

Against a New Ignorance and a New Forgetting

This is a slightly revised article that was published in the Spring, 1979 issue of the *Washington English Journal*. It is a condensation and revision of a talk, “Basic Skills; Or, Need Basics Kill?” presented to a conference of The Washington English Association in the Tri-Cities in Washington state in, as I recall, 1978. It deals with basic skills and the state’s promotion of spelled-out student learning objectives.

In our current flurry of self-analysis and accountability we must be careful that we do not ignore things about the teaching of writing that are deep and substantial and important – but hard to see. We do not want to ignore these things in our enthusiasm for superficialities, even important superficialities, that tempt us because, lying on the surface as superficialities do, they are much easier to see, and count, and thus be accountable for. Also, in this self-analytical flurry we do not want to make the mistake of forgetting certain things that we have learned in recent years about how we ought to do our job as writing teachers. We do not want to forget to check for the baby there in the bath water. And finally we must not forget that the process of writing, like any process, has different stages and phases, each of which makes different demands of the student writer, and each of which thus entails different basic skills. Because the basic skills of writing are so many and varied, it follows that a list of student learning objectives and any test used to evaluate student progress in terms of those objectives must be sophisticated and varied, too.

When we get back to basic skills, we want to be sure the skills we are getting back to really are basic. Not too surprisingly, the really deep basics, the foundation skills, are down in the basement. They are not up front – not in the facade. Things in the facade are easier to see, and thus easier to count – and thus easier to be held accountable for. But things in

the basement, hidden deep in the dark, are harder to account for. Facades are thin, superficial, even temporary, but basements sit down in the firm foundation – substantial, deep, permanent. We don't want to focus so much on things of the facade that ignore those deep in the basement.

Now although things of the facade are superficial, we can grant that there are such things as important superficialities. Some things right there on the surface can be very, very important. There is much to be said for the saving virtues of varnish. But still, there are signs that in our new move to accountability and basics we are worrying so much about cosmetic surfaces, so much about things that are obvious and superficial, that we are ignoring things that are deeper, more substantial, but harder to see – and count.

The following seem to me to be some examples of how we are worrying more about important superficialities than about the deeper basics, more about varnish than foundations.

We have begun systematically testing the arts of language in terms of standardized superficialities. Take spelling, for instance. Now please understand: I believe that spelling is very important and that it can, and should, be treated as a deep and basic skill. But the way we are addressing ourselves to it renders it superficial. Spelling involves the ability to produce spellings as one writes and the ability to recognize both correct and incorrect spellings as one reads. Our standardized tests worry typically only about the latter – the proofreading skills. Then they worry only about whether a spelling is right or wrong. These tests say nothing about how right or wrong. They say nothing about **why** a spelling is right or wrong. They speak only about **if** it is right or wrong. So far as these tests are concerned, the student who thinks the word *enough* should be spelled <enough>' is just as “wrong” as the one who chooses <inuf> – in spite of

the fact that there are worlds of difference between what the two misspellings tell us about the skills of the two spellers. So we take a basic skill and by restricting our concern to matters of proofreading and correctness we render it superficial (though still important). And then we trivialize it in our testing procedure by using a notion of right and wrong that has all the subtlety of a wrecking ball. On the basis of this trivialization of a superficiality, we get all excited about “basic skills” and run looking for the varnish can.

Too many of our students cannot spell very well. Working in an Academic Skills Center at a small regional university teaches you that pretty fast. I teach one or two remedial spelling classes at Central every quarter. And in a lot of ways it is pretty pathetic. Those students simply have not learned how to spell. Whether anyone has really tried to teach them how, I can't know. But clearly they have not learned. The one thing they all have learned well is that they are rotten spellers. Language arts and English classes seem pretty universally to teach bad spellers that: that they can't spell. In fact, at the Academic Skills Center we work with hundreds of students each quarter, and what is most disturbing about them is not their rotten spelling, not even their comma splices and sentence fragments. No, not at all. What is most disturbing is the feeling so widespread among the students themselves that they are inarticulate, that their native language is something beyond them, even something foreign to them. To have been taught to be alienated from your native language is a serious thing.

