Writing as Praxis 1900-1959

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This study of elementary school textbooks published between 1900 and 1959 investigates trends in writing instruction. In order to determine whether quantitative changes in the frequency and types of assignments had occurred over this timespan, the sixty-year interval was divided into three roughly equal periods: period A included textbooks published between 1900 and1917; period B, 1918 and 1935; and period C, 1936 and 1959. All textbooks tasks were allocated into one of twelve categories such as grammar, letter writing, or narrative and expository writing. Generally speaking, the results of trend analysis indicate an increased emphasis on oral language tasks throughout the period, with a concomitant decrease in the amount of time spent on writing tasks. Moreover, it is clear that current enthusiasm for the idea of writing-as-process has antecedents in earlier textbooks on American writing instruction. Teachers have long understood the demands and nature of the writing process, but have yet to commit themselves to the implications, namely, that the one indispensable prerequisite for good writing is increased amounts of time spent on the task.

Over the last decade, as unprecedented numbers of researchers and teachers have attempted to come to grips with the essential nature of writing instruction, their efforts have produced a change in the language used to describe the process and, ostensibly, in its theoretical foundations. Researchers, intent upon revealing the stop-and-start, stretching forward and curling back nature of the art of writing, have produced a literature of such daunting proportions that classroom teachers feel hard-pressed to keep abreast of the outpouring of recommendations (Check et al., 1985). Much ado has been made of writing "process"; nary a glance given to "products." One result has been that after the usages of the last two thousand years, the tradition-laden term composition instruction has been supplanted by the upstart term writing instruction, one seemingly more in keeping with our information processing age.

Teaching writing as a "process" has meant concentrating on the message and relegating worries over the mechanics to a later stage. By definition "process" entails a series of actions to be taken, stages to be worked through before the "product," the completed piece of writing, can be forged. Terms such as brainstorming, rough drafts, revising and editing have become the buzzwords of the day. The implication — that writing requires effort over extended periods of time — cannot be faulted. Yet, questions as to the validity and authenticity of the writing revolution remain unanswered. Had educators throughout the twentieth century truly considered only the "products," as alleged, that is, the mechanics of composition? If so, how did they avoid dealing with the generative stages? What goals did they set for themselves along the way? What tasks did they assign their students?

The Textbook As Time Capsule To explore such questions and retrieve information relevant to writing instruction and its classroom context, a retrospective study of elementary school English textbooks published between 1900 and 1959 was completed. In hopes of discerning shifting educational priorities, a trend analysis of the data required the following steps:

(1) Apportioning the investigative period, 1900 to 1959, into three roughly equal intervals: period A, 1900 to 1917; period B, 1918 to 1935; and period C, 1936 to 1959;

(2) Selecting nine separate series of English language textbooks that had been designated for use at the elementary school level, with a total of three series representative of each of the above-mentioned periods;

(3) Formulating a categorical framework that allowed for tabulation and allocation of tasks described in the textbooks into one of twelve categories; and

(4) Performing a trend analysis for each of the twelve categories to test: (a) whether significant changes had occurred over time for any of the twelve instructional categories; and (b) whether those differences could be described by either linear or quadratic trends. The level of probability was established *a priori* at the level p.<10; that is, significant differences were those whose likelihood of occurrence by chance was less than one in ten.

With respect to content analysis, the following aspects of English instruction were evaluated and tabulated:

(1) modeling — that is the use of literary selections for student emulation and edification;

(2) oral language exercises directly linked to writing activities;

(3) oral language exercises not linked to writing activities;

(4) vocabulary development tasks;

(5) exercises in forming sentences;

(6) exercises in forming paragraphs;

(7) letter writing tasks;

(8) narrative and expository writing;

(9) writing poetry and dramatic skits;

(10) tasks related to grammar and the mechanics of writing;

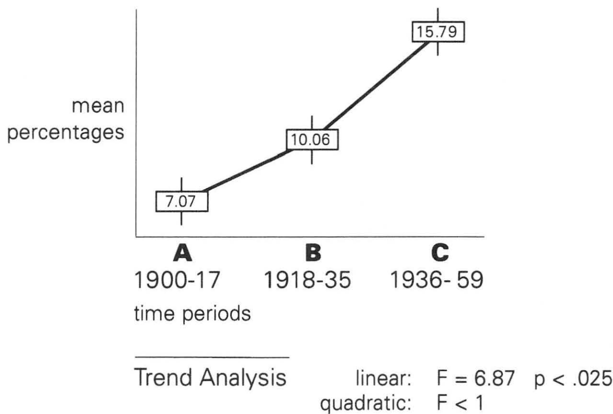
(11) study skills; and

(12) a residual category for unclassifiable material such as suggested field trips and artistic projects.

