

Reading and Writing the Rhetoric of American Identity
Unit 3: Reading and Writing Arguments About Gender
Stanley Aronowitz (2000); The Knowledge Factory

Writing Is Not a Skill*

Is “writing” a skill, an art, or a kind of critical literacy? Are its various forms -- fiction, poetry, discourse, and argument, embodied in memos, papers, essays, and treatises mastered by learning techniques and rules? If writing is a skill, then it can be compared to the instrumental activity of tying a shoelace, replacing a light bulb, operating a computer, a lathe, or a photocopying machine. We seldom think about what is involved in these activities because, after repetitive use, they become habitual. But learning a skill takes time, particularly for the neophyte. One must find out how to turn on the machine before discovering how to retrieve the work from a hard disk and use the various commands on the screen properly. The lathe operator must learn how to put the metal or the wood into a chuck, the machine part that holds the work, before he gets started; the photocopier operator must know how to place the paper correctly on the surface of the photocopier in order to get the job done.

Writing, too, would be a skill if its mastery were confined to habituating the student to such mechanical features. To be sure, writing incorporates skills: the practitioner must learn to use a pen or pencil or master the mechanics of typing. And in the case of computer-driven word processing, there are a fair number of technical features of some complexity to be assimilated, compared to the relatively simple operation of a typewriter. Further, the formulation of a simple sentence, which embodies spelling, grammar, and syntax, has certain skill components.

But since semantic issues always intrude in writing, making meaning is not a skill but both an art and a form of critical learning. If writing is an art-since it entails thought, the adroit use of language, and rules of expression, none of which is mechanical in nature-the process of learning involves imagination, genuine knowledge, and more or less self-conscious familiarity with logical sequences. Even the most mundane memorandum that goes beyond mere conveyance of information – “The office will be closed today at 12:00 p.m. on

Thursday, 31 December, for New Years Eve” - and instead makes a proposal for a course of action, or contests a course of action proposed by another, entails complexity and narrative coherence. Learning the formal apparatus of a memo is a necessary step, but only a first step. Almost everything else must be artfully as well as skillfully wrought, both with respect to its order and its rhetoric, for the object of the exercise is to persuade others of the rightness of one’s perspective. In this sense, rhetoric must not be understood pejoratively but in the sense used by the Greeks: like logic, it is inextricably intertwined with argument. It involves careful choices of words, a sense of dramatic presentation, an awareness of the questions that might arise from some of the author’s statements, the mood of the audience, and many other considerations.

Every good writing teacher is aware of these and many other issues. She knows that, however much the visual has become a cultural force, words retain their power, and those who are able to use them effectively -- to tell stories, invent slogans, contrast arguments, and to paint word pictures that have visceral appeal -- tend to acquire influence. In short, many writing teachers understand that the skills are subordinate to the art of writing. And they understand that writing is not only a form of communication and expression but signifies a content itself, modifying and infusing all other forms of knowledge. The notion of “writing across the curriculum” demonstrates at all levels of schooling that some teachers have become convinced that the idea that knowledge acquisition is independent of its expression is untenable. Yet few framers of the undergraduate core seem to have taken these insights into account; they persist in using the term “skill” to describe the nature of writing. This term reflects the persistence of the rest of the curriculum to transmit a fixed, specialized body of knowledge acquired by the instructor in graduate school and to which he has become habituated. That a sociologist or economist should consider himself a writing teacher and a guide to close textual reading would embarrass most professors in these fields, except some who understand that reading and writing are properly learned at all levels of the academic system.

By Stanley Aronowitz, distinguished professor of sociology, Graduate Center, City University of New York

* From *The Knowledge Factory* by Stanley Aronowitz. Copyright © 2000 by Stanley Aronowitz. Reprinted by permission of Beacon Press, Boston

Copyright Association of American Colleges and Universities Fall 2003

Provided by ProQuest Information and Learning Company. All rights reserved