

Every spring a new haystack; A method for the annual evaluation of new composition texts

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I. The Problem

For the publishers of composition textbooks, spring must arrive in a Chaucerian fashion, the drops of printer's ink piercing the financial drought of winter and producing sweet returns; but for the Writing Course Committees of English Departments which must evaluate those texts and select those that are most appropriate, April is decidedly Eliotesque, the cruelest month. At Loyola University of Chicago we have developed a system of evaluation that for five years has proved effective and enlightening. This system can be adapted to fit any size department and any departmental policy on textbook use, from one allowing free choice on the part of individual instructors to one that dictates which single text the whole department will use.

Each year we receive from publishers between 60 and 80 new texts (including the new editions of established texts), far too many for one person to examine effectively; however we do not trust written standards of evaluation enough to split the task between several people and expect consistent results. Through compromise and some surprising discoveries, we have fashioned a system that minimizes individual labor and greatly increases the chances of finding the best among the new texts. The commitment for each of our Committee members has averaged 12 hours, comprising three two-hour Committee meetings and six hours of preparatory work spread over four weeks.

II. The Committee

In our Department, composition courses are taught by all 35 full-time faculty, 35 part-time instructors and 20 teaching assistants. Of these people we choose seven for the committee: four faculty, two graduate students, and the Director of Writing Programs (who acts as chairperson). Seven seems to us just the right size: The work gets spread thinly enough so that no one person is overly burdened; enough votes are cast so that we can consider substantial majorities reliable; and yet there are few enough people to maintain close communication lines. The graduate student Teaching Assistants are especially valuable members since in general they have relied more heavily on texts than have the veteran faculty members and therefore tend to have stronger opinions and a greater diversity of insights. It helps to retain at least two faculty members from the previous year's Committee, for the more one participates in this process, the more adept and swifter one becomes at it. However, after three or four years on the Committee one

probably tires of reviewing large numbers of depressingly similar texts, and therefore regular rotation of Committee members seems a healthy practice.

We start the evaluation process in late March so that we can benefit from visiting the publishers' booths at the mid-March Conference on College Composition and Communication. By the end of April we are ready to announce our findings to the department.

III. Evaluating Rhetorics

We have three sources of information through which we become aware of new texts: (1) Advertisements mailed to us by the publishers; (2) visits from the publishers' representatives; and (3) visits to the publishers' booths at national conferences (CCCC, NCTE, and MLA). We request from the publishers four copies of each new rhetoric and of each new edition of an established rhetoric. Fewer than four copies prove insufficient to allow many members of the Committee to review the book within the few weeks available to us.

To each member of the Committee I send three or four different texts, accompanied by the same number of questionnaires. When members return the books and the completed forms, I respond by sending back three or four more immediately. I urge them to complete each of these tasks within three or four days, so that within a month's time each member can review between 20 and 30 books.

I keep two records, one of the books and another of the reviewers. The first allows me to check quickly how many times each book has been reviewed and by whom; the second shows me who has what books at the moment, which books each person has already completed, and whether someone is significantly ahead or behind the others in terms of the number of books covered.

I have found it essential to keep these records up to date, indeed, to the very minute; otherwise chaos threatens. No book leaves my office without being listed on both records, and books listed in the second record are check-marked as soon as they are returned with the completed questionnaires. It sometimes seems pesky busy work, but it turns out to be worth the effort.

The questionnaire is a simple one, allowing the reviewer opportunities to give both detailed comments and vague impressions. After identifying himself or herself, the author(s), the title of the book, and the type of the book (straight rhetoric, rhetoric-reader, rhetoric-handbook, etc.), the reviewer responds to the following questions:

- 1) How well do you think this book fits our course structure?
- 2) How would you describe its tone and pedagogical level?
- 3) What do you perceive to be its strong points?
- 4) What do you perceive to be its weak points?
- 5) Are there specific features about this book you find striking?
- 6) Would you recommend this book for inclusion on our department's list? (Answer "yes," "no," or "?.")

Since each text will be reviewed several times, I urge the Committee members not to spend more than 15-20 minutes per text. We have generated the following list of

concerns, which organizes the reviewing process even further, (Different institutions might have differing needs from these and therefore have to generate other questions.)

1) How well do you think this book fits our course structure?

- If it fits our structure in general, how well proportioned are the different sections for our needs?
- If it is not arranged in the shape of our course, can it be rearranged in use without doing its own progression real damage?

Note: We do not eliminate books that do not fit our particular course structure, for our seasoned instructors are quite capable of adapting any good book to their particular pedagogical approaches. The Committee, however, feels it important to warn instructors that particular books will require such adaptation.

