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Writing about Literature

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Revised and Updated

TRIP
Theory & Research Into Practice

Foreword by Michael W. Smith

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1 Theory and Research

The 2004 "NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing" articulates a plethora of purposes that result in writing: "Purposes for writing include developing social networks; engaging in civil discourse; supporting personal and spiritual growth; reflecting on experience; communicating professionally and academically; building relationships with others, including friends, family, and like-minded individuals; and engaging in aesthetic experiences" (p. 4).

Certainly, all of these purposes merit our students' attention, practice, and development within the English writing curriculum. Our intent is to focus upon students' development of writing skills related to "engaging in civil discourse" and "communicating professionally and academically." In *Clueless in Academe,* Gerald Graff (2003) makes the case that these two purposes in fact overlap, forming a "culture of ideas and arguments":

> By the culture of ideas and arguments, I refer to that admittedly blurry entity that spans the academic and intellectual worlds on the one hand and the arena of journalistic public discourse on the other. . . . What these different types [academics and professionals] have in common, from the research professor to the newspaper editorialist to the mythical educated lay person on the street, is a commitment to articulating ideas in public. Whatever the differences between their specialized jargons, they have all learned to play the following game: listen closely to others, summarize them in a recognizable way, and make your own relevant argument. This argument literacy, the ability to listen, summarize, and respond, is rightly viewed as central to being educated. (pp. 2–3)

Writing in the Classroom

As part of the English curriculum, our students engage in the study of literary texts. Real issues and real differences of opinion arise from the study of these texts. When students write about their ideas, explaining and supporting them while taking into account the ideas of others, they are using the medium of argument. In doing so, they are practicing the metacognitive skills that will stand them in good stead as both professionals and informed citizens. As Graff (2003) suggests, "The point is not to turn students into clones of professors but to give them access to forms of intellectual capital that have a lot of power in the world" (p. 9).

The formal argument provides the ideal venue for students to articulate their ideas about literature. As a student of ours once remarked, "I now see that I can have any idea I want to have about the literature. I just have to have the evidence to prove it!" And, we would add, "the explanations" as well. Explanations are, in fact, where students use the text at hand to explain and prove their insights about it.

What one reader sees within a piece of textual evidence may or may not be readily discernable to another reader. In a conversation, listeners may ask for clarification of points or signal their confusion visually, prompting the speaker to elaborate further upon a point being made. Such clues are not available to solitary writers. They cannot assume that their readers automatically "see what they see." According to Shaughnessy (1977), students used to conversational turns tend to assume that "the reader understands what is going on in the writer's mind and needs therefore no introductions or transitions or explanations" (p. 240). Thus, Graff (2003) argues the need for specific instruction in "elaborated code" (p. 58), or, in other words, in getting students to provide the contexts and explanations that are so vital to a fully developed argument.

Student Response to Literature and Writing Achievement

In 2005 the National Assessment of Educational Progress reported the results (NCES 2005) for 9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds' achievement in reading during the last three decades. The report indicates that in 2004 most 13-year-olds and 17-year-olds had "partially developed skills and understanding associated with reading" (p. 3). Reading performance involving "understanding complicated information," such as interpreting a challenging literary text, was demonstrated by only 38 percent of 17-year-olds (p. 3).

These results clearly indicate the need for effective instruction that will help students move beyond decoding and literal level understanding of texts. According to at least one national report, the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (2003), writing should be the centerpiece of a good education because "writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge" (p. 3).

Writing beyond the Classroom

Writing as a workplace skill seems more important than ever. The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (2003) asserts, "Although only a few hundred thousand adults earn their living as full-time writers, many working Americans would not be able to

hold their positions if they were not excellent writers" (p. 10). Further underscoring its point, the Commission also cites Richard Light's (2001) workplace statistic: "More than 90 percent of midcareer professionals recently cited the 'need to write effectively' a skill 'of great importance' in their day-to-day work" (p. 11).

Argument literacy is not only "central to being educated" (Graff 2003, p. 3) but also "central to getting things done" in the "real" world beyond the schoolroom. When a research scientist writes a grant proposal, he must take into account what others have done in the field and what others may be proposing to do and then explain how his approach is different from and better than those of others in order to obtain funding. When a lawyer presents her closing arguments, she may well summarize/acknowledge her opponent's case before going on to summarize her own, reviewing her own conclusions and explaining why her facts and evidence outweigh those of the opposition. When an ad executive "pitches" his new campaign to a client, he presents his ideas and explains the merits of his approach and why it is better than those of the competition.

We are not suggesting a direct leap from students' writing about literature to preparing a legal brief. In our previous hypothetical examples, there is much content-specific knowledge. In a recent review of research on writing in the professions, Anne Beaufort (2006) acknowledges that "No amount of preparation in school can equip one fully for content-specific writing tasks in professional life" (p. 229). Yet her review of relevant research over the past twenty years does suggest some ways in which transfer from classroom to workplace is possible and useful in terms of social and metacognitive processes. Beaufort cites Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare's study (1999) of four school/workplace contexts for writing. Their research suggests that writing for thinking and oral social skills were two skills that did transfer (p. 231). Beaufort (2006) also cites her own work (1998, 1999) involving an ethnographic study of four successful writers working within a nonprofit agency. Beaufort found that among other skills, "critical thinking skill fostered by academic writing tasks" provided writers with a useful base for "adding context-specific knowledge" (p. 231).

