8.3: Secondary-School English Teachers Should Only be Taught Literature

In a 2015 *Inside Higher Education* blog post, author and teacher John Warner recounts the frequent complaints heard across the university about students’ inability to write well. Warner’s blog illustrates why first-year college writing classes cannot fully remedy these complaints. Offering suggestions to counter bad writing practices, Warner’s article is one worth reading. Most first-year university teachers of writing are guilty of issuing similar complaints about incoming students’ writing abilities, often asking, “What is happening in high-school English classes?” College instructors lament students’ infatuation with the five-paragraph essay, the idea that grammatical correctness equals good writing, or personal statements that assert opinions without support. While university writing instructors bemoan what is happening in highschool English classes, they would be better off looking at what is happening in secondary English education classes—the classes that prepare high-school English teachers for their difficult tasks in the classroom. These classes teach very little about writing. As Robert Tremmel wrote in 2001, the training of high-school English teachers does not exclude lessons in writing, but it certainly minimizes such lessons.

A perusal of the requirements for secondary English education programs across the country illustrates that while some such programs do focus on instructing students how to teach writing, a majority marginalize writing in favor of instruction on the teaching of literature. However, a significant part of high-school education focuses on writing (or should focus on writing). Those high schools that have not decided writing is essential find problems meeting Common Core standards or, far more importantly, find their graduates are ill-prepared for college or the demands of a professional work position.

There are plenty of secondary English programs at universities around the United States that focus heavily on the teaching of literature instead of or to the detriment of writing. For example, in the State University of New York system, SUNY Fredonia’s secondary English education training program makes its graduate English education students take three of four core courses in literature. Students there must choose an additional 27 credit hours, and the only choice not in literature is a course that emphasizes not writing but grammar. Students only take one course in writing pedagogy.
And SUNY Fredonia is not an anomaly: I could list many colleges that almost exclusively offer classes in literature, requiring only one or two writing classes beyond first-year composition. It is a huge problem that our focus on the discipline of English in this country almost entirely circles around the study of literature, and while literature is certainly worthy of study (I am happy to note both my B.A. and M.A. are in English literature), it should not subsume or replace the study of writing and rhetoric.

Although the term *rhetoric* has pejorative popular connotations in American culture, people who understand rhetoric (as Patricia Roberts-Miller explains in the opening chapter to this collection) know that a grasp of rhetoric and the ability to analyze the rhetorical choices made by a writer are essential to good writing. While literature classes do require students to write papers, the purpose of these papers is to analyze a literary text and reveal a nuanced literary understanding of that text. However, rhetoric classes focus on persuading audiences. These classes teach students how to make writing choices appropriate for specific audiences and situations; in other words, they teach students how to consider who might read their texts and what this audience’s relationship might be both to the writer and the writer’s purpose. Writing rhetorically then is not just creating sentences and paragraphs that are grammatically correct; writing rhetorically involves understanding how an audience feels about the situation that the writer is focusing on, how the audience feels about the writer, and making sound choices with this understanding. Teaching such writing involves teaching strategies that will move the audience to accept an idea they might otherwise reject. Teaching writing through rhetoric also involves instructing students how to analyze other people’s rhetorical texts to see what strategies were used to persuade their audiences. Such rhetorical analyses can help writers find strategies that they, themselves, might use.

meeting Common Core standards or, far more importantly, find their graduates are ill-prepared for college or the demands of a professional work position. Recognizing the importance of rhetoric is not a new trend. Students have been studying rhetoric far longer than they have been studying literature. Aristotle wrote an important treatise for his contemporaries on rhetoric. The earliest American universities, such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, offered years of study in rhetoric. On the other hand, academic study of literature only started a little more than one hundred years ago; prior to that, the study of English meant the study of subjects in the English language (rather than in Latin, Greek, or French). Only in the early 20th century did the study of English come to mean a focus on literature, and with this focus, the study of writing diminished significantly. In recent decades, many scholars have written about this shift from the study of rhetoric to the study of literature. A common understanding is that as the study of rhetoric shifted from the study of oratory to the study of writing (because of changes in technology), it became far more onerous to teach rhetoric. As one of these scholars, James Berlin, has observed, critiquing a number of orations is one thing, reading up to 3,000 essays a year is another. The study of literature, on the other hand, has not been as onerous—and far more prestigious, because of its freedom from the grading of so many papers. Writing is a component of literature classes, but there tends to be far less of it and far less study of how to write effectively.

While some people might not think it really matters whether secondary English education focuses on literature or writing, the current concerns and complaints about students’ writing abilities reveals that it does matter. Without understanding how to approach a rhetorical situation—a situation where a writer wants to address an audience who has its own ideas about the situation—a writer cannot understand how to make writing effective. If teachers themselves do not know about the importance of understanding rhetorical situations as a part of writing, students will be less likely to become effective writers.

Increasingly, however, high-school teachers recognize the importance of rhetoric in the teaching of writing. As a group of rhetoric scholars observed at a national conference on high school and college writing, high-school teachers work very
hard to teach writing well. However, because of their educational background, they end up focusing on grammatical correctness or personal writing. The teachers recognized the importance of rhetoric and have been introducing rhetorical concepts into their classrooms; however, without a thorough understanding of rhetoric, the concepts remain formulaic, such as the writing of five-paragraph essays.

