Mechanical Correctness as a Focus in Composition Instruction

Robert J. Connors

“He that despiseth little things shall perish little by little.”

—Apocrypha

Throughout most of its history as a college subject, English composition has meant one thing to most people: the single-minded enforcement of standards of mechanical and grammatical correctness in writing. The image of a grim-faced Miss Grundy, besprinkling the essays of her luckless students with scarlet handbook hieroglyphs, is still a common stereotype; it is only recently that composition instructors have seriously begun to question the priority given to simple correctness in college-level instruction. What could the forces have been which turned “rhetoric” into “composition,” transformed instruction in wide-ranging techniques of persuasion and analysis into a narrow concern for convention on the most basic levels, transmogrified the noble discipline of Aristotle, Cicero, Campbell, into a stultifying error-hunt? In this essay I would like to examine some of those forces, both cultural and pedagogical, which shaped nineteenth-century rhetorical history and resulted in the obsession with mechanical correctness which for so many years defined the college course in written rhetoric.

During the first fifty years of the nineteenth century, the new nation of the United States was striving to define itself as a culture. Jeffersonian and then Jacksonian democracy had produced an ethic of equalitarianism that extended into all areas of national life, including education and language. During the earlier part of the century, Americans tended to be almost contentious in their rejection of imposed hierarchies of value, and this unique cultural situation was due partially to the American educational structure. In 1831, when Alexis de Tocqueville made his tour of the United States, he saw thousands of public elementary schools but relatively few colleges. As Tocqueville put it, “there is no other country in the world where, proportionally to population, there are

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so few ignorant and so few learned individuals as in America. Primary education is within reach of all; higher education is hardly available to anybody."2

The equality of prospect which Tocqueville marked as the most obvious feature of American democracy was to have several effects upon the national attitude toward language use. Most people were taught reading and writing in elementary school and emerged at the age of twelve or so with all the schooling they were to see; they developed a common denominator of expression. For a time, it seemed that linguistic class distinctions would disappear:

... when men are no longer held to a fixed social position, when they continually see one another and talk together, when castes are destroyed and classes change and merge, all of the words of a language get mixed up too. Those which cannot please the majority die; the rest form a common stock from which each man chooses at random. ... Not only does everyone use the same words, but they get into the habit of using them without discrimination. The rules of style are destroyed. Hardly any expressions seem, by their nature, vulgar, and hardly any seem refined.3

Tocqueville visited a nation in which elementary schools were emphasizing grammar instruction as an abstract "mental discipline" and where only a very few men could aspire to college training—training which led nearly inevitably to the closed circles of pulpit and bar. Such college-educated men were too few and too specialized to provide a real linguistic aristocracy, and thus for a time the common denominator provided by elementary schooling prevailed in language.

Nineteenth-century America, however, was a culture in transition, and the linguistic leveling that Tocqueville reported was slowing even as he published his first volume of Democracy in America. At some point after 1840, the level of common language stopped falling and began to rise as Americans became aware of and concerned about their speaking and writing habits. The reasons for this awakening interest in correctness of usage and the niceties of grammatical construction are both cultural and pedagogical. Culturally, the period 1820 through 1860 was the "American Renaissance," during which there rose a secular literary-intellectual culture in America. For the first time, the New World produced writers and poets who could stand with the best of the Old—and who also wished to stand separate from the old. The "frontier" was being pushed westward, and Eastern cities were developing indigenous intellectual elites. Classes, based both upon wealth and upon education, were beginning to form—and where there is class distinction, linguistic distinctions are not far behind.4

In addition, the character of school instruction in language was also changing. As Rollo Lyman has shown, grammar instruction in the United States became an important aspect of primary education after 1825.5 Lyman calls the period around 1860 "the heyday of grammar," and it is no accident that it coincides with the first great period of American linguistic insecurity. This rise of interest in vernacular grammar had led by the 1840's to a new awareness on
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Americans' parts of the concepts of "correctness" and "grammaticality," fostered by the sorts of exercises in "false syntax" that were central to the grammatical pedagogy of the period. These exercises gave students sentences with grammatical errors that had to be identified and corrected, and nurtured the idea that the main activity one performed with a sentence was knocking it to pieces to prove it bad. This pedagogy led to an insistence on proper usage and grammatical correctness in speech and writing. This new interest seems to have sprung from two distinct proximate causes: the Eastern reaction against the "roughness" and "crudeness" of frontier America, an attitude which wished to set standards of propriety in language as in all other aspects of life; and the desire for self-improvement and "getting ahead," which was an important part of the American mythos during the nineteenth century.