Beaufort (2006) further summarizes her 1999 study's findings regarding workplace communication by detailing several areas of necessary and overlapping knowledge: "discourse community knowledge, subject matter knowledge, genre knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, and writing process knowledge" (p. 234). Classroom writing can certainly give students knowledge of the final three. And while classroom writing can-

not substantively provide the first two types of knowledge, it can give students practice in answering real questions and collecting and assessing data, skills that should aid in acquiring and using discourse community knowledge and subject matter knowledge. Beaufort's review suggests that workplace writers have a sense of "writing as a problem-solving process" (p. 220) as do students who ask and answer genuine questions about their texts. Furthermore, in their study of writing in the workplace, Sellen and Harper (2002) note that in the workplace it is "the process of taking notes that is important in helping [workers] to construct and organize their thoughts" (p. 63). It is not information per se that gives these workers skill but rather the interaction with and assessment of that data. To take effective notes, these workers must ask questions regarding their data: What is most important? What is most relevant? What will I need to further my case, to solve the problem at hand? In the "information age," the skills necessary to assess information will stand our students in good stead.

What Is Basic to Interpreting Literature?

In reflecting on how to engage students in interpreting literature and defending their ideas in writing, we must first ask: What is involved in understanding literature? Logic tells us that students' writing about a literary work will not be very meaningful if they do not understand the work they are trying to write about. What does a reader have to know or be able to do in order to understand a literary work?

Textbooks, handbooks, and curriculum guides often suggest that understanding literature involves understanding a number of literary terms. The ninth-grade textbook *Holt Elements of Literature. Third Course* (Beers & Odell, 2005) presents a list of eighty-five terms in the "Handbook of Literary Terms" in the back of the anthology. The list includes terms such as *alliteration, allusion, blank verse, character, connotation/denotation, dramatic monologue, figure of speech, foreshadowing, imagery, irony, plot, point of view, satire, setting, symbol,* and so on. The eleventh-grade text (Beers & Odell, 2005) contains one hundred-fifty-four terms, and another ninth-grade text, *Prentice Hall Literature: Timeless Voices, Timeless Themes. Gold Level* (2000), presents one hundred-fifteen terms. When faced with such extensive lists, teachers may find it difficult to know where to begin.

Many of the terms are somewhat problematic. For example, *Prentice Hall Literature: Timeless Voices, Timeless Themes* defines *theme* as "a central message or insight into life revealed through the literary work" (2000, p. 1011). This text presents a thematic unit in which all of the works involve

"Visions of the Future." If a student were asked the theme of Isaac Asimov's short story "The Machine That Won the War," one of the selections in the thematic unit, would "Asimov believes that people will rely on computers in the future" or "The author believes that in the future there is life beyond Earth" be satisfactory responses? According to the teacher's notes in the text, both of these responses are acceptable answers and interpretations of the theme of the story. However, these responses do not reflect a very sophisticated interpretation of Asimov's "theme." Does identifying Asimov's vision that people will rely on computers in the future as a "theme" reflect the same skills as explaining the author's generalization that heavy reliance on computers is dangerous and might lead to some negative consequences?

In addition, are the skills involved in determining the theme of a fable when a moral is explicitly stated at the end the same as those involved in determining the theme of a work when it is implied and never directly stated? Do these extensive lists of terms represent basic skills involved in interpreting literature? Are skills taxonomically related; in other words, are there some skills that must be mastered before others can be learned?

Recognizing the importance of questions like these in arriving at a framework for instruction in literature, many theorists, researchers, and textbook editors have attempted to define the skills basic to the comprehension of literature and have hypothesized various skill hierarchies. Yet most of these hypotheses have not been substantiated by empirical testing. Hillocks and Ludlow (1984) present a taxonomy that is strongly supported by empirical evidence. It is also highly effective as a foundation for designing instruction for helping students learn to interpret literature.

The Hillocks and Ludlow Taxonomy of Skills in Reading and Interpreting Fiction

Hillocks and Ludlow's (1984) skill levels are clearly defined, and there is strong evidence of their hierarchical and taxonomical relationship. In co-research with Bernard McCabe and James E. McCampbell (1971) and independently (1980), Hillocks identifies seven skill types and corresponding question types. Following is his explanation of the seven levels from simplest to most complex. The skill types are not meant to be exhaustive but represent key skills that Hillocks indicates are of apparent concern to reading teachers, teachers of literature, and literary critics. They correspond to the skills the NAEP report (NCES 2005) identifies as important in raising student achievement.