2) How would you describe its tone and pedagogical level?

- Does a spot reading of several paragraphs, randomly chosen from different parts of the books, reveal a consistent style and tone?
- Would our students feel the author was talking down to them?
- Would our students feel the author was too sophisticated for them?
- Is the tone too "folksy" for our extraordinarily pragmatic students?
- Is the writing conversational? clinical? somewhere in between?

3) What do you perceive to be its strong points?

- Does the Table of Contents indicate an organization of materials that is logical and effective?
- Does the reading of the first paragraphs of each chapter show the author to be a good conserver of ideas for the students?
- Does the reading of an entire short section of the book demonstrate strengths in style, organization, and development of thought?
- Does this book differ substantially in any way from others reviewed?

4) What do you perceive to be its weak points

(These negatives would be discovered in generating the responses to the previous questions.)

5) Are there specific features about this book you find striking?

- Packaging? (cover, quality of paper, quality of binding, etc.)
- Printing? (type face, spacing, margins, borders, etc.)
- Use of colors?
- Use of non-verbal materials?
- Use of humor?

By the end of this part of the process, each book will have had between three and six reviews, each with a vote of "yes," "?," or "no." I record a score of two points for each "yes" vote and one point for each "?" vote, allowing no points for a "no" vote. Any book that fails to amass a total of four points is dropped from consideration. This process will normally eliminate two-thirds of the field.

We then assemble as a Committee to make the final decisions, choosing one text that will be required of all new Teaching Assistants and Part-time Instructors, and offering a list of suggested texts to all other instructors (who are allowed to choose whatever text they like or opt to teach without a rhetoric altogether). The meeting takes no more than two hours.

I circulate each of the surviving texts (multiple copies come in handy) plus all the texts on last year's recommended list, and I ask each reviewer for a written vote of "yes" or "no" for each book. Everyone will have seen most of these books before, but we have found that this second look makes a great difference, especially since I allow a maximum of three minutes per book, even for those books that are new to the reviewer. The pressure of time, the juxtaposition of so many texts, and the practice these people have had recently in making these decisions produce strong and consistent opinions in most cases. The great majority of texts will wind up with "yes/no" votes of 6-0, 5-1, 1-5, or 0-6. The 6-0 and 5-1 books we add to last year's list with little or no more comment; the 1-5 and 0-6 books we discard; and the remaining books (those with 4-2, 3-3, and 2-4 votes) we scrutinize at greater length, discussing together the points of analysis we had explored individually on the questionnaires.

We then review last year's list and delete from it any book that has not been used by anyone in the department for three years, as well as any book that has received consistently negative responses from those who have used it in class. We are aided in making these decisions by a Text Appraisal Form all teachers of writing fill out each December.

We publish the list of recommended texts on May 1, describing in a paragraph for each book the characteristics that have struck the Committee as most distinctive. We subdivide the rhetorics into three categories:

- 1) Rhetorics that fit our course structure;
- 2) Rhetorics whose progression must be changed to fit our course structure;
- 3) Supplementary texts (e. g., short style manuals, books, on specialized topics, research paper manuals, casebook approaches).

We go one step further, producing an evaluation aid that has greatly helped the (lamentably) few who have used it. For each of the recommended texts we prepare a two-page analysis under 12 specific headings:

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| 1) General Approach | 7) Instructor's Manual |
| 2) Level | 8) Special Features |
| 3) Pedagogical Difficulty | 9) Packaging |
| 4) Tone | 10) Major Strong Points |
| 5) Density | 11) Major Weak Points |
| 6) Structural Compatibility | 12) Price |

Each member of the Committee is assigned one or two of these to do or to revise, as needed, and I edit them all so that they appear uniform in style and length. When an instructor comes to me for advice on a new text and with complaints about the one he or she has been using, I can produce the file of analyses and have the instructor either read "vertically" through each two pages or read "horizontally" in the categories that were perceived as problematic in the text about to be discarded. For example, if the instructor complains that the students felt the old text had condescended to them and had proceeded too slowly throughout, then the instructor should check the entries of "Level" and "Density" in each of the analyses on file. This procedure takes little time and has worked extremely well for the few people who have taken advantage of it.

IV. Evaluating Readers

Choosing from among the host of reading anthologies presents different problems. Readers tend to be longer than rhetorics and far less easy to sample. We have developed an evaluation process which may seem rather arbitrary at first but which we firmly believe is efficacious. The entire process takes less than two hours, necessitates no previous screening of books, and has consistently resulted in text choices that have satisfied our instructors.

