

Limits on the Power of Naming

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As Cheryl Armstrong and Sheryl I. Fontaine demonstrate in "The Power of Naming: Names that Create and Define the Discipline," Writing Program Administrators have the task of naming. The events, roles, and ideas that administrators choose to name in a particular way become foregrounded and attended to differently than if they weren't so named. These names will then go on to be used in talk and in documents where the reality they name is more fully constructed through negotiation. So whatever may be the title of the person whose job it is to oversee the Writing Center, the position is constrained and elaborated by what predicates are ascribed to it in casual talk and in job descriptions, reports, and other documents. My choice of the verb "oversee" illustrates my point. A Director or a Coordinator may "oversee." In either case though, the predication primarily constrains the named reality. Thus, the predicates Writing Program Administrators propose for names are at least as important as the names they choose.

Predicates determine what roles nouns play in sentences; and, by implication, by the textual construction of a referential world, predicates construct the roles named participants may appropriately assume within programs, courses, and staff positions. Armstrong and Fontaine mark the moments of naming courses, staff positions, and programs as "important points of growth or tension" (5). For staffing, the job description supplies, besides names, predicates that specify what must be done and what can be done, as well as stating or implying what may or must not be done. No matter what name is given the position, the descriptions of it—the predications the name hangs from—lay out in more or less elaborated detail the web of reality in which the person filling the job will be operating. Course documents (proposals, syllabi, guidelines) delineate what Expository Writing or Essay Writing is assumed to be, what sorts of texts must be taught, may be taught, or should be taught. Calling writing classes "courses" or "studios" (as at Syracuse) does not itself mandate the roles of students and teachers. The predications of those names developed in course documents do. For programs, the proposal for modification of a program or for its full replacement is a major document that sets out the assumed abilities, obligations, and possibilities of those who participate in them.

None of these documents has a sole author. Job descriptions, for example, are rarely written once and for all by one person. The WPA may consult with the chair or the dean in generating the job description for a Writing Center Director—or a departmental committee may advise the WPA, with the final description subject to approval or vote by the whole department. Who gets into the act will also be different depending on whether the position is tenurable or not. The WPA may consult with staff from the computing service to describe the job of a computer lab facilitator. Job descriptions for staff are often also written or rewritten in consultation with the person who has been working in the job. Thus job descriptions reflect realities that the primary author has negotiated with others.

A proposal for replacing an existing university-wide writing program must incorporate the concerns of many more people than a job description must. The WPA must take into account the concerns of all departments on behalf of their majors, of the deans of the colleges, of the provost's office and of the governing boards. The WPA must gain approval of the program from the English department's literature faculty, as well as gaining the support of those who teach writing. When talking informally with representatives of these groups, making formal presentations to departments and committees, reading memos sent in response to such talks, the WPA is figuring out how to incorporate the views of each into the proposal for program change. Only in doing so can the WPA hope to get the program approved.

I am obviously talking about the rhetorical situation of the writer. A WPA may name things perhaps as she wishes, but those names become part of a public forum that influences and sometimes mandates the way those names function within a system of reality. I want to illustrate what I'm getting at by using a proposal reconceptualizing the composition program at Western Illinois University.¹ Because this proposal affects all students, it has had to be negotiated in a very direct way with committees, department chairs, faculty, and deans campus-wide. The roles that the program establishes must constitute a believable reality for all concerned, a reality that all of these groups can minimally agree to allow to stand—even if they cannot endorse it fully. While this is true for a job description written in concert by a WPA, a chair, and someone already on the job, and while it is also true for a course proposal written with particular committee members' approval in mind, the full program proposal allows me to display more comprehensively how what we name is predicated through

negotiations with others and to illustrate more vividly some effects of that negotiation. In accommodating the proposal to those others who have the power to veto, approve, or stall it, it comes to design a reality that few WPAs would be able to happily endorse. I suggest that this may also occur in less momentous documents, like job descriptions and course proposals. And I suggest also that it is vital for us to be aware of the compromises our documents make about the reality that we want our classrooms and our programs to endorse.

I will briefly describe the proposal to change the writing program university-wide at Western Illinois University. Then, I will examine the roles that the Western Writing Program Proposal establishes for students, faculty, administrators, and the program itself, interpreting those roles as representing a political reality across the university. From this analysis, I draw conclusions about the rhetorical situation of the Writing Program Administrator in his or her attempts to substantively re-name and predicate what we do—whether in staffing, teaching, or programming—and thus to redefine the discipline.