The first three skill types are literal level skills. They require identification of information that appears explicitly in the text. The next four skill types are inferential level skills that require generalizations about the relationships that are not stated in the text. The questions illustrating each of the skill levels are based on Chapter 1 of *The Pearl* (1972) by John Steinbeck. These questions comprise one of the four question sets examined in Hillocks and Ludlow's study.

Literal Level of Comprehension

1. Basic Stated Information—Identifying frequently stated information that presents some condition crucial to the story.
Example: What happened to Coyotito?

2. Key Detail—Identifying a detail that appears at some key juncture of the plot and bears a causal relationship to what happens.
Example: Where did Coyotito sleep?

3. Stated Relationship—Identifying a statement that explains the relationship between at least two pieces of information in the text.
Example: What was the beggars' reason for following Kino and Juana to the doctor's house?

Inferential Level of Comprehension

4. Simple Implied Relationship—Inferring the relationship between two pieces of information usually closely juxtaposed in the text.
Example: What were Kino's feelings about the pearls he offers the doctor? Explain how you know.

5. Complex Implied Relationship—Inferring the relationship(s) among many pieces of information spread throughout large parts of the text. A question of this type might concern, for example, the causes of character change. This would involve relating details of personality before and after a change and inferring the causes of the change from the same details and intervening events.
Example: In this chapter, Kino appears at home and in town. He feels and acts differently in these two places. Part of the difference is the result of what happened to Coyotito. Part is the result of other things. (a) What are the differences between the way Kino acts and feels at home and in town? (b) Apart from what happened to Coyotito, explain the causes of those differences.

6. Author's generalization—Inferring a generalization about the world outside of the work from the fabric of the work as a whole. These ques-

tions demand a statement of what the work suggests about human nature or the human condition as it exists outside the text.
Example: What comment or generalization does the chapter make on the way "civilization" influences human behavior and attitudes? Give evidence from the story to support your answer.

7. Structural Generalization—Generalizing about how parts of the work operate together to achieve certain effects. To belong properly to this category, a question must first require the reader to generalize about the arrangement of certain parts of a work. Second, it must require an explanation of how those parts work in achieving certain effects.
Example: Steinbeck presents a group of beggars in the story. (a) Explain what purposes they serve in relationship to the first eleven paragraphs of the story. (b) Present evidence from the story to support your answer.

In designing questions for these skill types, it is important to note that a question must be classified as a skill type in conjunction with the text from which it is derived. For example, if *The Pearl* contained explicit statements telling how and why Kino acted differently at home and in town, question five could not be classified as a complex implied relationship question. For the same reason, for a fable with an explicitly stated moral, a question that asks what the fable shows about human nature could not be considered an author's generalization question if a literal statement of the moral provides a satisfactory answer to the question.

The Hillocks and Ludlow Study

In Hillocks and Ludlow's study, sets of questions, including the one previously cited, for four different stories were administered to students from ninth grade to graduate school. The number of students responding to each question set ranged from seventy-seven to one-hundred-twenty-seven. Student scores were analyzed to determine hierarchical and taxonomical relationships of items on the individual tests using a form of the Rasch psychometric model known as the ordered categories model (Wright & Masters, 1982; Wright, Masters, & Ludlow, 1981), which considers partial and full credit. The results of the statistical analysis strongly support the hypotheses of the study: that the items are hierarchical and taxonomically related to each other. In other words, the question types are arranged from easiest to most complex, and the question types are taxonomical—readers will tend not to be able to answer question seven if they could not answer question six, or not be able to answer questions five, six, or seven if they could not answer question four, and so forth.

Some Implications of the Hillocks Taxonomy

Hillocks's taxonomy helps us not only to identify some of the complex skills involved in interpreting fiction but also to design instruction to help students master these skills. The results of Hillocks and Ludlow's study indicate the need to work hierarchically in helping students understand literature at higher levels. The teacher can use the question types to construct inventories (diagnostic tests or tools) to evaluate the skills of individual students and classes. For example, a teacher might have students read Chapter 1 of Steinbeck's *The Pearl* (or one of the short stories Hillocks and Ludlow use in their study) and answer the questions Hillocks and Ludlow developed for each of the question types. Or she might use the taxonomy to develop a set of questions for a chapter from another novel or short story. After evaluating students' responses to the questions and determining at what level students can work comfortably in interpreting literature in general, she can design instruction to guide her students in dealing with the next higher levels.

Working hierarchically is necessary. For example, if we want students to understand the author's generalizations in a given work, we need to be sure that they first understand the lower level relationships (Hillocks & Ludlow, 1984). But Hillocks warns that working at two or more levels above student competence is likely to result in failure to comprehend, frustration, and hostility toward literature. Although this taxonomy admittedly does not include all possible types of questions, it provides a basis for gauging what level of skill is required by specific questions and composition assignments. Also, it provides a framework for developing discussion questions and composition assignments appropriate for the level of a particular class.