The students' feelings of alienation is indeed a serious thing, a thing we should all be most concerned about. It is, I believe, a product of ignorance and guilt. The students are ignorant because they have not learned. And they feel guilt because everywhere they turn they are being reminded of their ignorance. They experience it in their classrooms. They read about it, assuming they read, in magazines and newspapers. They hear about it

on radio and television. The ignorance and guilt are crucial to any move to the basics. We have to do all we can to help the students out of their ignorance – but we have to do it in a way that does not add to their guilt. Only then can we bring them inside their language and their language inside them.

And we don't want to forget important things in our move to what we see as the basics. We should tally up what we have learned recently about doing our jobs. And we have learned some very important things! It is clear that in recent years in many ways American education has become more humanized and more democratic. At times, in the din and roar of the “new classroom,” that may seem to be at best a mixed blessing. I believe that it is a good thing anytime we can move towards democracy and away from fascism. It seems to me that we treat more people humanly and humanely in our schools today and that we show them how to treat one another, and themselves, more humanly and humanely. Surely these are good and important things.

Also, consider what has happened in the last decade or so to the teaching of composition: The influence of people like Ken Macrorie has been strong. Macrorie and Murray and Moffett – and more locally, people like Peter Elbow and Jim Sabol and (or at least so I would like to think) John Herum and me from Central – have talked much about how writing can and should help students formulate their own meanings and feelings. We have become more conscious of writing as an act of personal centering and organization.

We have learned that as students write, trying to clarify and express on paper their private meanings, they are in fact taking notions and feelings that are dim and jumbled and bringing more clarity, order, and power to them. We know that by expressing themselves, by writing it out, by using

the written language to convert dim and muddled thoughts into clearer and more orderly meanings, students begin to define their reality for themselves. We know that writing leads to stronger, more useful, more finished meanings in our students' minds. Writing helps them to become more sure of what their roles – and thus their importance – might be in the scheme of things.

These are all important and heady things – and we do not want to forget them in any accounting of the basics. One thing this more student-centered notion of writing does is to give the student a chance to worry about something other than being correct. I believe that this centering on the student is paying off in subtle ways. Here is one small example of this payoff. There is a freshman student working in the Academic Skills Center at Central. She is a black student. She entered Central through the Educational Opportunities Program. In her middle twenties she decided that she didn't like the direction her life was taking her. And so she decided to give college a try. Now that in itself is a marvelous thing. Just a few years ago such a decision would not have been possible for her. Now it is. She is in our Basic English class. In her very first paper we found out two things about her: First, she has massive language problems: sentence structure, conventions of usage and punctuation, spelling, lack of the old rhetorical virtues like unity and coherence. Grave problems. But the second thing we found out was the good news: The first step of the assignment was to write about 250 words of initial draft, which would be edited to a single paragraph of about 150 words. She drafted something like 600 words. She wrote about her job in a nursing home, what she did and how well, and why finally she hated the job. In a certain truly basic sense she was fluent, flowing. She was not at all bound up and abashed by the empty page, not at all alienated from her native language, or at least her version of her native language. That kind of fluency seems more typical of remedial students today than, say, fifteen years ago. Back then

the big problem was getting anything at all out of remedial students. Getting something, no matter how flawed, is far better than getting nothing at all. As we shall see in a couple of pages, that kind of un intimidated fluency is in itself a very basic basic skill. So there has been a gain, a good and important gain. And we want to be sure we do not forget it in our current accounting of things.

