

## LEARNING TO THINK AND TO WRITE: SEMANTICS IN FRESHMAN ENGLISH<sup>1</sup>

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### I

MOST students need Freshman English when they enter college, not, as is widely thought, because they need to learn the mechanics of writing (although some need this), but principally because they need a course in which to mull over, digest, and encompass the experience of their transition from their hometown, high-school culture to the wider culture of their college studies. Not all high schools or their products are provincial, to be sure, and not all colleges present a wider-than-hometown culture. Yet most students have the sense of entering a bigger world when they enter college. They are exhilarated by it—often troubled by it. Freshman English can be for these students, and perhaps should be for all, central to their growing up—a loosening of ties of their hometown evaluations and the discovery of their own intellectual powers.

I recall, from my days as a graduate assistant at the University of Wisconsin in the 1930's, a freshman English student from Dodgeville, which is not far from Taliesin, Frank Lloyd Wright's home and architectural headquarters near Spring Green. In my class my student learned for the first time that Mr. Wright was not merely (as she thought) a locally notorious crackpot who was the object of scandalized whisperings (all of which she believed), but a world-famous architect. I can still remember the astonishment in her face as she heard this news, and her excitement as she came in for conferences to announce that she had found *books* about Frank Lloyd Wright! She spent the next six or eight weeks survey-

<sup>1</sup> This article appears also in the current (February 1962) issue of *College Composition and Communication Journal*.

ing the literature about Mr. Wright and writing a term paper on his place in architectural history. That was when she ceased being a Dodgeville girl with Dodgeville evaluations.

I remember, too, a young man in the University of Wisconsin Extension at Manitowoc—a predominantly Catholic town—the kind of community in which there are the usual laws against gambling and the usual bingo games conducted by the Catholic Church. Somehow this student became deeply impressed during his Freshman English course with the importance of logic. He read the ordinances defining and forbidding gambling, decided that bingo came under the definition, and concluded that the Church was violating the law. A Catholic himself, it was hard for him to write down and stand by his conclusion, but he *was* persuaded of the importance of logic. This was his first venture in questioning that which his community took for granted—in thinking for himself. Certainly it was no turning point in the history of logic, but just as certainly it was a turning point in the history of this young man, who began thinking for himself about a number of things after this event.

## II

**T**HE REASON for my own enthusiasm for semantics in Freshman English is that I know of no other subject that gives students so effectively a sense of their own intellectual power—and a sense of both the pleasure and responsibility of using that power. Take the simple semantic distinction between a report and an inference.

REPORT: The car is weaving down the road.

INFERENCE: The driver is drunk.

REPORT: The Russian delegate proposed such-and-such at the U.N. assembly.

INFERENCE: The proposal is not serious, but intended only for propaganda effect.

REPORT: She does not often speak to her classmates.

INFERENCE: She is stuck up.

REPORT: It's been raining steadily for five days.

INFERENCE: The gods are angry.

The distinction is not a difficult one to make—it can be made by fifth-graders or high school students as well as by college freshmen.

Or take the equally elementary, but important, difference between statements of fact and statements of preference (judgments):

REPORT: Americans have the highest *per capita* income in the world.

JUDGMENT: The free enterprise system is the greatest economic system in the world.

Even if we give assent to both these propositions (syntactically so alike), the reason for agreeing with one is not the same as the reason for agreeing with the other. Hence, if we call both propositions "true," we are using the word in two different senses.

Or take another elementary semantic observation, namely, that that which is eloquently and impressively said is not necessarily meaningful.

Principles such as these generate intense excitement in the classroom. It is customary at early stages of semantic study to have students analyze newspaper editorials, advertisements, sermons, political speeches, in order to evaluate for themselves their reliability. I have often been amazed at the enthusiasm shown by students for exercises of this kind. Many of them feel that they are being taken behind the scenes for the first time to learn how opinion is generated and manipulated. One student telephoned me excitedly late one night to say, "Doc, I think I've got the idea. There's a story in the paper tonight, 'Communist-led guerrillas have captured such-and-such a village.' That the guerrillas have captured the village is a report. 'Communist-led' is an inference. Right, Doc?" And many students ask, semester after semester, "Why didn't they teach us this in high school?"

## III

I BELIEVE there is a good reason they were not taught semantics (or any other form of propaganda analysis) earlier. It is that we, as parents or teachers or both, rely profoundly on word-magic, the confusion of inferences and judgments with reports, and the authority of lofty and unexplained abstractions in our attempts to control our children. Until the anxious years of high school are over for our children, most of us would rather not put into their hands such critical instruments as would enable them to expose as nonsense much of what we say to them. Hence, there cannot be much in the way of semantics, as a rule, until the college freshman year—the year when parents and teachers begin to be willing to treat the children as children no longer.

The freshman year, then, is a year of opportunity. Many colleges devote the major part of their attention in Freshman English to teaching all over again the mechanics of English, which the students have been drilled in (often to little effect) over and over again since grade school. The tragedy of this approach is not only the boredom and rebellion it incites in the students; it is the wasted opportunity.

The way to get students to think is to treat them as if they were capable of independent thought. The self-fulfilling prophecy will operate, and the students will start thinking. For many, the commencement of that thinking will be the sign by which they begin to know themselves as college students and therefore as adults.