Using the Taxonomy as a Framework for Instruction

Some authorities are wary of questioning hierarchies. For example, Christenbury and Kelly (1983) are wary of questioning hierarchies because of the way "many questioning schemata have been abused and have become prescriptions rather than suggestions or guidelines" (p. 5). Alexander, Jetton, Kulikowich, and Woehler (1994) warn that any taxonomy can be misleading and even dangerous. They maintain that teachers think they must always ask one question from each category and that teachers often ask unrelated questions without considering that the questions should point to important and related content. These are, of course, important caveats. Working with a hierarchy should not be done in an inflexible way that suppresses responses that do not follow a prescribed pattern.

Even though some have expressed concerns about using taxonomies, McCann, Johannessen, Kahn, and Flanagan (2006) note that several taxonomies have influenced educators in expressing instructional goals and have aided teachers in developing questions to focus reading and to prompt discussion. They present and discuss taxonomies developed by Bloom (1956) and Pearson and Johnson (1978), as well as Hillocks. McCann et al. (2006, p. 103) then examine important similarities (see Figure 1.1).

The three taxonomies, Pearson and Johnson (1978), Bloom (1956), and Hillocks and Ludlow (1984), are similar in that all three share levels that seem to correlate to three levels of comprehension: literal or explicit information, textually implicit information, and scriptally implicit information or generalizations from the text to the world beyond the text. As McCann et al. (2006) point out, "No matter how one conceives of the levels of difficulty in comprehension and different levels of question types, it is important for teachers to recognize that the different levels exist" (p. 102). This has important implications for planning instruction designed to help students learn to interpret and write about literature.

The Hillocks Taxonomy and Vygotsky

Assessing students' levels of competence on the reading hierarchy and then designing activities and questions that will enable them to reach the next higher levels is consistent with Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) defines his concept as the distance between a child's "actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving" and his or her higher level of "potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Although Vygotsky's ideas originally were developed with respect to instruction leading to psychological development, many others (e.g., Bruner, 1962; Wells, 2000; Smagorinsky & Fry, 1993; Hedegaard, 2005) have seen the implications and applications for pedagogic theory and practice. In fact, in his review of research regarding middle and high school composition from 1984–2003, Hillocks (2006) notes a decided shift from educational researchers' reliance on the developmental theories of Piaget in the 1960s and 1970s to those of Vygotsky in the final decades of the century. Hillocks states that "Vygotsky (1978) makes a strong case that 'learning results in mental development' and makes development possible (p. 90)" (p. 49). Noting this, Hillocks identifies the teacher's task as "not one of waiting for the learner to develop and for learning to appear

HILLOCKS AND LUDLOW (1984)	BLOOM (1956)	PEARSON AND JOHNSON (1978)
Basic Stated Information: Identifying frequently stated information that represents some condition crucial to the story.	**Knowledge:** Bringing to mind specifics, methods, patterns, structures, or settings.	**Textually Explicit:** Dealing with obvious answers that are "right there in the text."
Key Detail: Identifying a detail that appears at some key juncture of the plot and that bears a causal relationship to what happens in a narrative.		
Stated Relationship: Identifying a statement that explains the relationship between at least two pieces of information in the text.	**Comprehension:** Summarizing, paraphrasing, interpreting facts, as opposed to just recalling them.	
Simple Implied Relationship: Inferring the relationship between two pieces of information usually closely juxtaposed in the text.	**Application:** Using abstractions (such as rules of procedure, generalized ideas, or methods) in particular and concrete situations.	**Textually Implicit:** Dealing with a level of comprehension in that there is at least one step of logical or pragmatic inferring necessary to get from the question to the response and both the question and the response are derived from the text.
Complex Implied Relationship: Inferring the relationship among many pieces of information spread throughout large parts of the text.	**Analysis:** Clarifying the basis for an arrangement of a communication.	
Author's Generalization: Inferring a generalization about the world outside the work from the fabric of the work as a whole.	**Synthesis:** Putting together, arranging and combining pieces of data in such a way as to have a structure or pattern not clearly there before.	**"Scriptally" Implicit** Dealing with a level of comprehension in which the data base for the inference is in the reader's mind, not just on the page.
Structural Generalization: Generalizing about how parts of the work operate together to achieve certain effects.	**Evaluation:** Judging the value of materials and methods for a given purpose or purposes.	

Figure 1.1. Three Taxonomies

naturally, but of finding ways to promote learning in the zone of what the student is capable of doing with help so that development takes place" (p. 49).

Among the pedagogic ideas drawn from Vygotsky's research is instructional scaffolding. In his introduction to *Introduction to Vygotsky*, Harry Daniels (2005) cites Vygotsky within his explanation of scaffolding: "The scaffolding interpretation is one in which a distinction is made between support for the initial performance of tasks and subsequent performance without assistance: 'the distance between problem-solving abilities exhibited by a learner working alone and that learner's problem-solving abilities when assisted by or collaborating with more-experienced people' (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)" (p. 6). If the goal of reading and literary instruction is to develop students' abilities to comprehend increasingly complex and sophisticated texts independently, then Hillocks's reading hierarchy provides a framework for both assessing students' current abilities and designing instruction that will enable them to move forward at a challenging yet appropriate level.