During this time of very valuable self-analysis and criticism, let us remember what we have learned in recent years. Let us not do anything that will cause us to ignore and forget this important learning. We have learned that the personal, the humane, the democratic are basic qualities in any good writing program. A flight to simplistic achievement tests bolstered with large doses of something like Warriner's grammar – with all of the concern for superficialities that such tests and texts entail – can cause us to forget this hard-won learning, can cause us to lose some hard-won gains. Such tests and texts can lead to a new ignorance and a new forgetting.

Another thing we have learned is that writing is a process. Our attention has broadened. Our emphasis is no longer just on the final product of writing; it is also on the process that leads to that product. It may be that we have so far done a not-so-good job of emphasizing the process and a much better job of de-emphasizing the product, which may account for some of the problems with those low SAT scores and all. But at least the move from product to process has begun, and it is an important and good move.

In order to see what basic skills are involved in that process of writing, we can take it apart. The writing process, like any process, is a string of events, changing through time. One way to take apart any string, or process, is simply to cut it into shorter segments. We have found it useful

over the years to cut the process of writing up in just that way. Specifically, we like to cut it into three shorter stages that we call *drafting*, *editing*, and *publishing*. Drafting is the earliest stage; editing comes next; and publishing, or preparing the final text, comes last. Admittedly the divisions between these stages are not neat and smooth. It is more as if the string had been torn into three pieces, with jagged and raggedy ends. But the fact remains that you can divide the process of writing handily into these three shorter stages: drafting, editing, and publishing.

In the first stage, the drafting stage, students simply put down on paper the beginnings of their ideas. They are involved simply in expressing themselves, pressing out what is inside their minds, getting it outside – in any form: telegraphic notes, lists of words and phrases, little sketches and diagrams, disjointed – even “incorrect” – sentences. At times it may come out as fairly long pieces of smooth and unified writing. But however it comes out, when students are drafting, they are simply trying to find their own private voices, trying to express themselves, trying to get what is inside them outside.

In the second stage of the writing process, the editing stage, students take their private draft and begin to treat it as a social thing, to treat it as something to be communicated to another person. As they edit, the student writers discover, for instance, what they have said in their drafting. Drafting is a kind of exploration; editing is a kind of discovery. When students draft, they explore their private meanings. When they edit, they discover which of those private meanings to communicate, which to make into social meanings.

In the third stage the student writers make public and more or less permanent the meanings they have so far explored and discovered. In the third stage, the publishing stage, they prepare a text, a final public copy of

their meanings. Now – and not until now – must they be concerned with matters of surfaces and correctness.

A superficial notion of basic skills and how to test for them overemphasizes this third stage and its concern for correct surfaces. Such an overemphasis will render our writing classes superficial. We must avoid overemphasizing the skills of correctness at expense of the skills of exploration and discovery, the skills of drafting and editing.

Exploring your private meanings, discovering your social meanings, publishing your public meanings – these are the three stages of the writing process, each with a different set of basic skills. The skills not only differ from stage to stage, but those required of one stage actually can contradict those of others.

During the first, or drafting, stage, the basics are those skills and attitudes necessary to release the students' powers of expression. It is basic that they learn how to start and sustain a flow of words and ideas – no matter how muddled, how fuzzy, how rough, how ragged these words and ideas may at first be. It is basic that they learn how to keep their minds occupied with a topic long enough to produce the quantity of draft necessary to bring order and clarity to their ideas and feelings about that topic.

Once the students have learned drafting skills and have begun to acquire the habit of sustained expression, the basics for them become the problems of the second and editing stage. One basic of editing is to discover exactly what there is in those private explorations that should be put into some sort of social form. The students must learn to identify the recurrent topics in their draft and to condense and summarize their important ideas in clear and strong summary sentences. They must learn how to edit rough draft so that the thought it embodies is given a clear,

organized, and coherent form.

It is not until the students have mastered some of the basics of drafting and editing that they should be faced with the problems of a public text.