The Western Writing Program (WWP)

In its present form, the Western Writing Program proposal is a twenty-six page document calling for a four-course writing requirement, with new courses designed for the first two years, a choice of courses for juniors, and a senior-level writing intensive course in each major department. The first two courses would be English department courses; the third year would be primarily English department courses. This program would replace the current two-semester, first-year sequence.

Even this basic statement of courses and responsibilities underwent revision at various moments—in the first departmental meeting about the proposal in 1987, in the writing committee, and after the English Chair and the Director of Writing made office calls, or "missionary visits," to thirty-six department chairs. The university curriculum committee asked for a section with theoretical background. The dean's concerns resulted in an appendix on staffing; the provost's, one on budgets. Over the past four years, each formal step of the process and many of the informal steps have resulted in revising the proposal, thus incorporating the results of negotiating with the university community about the meaning of composition and of writing programs. Many of those responding to various memos,

drafts, and conversations have influenced the elaborations and justifications in the proposal, directly revising the relations the document structures among the participants in the university: students, faculty, administrators, and the program itself. The current draft demonstrates the consensual reality of the proposal, a construct necessary for the proposal to get a hearing among all of the groups that must eventually approve it.

Roles of Participants in the WWP

I am particularly interested in the human attributes of the groups that the WWP establishes—what the different participants *can* do (ABILITY), what they *could, may, or might* do (POSSIBILITY), what they *would* do (PROBABILITY), what they *must, ought to, have to, or should* do but may choose not to do (ETHICAL OBLIGATION), and what they *will* do in the necessary course of things (NECESSITY or PREDICTION). What this set of verbs, the modal auxiliaries, and their core meanings (in uppercase) disclose are the speaker or writer's attitudes and beliefs about the grammatical subject in relation to the main verb. (I am drawing on several linguistic sources. See especially Coates, Ehrman, Hermeren, and Perkins.) In the case though of the WWP, the writer has sought to structure a human reality that is recognizable to the university community as "our" reality, the one we at Western perceive ourselves acting in, in our professional lives. This move to represent a consensual reality is a rhetorical move, one designed to gain a reading from the various approving bodies. So my analysis has little to say about what the primary author believes. My analysis does disclose the negotiated reality that all concerned have contributed to. This negotiated reality, in turn, constitutes the framework of the world that the program and its participants will operate within. Though they may subvert it, this framework defines what would have to be subverted.

Faculty

My own academic role straddles the two faculty categories that the document sets up, professors and writing teachers. As a relatively new professor who arrived at Western late in the proposal's preparation, I am an anomaly in its text-world, neither fish nor fowl. I teach writing courses. The proposal would have to see my position as a *dual* role, since for the document there are two distinct categories of faculty: first-person plural "we," the professoriat, and writing faculty who are in officially temporary positions (as "the composition staff," "the teacher," "the writing faculty"—always third person). The intention was for "they/writing teachers" to be a subcategory of "we," for the "we" to subsume the "they." This does not seem to be the effect however, perhaps partly because readers are conditioned by normal use to perceive "we/they" dichotomously.

The proposal thus encodes an ambiguity in my own professional commitment for its readers. It presents faculty in this way—either writing teacher or professor—because it makes sense to its readers across the university. This structure does not acknowledge a role that combines professorial status and writing instruction. The proposal's faculty categories are clearly artificial, an obvious place to begin an analysis looking at the constructed and negotiated nature of its textual reality.

For faculty who are "we"—the professors—the greatest emphasis is on what they *can* do, on ABILITY. And what faculty can do is speak and think with psychological subtlety. They are able to "teach," "expect," "generalize," "suggest," "challenge," "support," and "anticipate":

1. By spreading writing instruction throughout the four years students spend at WIU, *we can* more effectively *challenge* and *support, reinforce* and *develop* both writing and thinking skills. (WWP 3. Emphasis in all examples is mine.)
2. Already *we can anticipate* that the assistance of a consultant to interpret the statistical data will be necessary. (WWP 14)

Faculty as "we" have the POSSIBILITY of "teaching" and the PROBABILITY of "lecturing."

3. With additional classrooms/labs, *we could teach* all sections of 180 [the first-year course] with computers. (WWP 24)
4. Few of *us would lecture* on a subject the first week of class and then, without ever mentioning it again, *base* an entire final exam on that subject. (WWP 6)

"We" also have an ETHICAL OBLIGATION to "examine," "begin," and "challenge."

5. Rather than classifying and evaluating writing in terms of form or mode or subject, *we should* instead *examine* the writer's motives for writing. (WWP 3)
6. *We must* consciously *challenge* students to higher levels in *our* composition classes. (WWP 3).