Writing to Express Interpretations

Although Hillocks's question sets were not used to evaluate writing *per se*, the questions at levels five, six, and seven are typical of composition assignments often given to students. Questions at these levels are complex enough to generate lengthy compositions. In Hillocks and Ludlow's (1984) study, good answers for, say, a complex implied relationship question usually ranged from two to five sentences. The following is an answer to the question about how and why Kino acts and feels differently at home and in town. In the study this answer was rated as "good." (Answers were rated either "wrong," "partly right," or "good.")

> At home Kino feels comfortable, secure, and peaceful (that is until the scorpion stings Coyotito). In town he is nervous and afraid. The difference is caused by the bad way the townspeople have treated his race. They treat his race like animals. He is afraid of their power over his people but also angry that they have this power.

What is needed to expand this kind of response into an effective essay? Toulmin's (1958) and Toulmin, Rieke, and Janik's (1984) analyses of argument help answer this question. A response to a complex implied relationship, author's generalization, or structural generalization question is an argument in the sense that the writer is attempting to convince a reader that his conclusions about the text are accurate. Toulmin identifies three basic parts of an effective argument—claim, data, and warrant.

The *claim* is the conclusion (or generalization) that is advanced; the *data* are the evidence or the specific details presented in support of the conclusion; and the *warrant* is the explanation of why the data justify the claim or, in other words, authorization for the "leap" from the data to the claim.

An analysis of the previous answer in Toulmin's terms reveals that it is basically a series of claims that could be elaborated with data and warrant(s). An effective composition on this question would perhaps begin with the ideas presented in the previous answer as a series of claims to be argued (the "thesis"), and the body of the composition would present evidence and warrants for each of the claims. For the first claim, for instance, "At home Kino feels comfortable, secure, and peaceful," evidence might include quotations from the novel such as, "Kino heard the little splash of morning waves on the beach. It was very good—Kino closed his eyes again to listen to his music" (pp. 1–2). At another point, the novel states that as Juana ate her breakfast, "Kino sighed with satisfaction" (p. 4). The music or family song Kino hears at home is described as "an aching chord that caught the throat, saying this is safety, this is warmth, this is the *Whole*" (p. 3).

This kind of analysis reveals some skills in addition to those suggested by the taxonomy that students need in order to write effective essays interpreting complex implied relationships, author's generalizations, and structural generalizations. They must identify their claims, find supporting evidence for each, organize their evidence, smoothly incorporate evidence in their papers, and explain how their evidence justifies the claims. As the National Commission on Writing in American Schools and Colleges (2003), NAEP (NCES 2005), and our experience in the classroom suggest, students have difficulty with these skills. Furthermore, being able to answer successfully a level five, six, or seven question in a short paragraph, such as the one previously for *The Pearl*, does not automatically mean that the student can write an effective argument on the question. Students may be able to make insightful claims but not be able to support those claims in a composition.

Often we have found that students use virtually no data at all, presenting claim after claim without any support. This makes a very weak composition even though some of the claims may be insightful. We've also found that sometimes our students state a claim (x), then present an extended summary of what happens in a story or novel, and conclude with the idea "all of this shows x." In this case they lose the focus of their argument with considerable irrelevant detail. This seems to be what many

teachers are frustrated about when they say that their students' writing is "plot summary" rather than "analysis." Students developing their papers in this manner need to learn how to select and use appropriate evidence.

One of the greatest difficulties, even for competent writers, is providing warrants. How many times have we all heard our students tell us something such as, "But the evidence speaks for itself"? They assume that the leap from data to claim is obvious and that it is, therefore, not necessary to elaborate on the connection between the two. In some cases the relationship may be fairly obvious, but most often it is not. For example, a student writer might use as evidence of Kino's fear in town the fact that he removes his hat when he knocks at the door of the doctor's house. Without a warrant explaining why the writer concludes that removing his hat shows fear, the reader may not be convinced by this evidence. He may conclude the action shows respect or good upbringing instead of fear.

The difference between a good answer to a complex implied relationship question and a good composition of literary analysis suggests that whereas reading and writing may be "reflections of the same cognitive process" (Squire, 1983, p. 582), they also require a shift in focus for the student. Reading and responding to literature require students to focus on a topic (What do they know?), but writing a persuasive composition requires students to focus on a goal (What do they want to do with what they know?). In Squire's terms, the learner is *reconstructing* the structure and meaning of another writer in comprehending; whereas the learner is *constructing* meaning and developing ideas in composing. Flower and Hayes seem to agree with this concept of construction. As they note, "In composing, writers often work from the bottom of a tree [hierarchy] to more inclusive steps" (1977, p. 460). However, Flower and Hayes (1977) identify a problem at this point, "But, readers [of analytic prose] understand best when they have an overview, when they can see an idea structure from the top down" (p. 460). It is not enough then for the writer to *know* something from reading. The effective writer is aware of this shift in focus from what she knows to what she does with what she knows. She is aware of this difference between the manner in which she privately constructs a conclusion and the manner in which it is best presented to a reader who has not been privy to her thought processes. How can we design instruction to provide students with the kind of argument literacy they need to write compositions that are clear and convincing for readers?