Surface correctness is not basic during the drafting stage. Indeed, during the private act of expression a concern for correctness can be a sterile, debilitating distraction. During the second or editing stage correctness might be moderately important, though certainly not yet basic. Correctness is really basic only when the students are finally making their texts permanent and public.

But it seems that when most people talk about basic skills nowadays, they are thinking in terms of just that final publishing stage and its preoccupation with correct surfaces and the final product.

Any analysis of basic skills that is going to get beyond the surface product must emphasize the skills involved in the earlier stages of the writing process. One clear and present danger of student learning objectives, accountability, and tests is that they can lead us to expend too much of our and our students' time – too much time spent too soon -- working on the skills of public correctness. We must be certain that students are given the training they need in the basics of the earlier stages. They need to work with drafting and editing; they need to learn how to explore their private meanings and discover their social meanings through the use of their written language.

We need to sit down and decide what we feel is really basic in each of those three stages. Then we need to write objectives as best we can for the different basic skills in the three different stages. And we must not get too upset if we find that the basics in one stage run counter to those in another. For instance, the openness and momentum of thought that are

desirable while drafting run quite counter to the care and downright prissiness that are desirable to proofreading in the publishing stage. We need, finally, to figure out how this rich and varied array of basic skills can be tested for – really tested for – in a way that gets beyond facades and varnish.

So far we have cut that string representing the process of writing into three pieces: the three stages – drafting, editing, publishing. But there is more than one way to take apart a process – or a string, for that matter. Rather than cutting it into shorter pieces, you can unravel it, untwisting the strands that run through its length. When you unravel a process this way, you are not analyzing it into shorter stages; you are analyzing it into simpler phases. A stage is a shorter piece cut from a longer process; a phase is a simpler strand that runs through the process. This analysis into the phases of writing is very useful when you are trying to decide what skills really are basic. For there are certain phases, or strands, that run through the entire process, changing form from one stage to another.

Consider, for instance, grammar--that is, the study of the structure of phrases, clauses, and sentences. Grammar is an important phase of the writing process, but its role as a basic skill, the way in which it is basic, changes radically from one stage to the next.

Grammar can be important to the drafting stage in a number of ways. For instance, the major concern during early drafting is to get some ideas down, maybe sentences, maybe just lists of words and phrases. You can use a variation of the reading teacher's cloze sentence technique to help the students generate new ideas. One way is to let your topic play the role of subject in a cloze sentence – that is, a sentence with a blank in it. For instance, if our topic was “my '69 Fiat Spider,” we could set up a cloze sentence with that topic as the subject plus the verb *is* – like this: “My Fiat

Spider is _____.” And then we could simply list words and phrases that fill in the blank: “My ‘69 Fiat Spider is bright orange / very quick / temperamental / hard to start on cold mornings,” and so on. Though it may seem too easy, this is an important kind of drafting. Then we can change the verb *is* to *has* : “My ‘69 Fiat Spider has _____: “a five-speed transmission / dual overhead camshafts (newly replaced) / a choke that sticks / an over-priced electric pneumatic horn that doesn't blow,” and so on. Then we can change the cloze sentence so our blank includes part of the verb and the rest of the predicate: “My ‘69 Fiat Spider can _____: “go very fast / corner like a snake / keep a mechanic busy full-time/go through oil at an unbelievable rate.”

We can also try the topic elsewhere in the cloze sentence. For instance, instead of subject, it could be direct object, leaving both the subject and verb slots blank: “ _____ my ‘69 Fiat Spider.” Two blanks – a subject and a verb, which leads to “My daughter Jody likes my Fiat Spider (and so do her girlfriends) – or “My wife does not understand my Fiat.” And even “My wife hates my Fiat.” And “Our mechanic does not understand my Fiat either-- and probably hates it to boot.” Notice that that pattern begins to generate not so much details as beginnings for little stories.