In 1847 there appeared a harbinger of things to come: Seth T. Hurd's self-improvement manual, A Grammatical Corrector. Between 1826 and 1834, Hurd had spent his winters as a "public lecturer" on English Grammar, probably at the Lyceums then coming to popularity. In his capacity as a travelling lecturer—a sort of early Chautauqua figure—he visited "almost every section of the United States." Hurd explained his method thus: "The common errors and peculiarities of speech, which were found to prevail in different communities, were carefully noted down and preserved, not only as a source of amusement (to myself), but for the purpose of correction and comment in the Lecture-room." The epigraph on his title page describes the contents of the Grammatical Corrector better than anything else:

Being a collection of nearly two thousand barbarisms, cant phrases, colloquialisms, quaint expressions, provincialisms, false pronunciation, perversions, misapplications of terms and other kindred errors of the English language peculiar to the different States of the Union. The whole explained, corrected, and conveniently arranged for the use of schools and private individuals.

Painful though it might have been for them, Hurd's audiences in the 1830's were interested in having their "barbarisms" corrected, in being told that "done up brown" was "a very low phrase."

Linguistic anxiety, first felt in the 1840's and 50's, grew stronger in the 1860's, when much of the American intellectual community was inflamed by a small book written by an Englishman. A Plea for the Queen's English, by Henry Alford, Dean of Westminster and a noted British intellectual, appeared in 1864. In it, "the Dean," as he was called by his opponents, attacked much current usage, both literary and popular, striking out at poor pronunciation, wrong words, improper sentence construction, and other "objectionable" misuses of English. The Dean's book raised a number of hackles in England, but to Americans it was a particularly stinging rebuke, for Alford was bitterly anti-American in addition to being a linguistic purist. Dean Alford was wrong about where the deterioration lay, argued his American opponents, but no one argued that it did not exist. In fact, the deterioration of English at the hands
of uneducated frontiersmen was what these Easterners excoriated most violently, building a linguistic base for class distinctions. Richard Meade Bache put the case most clearly in the preface to his *Vulgarisms and Other Errors of Speech* (1869):

> Many persons, although they have not enjoyed advantages early in life, have, through merit combined with the unrivalled opportunities which this country presents, risen to station in society. Few of them, it must be thought, even if unaware of the extent of their deficiency in knowledge of their language, are so obtuse as not to perceive their deficiency at all, and not to know that it often presents them in an unfavorable light in their association with the more favoured children of fortune. Few, it must be believed, would not from one motive or the other, from desire for knowledge, or from dread of ridicule, gladly avail themselves of opportunities for instruction.\(^7\)

More than any of the other early prescriptive philologists, Bache realized that changes in American society itself were behind the interest in correct speech and writing that sold so many of the nit-picking books of Alford and the other prescriptive controversialists. As a result of Alford's attack, William Mathews wrote in 1876, "hundreds of persons who before felt a profound indifference to this subject . . . have suddenly found themselves . . . deeply interested in questions of grammar, and now, with their appetites whetted, will continue the study . . ."\(^8\)

Colleges had always assumed part of the burden of socialization, and during the 1870's they began to react directly to these changing cultural attitudes—at precisely the time when, in one of several profound shifts in emphasis, the professional goals of a college education were beginning to rival the social goals.\(^9\) It was impossible that the college course in rhetoric and writing should be unaffected by these shifts, and beginning in the 1870's we see the focus of writing instruction in America undergo a radical change. Like the rest of the traditional college curriculum, rhetorical instruction was forced to move away from the abstract educational ideal of "mental discipline" and toward more immediate instructional goals.\(^10\) The immediate goals, in this case, came to involve, not more effective written communication, but rather, simple mechanical correctness. Let us examine how this occurred.