Trend analysis revealed an increased emphasis throughout the sixty-year period on oral language. Textbooks published between 1900 and 1917 (period A) integrated speaking and writing tasks far more completely than did those published during the later periods.

In general, textbook tasks related to the written word — modeling exercises, letter writing, and narrative and expository writing — fell from favor, with textbook authors recommending fewer and fewer writing assignments. On the other hand, oral language activities were much in vogue, with authors calling for committee work, socialized revision of compositions, discussion groups, and parliamentary councils. As shown in figure 1, the trend in the data reflected by the mean percentage of textbook tasks related to oral language activities, was best described by an ascending linear function ($F = 6.87$, $p<.025$). Whereas only seven per cent of tasks in textbook series published between 1900 and 1917 involved oral language unrelated to follow-up activities of a written nature, by period C, 1936 to 1959, the allotment of such tasks had more than doubled, reaching nearly sixteen per cent.

Figure 1.
Trend analysis of oral language tasks unrelated to writing assignements, category 3.



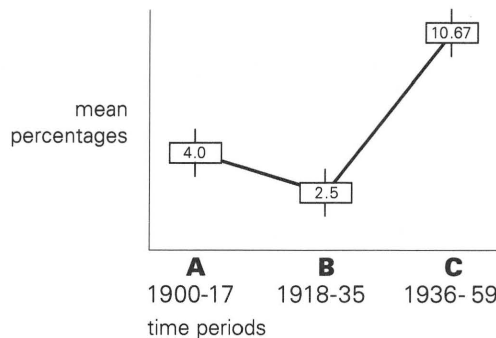
This heightened interest in oral language was a direct result of teachers' and publishers' concerns for the state of the nation as well as the state of what was commonly referred to as the mother tongue, the English language (Donsky, 1984, p. 118). As the public school system expanded to embrace millions of foreign-born children reaching these shores during the early decades of the twentieth century, in addition to millions of first-generation American children for whom English was not the language spoken at home, teachers increasingly emphasized oral language tasks to assure, in part, the preservation of the English language, but also to assure that by learning to speak English their students would be able to participate fully in the

American experience and way of life.

Despite recent articles to the contrary (e.g. Giroux and McLaren, 1986, pp. 213-38), the American educational enterprise has had a long history of tailoring schoolwork to fit the needs of a democratic society and of educating civic-minded citizens ready to assume roles in the economic, political, and social life of the nation. Moreover, forces other than immigration and industrialization have altered school curricula: technological innovations, such as the introduction of the telephone and the radio into the vast majority of American households by the 1920s, placed a premium on the spoken word.

Another aspect of the language arts curriculum analyzed within the study, one that clearly showed educators' concerns for the needs of business and commerce, was the study skills factor (figure 2) which included activities such as outlining, notetaking, alphabetizing, and paraphrasing. Trend analysis revealed that both linear ($F = 33.74$, $p<.001$) and quadratic ($F = 10.13$, $p<.01$) functions were significant, with the ascendant linear function best describing the trend over time. Increased attention given these tasks between periods B and C were due in great measure to the authors' awareness of economic and cultural concerns including the Stock Market Crash of '29 and the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Figure 2.
Trend analysis of study skills factor, category 11.



On the other hand, a number of skill-building tasks were losing favor as authors attempted to revamp and modernize courses of study. Losers included those oral language tasks directly followed by writ-

ing assignments (category 2, figure 3), for which a descending linear function ($F = 18.35$, $p<.001$) was significant.

Figure 3.
Trend analysis of oral language tasks linked to writing assignements, category 2.