Or how about my Fiat as indirect object? “ _____ my Fiat _____”
Three blanks – a subject, a verb, and a direct object. “We feed my Fiat oil.” “Jody gives my Fiat tender loving care.” “Our mechanic gives my Fiat puzzled and out-raged looks.” “I try to give my Fiat the benefit of the doubt.”

This way of playing with the grammar of sentences – something like “applied parts-of-speech” – can be fun. It can help make the parts of speech a more immediate and useful concept. And it generates ideas and words, which is, after all, what is really basic to the drafting stage.

In the editing stage the grammatical phase plays a different role. When they are editing, students have to begin to worry about putting their ideas together in ways that are clear and orderly. Obviously this is a big area, but here is one for-instance. In English there is a very powerful norm that says that in normal sentences there is a certain amount of information that is old and a certain amount that is new. And, says that norm, the old information should come early in most sentences, and the new information should come later. During the early drafting stage it is common for sentences to get written backwards. For one thing, writers tend to start out sentences with what interests them, so they often start out talking about something new – and then they tack the old information on the end, rather like an afterthought. These awkward sentences are to be expected in the early draft. They can even be encouraged: **Any** kind of sentence should be encouraged during early drafting! But these backward sentences need to be revised for the readers, who expect old information early in the sentence and new information later – and who must get that pattern if they are to get a sense of coherent form in the writing. So one grammatical skill involves knowing how and when to invert sentences and rearrange them so that the old information gets shifted to the front. Students need to know how to manipulate the grammar of their sentences so as to front-shift the old information. They need to know something about the unfairly maligned passive voice and the unfortunately-named expletive, two useful devices for front-shifting. They need to know something about the many and marvelous choices that English grammar allows when they string words into sentences. The skills learned in sentence-combining exercises can be a powerful use of grammar in the editing stage. Grammar becomes a look at all the nifty things you can do with a sentence, rather than a list of things that you are supposed not to do.

In the third, publishing, stage grammar plays even yet different roles. Here,

as we've said before, the emphasis must shift to more superficial, but very important, matters of stylistic polish and correctness. All the old grammatical verities come into play now: how to punctuate complex sentences and non-restrictive modifiers, how to distinguish between coordinating conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs and how to punctuate accordingly. And the role of the grammatical phase in the basic skills of writing has changed again.

So there, quickly and in brief, is an example of how one phase, the grammatical phase, strands its way through the process of writing, changing always the way in which it is a basic skill. Well-written learning objectives ought to reflect this changing strand-like role. Well-written tests should account for it.

Grammar is the study of phrases, clauses, and sentences. The study of words is called lexicology. In recent years my work with spelling has turned me into something of a fanatic about how much we have underestimated the importance of lexicology in the writing curriculum. One reason so many students know so little about spelling in particular is that they have learned so little about the structure of words in general.

The big textbook for lexicology is the dictionary. Consider how the roles of words and the dictionary change as we trace the lexical phase through the process of writing: In the drafting stage students can use the dictionary's different definitions to help get some control and precision in their use of abstract terms. A student writing on the topic of love, for instance, can learn much by pondering the seven or eight different definitions of the noun *love* given in a typical desk dictionary: "Which one or ones am I talking about? How can I give these different kinds of love names that really make clear what the different kinds are? What are the crucial differences among these different kinds of love? What are the crucial similarities among

them?" Such questions are essential during the drafting stage. And the entry in the dictionary, pondered carefully and well, can help students get answers to such questions.

In the editing stage the lexical phase – that is, the use of words and the dictionary – plays a different role. In this stage the search for just the right word often becomes crucial. The synonym studies and the etymologies in the dictionary can help students get at just the right word by helping them get control over nuance, overtone, and connotation.

In the publishing stage the lexical phase plays yet a different role: "How do you spell *pediatrician*? How do you syllabicate the word *myriad*? Should you capitalize *autumn*? Is there supposed to be a period in the middle of the abbreviation *PhD*?" These are the kinds of uses of the dictionary we are perhaps more used to. And important they are, but not until now, not until the third stage.