From the classical period up through 1860 or so, the teaching of rhetoric in college concentrated on theoretical concerns and contained no material on mechanics at all. Usage and style, of course, were major areas of rhetorical consideration, but traditional prescriptive advice in these areas assumed a student able to construct grammatical sentences and physically indite an acceptable manuscript with complete facility. These were, after all, supposed to be the subjects of the students' earlier course, the grammar course taught by the *grammaticus*, or usher, or master in the boys' school. Such elementary skills as handwriting, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling might be critiqued by the professor of rhetoric, but officially they had no place in rhetoric through-
out most of history. They were thought to be the domain of pedagogues and pedants; rhetoric was a higher mystery, the domain of dons and professors, and it did not degrade itself to attend to mere correctness.

In a sense, the history of the college composition course in America is a history of this heretofore "elementary" instruction's taking over a commanding place in most teachers' ideas of what rhetoric was. Between 1865 and 1895; such elements of mechanical correctness as grammar, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization, which would never have been found in textbooks before 1850, came to usurp much of the time devoted in class to rhetorical instruction and most of the marking of student writing. What came more and more to be taught and enforced was correctness, but, as Albert Kitzhaber points out, "the sort of correctness desired was superficial and mechanical."¹¹ (The word "correct" changed between 1870 and 1910 from meaning "socially acceptable" to meaning "formally acceptable.")

We have already examined some of the general causes of this interest in correctness, but for its direct introduction into the rhetoric course we can also identify a proximate cause: in 1874, Harvard University introduced an entrance examination featuring, for the first time, a writing requirement. When the English faculty at Harvard received this first test of candidates' writing ability, they were deeply shocked. Punctuation, capitalization, spelling, syntax: at every level, error abounded. More than half the students taking these early examinations failed to pass. This could not be borne, and the seventies and eighties saw a good deal of pedagogical change as teachers engaged in the first great wave of college-level remedial English.

The Harvard examinations seemed to pinpoint mechanical problems as the important troubles of freshman writers, and it was natural that such exams would tend to make "error-free" writing the central definition of "good" writing in many teachers' minds. This conception quickly gained great power, and, after 1885 or so, the goal of the freshman writing course came to be teaching the avoidance of error rather than teaching genuine communicative competence. As Kitzhaber points out, this meant in practice that composition had to be taught as series of explicable rules, and that the writing desired from students was writing that violated none of these rules.¹² The rhetorical theory developed between 1865 and 1895 about structures above the sentence level—most importantly, the modes, the concepts of paragraph structure, unity-coherence-emphasis and the methods of development—was all an attempt to govern the written product by rules. The central emphasis in this orientation, however, always remained on application of grammatical and mechanical rules at the sentence level.

It was quickly obvious to writing teachers that the old abstract rhetoric of Blair, Whately, and Day would not solve the problems uncovered by the Harvard examinations. What good, they asked, did knowledge of tropes or amplification do a student who could not spell or punctuate? Beginning in the 1870's, college-level teaching tools of a simpler sort began to appear. New
texts were published which contained simple right-wrong sentence exercises as well as theoretical advice, and during the late seventies college texts began for the first time to include sections on such simple formal elements of writing as capitalization and punctuation. Uncased from its elementary-school framework and its general association with abstract mental discipline, “grammar” began to be introduced to college students in the 1870’s in the hope that somehow a theoretical knowledge of the structure of English would act as a prophylaxis against errors in writing. College teachers turned to grammar out of the idea that somehow students’ elementary grammar instruction had not “taken,” and that it needed to be repeated until it did somehow take hold. This was an essentially incorrect idea. Students failed the Harvard examinations because they had never been asked to do much writing, not because they had failed to grasp their elementary grammar lessons. But once the grammar-based college pedagogy became enshrined in textbooks there was no escaping it, as we shall see.