In example #6, "we" could be interpreted as "composition teachers." However, the section it is in, titled "Student Development Theory," sum-

marizes William Perry's model of development and its implications for the teaching of writing. The effect of "our" and "we" seems much more related to a kind of general professorial concern for students. The document is not intended to persuade those who teach writing courses but those faculty whose students would, under the program, have two additional writing courses added to their graduation requirements.

The compound initial modifiers in example #5 make sense only if the reader already assumes that *we can* (and do) *classify and evaluate* writing, thus adding, through what linguists call presupposition, to the range of professorial cognitive abilities.

As the reader will see in the examples that follow, the sole act of NECESSITY, for the readers who identify with "we," is to "need" (four times, the highest of any act regardless of modality). In example #8, "we" narrows to the professors of the English department, not including instructors—since instructors could hardly initiate such a request.

7. *We will need* 53 sections of 180. (WWP 12)

8. It is possible that *we will need* to request additional staff. (WWP 23)

Besides professors, the proposal talks about composition staff or writing faculty. Writing faculty are as dependable and reliable as natural acts. What they do, they mostly do in the natural course of things, without qualification. Writing faculty are credited with no ABILITY different from other faculty. Their POSSIBILITY includes "preparing," "teaching," and "needing." The greatest concentration of acts for writing faculty though is in NECESSITY. Writing faculty "*will continue*," they "*will teach*," they *will* have both "time" and "responsibility."

9. *Some* [composition staff] *will continue to teach* English 102, 111, and 112 for previously admitted students. (WWP 12)

10. In the WWP, these same [English] *instructors will have responsibility* for 200- and 300-level courses. (WWP 24)

Writing faculty need nothing beyond what professors need. They are *obliged*, however, in two senses, moral and coerced, to "design a program" and "use" computers—a far more practical ethic than the professorial "examine" and "challenge."

11. Consider, then, the plight of the "average" students, and of *the teacher who must design a program* to develop not only their skills but also, more fundamentally, their thinking skills, all within the first college year. (WWP 3)

12. Currently *the faculty* [teaching writing in computer classrooms] *must use* one of the classroom computers after hours or *use* one of the back-up computers housed in the Writing Center. (WWP 24)

The WWP thus structures a textual reality in which professors are both able to think and obliged to do so. Those who teach writing are more characteristically oriented to doing rather than to thinking and to NECESSITY rather than to ABILITY.

The proposal represents only the text world that has been negotiated through drafts revised according to the preliminary readings of various interested parties—colleagues, deans, committee members, department chairs, etc. In the sequence of memos and drafts leading up to this document, there is a change from tentative POSSIBILITY and PROBABILITY to NECESSITY, from *could*, *may*, *might*, and *would* to *will*, a result of the author's becoming more and more sure of what the consensual reality in fact is. The text-world is constructed for the rhetorical purpose of fitting the program into a world sufficiently recognizable to its readers to gain their assent to that world and to see the program as reasonable and important within it.

Administrators

I've supplied the title "administrators" to name the deleted agent of a number of passive constructions—the ubiquitous "someone" of bureaucratic prose. Administrators are not named as such in the document, but the acts performed by "someone" are the kinds of acts associated with administrators. They have a certain amount of agency. They have the ABILITY to "reach," "begin," and, perhaps most importantly, to "accomplish."

13. Much of the retraining *can be accomplished* internally. (WWP 25)

Administrators have OBLIGATIONs to "define," "equip," and to "account for money."

14. This amounts to an indirect cost which *must be accounted for*. (WWP 25)

But they are mostly driven by NECESSITY, by what they *will* do in the natural course of things. The verbs associated with the bureaucratic deleted "someone" are the most powerful and active in the document. There are 22 different verbs on 36 occasions linked by "will" to a deleted administrative agent—more than twice the number of verbs in any category for any role. Administrators will "use," "reinforce," "strengthen," "split," "reduce," "draw from," "manage," and "eliminate." They will "observe," "adjust," "schedule," "remove," and "reassign." Though administrators will "need" (five times), they will also "require" something of others (five times). Administrators are doers. Out of their ABILITY to "accomplish," they *will* get things done—somehow getting what they need to do so. The deleted agents are sometimes the WPA; more often they would have to be higher-level administrators like the chair or dean.