6.5
4.5
mean percentages
0.56
A B C
1900-17 1918-35 1936-59
time periods

Trend Analysis			
	linear:	$F = 18.35$	$p < .001$
	quadratic:	$F < 1$	

For modeling tasks (category 1, figure 4) calling for the reading of literary pieces in preparation for writing assignments, both the linear ($F = 23.86$, $p<.001$) and quadratic ($F = 10.06$, $p<.01$) functions were significant with the descendant linear function best describing the trend over the sixty-year investigative period. Modeling, as a

Figure 4.
Trend analysis of modeling factor, category 1.

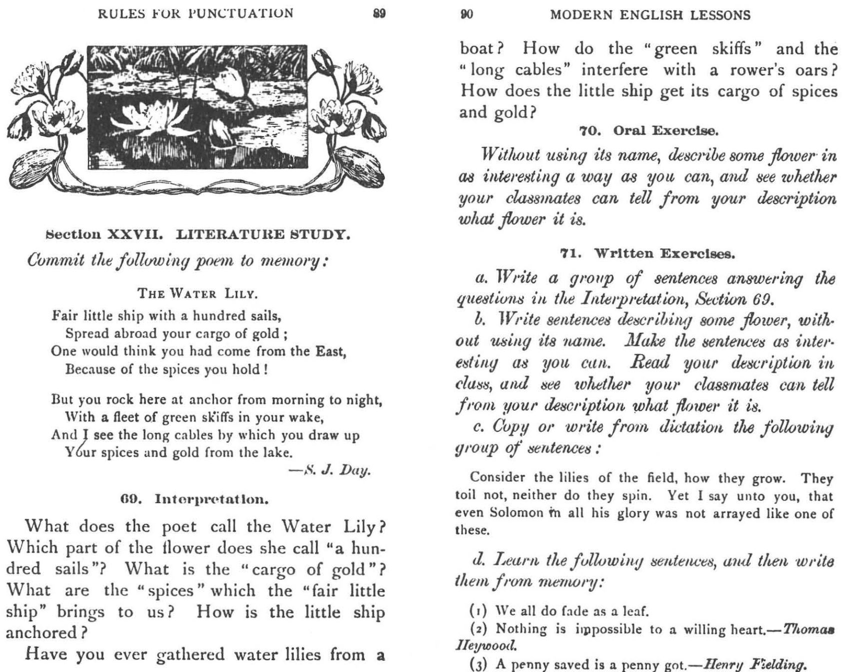
11.78
mean percentages
5.50
4.56
A B C
1900-17 1918-35 1936-59
time periods

Trend Analysis			
	linear:	$F = 23.86$	$p < .001$
	quadratic:	$F = 10.06$	$p < .01$

teaching strategy, declined significantly as an integral component of the language arts program with a greater decline witnessed between periods A and B than between periods B and C. The lessened attention given this category is of particular interest since modeling techniques — that is, patterning student writing on standard forms or styles — have historical precedents going back to the students' manuals of the Middle Ages which contained forms for all occasions, though primarily forms to be used when writing home for more money (Haskins, 1963, p.76), a seemingly perennial student preoccupation!

A typical modeling task is exemplified by figure 5, taken from Huber Gray Buehler's *Modern English Lessons* (1902, pp. 88-89). The reading, memorizing and discussion of the selection was typically followed by a writing assignment. Noteworthy is the author's injunction to memorize the piece, a requirement that would be heard less and less frequently as the century wore on. The memorization of material, a venerable learning strategy that probably reached its apotheosis during the golden age of ancient Greece, continued its

Figure 5.
Illustration from Huber Gray Buehler's *Modern English Lessons,* 1902.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Section XXVII. LITERATURE STUDY.

Commit the following poem to memory:

THE WATER LILY.

Fair little ship with a hundred sails,
Spread abroad your cargo of gold;
One would think you had come from the East,
Because of the spices you hold!

But you rock here at anchor from morning to night,
With a fleet of green skiffs in your wake,
And I see the long cables by which you draw up
Your spices and gold from the lake.

—*S. J. Day.*

69. Interpretation.

What does the poet call the Water Lily? Which part of the flower does she call "a hundred sails"? What is the "cargo of gold"? What are the "spices" which the "fair little ship" brings to us? How is the little ship anchored?

Have you ever gathered water lilies from a

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boat? How do the "green skiffs" and the "long cables" interfere with a rower's oars? How does the little ship get its cargo of spices and gold?

70. Oral Exercise.

Without using its name, describe some flower in as interesting a way as you can, and see whether your classmates can tell from your description what flower it is.

