

Department of English Memorandum

TO: Members of the "Format I" group

From: Chuck Rossman

What follows is surely much longer than most of us had in mind when we agreed on a "one-page position paper." I hope that my self-indulgence as to length is justified in part by addressing worthwhile ideas.

Rossman: "Position Paper" for Freshman Composition Committee--Format I

SATAN: I reject the word "composition," both as a description of our work as teachers of writing and as a description of our activity as a committee. "Composition," rather than mere "writing," is a loaded term that promotes the interests of a particular group of theorists who conceive of writing as a pure skill detached from subject matter, as form divorced from significant content.

GOD: What can you possibly mean by a phrase like "form divorced from content"? You are tilting at windmills, combating figments of your own imagination, rather than any teachers or courses that actually exist at U. T. Every theme produced by students in our E. 306 sections is, ipso facto, about something. Composition merely teaches the student how to discover and express his or her ideas most effectively. The distinction between form and content is naive.

SATAN: And your word "naive" is simply another question-begging political term, like the word "composition" itself. Naturally "form" and "content" describe fragments of a whole, elements which have been momentarily abstracted for analytic purposes. Yet, all of us make the distinction regularly. And you stress form in your teaching of writing, while I believe that content should be emphasized.

GOD: Just one second there. My E. 306 classes have an abundance of content. We study diction, syntax, logic, rhetorical strategies for the opening and concluding of essays, and lots more. Then we apply what we have learned in our own practice of writing.

SATAN: Practice of writing about what? That is my point: you have converted a concern with the forms and strategies of writing into a subject matter. I believe that a few experienced graduate students and a few more faculty members might have sufficiently informed interest in the forms and strategies of writing to make that a topic of investigation. But to impose that on eighteen-year-old freshman is a disaster. They have little interest in direct study of rhetoric. In my experience, "freshman composition" has been one of the most unpopular courses--among students and faculty alike--on every university that I have been involved with. That is because the tool of rhetoric has been converted into a subject of study.

GOD: And for good reason: if you had recently taught an E. 306 class, you would know how desperate the situation is. Students can't write, period, and the only way to change that is to attack the problem of writing directly--that is, to bring matters like diction, syntax, logic, and so on, into immediate consciousness.

SATAN: No. Far better to involve students in a subject that grips them, in a world of ideas that challenges them and stretches them, and to ask students to articulate ideas about that subject. Let us teach our students literature, give them genuine content, and then help them find the best ways to write about that. The advantages to such an approach are numerous. First, students will have a subject that matters to them (literature is likely to matter, after all), and will lead them naturally to a concern for how and what they write about it. The faculty would then be equally involved in something that matters deeply to them. And we might have a chance at resurrecting the ideal of liberal and humane education. Passing through our English department--rather than our composition courses--university students might awaken to numerous ideas and experiences that literature can provoke, and learn to write at the same time. With luck, we might even gain a few new English majors.

GOD: How absurd. Don't you realize that no other academic disciplines teach students to write? Because of their default, and the default of education in general from the first grade on, our department must attack the problem of writing skills specifically, directly, and head on. We still have our literature courses, but our composition courses are essentially service courses.

SATAN: "Service Course" is even more repugnant to me than "composition." The analytic approach to writing, the breaking down of literacy into components

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like "literature" and "writing"—let alone "technical writing," "freshman composition," and "advanced composition"—is part of the general tendency toward analytic, abstract, and technical thinking that has been both the boon and the bane of our civilization. One important example of such thinking is, in fact, our work on this very committee.

GOD: What is wrong with our committee?

SATAN: Only that its existence, like the existence of the other committees studying the problem of "composition," presumes that there is no logical and organic structure to the matter, that it can be approached analytically. Don't you feel that our committee's work, like the teaching of writing, should be viewed in a larger context, seen as part of a whole? For instance, everything that we are now considering depends on a logically antecedent matter: the kind of courses that we teach. How can we address questions of requirements, sequence, exemptions, and so on, until we first settle the fundamental questions about the content and method of our course or courses? We are otherwise wasting our time.

GOD: I've heard enough from you. Obviously, you are a troublemaker and cynic, a mere anarchist who wants to frustrate the good will and efforts of the rest of us. You can never prevail. But I warn you—even if you did prevail, I would simply begin again elsewhere, with a new creation.

SATAN: A new heaven and new earth?

GOD: No, I would call it either a "writing lab" or a "Department of Rhetoric and Composition." I am, you see, an expert in composition; I know what I am talking about; and I will not let any reactionaries like you thwart me in my effort to help the world's poor writers. Don't you realize that "the humanities" are dead, that we must serve the university and the world as they really exist, not as we might wish in our dreams? We must teach the business majors and engineers and communications majors how to write. We are a service course. And I am an expert in being a teacher of service courses. I have lots of studies and computers and government funds, not to mention high level administrators on my side, to prove it. God damn you, where is my thunderbolt? I'll teach you a thing or two.

SATAN: I can see that you're becoming incoherent and violent. With good cause: these committees would drive anyone crazy. But before you zap me with your thunderbolt, let me offer my version of a writing program.

First, we should have many versions and formats of "freshman English," perhaps allowing every regular faculty member to proceed however he or she prefers, stipulating only that every first-semester freshman course must give special attention to the processes of writing, must have at least six essays, must have conferences outside of class to discuss essays, must teach students to use a dictionary and the library, and a few similar matters. But remember, these are fully professional faculty who understand and take seriously their obligations. If one wants to construct a "freshman composition" course around a handful of poems and a couple of novels, the course could be brilliantly successful.

Better, of course, would be to agree as a faculty on a body of knowledge, on a subject matter, that we would teach to freshmen and that they would write about. Something revolutionary, like "Masterpieces of World Literature" or "Masterpieces of English Literature" appeals to me. Let our students read-and-write about such books and we might change the course of the future! At the very least, it would be a pleasure for us to teach the course, particularly if all classes were closed at twenty students.

Two other courses or programs might be useful. For students who are truly incompetent with language, who cannot achieve a minimal score, say, on a test that allows them to enter the freshman English program, we might set up a program of self-paced teaching materials involving little if any faculty. Simply let a student work his or her way through a book or computer sequence until the deficits from previous "education" have been made up.

Finally, a junior or senior course might be organized to address the subject of composition, per se, directly. By this time, students might be able to profit from it. Even then, the direct study of rhetorical principles might not really help much with the practice of writing. Probably, improved writing is simply a function of experience, and of a student's maturity.

GOD: (Zap) Got you, you windy devil!