15. The sophomores *will be* similarly *split* between the two semesters. (WWP 11)

16. The composition staff *will not be* significantly *reduced*. (WWP 12)

17. Faculty *will be reassigned* for retraining. (WWP 25)

The Program

The program, its courses, and their sections also have significant agency. The roles the program and courses take on of NECESSITY are versatile and categorize easily into roles stereotypically gendered. The program is maternal and nurturant. It will "assure," "provide" and "give," as well as "help," "be able to meet needs," and "respond":

18. *It [the program] will help* us to define our purpose and shape our identity. (WWP 15)

19. *The Western Writing Program will be better able to meet* the developmental needs of the students. (WWP 8)

20. *The new program will respond* to Herrington's call for integrated methods of Writing Across the Curriculum (1984). (WWP 8)

Besides being maternal, the program is disinterestedly teacherly: "introducing," "emphasizing," "reinforcing," and "drawing on students' prior experience."

21. The proposed *Western Writing Program will not only reinforce* the emphasis on writing in a liberal education but also *provide* students with the necessary support throughout their college careers. (WWP 1)

22. The computer-based *sections will introduce* techniques of composing with a word processor. (WWP 9)

23. The junior *courses will, then, introduce* the discourse communities to which the students aspire. (WWP 9)

24. The writing *courses will draw on* [students'] experience in [their major] fields. (WWP 9)

The program and its parts are also manly: "challenging," "reasoning," "placing demands," and even "forcing."

25. The expanded writing *program will place* many more demands on its director. (WWP 24)

26. The *exercise* of putting thoughts into organized, understandable prose *will force* students to clarify what they know. (WWP 7)

This versatility of human roles is supposed to illustrate the program's means of meeting the needs of everyone: whatever it is anyone lacks, the program will make up for. One intent of this description of the program is to include appeals to all common models of teaching. One effect, though, of this personification in the constructed reality is that the program has the fullest personhood of all the participants. It acts in a wider range of roles (nurturant, disinterested, forceful) and with greater agency than any other participant, lacking only the cognitive abilities of the professor and the supervisory acts of the administrator.

Students

Students' roles are as telling in what they specify as in what they do not. Their ABILITY is to "enter" and to "learn."

27. It allows *students* to discover that they *can, indeed, learn* what they know and what they think by writing. (WWP 4)

28. Transfer *students* with associate degrees from those colleges *can enter* WIU with the basic curriculum completed. (WWP 14)

They have a POSSIBILITY of “enjoying” and “choosing.” The PROBABILITY is their “understanding.” They have an OBLIGATION to “examine,” “choose,” “defend,” “imagine,” “respond,” and “practice.”

29. The student must examine alternatives, choose one position, and defend this position. (WWP 4)

30. The student must be able to imagine the reader’s attitudes and appropriately respond to them. (WWP 4)

Of NECESSITY, students will “take” (seven times) and “need” (four times). They will “develop,” “have opportunity,” and “face frustration.” They will “maintain” or “move.” They will “write,” “practice,” “learn,” “begin,” and “fail.”

31. The way to assure that our students will develop and maintain their writing skills is not merely to test them, but rather to provide continuous instruction and reinforcement of strategies learned earlier. (WWP 6)

32. Students who do not perform at that minimal level will fail the course and will repeat it. (WWP 13)

33. They [students] will discover how writing helps them to come to terms with experience and clarify that experience. (WWP 8)

34. The Western Writing Program assures that students will have opportunities to practice and develop their writing skills throughout their college careers.

There is no indication in the proposal that students will “generalize” or “anticipate” or “perform” other cognitive acts that professors do—at least such a mentality is not proposed as a result of the writing curriculum. They are apprentices for their full four years in the program. While they will “write,” “practice,” “learn,” “discover,” and “maintain,” the proposal does not predict that they will “classify,” “generalize,” “evaluate,” or “anticipate”—as their professors can.

The University World

The proposal presents administrators as persons whose actions have material consequences. No one else displays the active cognitive life that

professors do. The program itself takes on the traits necessary to round out the personhood of the corporate body of Western. Students, in their turn, never move out of the role of apprentices. What binds this reality together is twofold: the common obligation of faculty and students to examine and the unavoidable neediness of the human participants. Students and faculty both are ethically obliged to examine, but they do so with vastly different tools. While the writing done in the program will force a clarity of thought, it will not, it appears, force a clarity sufficient to compete with professorial cognition. The neediness of all the participants derives from their complementarity—each needs the others and each especially needs the program in order to form the corporate body of the university.

At Western, much of the consensually allowable reality is a liberal construct: everyone is needy. Administrators have to take care of things so that programs can have their effect. There is a hierarchy of concern and power among administrators, with the WPA at the bottom of this ladder in power but problematically concerned with a program affecting the entire student body. So problematic is the WPA’s position that no procedures exist for the proposal’s approval process. It is being invented as the proposal moves through various approving bodies.