After the mid-eighties, emphasis on rules and forms constituted a sort of “hidden agenda” in college writing courses. Unlike the doctrines of rhetorical theory in the period, which were all developed in textbooks, the insistence on mechanical correctness in composition courses of the eighties and nineties was not visible in textbooks. The emphasis on correctness was there—as we know from non-textbook sources—but texts hardly mention it, concerning themselves with paragraphs, modes, abstract rhetorical desiderata (e.g., unity, coherence), etc. (See my “Static Abstractions and Composition,” Freshman English News, 12 [Spring, 1983], 1-12.) The fact that college composition was fast becoming obsessed with error was like a shameful secret during this period, mentioned only obliquely.

In examining how this obsession with error affected courses in writing, we must understand that rhetoric teachers at nearly all colleges after 1870 were grossly overworked. We may still have a way to go today before teachers are given realistic teaching loads in composition, but the composition instructors of the nineteenth century faced situations far grimmer. It is difficult for us today to imagine, but the standard practice during the period 1880-1910 was for teachers to be assigned writing courses that were lecture-sized. Most teachers were responsible for teaching between 140 and 200 students. Leaving aside the question of the worth of abstract lecture material to the struggling writer, the large class sizes of lecture-organized sections meant two things: first, that the teacher could give little individual attention to students, even if a large course was split into smaller classes; and second, that the number of papers each teacher was expected to read and grade was staggering.

There are few statements extant today recording the effect on nineteenth-century teachers of having to grade hundreds of papers each week—often more than 3,000 a year—but it must have been exhausting. Fred Newton Scott of the University of Michigan, the greatest rhetorical theorist of the period 1875-1925, was also the most honest and outspoken about the overwork teachers endured: “Now the hungry generations tread us down,” he wrote,
"We hardly learn the names and faces of our hundreds of students before they break ranks and go their ways, and then we must resume our Sisyphean labors."  

We will never know the degree to which this glut of theme-correcting destroyed rhetoric as a scholarly discipline by driving sensitive scholars into other fields—particularly literature—but it must have been considerable.

Faced with this gross overwork and with growing social and professional pressure to enforce "the basics," teachers were forced to evolve strategies to protect themselves from insanity and to get on with their work. We are still seeing versions today of the several strategies evolved by the writing teachers of the late nineteenth century to cope with those conditions. At some point between 1870 and 1900, the teacher as commentator on the general communicative success of a piece of student writing—form and content—was succeeded by a simplified concept: the teacher as spotter and corrector of formal errors. Skill in writing, which had traditionally meant the ability to manipulate a complex hierarchy of content-based, organizational, and stylistic goals, came to mean but one thing: avoidance of error.

Since merely scanning a paper for formal and syntactic correctness is a rather mechanical act, far more students' papers can be passed through such a mechanism in a given period of time than can be passed through a full editorial reading, with its time-consuming demand for complete attention to all levels of style, form, and meaning. The writing teachers of the 1880's and 1890's, faced with a reading task that was essentially impossible, were forced to substitute rapid scanning for errors in place of full readings. They came to see this simple correcting procedure as what they were expected to do. They "corrected" and graded the 170 themes a day or the 216 themes a week, and rationalized this sort of reading by claiming that they were giving students what students really needed most. The work was demanding; it took time; it was onerous—but it was not impossible, as genuine reading would have been. Faced with killing work levels, teachers had to give something up; what went, unfortunately, was rhetoric. The new emphasis upon mechanical correctness grew out of the furor over "illiteracy" we have discussed, but also out of the understandable need of teachers to somehow deal with their huge stacks of student themes.

