

Hiring composition specialists

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One of the gravest threats to any writing program is the tendency of the profession to regard composition as a course that anyone can teach. We seem to inherit this attitude from our patrician past. Whatever its origin, and however relevant it may have once been, it is an attitude no longer appropriate to the needs of our profession. One of the most serious problems any writing program administrator or department chair faces today is hiring faculty who are truly competent to teach writing. And the problem is more than a practical one. It has a rhetorical aspect as well. If we do not challenge everywhere the tendency to hire poorly qualified faculty at low rank and salary to teach composition courses, we will continue to convey the message—to our higher administration, to our colleagues, and to our constituencies outside the institution—that composition teaching and research in related fields are, media propaganda notwithstanding, still relatively unimportant to a good college education.

But hiring highly qualified composition faculty, especially in a time of retrenchment, is a high risk enterprise. I would like to suggest a few ways to lessen that risk. The central questions are, What should a competent composition teacher know? and How can we tell whether he or she knows it?

Writing an effective ad. Perhaps the best place to begin a discussion of how to hire a competent composition person who will be both a teacher and a scholar is with the job advertisement itself. If we are seriously searching for the best trained person we can find, we must compose a precise description of the position and its requirements. The *MLA Guide for Job Candidates and Department Chairmen* (1975) gives the following advice: "describe the position in detail so that candidates will know whether or not their qualifications fit your needs" (page 19). The following is a typical example of the sort of advertisement to avoid. It is simply too vague:

Possible opening. Freshman and intermediate composition. Additional competence in technical writing or in screenwriting desirable. MA/ABD for instructorship, Ph.D for assistant professorship.

An advertisement like this one is bound to attract a host of minimally qualified candidates. A more specific description, like the one that follows, is more likely to draw only those whose qualifications at least come close to matching what is needed in a composition specialist. This means fewer letters to wade through and more letters and vitae received worthy of close scrutiny.

Composition specialist. To teach freshman and intermediate (expository) composition. Training or experience in reading (diagnostic and clinical), remedial writing or Garrison methods desirable.

Prefer Ph.D. specialist in composition with research direction for assistant professorship.

There are at least two clear differences between these two descriptions. The second spells out in unambiguous terms what the employer wants, which is not merely anyone to teach freshman English but rather a composition specialist. Then too, because the ad specifies research interest, the chances are reduced that desperate but unqualified people will apply. The specificity of the second description will also allow would-be candidates to infer that the department that placed this advertisement is indeed serious about composition.

Reading letters of application and vitae. Unhappily, even a clear, specific job advertisement is bound to be ignored by some candidates, so that the administrators of departments hiring composition staff for the next year must still expect hundreds of letters. Many of these will have been written by "closet" literature teachers trying to obtain positions as composition instructors. Now, I do not claim that either literary training or the prior teaching of literature automatically makes for an unhappy or incompetent teacher of composition. After all, most of us who teach composition today come from that very background. But it is also true that given the despair born of today's job market, many candidates who have no real interest or experience in teaching composition nevertheless try to persuade would-be employers of their total commitment to writing courses and writing research.

The strategies of these applicants are not unfamiliar to most of us who have had to wade through hundreds of letters of application. One strategy is to mention in the first paragraph of the letter of application the candidate's desire to teach freshman English exclusively, or if not freshman English, then intermediate composition, or if not that, then technical writing. Literature is mentioned in passing only briefly in the fifth paragraph of the letter as perhaps the candidate's third or fourth choice, welcome but reluctantly admitted to, only because the dissertation is likely to be on a literary subject. A second strategy is to list the candidate's experience teaching composition, experience which often turns out to have been teaching something called a freshman composition course in what really is a program in introduction to literature.

I do not want to seem cynical. But times are hard indeed, and they often breed desperate rhetorical strategies. Letters of application and vitae always are, or should be, carefully designed rhetorical pieces. They are all the more likely to be so today, since the times demand that applicants take a strong, persuasive stance. But for the same reason, readers ought to be on their guard. Applicants must make their best case; readers must decide how substantial that case is. How to cull the genuine composition applicant from that vast pile of letters would seem, then, a talent well worth developing, and, to that end, the *first step* is to *compare applicants' letters with their vitae* in order to ascertain whether or not the claims made by the letter are backed up in the vita. There are at least four areas in the candidate's vita itself that need to be scanned with care: 1. courses of study (some include this, others do not; if not, the full dossier must then be consulted); 2. the order of items in the section on teaching interests; 3. the section on publications and papers (this would include looking at research in progress and research pro-

jected for the future); and 4. the section detailing teaching experience.

1. *Courses of study.* I will have more to say about composition-related courses later, in discussing the dossier. For now, I will only say that many of the most attractive vitae list lots of independent reading, primarily because most dedicated composition students at the Ph.D. level have had to forge their own programs. This means that they have often had to *develop* their own courses as well.

2. The *order of items* in the section of the vita listing teaching interests can often be very revealing, particularly when it is compared with information found *in other* areas. Candidates usually list courses they would like to teach, roughly in the order of preference or strength of interest. If composition is not high on the list (quite literally!), then perhaps that candidate needs closer scrutiny.