I act as co-ordinating technician while the other six on the Committee do all the evaluation. I assemble all the new readers and the new editions of established readers on a table adjoining our conference table. (To have all those books constantly before us and between us would produce unnecessary added anxiety.) Each Committee member receives one book and has precisely one minute to evaluate it and vote "yes," "no," or "borderline" for including it on our list of twenty or so recommended anthologies. I watch the clock and rigidly enforce the one minute limit, giving them a "ten seconds" warning and calling for them to vote at the minute mark. They record their votes on a score sheet that lists the texts and their editors on a "yes," "no," and "borderline" grid. Votes recorded, each Committee member passes the reader to the person on the left and receives a new one from the person on the right. The process is repeated, without interruption, until each person has seen each of the six books. Those books are then retired, and a new six take their place. At the end of every second group of six books we take a short break, a needed relaxation from the substantial intensity generated by the time limits.

When all the books have been considered I tabulate the votes on my score sheet. Each year it is stunning to see how many of the votes are unanimous or nearly so. It is precisely that constant concensus of opinion that convinces us the one minute time limit is not only reasonable but extremely effective. No one can be sure how well a text will function until it has been used in actual course conditions; short of that, one intense minute is as good as five or twenty lax ones to make a determination. Here are the factors we consider most important, all of which can be investigated in one minute of energetic concentration:

- Does the book have a structure that co-ordinates well with our course structure?
- How many of the selections are excerpts of longer works? How many are complete essays in themselves?

- How many "old chestnuts" are included?
- How many pre-20th Century selections are included?
- What sources tend to dominate?
- How helpful is the rhetorical material of the editors?
- Is there a theme to the selections, and, if so, is it intrusive?
- Is the size of the book a problem?
- Is the book attractive?

With very little practice one can ascertain all of this in a single minute. The greatest variable is the individual reviewer's familiarity with the particular essays in a given book, a variable compensated for by the breadth of knowledge of the Committee taken as a whole and the repetitiveness of the editors' choices.

We repeat the final steps that we used in the evaluation of the rhetorics, discarding the .1-5 and 0-6 texts, accepting the 5-1 and 6-0 texts, and discussing further the 4-2, S-3, and 4-2 votes. Again we discard from last year's list all those texts which either received bad reviews in our December appraisals or have not been used by anyone for the last three years.

From beginning to end this process has taken us between 1 1/2 and 2 hours, and despite the high pressure it has never seemed painful or overly burdensome. It has been our experience that members new to the Committee view this process with distrust at the start but become completely convinced of its efficacy by the end of the meeting.

V. Evaluating Handbooks

We evaluate the handbooks, as we do the readers, in one Committee meeting of 1 1/2 to 2 hours, with no previous preparation. The procedure is quite different, however, requiring three separate stages.

A. The first stage

Fewer handbooks are produced than readers or rhetorics (10 to 15 handbooks in a given year, as opposed to 30 new readers and 30 new rhetorics), and therefore we can spend a greater amount of time on each volume. In this first stage each Committee member looks at each of the handbooks, trying to get some sense of what is standard among them in structure and contents. We have a good sense of what our students are like and how much the book should be used in our courses, and therefore we can make quick judgments as to whether a given handbook is too short or too long for our needs, too condescending or too folksy, too prescriptive or not prescriptive enough, too complex or too simple-minded. Our purpose at this point is only to eliminate those few books that clearly will not fit our program and to get a sense of what the field is like at the moment. There are few enough handbooks on the market that we have no trouble reducing the number under consideration to 12 to 14 (two per Committee member); we need not discard any book that looks promising at this point.

B. The Second Stage

In this stage the books do not circulate; each reviewer will have one or two that remain with him or her throughout. Our purpose is to test how the handbooks will function under actual reference conditions. To do this, we establish a short list of some of the mechanical writing problems for which we most often direct students to handbooks (e.g. sentence fragments, comma splices, formation of plurals and possessives, comma rules for compound and complex sentences, uses of semi-colon and colon, and the definition of plagiarism). Everyone works on the same category simultaneously. To start with, then, we each try to find the material on sentence fragments in our two handbooks. We then report to each other orally concerning the ease of finding the appropriate section and the clarity, quality, and precision of the information. Usually it is easiest to read the material aloud, giving everyone an opportunity to compare the various entries. By the time we have reached the third category on our list, we have raised expectations concerning the quality of each of the texts, and soon thereafter we feel confident about eliminating a few which have been consistently disappointing. We have been quite surprised at how different the handbooks really are on close inspection, how much of the author's personality comes through the seemingly impersonal text, and how consistent they are in terms of style, approach, and thoroughness. Usually we have reduced the field to six or seven by the time we finish our short list of categories. In our department we insist on the use of a handbook and provide a list of five, from which each instructor must choose one.