The mechanical grading and evaluation that teachers were being forced into invited mechanical support systems, usually in the form of systems of rules to which students could be referred. These systems of mechanical rules were increasingly found in specialized textbooks. The obvious answer to the problem of how to enforce mechanical correctness of papers was a new sort of textbook, one that would explain and exemplify the sorts of rules that teachers were increasingly asking their students to learn and practice. Through the last quarter of the nineteenth century several attempts to find the form for such a book were made, none of them completely successful. The first truly popular correction book was Edwin A. Abbott's 1874 manual How To Write Clearly: Rules and Exercises. This book, which went through 25 printings between 1874 and
1914, is the earliest recognizable prototype for all the "handbooks of composition" that came after it. "Almost every English boy can be taught to write clearly," said Abbott, "so far at least as clearness depends upon the arrangement of words. . . . Clear writing can be reduced to rules."16 How To Write Clearly contains 56 rules, most of them dealing with sentence construction and style, many of them similar to certain of today's handbook prescriptions.

Though books copying Abbott's approach were not quick to appear, textbooks in the new century became predictable and derivative, and materials on mechanical correctness became more popular. Finally, in 1907, there appeared a new sort of textbook, the logical culmination of the move toward rule-governed composition that had been going on since 1875: the modern handbook of composition. The first handbook was Edwin C. Woolley's Handbook of Composition: A Compendium of Rules. Woolley provided in a primitive form nearly all of the elements that make up today's handbooks: it dealt with punctuation, spelling, legibility, and sentence structure. The Handbook saw no element of writing as beneath its scope.

With the Handbook, Woolley began the handbook era, initiating a new sort of writing text that would quickly come to be at the heart of most college writing courses. Since the first Woolley Handbook, composition pedagogy has been transformed as the texts shaped the writing courses; the handbooks, always the favorite texts of untrained writing teachers, exerted a great, although often hidden, influence. The twenty years following the Woolley Handbook might be called the time of the Great Handbook Boom. Between 1907 and 1927 at least fifteen different handbooks were published. As important as the numbers of handbooks, however, were the changes that the handbook form was causing in the rhetoric texts of the period and the broadening of the purposes of the handbooks themselves. Beginning around 1910 we see much more material on mechanical correctness in rhetoric texts. Clippinger's Illustrated Lessons, Foerster and Steadman's Sentences and Thinking, Young and Young's Freshman English all reflected a novel emphasis on lower-level elements of mechanical correctness: punctuation, spelling, grammar. Clippinger in 1912 actually included a separate handbook section in his rhetoric—probably the first such conjunction. During this period, textbooks based on the old tradition of rhetorical theory in composition virtually disappeared.

In "Handbooks: History of a Genre," I have discussed how the handbook of Woolley, intended for home use, grew first into a book of rules and exercises and then into a full-scale textbook meant for use both at home and in class: the rhetoric-handbook (Rhetoric Society Quarterly, 13 [Spring, 1983], 87-98). Woolley and Scott's College Handbook of Composition in 1928 marked the first rhetoric-handbook; it extended the handbook's emphasis on mechanical organization and algorithmic rules into all aspects of rhetoric. The derivative rhetorical theory of the period became even more formalized and abstract, even more removed from the actual process of communication, so that it became the most reductive form of current-traditional dogma. By the 1920's there was little rhetorical theory not influenced by handbook approaches.
Beret of a theoretical discipline and a professional tradition, teachers during this period had nothing to turn to for information about their subject—except their textbooks. After 1910, composition courses were increasingly staffed by graduate students and low-level instructors. Writing teachers became as a result the only college-level instructors who know no more of their discipline than is contained in the texts they assign their students—a sad pattern that still, alas, continues today at too many schools. Especially influential on such teachers were the handbooks, which after 1930 assumed a larger and larger place in the pedagogical scene and eventually became the single most important element of stability in the entire composition course. Writing in 1941, James McCrimmon identified the reasons behind the growth of popularity of handbooks: their role in transmitting values. Since most composition teachers by this time were untrained graduate students without experience, McCrimmon stated, they had no idea what besides the handbook to teach:

Little wonder that in such a sea of confusion [the new teacher] clings to his handbook as a shipwrecked sailor clings to his raft, and by an interesting human weakness, soon comes to believe that these rules, which only yesterday were unknown to him, are the sole criteria of good writing.17

Forty-two years later, the phenomenon remarked by McCrimmon, though rarer, is still with us.