What Works in Teaching Writing

What methods and approaches are most effective in helping middle and high school students learn to write well? Langer (2001) examines three groups of teachers in urban schools with diverse populations, some of which consistently beat the odds by helping students to higher achievement in English than socioeconomic data would predict. Langer (2001) finds that "all of the more successful teachers overtly taught their students strategies for organizing their thoughts and completing their tasks, whereas only 17 percent of the more typical teachers did so. The other 83 percent of the more typical teachers left such strategies implicit." For example, Langer (2001) indicates that "Most teachers in the higher performing schools share and discuss with students rubrics for evaluating performance; they also incorporate them into their ongoing instructional activities as a way to help their students develop an understanding of the components that contribute to a higher score" (p. 868). The higher-performing schools emphasized teaching procedures or metacognitive knowledge. However, Langer (2001) adds that "in more typical schools, instruction focused on the content or the skills, but not necessarily on providing students with procedural or metacognitive strategies" (p. 869).

Langer (2001) also finds that high-performing teachers create interactive, social contexts for learning. In schools that beat the odds,

> English learning and high literacy (the content as well as the skills) were treated as social activity, with depth and complexity of understanding and proficiency with conventions growing out of the shared cognition that emerges from interaction with present and imagined others. [The more typical classrooms] emphasized individual activity and individual thinking, with students tending to work alone or to interact primarily with the teacher. Even when group work occurred in such classrooms, the activity usually involved answering questions rather than engaging in substantive discussion from multiple perspectives. (p. 872)

Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003) and Nystrand (2006) report that a growing body of research reveals that discussion-based instruction, in the context of high academic demands, significantly enhances literacy achievement. Engagement in authentic or dialogic discussion—as opposed to recitation—resulted in enhanced reading comprehension and literacy skills. Fisher (2006) and Fisher and Frey (2003) found that instruction is most effective when it progresses from teacher-led modeling of procedures and strategies to small-group collaboration in which students practice the procedures and strategies to independent work in which students apply the procedures and strategies individually on

their own. Fisher argues that the most important—and most often neglected—part of this instructional process is the small-group collaboration in which students work together without the direct guidance of the teacher.

Hillocks (1986, 2006) reports that results of a meta-analysis of various approaches to teaching writing reveal that by far the most effective approaches "had clear objectives and emphasized strong interaction among students and the teacher about the focus of instruction" (2006, p. 70). The most effective instruction focused on teaching "task-specific procedural knowledge" and "inquiry, learning strategies for producing the content of specific writing tasks" (p. 70). The focus on inquiry was much more effective than focusing instruction on the study of models.

Furthermore, Hillocks found that focusing on task-specific procedural knowledge and inquiry is more effective than teaching what has been called "the writing process." A focus on the writing process generally involves students in learning techniques such as brainstorming, freewriting, mapping, and so forth to generate ideas for writing. Students frequently engage in peer response activities and in revising, editing, and publishing their writing. However, these general skills may not help students learn and practice the specific procedural knowledge involved in writing a literary analysis. As Smagorinsky and Smith (1992) explain, while some authorities claim that general knowledge is sufficient to guide all writing, others maintain that "the complexity and demands of particular tasks require more specialized knowledge" (p. 287). They go on to explain that because the knowledge that students must learn is "task-specific," the instruction needs to be "differentiated" and is "dependent on the particular demands of individual tasks" (1992, p. 288). Finally, Smagorinsky and Smith (1992) point out, "Pedagogy based on the assumption that composing knowledge is task-specific requires an analysis of the particular knowledge required for each type of composition and explicit instruction in the appropriate set of procedures" (p. 288).

In summary, approaches that are most effective focus on teaching students task-specific procedural knowledge and inquiry through scaffolding instruction so that students practice targeted strategies by engaging in activities that involve high levels of student collaboration and gradually increase the level of student independence. As Smith and Wilhelm (2006) explain, designing instruction that focuses on procedural knowledge and inquiry requires the following:

1. Identifying the knowledge experienced writers employ to write a particular kind of text, focusing especially on procedural knowledge;

2. Helping students develop the knowledge they need by provid-
   ing plenty of practice, focusing especially on meaningful social
   activity;

3. Moving students to independent application of the knowledge.
   (p. 128)

Research Using the Toulmin Model

Research involving instruction using the Toulmin model of argument
suggests its efficacy for writing instruction and improving writing. In his
review of middle and high school composition research from 1984–2003,
Hillocks (2006) reports on a study by McCann (1989) using the Toulmin
model of argument to examine sixth-, ninth-, and twelfth-grade students'
knowledge of and ability to make arguments in writing. In analyzing
students' writing in response to a prompt regarding whether students
could leave school for lunch, McCann found that students at all grade
levels included claims (reasons for support of the proposition) but that
"at all grade levels students had difficulty incorporating data or evidence
into their texts" (Hillocks, 2006, p. 71). McCann also asked students to
read and rank constructed passages of argument ranging from "carefully
developed passages with all parts of an argument to a passage with only
a narrative" (Hillocks, 2006, p. 71). Students at all three grade levels "rank
ordered the three most complete arguments as did the expert adults, in-
dicating that they are able to recognize [effective] arguments" (Hillocks,
2006, p. 71).