3. On the other hand, if a candidate already shows a *research interest* in composition, by reading papers at meetings or by publishing articles, textbooks, and the like, the chances that such a candidate will prove to be genuine are obviously increased. Such a research interest is very important because it is extremely difficult for new staff members to publish consistently in an area other than the one they are to do the bulk of their teaching in.

4. The section of the vita that lists *teaching experience* must also be examined carefully, for it is not likely that a candidate without three or four years teaching experience in composition at the undergraduate level is going to know or care much about the subject or its clientele. Close attention to the kinds of composition courses taught is also necessary in order to make certain that what has been taught has been something more than a literature course. Care must be taken in weighing a candidate's claim to experience in advanced composition courses. We must beware, for instance, of a candidate's claim to have taught a technical writing course on a freshman or even sophomore level. Such a course is not likely to have been very substantial, because ordinarily a rigorous technical writing course can only be taught at a junior or senior level after the student has learned a technical discipline.

Perhaps some examples will clarify the generalizations I have been making. A section of a typically misleading vita might look like this:

Courses Taught	Teaching and Research Interests
Freshman Composition	British Fiction of the Nineteenth Century
Intermediate Composition	British Fiction of the Twentieth Century
Women and Literature	Women's Studies
American Literature Survey	Popular Culture Studies

In the letter accompanying this vita, the candidate wrote two long paragraphs on his composition experience and two short paragraphs, at the end of the letter, on his literary interests. But the vita revealed quite another set of priorities, a contradiction between what the composition job offers and what the candidate wants in his professional future. The teaching and research interests-and how crucial that word "interests" is-are at odds with the letter's emphasis and with the candidate's professed experience; nowhere in the list of interests is composition mentioned. We can only conclude that were this person to be hired for the

composition position, neither he nor his employers would remain content for long.

In contrast, another letter began by stating that the candidate was *an experienced teacher of writing*. The candidate backed that claim up with some specifics: "I am currently teaching a freshman writing course aimed at engineering and technology students and, in addition, a business communication course for juniors and seniors in the School of Management." The writer went on to provide some useful details about the courses she was teaching. She then concluded: "I have developed a course in technical writing.... This course was the product of six months of research during which time I consulted with many professional technical writers.... This research has also fed directly into my attempts to formulate a 'genre' theory of technical writing."

The promise explicit in this candidate's letter was reinforced rather than contradicted by the *vita*, where the candidate listed the following under "Teaching and Research Interests":

- Freshman Composition
- Business Communication
- Technical Writing
- ESL and the Problems of Native Speakers
- Rhetorical Theory

Particularly important here are the last two items. An interest in rhetorical theory shows at the very least that the candidate will probably have some sound basis for pursuing research in writing, especially in her genre work with technical writing. The item dealing with applied linguistics tells us that the candidate is aware of what linguistics can tell us about the applicability of ESL methods to the remediation of native speakers, an area of composition that even many veteran writing teachers know little about.

Formal training. The *second step* in evaluating applicants' materials is to *examine closely the formal training of the applicants whose letters and vitae have survived this initial comparison*. I do not want to say much about letters of recommendation. Obviously, if a composition applicant is serious, he or she will have at least one letter written by the director of rhetoric or freshman English. Such a letter should comment not only on the applicants' teaching ability but also upon his or her promise as a scholar of writing. If there is also a letter from a composition specialist with a national reputation, so much the better.

But I believe the main attention should be paid to the candidate's course work, for, short of the interview, it is here that we can tell whether or not the candidate has received basic training that will enable him or her to teach and to do research in composition. What courses should these be? What follows may seem like a slightly mad, impossibly idealistic recipe for a training program for composition specialists. It is in fact a composite list of what I have found in the dossiers of good composition candidates.

Among courses related directly to composition, we might hope to find the theory of modern rhetoric, theory of composition, classical rhetoric, the major practical approaches to composition, and perhaps modern persuasion theory. Among linguistics courses might be structure of the English language, non

standard dialects, psycholinguistics, and perhaps a course or two in teaching English as a second language. This last is important because of the increasing numbers of students at many institutions whose first language is not English, and of the value of applying ESL strategies in teaching native speakers.

In addition, a course in statistics and another in research design surely might be expected in the dossier of the composition specialist. Research in composition is often undertaken on a large scale where the practical knowledge drawn from such courses would be of great value. And because of its growing importance, not only in writing clinics or centers but also in regular composition courses themselves, we might also expect a course on teaching reading to appear in the dossiers of full-fledged writing specialists. Finally, due to the influence of such theorists as Vygotsky and Piaget and the more general bearing that studies in cognition appear to have upon composition, a course in cognitive psychology might also help.

I should point out, in closing, that the steps and strategies I have just outlined are predicated on the hiring practice of a large university, where teaching and research are of equal importance and where narrow specialization even in writing instruction is both possible and necessary. Obviously, not all I have said would be applicable to the hiring procedure in a two-year school or liberal arts college. The two-year writing teacher, for instance, certainly needs to have some of the training I have mentioned, but he or she will also undoubtedly require some additional competencies in, say, the diagnosis of language dysfunction and oral communication, which an instructor in a large university is not so likely to need.