The main purpose of handbooks, in theory at least, was to be support systems for instruction that was still supposed to be rhetorical: to produce student essays that would be read by the teacher. Following closely behind handbooks, however, were their dark siblings: drillbooks and workbooks, which introduced completely a-rhetorical practice in error-recognition and sentence-construction into the college writing course. Porter Perrin's voice was one of the few raised in protest against the workbook approach:

These exercises obviously violate the lone principle that present teachers of composition have salvaged from the 2500 years of the discipline of rhetoric, that one learns to speak and write by speaking and writing. . . . Why do we adopt them? Well, they're easy to handle: like every popular "advance" in pedagogical method, they are ultimately easier for the teacher. . . . We find a comforting certainty in grading exercises in the most elementary conventions of the language that is a great relief in a field where so little is certain, where the real work is eliciting variables in a growth. We may realize that these absolutely certain elements are few and are the least, or at any rate the lowest, factors in style. But we cannot help breathing more freely as we pass from the sand of better-or-worse to the pavement of supposed right-or-wrong.18

Perrin could certainly understand the weakness that made teachers turn to drillbooks, but he could not condone it. His was the first voice in a rising chorus of criticism of the status quo in college composition that began in the 1930's.

But some scholars and theoreticians of the discipline began to question the practices of the great mass of classroom teachers. They began during the thirties to bring together some of the research that had been going on since the
teens; studies of errors in writing, of remedial techniques, of the efficacy of grammar drill were all scrutinized, and all these studies pointed to the conclusion that the popular sorts of classroom grammar drills were essentially futile as attempts to improve student writing.¹⁹ Linguists, educationists, and rhetoricians thus began to struggle against the overwhelmingly mechanical classroom methods of the time. Eventually, through the forties and fifties, the reaction against mechanical emphases in the standard composition course began to grow strong. Rhetoric, which had been dormant within composition since the 1890's, began to make a reappearance after 1944, when the first communications courses were taught at the University of Iowa. Communications courses quickly spread to other schools, bringing together scholars from English departments and Speech departments (where Rhetoric had been housed in the first third of the century) for the first time since the tragic split between the disciplines that occurred in 1914; such courses taught all four of the "communications skills"—reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Rhetoric was a vital part of these courses, and many English teachers learned for the first time what some of the alternatives to mechanical correctness might be.

That successful communication and not mere grammatical correctness is the central aim of writing was novel and exciting to English scholars of this time; they once again began to investigate the great traditions of rhetoric; the newly-formed Conference on College Composition and Communication became the professional vehicle for this movement away from composition as learning and following rules of grammar. Beginning around the late forties, we hear voices raised in plaintive criticism of the methods of brother teachers both past and present. Porter Perrin, who had been a soldier in the rhetorical trenches for over twenty years, spoke in 1951 of the years 1900-1935 as "a conspicuously narrow era of instruction" which showed "a general surrender of the broad aims that have made the study [of rhetoric] great to a concentration on minutiae of usage (actually a triumph of grammar over rhetoric)."²⁰ And Barriss Mills, in his seminal "Writing as Process" of 1953, strongly condemned the "police-force concept of usage" that still prevailed in most classrooms. "Nothing is more blighting," wrote Mills, "to natural and functional written communication than an excessive zeal for purity of usage in mechanics."²¹ This revolt gathered strength during the fifties, and during the early sixties theorists and teachers everywhere were actively—and sometimes heatedly—discussing the purposes and methods of teaching composition. The reign of mechanical correctness, which had largely depended on teachers' continued ignorance, was threatened.

I need not, I think, rehearse here the disputes of the last two decades over such issues as whether to practice formal marking, to correct "themes," and to teach grammar, and the issue of how to teach revision. On the one side are the theorists, the rhetoricians, the proponents of writing as discovery or communication; on the other are the traditionalists, the front-line teachers, the proponents of writing as vocational skill. Both sides make valid points, and if the
rhetoricians often get the best of the abstract arguments, the traditionalists can still point to savage overwork as an occupational reality for many writing teachers—a reality that makes real rhetorical instruction difficult or impossible. A teacher with 100 papers to grade in a weekend, say the traditionalists, cannot possibly respond effectively to each one as communication—and they are right.