These findings suggest that writing effective arguments is within
students' zone of proximal development and that teaching students to
identify, assess, and incorporate data into their arguments would be use-
ful instructional steps. The significant results of two other studies
(Connor, 1990; and Yeh, 1998) highlighted by Hillocks (2006) provide
further strong support for using the Toulmin model for instructional
purposes: it helps teachers identify and focus instruction on the proce-
dural knowledge involved in developing an argument.

Formulas for Writing

Some teachers and researchers have argued that instruction focusing on
teaching formulas, such as the five-paragraph theme, tends to result in
shallow, formulaic writing (Hillocks, 2002). So wouldn't this problem also
result from focusing on the Toulmin template of claim, data, and war-
rant? One of our sophomore students once remarked about his confidence
in going ahead with an English assignment, "English papers I under-

stand: you've got your claim. Then, you've got your context, evidence, explanation; context, evidence, explanation."

There are differences, however, between the five-paragraph formula and Toulmin. The Toulmin model prompts students to develop certain kinds of content for their writing. For example, it prompts them to find evidence to support a claim and to identify the warrant that links the evidence to the claim. It prompts them to identify alternative explanations or opposing arguments and to address them. In contrast, the five-paragraph format, as Hillocks (2002) explains, typically asks students to state an opinion and then to "suggest reasons why they think their opinion is justified. These reasons are to be developed by adding other relevant sentences, but not necessarily evidence to support the asserted reasons" (p. 201).

In justifying the formats for argument that he gives his students, Gerald Graff (2003) asserts, "all communication is partly formulaic. Formulas can enable creativity and communication as often as they can stifle them. If we refuse to provide such formulas on the grounds that they are too prescriptive or that everything has to come from the students themselves, we just end up hiding the tools of success" (p. 11).

We use the Toulmin model to identify procedures that students need to learn in order to develop effective arguments and, in this case, effective arguments about literature. In other words, it helps us in doing a task analysis. The practice section includes instructional activities that are scaffolded to enable students to learn these procedures or strategies for generating arguments rather than merely to imitate a formula.

Why Task Analysis Is Important

As Smagorinsky and Smith (1992) indicate, each writing task involves task-specific knowledge, and if teachers want their students to learn the skills and subskills involved in writing an effective literary analysis, they will need to do a careful analysis, task analysis, of the skills and subskills involved in such tasks in order to plan effective instruction.

Literature texts provide a wide scope of readings, literary terms, and writing assignments. This scope allows teachers to select materials that are interesting to and appropriate for their students. In providing this breadth, however, textbooks, by their very nature, cannot provide the necessary depth required to set up effective writing about literature. Take, for example, a writing assignment presented after students read "The Cask of Amontillado" by Edgar Allan Poe in the *Holt Elements of Literature. Third Course* (Beers & Odell, 2005, p. 181). Students are asked

to assume that Montresor is arrested and that they are to write a speech for either the prosecution or the defense arguing that Montresor is either insane (defense attorney) or that he knew exactly what he was doing and planned the murder in advance (prosecutor). On the surface, this assignment has several advantages that make it attractive: a sense of "real world" application, a defined audience, and a clear point to argue. Teachers selecting this writing prompt might well assume that students would find this role-play engaging and fun.

Yet a closer look at the assignment suggests that students would need several important subskills and additional information in order to complete it successfully. To ensure that students move beyond such undeveloped and idiosyncratic definitions as the following, students would need much clearer definitions of the target terms used for either thesis.

> Montresor is insane because he murdered Fortunato. Murder is not a rational act.

> Montresor murdered Fortunato to avenge a perceived "insult." In this case, the punishment does not fit the crime, so Montresor is insane.

A legal insanity defense is based upon an absence of willful intent and awareness: the defendant "at the time of the commission of the acts constituting the offense" due to "severe mental disease or defect" was "unable to appreciate the nature and quality of the wrongfulness of his acts" (Insanity defense, 2006, 'Lectric Law Library online). Establishing insanity also rests upon two distinguishing criteria in this case: an inability to distinguish fantasy from reality and uncontrollable impulsive behavior. Thus, a student taking the defense attorney position would have three possible claims to prove: (1) Montresor was unable to distinguish whether his actions were right or wrong at the time of his crime. (2) Montresor was unable to distinguish fantasy from reality at the time of his crime. (3) Montresor's behavior at the time of his crime was uncontrolled and impulsive.