My work with the College Board’s Advanced Placement (AP) English Language program also illustrates how the secondary English education curriculum’s lack of writing instruction hinders both high-school teachers and students. This program offers a college-level writing class to high-school students, as well as workshops and other training to help high-school teachers get ready to teach a college level course, although this training is not mandatory. The program offers an annual exam to any students who pay to take it, whether or not they have been in the AP class. The exam tests students’ abilities in reading comprehension and writing.

The typical essay on the AP Central website suggests both the student and the teacher are doing their best with what they know; the teacher is teaching what she has been trained to know from the few writing and many literature courses required in secondary English education teacher training. Typical responses to an AP essay question that asks students to analyze the rhetoric of a writer or speaker illustrate that students can do much well. For the most part, students understand that they need a central claim, and they need to support this claim. However, in their analyses, too many students focus solely on elements of style, such as tone, diction, or tropes and figures—aspects common to literary analyses, not rhetorical analyses—suggesting that high-school teachers rely on their education in literature to teach rhetorical strategies. While elements of style certainly can be fodder for excellent rhetorical analysis, without a fuller understanding of rhetoric, a student cannot analyze and connect the writer’s stylistic choices with the writer’s situation. In other words, the student essays do not connect the writer’s or speaker’s use of the stylistic devices to the rhetorical situation: the writer’s purpose, audience, and context for the text. Teacher training in English and its emphasis on literature does not indicate that either teachers or students know that rhetoric is more than having a thesis and using a style.

There are other examples of secondary English education teacher training having a focus on literature to the detriment of rhetorically based writing instruction. These examples can be found in websites full of programmatic responses by English teachers who want students to write well for the AP English Language and Composition Exam. The instructions on such websites provide formulaic methods, including fill-in-the-blank sentence structures, that do not help students actually analyze a sample text to comment on the relationship between the writer, purpose, and audience, or why the writer made particular choices in the text.

Hepzibah Roskelly, writing for the AP Program, suggests that the way to understand the relationships between writer or speaker, audience and context or purpose cannot be reduced to a simple formula or dictum; there are too many variables. However, because high-school teachers do not have the background in rhetoric necessary to teach writing well, they too often rely on formula and dictum. Such reliance does a disservice to students. It is part of what creates the negative commentary about students’ writing abilities. However, it is not the fault of the high-school English teachers who teach it. It is a systemic problem created by our focus on English literature at the near exclusion of rhetoric and writing. While this system may have helped decades of college professors focus on literature to avoid reading the thousands of papers created by students, it clearly is not benefiting students or highschool teachers.

This problem, however, is not unique to high-school teachers of writing. It is similarly a problem for first-year writing classes, a majority of which are taught by graduate students in literature or non-tenure-line faculty with degrees in
literature, not writing. My attempt in pointing this out is not to condemn these poorly paid instructors but to focus on the system that encourages literature at the expense of writing. If we are going to be serious about writing instruction in this country, we need to realize that the study of literature does not prepare a person to teach writing—and students of all disciplines need to know how to write.

The teaching of writing is difficult. As someone who has been teaching writing for almost thirty years, I still struggle in classes. However, I have millennia of tradition to rely on. I know the many elements that must be considered in writing. I know how to lead students through an investigation of writing’s context, of understanding the rhetorical situation. A quick tutorial in rhetoric cannot compensate for the lack in our secondary English education system. While a few prescient teacher-training programs do focus on rhetoric, these few are not enough. Literature is not rhetoric. Nor is grammar instruction. As a matter of fact, grammatical correctness is a rhetorical strategy, as is grammatical incorrectness. What works for a writer entirely depends on the situation: a writer’s purpose, context, and audience. The educational system needs to recognize the importance of rhetoric and put the time into training all English teachers how to teach writing. Literature is still important as it teaches us about ourselves and our world, but literature ain’t writing—and writing and rhetoric are essential for our students, and for the high-school teachers who teach English.

Further Reading

For more about the evolution of the discipline of English, see James Berlin’s *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900–1985* (Southern Illinois University Press); James Murphy’s three editions of *A Short History of Writing Instruction: From Ancient Greece to Contemporary America* (Routledge); and William Riley Parker’s “Where Do English Departments Come From?” (*College English*). Each of these texts detail the changes in curriculum corresponding to changes in the country, as does Theodor W. Hunt’s “The Place of English in the College Curriculum” (*Transactions of the Modern Language Association*, 1884-85), a primary source that illustrates how the discipline of English was viewed at the founding of the Modern Language Association.

More information about the College Board’s Advanced Placement English Language and Composition Exam can be found at *AP Central* where readers can also find Hepzibah Roskelly’s “What Do Students Need To Know About Rhetoric?” For more on the gap between high school and university instruction in writing, see Robert Tremmel’s “Seeking a Balanced Discipline: Writing Teacher Education in First-Year Composition and English Education” (*English Education*) and John Warner’s “The High School/College Writing Classroom Disconnect” (*Inside Higher Ed*). More on the discussion about the gap between high school and university instruction in writing can be read in the *College Composition and Communication* 2009 Special Symposium, “Exploring the Continuum...Between College and High School Writing,” as well as in Robert Tremmel and William Broz’s *Teaching Writing Teachers* (Boynton/Cook). John Warner’s *Inside Higher Ed* editorial, “I Cannot Prepare Students to Write Their (History, Philosophy, Sociology, Poly Sci., etc...) Papers,” discusses problems with and the limits of writing instruction.

Keywords

secondary English education programs, rhetoric, AP Central, writing pedagogy, first-year writing
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