71. Written Exercises.

a. Write a group of sentences answering the questions in the Interpretation, Section 69.

b. Write sentences describing some flower, without using its name. Make the sentences as interesting as you can. Read your description in class, and see whether your classmates can tell from your description what flower it is.

c. Copy or write from dictation the following group of sentences:

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They toil not, neither do they spin. Yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

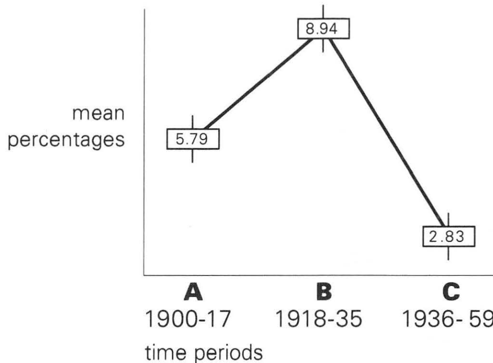
d. Learn the following sentences, and then write them from memory:

(1) We all do fade as a leaf.
(2) Nothing is impossible to a willing heart.—*Thomas Heywood.*
(3) A penny saved is a penny got.—*Henry Fielding.*

uninterrupted decline hastened by twentieth-century technological advances.

As for narrative and expository writing tasks (category 8, figure 6), the descending linear function ($F = 17.68$, $p<.001$) best described the trend over time, but it should be noted that the quadratic function ($F = 11.03$, $p<.01$) was likewise statistically significant though less powerful. The data, reflecting an increase in narrative and expository writing assignments between periods A and B, followed by a more marked decrease between periods B and C, demonstrated a growing interest in the child-centered curriculum and a greater awareness of the importance of using the child's own language patterns. This movement was to be subsequently reversed in part by the difficult economic situation resulting from the Great Depression and the exigencies of the Second World War.

Figure 6.
Trend analysis of narrative and expository writing, category 8.



Trend Analysis linear: $F = 17.68$ $p < .001$
quadratic: $F = 11.03$ $p < .01$

Another twentieth century casualty, one closely allied to memorization, was the use of "memory gems," bits and pieces of prose and poetry liberally sprinkled throughout textbooks, as were these in *Modern English Lessons* (Buehler, 1902, p. 90)

> *Memory Gems.*
>
> *Howe'er it be, it seems to me*
> *T'is only noble to be good.*
> *Kind hearts are more than coronets,*
> *And simple faith than Norman blood.*
>
> —Alfred Tennyson.

Memory gems, in this case lines from Tennyson, were considered of inestimable value in forming character, developing sensibility, and instilling an appreciation of the beauties of the natural world and of the English language. Moreover, these gems were intended to provide a common core of knowledge, as well as intellectual stimulation and spiritual sustenance.

Even a lesson on the most commonplace of rules — as in the case of the humble apostrophe — was regarded as an opportunity to expose students to lofty sentiments and fine expression (Buehler, 1902, p. 98). For one exercise, Browning's immortal lines provided the focal point for a discussion on whether the apostrophe marked possession or contraction:

The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hillside's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn;
God's in his heaven—
All's right with the world.
—Robert Browning.

The class was then enjoined to copy the following sentences, and to point out the contractions and possessives:

(1) *Don't cross a bridge till you come to it.*
(2) *An honest man's the noblest work of God.*
(3) *Wasn't that a dainty dish to set before the king?*
(4) *Variety's the very spice of life* — William Cowper.

No opportunity was to be squandered. Every effort was to be made to awaken untutored ears to the recognition of the force and majesty of the English language and to the creation of a literary classroom environment. As the years passed textbook publishers, citing social and economic pressures, departed more and more from the time-honored practice of including literary models as modeling exercises; memory gems disappeared from the nation's textbooks, as did the injunctions for memorizing them. All three aspects — modeling, memory gems, and memorizing — suffered parallel declines dwindling to a point where mentions of them appeared rarely, if at all, in English textbooks.

In short, these trends reflected an anti-writing bias with fewer and fewer textbook assignments related to the written word: pedagogical prejudices had shifted in favor of experience-based curricula, and

opposition had intensified towards any tasks pertaining to memorizing, rote learning, or study for study's sake.