Conversely, the prosecuting attorney would need to prove: (1) Montresor was aware that his actions were wrong at the time of his crime. (2) Montresor was able to distinguish fantasy from reality at the time of his crime. (3) Montresor's actions demonstrate planning and intent. To be effective, each of these claims would need supporting evidence [direct quotes] from the text and explanations showing how the evidence supports the claim. At the very highest level of response, the prosecution or defense also would take into account the arguments of the opposition. In fact, a close reading of "The Cask of Amontillado" suggests

that a defense of insanity would be very hard to mount. Thus, there is little or no controversy inherent within this assignment.

Looking more fully at what students are being asked to do in "The Cask of Amontillado" assignment, teachers may wish to give students additional information (for example, the criteria for establishing insanity), to modify the assignment (perhaps asking students to take the role of the prosecuting attorney but to identify and refute possible evidence for the defense), or to have students work on specific aspects of the assignment (for example, an activity in which students identify which criterion for sanity Montresor's "putting on a mask of black silk" [p. 175] supports and explain how this textual evidence proves it).

Teachers want to read good papers and want students to succeed in assigned tasks. In order to do this, we need more than engaging assignments. We need to analyze the final product that we are asking students to produce in order to identify the information and skills they need to execute it successfully. Such task analysis lies at the center of purposeful rhetorical instruction. Furthermore, teachers need to assess which of these skills students already have and which they need to practice in order to complete the writing assignment successfully. Once again, we need to be aware of our students' zones of proximal development.

Such a task analysis approach is consistent with Wiggins and McTighe's (1998) concept of backward design. Wiggins and McTighe identify three stages in their backward design process: (1) identify the desired results [students' independent demonstration of acquired skills/ knowledge]; (2) determine acceptable evidence [task analysis: determine what skills and information students need to complete the assignment successfully]; and (3) plan learning experiences and instruction [assess students' current competencies and design activities and instruction to give students expertise in new areas].

Principles of Sequencing and Activity Design

In designing the instruction in the Practice section, we used the following principles of sequencing and activity design derived from the theory and research findings previously presented.

1. The activities move from the kinds of interpretations with which students are more comfortable (making simple inferences) to those that are more difficult or challenging for them (interpreting complex implied relationships and author's generalizations).

2. The activities focus on helping students learn procedural knowledge

that will enable them to turn their understanding of literature into what some call analytic, persuasive writing and others call argument. Students practice stating a position or viewpoint, collecting evidence to support their position, evaluating their evidence, and articulating the relationship between their evidence and their claims. They learn to anticipate objections to their interpretations and respond to the objections.

3. The activity sequences involve high levels of collaboration and student interaction, moving from teacher-led discussion to small group collaboration to independent work.

4. The activity sequences provide scaffolding for students so that they have more support from the teacher and from teacher-designed materials in the early stages of learning a procedure. The activities and sequences gradually reduce the amount of support and become more open-ended.

5. The activities are designed to capture student interest and engagement—to pose interpretive problems that will be intriguing to students. Introductory activities are close to student experiences and are designed to elicit students' opinions and prior knowledge and to "hook" students on some of the key concepts on which the literature will focus.

6. The activities focus on knowledge of form when students have developed the procedural knowledge necessary to generate substance or content.

The activities explained in the Practice section are intended to serve as a model for activity design and sequencing that teachers can follow in creating materials to meet the needs and interests of their own students. We present the activities as they would be used with specific literary works in order to illustrate the procedures and classroom dynamics. We have chosen literary works and authors that are widely used in secondary-level English curricula and that represent various genres, cultures, and levels of sophistication. The sequences are designed to help students interpret literature at higher levels and write effective compositions expressing their interpretations. We are not, however, suggesting that the activities we present comprise a complete instructional unit for the literature included. We would expect them to be part of the instruction (such as study guides, vocabulary activities, media presentations, role-playing, oral presentations, productions, projects, and so forth) designed to guide students in understanding each work as a whole.

Writing
about Literature
2nd Edition, Revised and Updated

Literary analysis and well-honed analytical writing skills are crucial for student success—in English class as well as on writing assessments and in other content area classes. Unfortunately, these skills are often taught separately from one another and students have a hard time making the connections between the two.

Drawing on years of real classroom experience, this follow-up to NCTE's immensely popular *Writing about Literature* (1984) addresses the challenge many teachers face: How can we use writing assignments to deepen students' understanding of literature, while at the same time improve their writing, critical thinking, and analytical skills?

A Theory and Research into Practice (TRIP) book, *Writing about Literature, 2nd ed., Revised and Updated* seeks to answer this question by first providing an overview of the key components of theory and research—including assessment, literary interpretation, composition, sequencing, and activity design—and then offering an extensive selection of practical activities to help students learn how to interpret literature, write compelling arguments, and support those arguments using evidence from the text.

Specific activities include:

- Exploring role models from *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The House on Mango Street*
- Analyzing characters from "Everyday Use" and *Huckleberry Finn*
- Interpreting love themes from *Romeo and Juliet* and Shakespeare's sonnets

Featuring two dozen reproducible handouts and suggestions for adaptations, all of the activity sequences are designed to be used as a teaching tool—a model for teachers and students to use as they study other texts and types of literature.

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