Geometrics and Words+Authors Response

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Recommended Citation

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Comments

This article was originally published in *College English*, volume 44, issue 1, in 1982.

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On the other hand, programs like the Bay Area Writing Project and its spin-offs can and do deal competently with real students and their attempts to write well. Mina P. Shaughnessy's milestone *Error and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) provides strong mental armament for the war on illiteracy. Most recently, the "Garrison Method," as exemplified in Charles W. Dawe and Edward A. Dornan's *One-to-One: Resources for Conference-Centered Writing* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1981), provides English teachers with probably the best writing *model*—if that's the word—available. With Garrison, Dawe and Dornan share an easily understood premise: Students learn how to write by writing. What makes their book an exciting one is that their approach is fruitful and painless. Conference-centered writing is going to be around for quite some time, for as James Moffett remarked, "The most natural assumption about teaching any symbol system should be that the student employ his time using that system in every realistic way that it can be used, not that he analyze it or study it as an object" ("A Structural Curriculum in English," in *TLLR*, p. 329). Any composition model which does not incorporate clearly that natural assumption can hardly be a lasting one.

At last, here's a quote from Noam Chomsky's letter to me dated 1 May 1981: "I can appreciate your reaction to the efforts by linguists and others to browbeat teachers. I've written about it myself, earning few plaudits from my colleagues, for example, in a paper at the Northeast Language Conference about fifteen years ago."

So don't go blaming any of that linguistically oriented, rhetorical model stuff on Noam Chomsky.

Don K. Pierstorff
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Dorothy Augustine Responds

Given some key concepts in my essay, I find myself in the graceless situation of interpreting what I wrote by disclaiming the intentions the reader assigns to me in what he supposes I wrote, or wishes I had. I will try to address Professor Pierstorff's particulars in the order in which they first appear.

1) Professor Pierstorff is perfectly correct about my not defining the term "model." Nowhere in the essay do I include "model" in a genus and then mark its differentiae. I believe that is what Pierstorff means by "definition," for he gives us an example of his term, just as I gave illustrations of mine. I had no trouble at all understanding his meaning, and I wonder if he was not diverted in his computations of boxes and circles from appreciating mine.

Model-builders nowadays (historians, physicists, economists, etc., and philosophers and linguists too) generally go about the task of conceptual analysis by asking three questions, which I'll put in the context of the essay in question.

—What is the nature of composing?
—How do I analyze composing? What are the steps and terms of my procedure?
—What is the meaning of composing, and how do I get to that meaning?

With that heuristic in mind, may I suggest that the essay does a fair job of

analyzing what it is that the competent writer does, with the model as a feature of that analysis. I repeat that my conclusions may be wrong, dead wrong, but let us begin discussion by agreeing on what in the essay I asserted to be true for linguistic models, that they are hypothetical constructs of reality.

2) In referring to Searle's position on the link between philosophy and linguistics, I quoted an authority in both disciplines, one of the best, to support my own views. I took it for granted that a reader would know that argument is the philosopher's stock in trade and that students of language have not yet elected Professor Searle their spokesman. I might have included statements on the subject from half a dozen others, including Chomsky, who agree with Searle on this point. I did not want to air or settle a debate, however; I just wanted to pull some credibility into what otherwise might have been construed as an arbitrary crossing of research lines. Professor Pierstorff is free, of course, to disagree with Professor Searle, but I wish he had told us why.

3) Pierstorff comes close in his remarks on ideality to understanding one of the terms in the essay, and then sabotages his whole effort. Indeed I do count on there being an ideal writer, or as I designate him or her, the competent writer. My subject is the composing process; would he have me describe the pre-literate, non-literate, a-literate, half-literate? How would we presume to teach writing if we did not have an ideal in mind? Why does Pierstorff teach writing unless he shares some notion of the ideal writer with his students? I can assure him they have one in mind. To quote a

teacher-writer both of us admire, "the difficulties of the so-called remedial student [are] the difficulties of all writers, writ large" (Shaughnessy, p. 293) It seems logical to me to describe competency first, the better to decipher what is written large or small in any writer's efforts to be understood.

The parade passed a long time ago on this point, but I'll drum it by again: A linguistic model attempts to describe the mental reality underlying behavior, not the behavior itself. In the essay I make no promise about the capacity of the model for generating a lecture on how to write. I was concerned with what every competent writer "knows," not with what every student writer will necessarily "learn." I am talking theory, Professor Pierstorff, not course objectives. I am saying "perhaps," not "assign theme." Everyone knows, twenty-four years after the publication of *Syntactic Structures*, that a description of a "grammar" never taught anyone "language." But such models can certainly instruct us in our work as researchers and teachers. A stated rationale for writing the paper that I did is that we are already swamped with behavioral how-to's, prescriptions, protocols, and confessions-of-a-writing-teacher, with various prolegomenas and summary statements and sundry statistics on the literacy "crisis," swamped to the point where I, for one, am no longer instructed by them. Hence the tack my research took. Professor Pierstorff wants another solution to his teaching problem. I want to find out what a writer does in composing, partly out of curiosity and partly out of our profession's need to describe competency so that we can assess not only the "solutions" to the problems of writing but

our understanding of the problems themselves. Judging student writing as illiterate is not a description of a problem; saying so-and-so's teaching methods are fruitful and painless is simply a variation on my-old-man-can-whup-your-old-man.

4) The complaint that linguistic research stops at the boundaries of the sentence and therefore is of small significance to the rhetorician's study of discourse always seemed to me to have a shaky foundation, but now such complaints are made obsolete as well. Format does restrict a bibliography here, but anyone interested in the subject might begin reading with the volumes published so far in the series *Discourse Processes: Advances in Research and Theory*, edited by Roy O. Freedle (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex).

5) As far as writers learning to write

by writing or there being no correlation between writers' formal knowledge of grammar and their rhetorical proficiency, I couldn't agree more. And I can't see that I implied otherwise in the essay.

I had thought that my semi-precious title and long introduction would inhibit or reduce any knee-jerk responses to my method or thesis. In that, Professor Pierstorff proved me wrong. But now that I have gone through some terms and categories a second time, perhaps Professor Pierstorff will offer some substantive argument or difference of opinion and, to end with another metaphor on anatomy and perception, quit looking at my finger while I'm pointing at the moon.

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