C. The Third Stage

In this final stage we distribute all the copies we have of the six or seven handbooks remaining under consideration, so that each person will have four or five books to look at. We return to considering the book as a whole, concentrating on structure, quality of prose, indexing systems, and accuracy. (One would not think the latter would be a problem, but it is, on occasion. Once we found a comma error in the section describing parallelism and an error in parallelism in the section describing the use of commas in a series.) Again we report orally on our findings, which usually leads to the exclusion of one or two more books.

We have little trouble, therefore, in deciding upon our list of five, especially since handbooks do not change with as much speed or drama as do the rhetorics and readers. It can be a bit of a problem, however, to choose the one text that we will require for our new teachers. If no one text seems the clear victor at this point, we consider collectively the physical characteristics of the books: print, paper, cover, size, use of color, and clarity of indexing numbers. (We rarely have to consider price as a factor since the publishers remain quite competitive in that respect.) Our final decision always seems to us a bit arbitrary, since we believe that there is little to choose between the best four or five, but we feel confident that we have identified a handbook at least as good as any other.

VI. Some Conclusions

Rhetorics

For five years we have made the most careful choices, and yet each year we find ourselves faced with discarding the old required text and coming up with a new one. We have been able to hypothesize four causes for this lack of success:

- 1) Perhaps there simply is no outstanding rhetoric on the market now, no book that does the job so well that a whole staff of instructors would regret parting with it.
- 2) Perhaps the mere act of imposing a narrative text like a rhetoric on a group of instructors dooms it to unpopularity (much as imposing Freshman English on the students makes the teachers and the course initially unpopular).
- 3) Perhaps for the teaching of writing the presence of any voice in the classroom other than the instructor's is intrusive and therefore resented.
- 4) Perhaps it is impossible to write a book prescriptive enough for those who require a structure, yet free enough for those who wish to develop their own structure.

Apparently the country at large feels the same way about rhetorics, as evidenced by the overly active market for new texts and new editions of old texts; but perhaps even the ideal text would not hold center stage for long, since instructors seem quite simply to get bored with teaching the same chapters over and over. After three years with any text, many instructors feel the need to choose a new one, if only to regenerate a sense of pedagogical challenge.

Readers

As I have stated above, we feel most satisfied with the results of our evaluations of readers. Each year about one third of our department tires of the reader they have been using, but nearly everyone seems to be able to find something on the recommended list that will do adequately (even admirably in some cases) for the next three years.

Handbooks

Not many instructors find the choice of which handbook to use an issue of passion, so we have experienced little difficulty with the results of our choices. We are slower to discard a book from this list than from the other two lists because it takes instructors a long time to become comfortable with a handbook, thus making novelty more of an annoyance than a method of rejuvenation.

The Committee members profit even more than the department as a whole from this process. We often find ourselves debating the issues raised by conflicting information long after the meeting has ended, and we have rid ourselves of the misconception that there exist gods of Grammar who know the Truth about these matters. We have saved the department the trouble of being subjected to inferior texts bound in handsome covers with an impressive publisher's name in the title. In all, the process we use pleases us completely.

VII, Conclusion

These procedures will not produce problem-free texts because there seem to be none published, especially when the needs of many instructors are taken into account simultaneously; but they do reduce the chances of error and make the final choice an informed one, no matter how impressionistic any given moment of the process might seem. As a department we are aware of what is available on the current market, and the individual Committee members gain such good experience that they will be able to evaluate their own texts competently long after they have stopped serving on the Committee. We feel our efforts result in substantial aid to our instructors and students, as well as in fairness to the publishers, whose representatives are (in my experience) unfailingly helpful.

All this does indeed require a certain amount of time and effort. The Committee members have to endure a month of pesky reviewing (and none have ever wished it longer). The Writing Program Director must have the willingness (or the compulsion) to keep track of all the details (getting the books, circulating them, recording the results immediately, keeping the slower Committee members up with the rest, etc.). Nonetheless, we have all seemed to find it worthwhile. The Committee meetings themselves, although requiring a substantial expenditure of energy, have always been interesting and quick moving, replete with biting satire aimed at the numerous inanities uncovered and a rewarding feeling of accomplishment when the final choices have been made; and we get to hear the other shoe drop eight months later when the faculty evaluates the texts they have used, providing the guidance that will help us to get to and through the next Spring's haystack.