The enforcement of standards of mechanical correctness is not, I think, a tradition that can—or should—die out of composition instruction. Mechanical errors, as Mina Shaughnessy says, are “unprofitable intrusions upon the consciousness of the reader” which “demand energy without giving any return in meaning”; helping students overcome their own unintentional sabotage of the process of communicating their thoughts is certainly an important part of our work. But it is not all or even a major part of our work. Striking a balance in our teaching between formal and rhetorical considerations is the problem we now face, and it is a delicate one. We cannot escape the fact that in a written text any question of mechanics is also a rhetorical question, and as a discipline we are still trying to understand the meaning of that conjunction. We may spend the rest of our professional lives investigating how the balance between rhetoric and mechanics can best be struck—a difficult question, but one heartening to see asked. The fact that we are confronting such questions shows that composition studies are finally coming to constitute a genuine discipline and are no longer a mere purblind drifting on the current of unexamined tradition.

Notes

1. Tewksbury lists 54 American colleges extant in 1831; this was just prior to the great Protestant college-building boom of the period 1830-1850. See Donald G. Tewksbury, The Founding of American Colleges and Universities Before the Civil War (New York: ‘Teachers’ College, Columbia University, 1952), pp. 32-54.


3. Tocqueville, Democracy in America, p. 480.

4. It is no accident that around this time we also see the beginnings of dialect humor in the Sam Slick books, the writings of Artemus Ward, etc.


10. For information on this movement, see Lawrence R. Veysey, The Emergence of the American University (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 1-20, 57-118.
15. This is illustrated by "a private letter by a teacher in an Eastern University" quoted in George R. Carpenter, Franklin T. Baker, and Fred N. Scott, *The Teaching of English in the Elementary and Secondary School* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1903), in which the anonymous author says, "I have never done any rhetorical work at __________ except in connection with my courses in literature, and I thank God I have been delivered from the bondage of theme-work into the glorious liberty of literature" (p. 329n).

It was early obvious that the lecture-sized class was the wrong sort of setting for composition, but nineteenth-century administrators, as many today still do, turned their backs on the obvious evidence of overwork and mediated instead on the bottom line. Seminar-type writing courses seem never to have been considered, but some schools were wealthy enough or had prestigious enough faculty members so that their writing courses were taught as "laboratory" courses. John Genung at Amherst led this movement most obviously. These first laboratory-type courses were not much different from regular classes except in their numbers—Henry Frink, the freshman teacher at Amherst, had five assistants for a class of 110 students—but numbers were so important that a movement in favor of composition as "laboratory work" became very vocal and had by 1900 gained some power. If composition is truly laboratory work, said Fred Scott in 1895, "why should it not be placed on the same footing as other laboratory work as regards manning and equipment?"

Such support, despite outcries from teachers, was not rapidly forthcoming. In 1911, the NEA and NCTE organized a committee to investigate the labor involved in composition teaching. Edwin M. Hopkins, chair of this committee, said in his first report that "composition teaching has been described as a 'laboratory subject' for a fairly long time," but that adequate conditions had never been provided for such teaching and only existed, when they did, as "the result of a fortunate chance." The Hopkins Committee Report, issued in 1912, put their findings bluntly:

Under present average conditions, English teachers are assigned more than twice as much work as they can do. Some of them try to do it by working more than twice as much as other teachers do. This is wrong, because it disables them. Others do only what they reasonably can and let the rest go. This is wrong in another way, because it is an injustice to the pupil and a waste of his time. . . . Under present average conditions of teaching English expression, workmen must choose between overwork and bad work; between spoiling their material or killing themselves. . . . (Edwin M. Hopkins, "The Labor and Cost of Composition Teaching: The Present Conditions," *Proceedings of the NEA*, 50 [1912], 750.)

This report was the first shot in an NCTE campaign to lower class size in writing courses, a campaign that has lasted into our time. Conditions began to improve after 1915; by that time, however, teachers had been set in pedagogies shaped by the bad old days.