The program itself functions as a kind of brute reality. It meets needs while demanding and forcing. The program becomes the context of it all, unaffected itself but, once in place, affecting everyone. Ascribing such power to the program is necessary to construct the kind of textual reality that makes sense across the university. It also, to some degree, undermines the proposal. Rhetorically, it might be better to present the program as less pervasive, less powerful in the changes the proposal claims for it. Rhetorically, that is impossible. Only a very powerful program can justify changing the status quo for all students in every college and major in the university.

The program as an organizing system is an almost absolute controlling context, the source of both stability and change. The dangers of this reality are obvious: a paternalism that obstructs the adulthood of students, a fostering of helplessness and powerlessness among all members of the university, a submissiveness to one’s station in life. The benefits of this reality are that, in its ideal form, people are benevolent and know what to do, how to act, and feel secure that things are taken care of.

The Rhetorical Situation of the WPA

A proposal for major curricular change that constructed a critical view of the university or a conservative approach to education would not get far at Western—the assumptions necessary to agree to such realities are not in wide enough circulation. Are we typical? I suspect we are typical of our kind of school—a middle-sized, public, rural university with nearly open admissions, no PhD programs, and little influence from a major urban area. I think there are many similarly situated schools. A critical proposal might take hold if it were structured as a kind of populism. A conservative approach might take hold if it were structured as a kind of traditionalism. Any blatantly politicized proposal would not get a serious, university-wide hearing, since it is part of "liberally constructed" reality that educating is not a primarily political act.

This rhetorical situation of having to construct a politically "neutral" university in order to gain approval of program changes may not sit well with some Writing Program Administrators. Others may see it as an obvious tactic of practical politics. Such rhetorical considerations, on a lesser scale, also affect staffing and course documents. Becoming aware of these considerations sheds light on the trade-offs we make when we write for approval—whether that approval comes from university, college, or departmental sources. There is a truism we bandy about that when we shut the doors of our classrooms, we can teach as we want. But what we do has been already formed and shaped by the textual realities surrounding our practice, for ourselves and for our students.

More than many English faculty, WPAs are aware of the benefits compromise can achieve. In wheeling and dealing their way through the heady terrain of practical university politics though, WPAs might want to remain sensitive to what the practical politics accomplishes besides approval. The documents required for staffing, courses, and programs structure a negotiated, consensual reality. That reality can come to seem simply the way things are rather than a reality constructed by a document for purposes of gaining a hearing and approval in a bureaucratic structure. While it would be regrettable for any participant to accept the textual reality as "how things really are," the most dangerous believers would be teachers of writing and their administrators, those who daily draft the text of the classroom. WPAs will want to remain sensitive to that nature of the text-world and vigilant for signs of naturalizing that world among those most directly involved in writing programs, faculty and students.

In the WWP proposal, there are traces of Friere's banking model of education. Students and faculty are "manageable" (Friere 60) and are "objects of assistance" (71). "The teacher thinks and the students are thought about" (59). Everyone is placed into a world that resembles medieval feudal society with clear roles associated with the stations of life. Faculty are psychologically sophisticated but do not much act. Administrators act but show no signs of intellectual subtlety. Programs, the context of education, organize this world, creating both stability and change. This picture of the university world is unattractive, even repulsive. I'm not comfortable with it. I don't know if the trade-offs it makes will be worth having made them.

But I do believe the WWP will make a positive difference for students and faculty at Western, though the arguments I would use would be countereffective in the rhetorical situation of seeking university-wide approval. I certainly would not call for change to halt so that WPAs might articulate their real beliefs without regard for the practical politics affecting writing programs. I do suggest that WPAs remain aware of the larger implications of practical politics, the realities acquiesced to and constructed in order to get things done. Whatever WPAs find necessary to predicate about named realities constitutes the roles—the abilities, possibilities, necessities, and obligations—that writing faculty and students will most easily assume.

WPAs sometimes feel they have been co-opted. They are re-assigned from teaching and often have little direct association with the undergraduates their programs and directorships are intended to serve. The Writing Program Administrator is perceived as initiating and maintaining a program machine that will get done what needs to be done. The WPAs' linguistic acts, the naming and predicating of reality, do assert power. But because this naming and predicating are negotiated—because they *must* be negotiated—that power is constrained by the world models that all active members of the community are loyal to. To go beyond these limits, as I believe we always should, requires sensitivity, vigilance, and subversion.

Note

1. I would like to thank Dr. Bruce Leland of Western Illinois University for supplying me with archival material on the Western Writing Program proposal and with a rich oral history of its development.

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