Much of the recent concern over and criticism of objectives, testing, and accountability seems to me to be well-intentioned and often wise, but badly aimed. We don't have to hide behind the smoke screen of academic ineffability. We do not have to argue that English teachers are the guardians of culture and humanity in order to show that current tests are at best inadequate samples of the total process of writing. Our analysis of basic skills must include all of the stages and phases, however we agree to analyze them out. We must recognize that the tests now being used – and too many of the textbooks that are available and are being wheeled in to bridge the basics gap – are overly preoccupied with just one stage, the third and last, publishing. What is more, these tests and texts are too often overly preoccupied with just one concern in that third stage – namely, matters of surface correctness. Such things are not bad as examples of basics; it is just that by themselves they ignore and forget too much. And if

we treat them as the whole of basic skills instead of a mere part or sample, then we will find ourselves varnishing the facade instead of checking and strengthening things down in the basement.

What it all comes down to is that the answer to the question of what the basic skills of writing are depends on one's analysis of the writing process. What are the stages in that process? What are the phases that we want to emphasize most and declare to be truly basic?

So far we've talked about two phases: the grammatical and the lexical. A reasonable question would be, "How many phases are there in the writing process?" And an honest answer would be, I'm not sure I know. But other than the grammatical and the lexical, there is surely one other phase – the rhetorical. The rhetorical phase deals with the relationship between the writer and the reader. And thus it is concerned with such questions as what is the purpose of the writing, how does the expected reader feel about the topic, how much does the reader already know. Such rhetorical considerations obviously affect the way you draft, but they affect most drastically the way you edit: What you choose to say, and how you choose to say it, and what you choose to leave out and why.

So we can be pretty sure about three phases – the grammatical, the lexical, and the rhetorical. There are two more I'm not yet so sure of. The first has to do with thinking and problem-solving; it can be called the cognitive phase. It involves operations like analysis, synthesis, seeing connections, perceiving, tracing out assumptions and implications, sorting and categorizing things, seeing patterns of sameness and patterns of difference – all the various cognitive operations.

The last phase about which I feel fairly certain deals with the writer's values and value judgements. In a certain sense it would not be too far off the

mark to call this the spiritual phase. But it can also be called the axiological phase, since axiology is the study of values and value judgments. The axiological phase, I believe, deals with the kinds of things that go on in values clarification work and in a more general way with the being-values identified by the psychologist Abraham Maslow – values like symmetry, wholeness, beauty, unity, diversity, individuality, truth, meaningfulness, and so on.

So there are five phases that I would suggest as a start for this analysis: the grammatical phase, which deals with phrases, clauses, and sentences; the lexical, which deals with words; the rhetorical, which deals with the relationship between writer and reader; the cognitive, which deals with ways of thinking and problem-solving; and the axiological, which deals with values and value judgements. But whether your analysis of the stages and phases agrees with mine or not isn't too important. What is important is that each teacher, or better, each little pod of teachers, sits down to decide what the stages and phases really seem to them to be. It's always more fun – and much more useful – to work out your own analysis.

But whatever our analysis, let us not ignore the early stages. For if we see the basics as all residing in that final publishing stage, then we will end up with an oversimplified analysis of the process. And we will end with an oversimplified set of basic skills, student learning objectives, and achievement tests. We will have achieved a deadly sort of superficiality – a new ignorance and a new forgetting.

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So now, at last, we are faced with the job of pulling all of this together – all of this talk of basics and superficialities, of basements and facades, of strings being cut and unraveled, of stages and phases, of skills and

objectives, of texts and tests. All need to be pulled together. When in a pinch, look for a poet. The British poet Robert Graves ended his *Collected Poems* with a poem called "Leaving the Rest Unsaid," and here are the final lines of this final poem:

So now, my solemn ones, leaving the rest unsaid,
Rising in air as on a gander's wing
At a careless comma,