It is impossible for students to be exposed to semantics without beginning to be critical and thoughtful. One begins, of course, by noticing the semantic shortcomings of others: "My father has a two-valued orientation," "I have an uncle who has a signal reaction at the mention of Mr. Truman," "I know a girl who shrieks on seeing the *picture* of a spider," "Joe is so hung up on words that he won't even look at the facts," and so on. But it is not long before self-insight begins to develop, and therefore self-criticism and self-correction: "Where *did* I get my views about labor (or Standard Oil)?"

"Do I believe what I am saying, or am I just parroting what I have heard?" "Is surrender the *only* alternative to preparing for a thermonuclear showdown?" "I keep telling myself I'm not good at math. Is this what keeps me from doing well in math?"

## IV

FRESHMAN ENGLISH should be, in some important respects, like group psychotherapy. In both Freshman English and therapy, the aim is to integrate conflicting feelings and purposes (even the apparent lack of purpose is a symptom of purposes not integrated), to come to terms with challenging realities, to acquire self-insight and therefore to grow in one's capacity to understand and handle problems. In both, a relaxed and permissive atmosphere is desirable, because one acquires self-insight not by being pushed and harrassed (and the teacher's red pencil is a form of harrassment), but by being encouraged to try out one's ideas in discussions or written themes in an environment free of the fear of censure. Hence skill in keeping a flow of communication going among students and between himself and students is essential to the Freshman English teacher, as it is to the leader of group therapy sessions.

But Freshman English is not psychotherapy; it has its own goals to pursue. What should its content be? Besides instruction in semantics, I believe there should be much reading—preferably a freshman anthology that the instructor himself enjoys and a stack of paperbacks. The readings should be varied—literature, science, criticism, sports writing, biography, news, public affairs—because the interests of students are varied, and one never knows what is going to strike a spark. Furthermore, the reading should include literature that enables the student to compare and contrast his own experiences in growing up with the experiences of others—books of analytic self-revelation varying in style and content from *The Way of All Flesh* to *Catcher in the Rye*. And reading should be treated not as a chore to be done, but a pleasure to look forward to after routine assignments are completed.

But most importantly, students are in Freshman English to learn to write, and all the reading that is done to stimulate the mind and imagination ultimately justifies itself, so far as this course is concerned, in the student's improved ability to write. The stimulation of intellectual curiosity, the re-evaluation of his own earlier experience, the heightening of perception—these are to give the student material to write about. The study of semantics and preoccupation with processes of communication—these will help him write more clearly and accurately.

Students often come to us from high school with a belief that instruction in English composition is almost entirely a matter of instruction in errors to avoid. The study of semantics, which includes among other things the consideration of the many modes of communication—science, history, directive language (including law, religion, and advertising), poetry—offers for many students almost their first experience with instruction in English as a body of positive guides to writing rather than a body of negative injunctions.

## V

**H**ow, then shall writing be taught? I am just about coming to the conclusion that it should not be taught at all. I believe that instruction in grammar, spelling, sentence structure, paragraphing and such should be abandoned in Freshman English. The students should be told that the lid is off, that they can write and spell and punctuate any damn way they please—but that they must write daily and copiously.

A favorite exercise of mine (the idea comes from Paul Eluard and the surrealist poets) is to give students a specified period—say fifteen or twenty minutes—and tell them to write rapidly and continuously for that length of time, without pausing, without taking thought, without revising, without taking pen from paper. If the student runs out of things to say, he is to write the last words he wrote over and over again over and over again over and over again until he can find other things to say. The papers are to be turned in unsigned—unless the student feels like signing it.

Of course, the teacher cannot read all that the students write in this way, because he is going to give this assignment daily with instructions also to do similar half-hour exercises at home. But he can read enough samples to find things to comment favorably on, to assess what improvement is being made (and there will be tremendous improvement with about the third or fourth exercise). To some extent, too, students will enjoy reading each other's papers. When students sign their papers, which is a request that the instructor read them, he will of course do so.

The reactions of students to this kind of exercise are often extremely rewarding. The most common one is, "I didn't know I could write!" It is also surprising how many students want the instructor to read their hastily-written, unedited stuff. It is as if they were saying (as they cannot say about their laboriously written assigned themes), "This is I—this is what I am like—*please* read it." In a matter of weeks, student writings, at first so labored and self-conscious, become fluid, expressive, and resonant with the rhythms of the spoken American language.

Students find subject matter in this way, too, because they write down things that they would not have written in pre-meditated themes, and discover that some of it is literary material. Frequently, having touched upon a subject in their impromptu papers and found it interesting, students will explore the same subject more deeply later, in carefully rewritten and revised papers.

Of course, these exercises in spontaneity are not the whole of freshman composition in my view, but they provide the release and establish the self-confidence in students that enable them to approach their more formal writings assignments with fewer inhibitions, fewer anxieties. Teachers who have not tried such an approach as this are earnestly entreated not to argue against this exercise on *a priori* grounds, but to try it, because I am sure they will be as amazed by the results as I was.

So that's my formula for Freshman English: semantics, to induce a heightened awareness of language and its many