Clearly, in retrospect, the period 1900 to 1917 can be seen as the high water mark for interest in the written word. After that, the inexorable forces of immigration, urbanization, and industrialization turned the tide in favor of oral language tasks. Yet, such quantitative data does little to answer those questions initially raised about product-versus-process teaching: one may understand that historical forces shaped curricula, with fewer and fewer writing assignments appearing in textbooks, yet such an understanding says little about the manner in which authors presented writing instruction.

Messages From the Past Deciphered Over the past decade, a great deal of attention has been focused on the symbiotic nature of reading and writing instruction; yet these same insights have been expressed by authors throughout the entire century. In a 1912 edition of Everyday English, Franklin Baker and Ashley Thorndike, professors at Teachers College, Columbia University, spoke forcibly of the need for total integration of all reading, writing, and oral language instruction. Their philosophy was that writing was meant to be read. If student writing was dull and blundering, it was due to a lack of ideas. To remedy any such likelihood, ideas were to be stimulated through listening, speaking, and reading, and then clarified through writing (Baker and Thorndike, 1912, p. 12). None of these processes was viewed as an end in itself, but rather as a means of fostering the growth of the cognitive processes and developing the students' ability to apply information under new circumstances.

During this same period authors other than Baker and Thorndike spoke of learning to read through writing and of learning to write through reading: James Hosic, a professor at Teachers College and a prime mover of both the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and its prestigious *English Journal*, and C. Lauron Hooper, a principal of the John W. Cook School in Chicago, joined forces in decrying the mere word pronouncing that passed for reading. As authors of the *American Language Series*, published by Rand McNally in 1932, they suggested that the antidote for poor reading was to be found in the composition class, and that writing instruction provided the best opportunity for training children to read, understand, and act upon those understandings (Hosic and Hooper, 1932, pp. xv-xvi).

By 1912 time spent on composition instruction nearly equaled that spent on arithmetic, geography, and history combined. Educators

obviously believed that one learned to write by writing *often*. Over seventy years later, similar counsel on the necessity of writing often recently surfaced in a compilation of research about teaching and learning published by the Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education, 1986, p. 27). In addition to frequent writing practice, the authors recommended teaching writing as a process involving brainstorming, composing, revising, and editing. Shades of Baker and Thorndike and 1912! In a sense, the report summarized what some researchers and educators have tirelessly expounded, not only for the last decade, but also throughout the past century: writing instruction requires attention to prewriting activities, rough drafts, revising, and editing. Moreover, it requires practice, practice, and more practice.

Stepping back into history we find these same ideas discussed in textbooks published fifty, sixty, and seventy years ago. At the turn-of-the-century, eminent authorities such as Huber Gray Buehler, headmaster of the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut, emphasized that children needed opportunities for thinking about and exploring their interests in preparation for writing. Artwork, drawing, and painting were to be used as springboards for writing, with poetry, fable, story, and biography brought in to stimulate the child's imagination (Baker and Thorndike, 1912, pp. vi-vii). Prior planning, brainstorming, selection of topics, and even "musing" were all considered part-and-parcel of the writing process (Buehler, 1902, p. vii).

Once first draft writing was underway, peer conferences were the order of the day. By the 1920s, textbooks regularly suggested that students read each other's stories, question each other's ideas, and tell what they liked or didn't understand about them (Pearson and Kirchway, 1929, p. 49). Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, peer teaching remained central to writing instruction, although the practice fell into disuse in later years. According to Goodlad, Professor of Education and former Dean of the Graduate School of Education, University of California at Los Angeles, the near total neglect of peer teaching in the 1980s represents a singular blind spot in American schooling (Goodlad, 1984, p. 110). Clearly, it wasn't always so.

For along with prewriting activities, rough drafts, and peer teaching, a practice known as "socialized revision" was dear to the hearts of educators during the 1920s and 1930s. The procedure involved writing a sample or class composition on the board and then having the class revise, augment, correct, and rewrite it. The chalkboard was considered the appropriate place to point out errors and to present minilessons. Teachers were cautioned, time and again, to keep their

pens out of the red ink bottles for fear of discouraging students' efforts.

