say I pulled another semi-all-nighter.

Just this last night?

Yeah. I thought about it Friday and Saturday . . . Sunday I actually sat down and decided to write a rough draft. But you know how that goes. You sit there for three or four hours and finally say phooey. It’s just not coming out. So then last night I started writing. And then I panic. So I have to take a break. So then I go back and panic some more. Then I got up this morning at about 7:00 to work on it once more at the computer. And then I got to class about 20 minutes late with it. But I made it. I did get it done.

What do you anticipate the result/reaction will be?

Big C.

How much better do you think it would have been if you’d drafted it on Sunday like you planned and then looked at it again before turning it in?

‘Um, maybe a letter grade. A solid B.

Can you predict the kinds of remarks, apart from the grade, that the prof will mark on this paper?

Yes. I'm sure he'll ask for more support on some of the points. He'll write, where's the support for this. Generalization. Generalization. That'll come up with this.

Can you tell where, specifically?

Yeah, like right here, he'll say it's not supported well. Let's see, where else . . . [flipping through the manuscript] . . . Here he'll put, "more evidence. What do you mean here?" Here he'll say, "Why? How so?" But sometimes it just takes so long to back everything up. A whole 'nother paragraph.

Can you predict these things while you're writing? Where he'll ask for more evidence? But you just make the decision not to elaborate on those points based on time?

Yeah.

(J., senior in English)

* * *

Do you feel like by the time you hand something in it's polished to the best of your ability?

Well, there's not enough time. I'll always wish I could walk away from a draft and come to it fresher a few days later, but rarely is that possible. . .

But you enjoy writing papers? You find it to be a generally positive experience?

Yeah, yeah. I mean, the time factor is frustrating at times. But the actual sitting down and writing something, I think a lot more about it. Writing's the time when I do the most concrete thinking things out. So I think that's really fun. And when I have the time to really polish something, it's a fine experience. . . but one paper last quarter, 20-25 pages, I finally ended up hitting Control P and just printing it out. I didn't have time to get away from it and get back to it. I didn't feel good about turning it in. It caused me two weeks of anxiety -- why did I hand that thing in?

(R., senior in English and Philosophy)

* * *

How happy are you with the paper? On a scale of 1 to 10.

Well, I'd say maybe 6.95.

That's pretty specific!

(laughs) Yeah, I was writing another paper at the same time, too, and if I'd been able to concentrate on this one more I would've done a better job. But for the amount of time I put into it, it's decent. It's okay.

(E., junior in English)

* * *

How much time did you spend on this compared to how much time you usually like to spend?

Less, because I had two things due.

But you're still reasonably satisfied with it, given your time investment?

Yeah, I'm real happy with it for the time investment.

...

What do you think you learned from writing the paper?

Hmm. What did I learn from writing the paper . . . how quickly I can write something! No, just kidding. Boy, that's a tough question. . .

(S., senior in English and History)

* * *

Granted, time is an easy excuse. But it is also a very real constraint. An article in a recent *Utne Reader* quotes the *Minnesota* alumni magazine (Jan/Feb 1993) as stating that four out of five students at the University of Minnesota now work, and one out of three works more than 20 hours a week. The article goes on to quote Martha Stephens (a professor at the University of Cincinnati and editor of a document on obstacles facing college students): "It's not hard to see why getting in trouble on the job is for many students a far worse situation than not getting to class, getting a poor grade on a test, or disappointing their teachers" (Ouellette 23). The close attention and revision necessary for good writing require time. "Passable" writing requires less time. While there are those students who have ample time but who also have a lackadaisical attitude toward college, the students who volunteered to be interviewed and share their papers-in-progress—

somewhat time-consuming processes themselves—seemed to have the ability and the desire to do high-quality work. In fact, several students brought copies of papers they'd written, which they felt more accurately reflected their (in a couple of cases considerable) writing skills. Papers on which they were able to or chose to spend more time. (Brief disclaimer: Students who volunteer to participate in research efforts such as this one are not necessarily representative of the student population. On the contrary, they might be viewed as particularly conscientious or at least interested in or concerned about the topic of writing. But it's also worth noting that many more students volunteered to participate than our own limited time could accommodate.)

The time factor is a tricky one to get around. There are ways to build time management into assignments by, for example, setting earlier due dates to allow for scheduled peer or instructor review. But this usually means requiring fewer papers, and there are good reasons for asking students to write two or three papers in a quarter or several across a semester, writing about new knowledge as it's acquired and practicing writing through successive papers rather than successive drafts of a paper or two. Choices must be made and human nature considered. As a professor from another university put it:

I always offer students the opportunity to come and talk to me about the paper before it's due.

Do any of them take you up on that offer?

No. They're just like the rest of us; they do things in the order that they're due.

Remarks

Not surprisingly, descriptions and discussions of writing in the undergraduate English major dovetail with other projects underway or on the boards not only in the

English Department (for example, several of the recommendations from the Undergraduate Studies Committee and the review of the “Techniques of Literary Study” course), but across the University (such as the Subcommittee on Writing’s recommendations for writing-intensive course requirements). Efforts to examine ways in which students write in any particular academic context can be integrated with the University’s efforts to promote writing in each of its departments and to prepare thoughtful and able communicators for a world beyond the academy. Again, this paper aims not to make sweeping recommendations for reform—that tactic hasn’t worked very well, at least before or since 1939 -- but simply to encourage further conversation by sharing conversation. So this discussion ends with one last snippet of conversation about endings from one of the student interviewees:

Endings are tough. Like this one. I have this sentence tacked on. [The prof] will probably comment on it, unless somehow it’s a big insight on my part. But I’m not really counting on that.