Other concepts associated with writing-as-process surfaced. Language arts series in the 1950s contained suggestions that students maintain journals in which to record ideas, jot down notes for future pieces of writing, and keep track of new vocabulary. There were recommendations for daily writing periods as well as caveats to the effect that writing was not a one-shot deal:

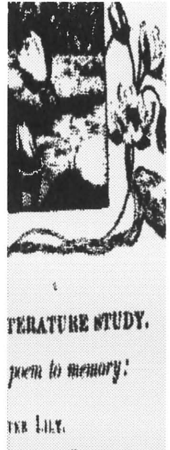
> *Make the story as long or as short as you wish. Take as many weeks as you need to complete it, but always every school day, add something new to the story, or polish and improve it, until you are ready to read it to your classmates* (Burleson, Burleson and Cash, 1952, p. 243).

It appears that teaching writing with a process orientation was a familiar teaching strategy long before Emig, Graves, Calkins, Elbow, and a host of others took to the hustings (Emig, 1971; Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986; and Elbow, 1981). It is an educational concept that can be thoroughly documented in English textbooks written throughout this entire century — rather a sobering thought. What then are we to make of the current brouhaha over process-versus-product teaching?

To begin with, the term "process" entered the research literature in force around the mid-1970s, just as computers were entering the nation's classrooms and information processing technology was transforming the entire mode of communication throughout the nation. The magnitude of these changes was reflected by the emerging vocabulary: word-processing, computer-conferencing, electronic mail, on-line information searching, text-processing, and indexing were all indicative of the instantaneous, ongoing nature of a computer-driven, information processing revolution — a revolution every bit as radical as that ushered in by Gutenberg's invention of movable type in the mid-1400s. Understandably, by the 1980s, one no longer spoke of "compostion instruction," but of "writing process", for the term "composition" smacked of static conditions, denoted fixed products, and suggested little in the way of change; on the other hand, the term "writing process," with the emphasis on process, far better conveyed the vicissitudes of the electronic culture while offering an impression of developmental vitality.

As Christopher Lasch indicated in *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, Americans in the 1980s have rather short memories, and although we may pay lip-

service to the past, our eyes are firmly fixed on the future; consequently, we suffer from a sense of historical discontinuity in which the past holds out little guidance (1979, p. xviii). Inevitably, speculations about, for example, the symbiotic relationship of reading and writing, or the concept of teaching writing as "process" not "product," appear novel and untried each time they reappear on the educational horizon when, in fact, the only thing that's new is the vocabulary. The ideas have been around for at least one hundred years.



Good teachers have always been interested in the growth of students as readers/writers/speakers/and listeners. Problems as they exist today with students' writing (and thinking) skills will not admit of easy solution simply because we approach writing instruction using a process orientation, unless by the use of the term process the need to write frequently is implied. The data from the study "Trends in Written Composition Instruction in Elementary School Textbooks, 1900-1959" (Donsky, 1984) are clear: no matter in what manner we have been approaching writing instruction, we have been doing so with less and less frequency and with devastating consequences. Anne Campbell's article in this issue indicates that forty-four per cent of nine-year-olds nationwide were incapable (in 1979 and again in 1984) of completing an informatory writing task at even a minimally satisfactory level (Campbell, figure 7, this issue). After many years of hearing why Johnny can't read (Flesch, 1955), it is now becoming obvious that Johnny can't write; moreover, this year, as mathematics scores for eighth grade students in the second international mathematics assessment put the United States in thirteenth place, trailing virtually every other industrialized nation on earth, we have been informed that Johnny can't do 'rithmetic either (U.S. Department of Education, 1986, pp. 28-31).

What then is the solution? The answer, as suggested by the data, points to the amount of time spent on task; in effect, children learn what we teach, but learning takes time. Before writing (and thinking) skills can be improved, far more time has to be allocated to writing instruction and not simply to instruction given within the confines of the English class. To promote writing skills, writing assignments must transverse the curriculum, reaching across the content areas and thereby providing a common thread linking all disciplines and integrating all curricular knowledge. Teachers must be clear as to their goals, certain of their priorities, and united in their efforts. Given such attitudes and commitment, we can begin to turn around the rather dismal state of contemporary education, especially with respect to writing instruction. We must listen to the voices of our eminent forebears, those outstanding educators and authors who

have long understood the nature of writing instruction, who tailored activities for students in keeping with their philosophies, and who offered sound, if thus far unheeded, advice in the distinguished textbooks they published throughout the twentieth century.

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