

ONCE MORE TO THE ESSAY: PROSE MODELS, TEXTBOOKS, AND TEACHING

Robert L. Root, Jr.

Along with “rhetorics” and “handbooks,” anthologies of prose models or “readers” have long been standard texts in first-year college composition classes. Most publishers in the field offer a variety of formats to choose from—reader in both massive and brief editions, rhetoric alone, rhetoric with handbook, rhetoric with readings, or a combination of rhetoric, handbook, and reader. In addition they may provide auxiliary services: diagnostic tests, computer software, overhead transparencies, quizzes, and skill drill exercises. Such a mix-and-match potpourri suggests that any number of possible—and equally effective—approaches to the teaching of composition are available, a pluralistic marketing approach that often contradicts composition research and theory. Textbooks play an important role in maintaining and sustaining traditional models of teaching and writing; in training beginning teachers of composition in classroom activities, assignments, and attitudes; and in habituating novice writers in ways of approaching both self-motivated and teacher-generated composing. Instead of simply accepting that role for textbooks, composition teachers need to examine the contents, premises, and assumptions of the textbooks we adopt or are assigned to teach.

In spite of frequently infusing more contemporary authors and readings into their anthologies, much of the current textbook and reader field still reflects the long-established tenets of current-traditional rhetoric. Robert J. Connors has

demonstrated that much of what we identify as current-traditional rhetorical practices in the composition classroom dates back to the nineteenth century, when they were “sheerly invented out of the whole cloth of personal observation, supposition, and selective plagiarism” by A. S. Hill, John Genung, and Barrett Wendell in their influential textbooks (187). In the period 1900–1930, Connors notes, similar popular textbooks were the chief source of a teacher’s background in composition instruction. “Composition was the only college-level course consistently carried on by people whose only real training came from the rules and tenets found in the textbooks they asked their students to buy” (190). Connors paints a more optimistic picture of our own time, when composition teachers are better trained and a quarter century of intensive composition research has provided a sounder theoretical underpinning for textbook production. Nonetheless, current departments of English still assign composition classes to members trained in literature research rather than in composition pedagogy, program-wide adoptions of texts at many schools still are chosen to reach consensus of diverse and fractious departmental interests, and the training that graduate assistants receive still is being offset by the hiring of unprepared tenured and temporary faculty. We need, as Kathleen Welch has claimed, “to recognize the probability that the textbooks are instructional material more important for the writing teacher than for the writing student” and that they “act as persuasive places where new teachers of writing are trained and where experienced ones reinforce the training” (“Ideology” 271). She argues:

When only one successful textbook sells 50,000 copies in one year, and when each year hundreds of textbooks are in print and used ones remain in circulation, the power of the books—the effective, intelligent textbooks as well as the superficial, numbing ones—becomes difficult even to imagine. The power of the written word dominates change in the teaching of writing. (“Counterstatement” 237)

Moreover, even if little concrete data on actual classroom pedagogy has been gathered to confirm or deny the influence of

textbooks and the extent to which they guide teaching practices, Lester Faigley argues that “they do reflect teachers’ and program directors’ decisions about how writing should be represented to students” and adds that the choice of a textbook must be considered significant “when teachers answer with the name of a textbook when asked how they teach writing” (133). Since textbooks can stay in service for a very long time through multiple editions with often only superficial or cosmetic revisions, the most successful—and therefore the most widely disseminated—textbooks continue to endorse pedagogical practices that many critics claim lag considerably behind contemporary composition research (Clifford; Gould & Gould; Rose; Stewart).

Most of this critical attention has been given to composition rhetorics, which are the site of explicit prescriptions and models of composition, but considering the popularity of “readers”—anthologies of articles, essays, book excerpts, and occasionally fiction, poetry, and drama—in composition courses, the assumptions that underlie composition readers also need examination. As a means of exploring those assumptions, I reviewed the ways a random selection of college composition anthologies presented the same essay to its readers. I chose to focus on “Once More to the Lake” by E. B. White, an essay widely admired among those familiar with the essay form and frequently reprinted in both college readers and trade collections on the history of the essay. Because it is so well-known and so widely admired, I thought a comparison of the ways anthology editors use the essay would be revealing of the ways these readers handle all material.

Written in 1941 as an entry in White’s monthly column for *Harper’s*, “One Man’s Meat,” it tells how the narrator, accompanied by his young son, returned to the lake where he and his family had vacationed regularly in his youth and how the occasion, by contrasting his presence as a father of a son with his earlier experience as a son himself with his own father, made him recognize the cycle of life he is a part of and feel the eventuality of his own death. The essay is admired not only for the treatment of the theme but also for the author’s ability to draw a universal realization from a particular experience, his vivid, lively descriptions, and his clear, direct and engaging

prose style. According to Donald Murray, "All nonfiction writers in our time have been students of [E. B. White's], whether they know it or not" (347). For well over half a century, the editors of composition anthologies have steadily provided opportunities for student writers to study his writing and for teachers to assign it for imitation and analysis. In 1959 John Wesley Fuller reviewed forty randomly selected composition anthologies published over the previous ten years and found work by White in thirty-two of the volumes (2-3). Over thirty years later my own random selection of forty-one recent collections found "Once More to the Lake" reprinted in twenty-four anthologies.

My survey of those anthologies compared the ways they classified or categorized "Once More to the Lake," the study apparatuses and contextual backgrounds they connected to it, the suggestions for student writing they made, and the rationales underlying the designs of the collections. While it may have been naive to expect considerable consensus about how and why to teach this long-established staple of college composition readers, I was nonetheless disturbed at the degree to which the textbooks presented the essay in seemingly arbitrary and even idiosyncratic ways. Concerned as a writing teacher with the ways anthologies of readings foster student growth in writing, I was dismayed to find the treatment of the essay not only counterproductive to effective student writing but also often misleading or narrowly restrictive in presentation of the work itself.

Classifying "Once More to the Lake"

The problems arise at once in the tables of contents. The twenty-four collections I examined were organized in one of four ways: by rhetorical mode, genre, or pattern of development; by theme or topic; by author; or, in only one case, by stages of the composing process. However, because it is a given of composition anthologies that they should be flexible enough to accommodate several different approaches among teachers who assign readings, most of these readers offered alternative tables of contents, reclassifying the readings in other ways. No matter what the principal scheme of organization

centered on, only two of the twenty-four offered no rhetorical grouping whatever, even in an alternative table of contents, while only one-third offered no thematic groupings of any kind. Having suggested these alternatives, the anthologies then proceed to address the contents only in terms of the primary classifications.

The difficulties of categorization are described in the introduction to the second edition of one of the author-centered anthologies. In its first edition the editors had "struggled to make a stylistic organization [but] a year after deciding on our organization, it was no longer clear why essay X was to be studied for its sentences, essay Y for its paragraphs," forcing them to conclude that "no piece of real prose is ever so pure as our systems of classification"; to demonstrate the "flaws" of thematic organizations, they ask, "Is E. B. White's theme, in "Once More to the Lake," Mortality? Aging? Youth and Age? or, How I Spent My Summer Vacation?" (Hall, vi-vii). Nonetheless, along with their alphabetical listing these editors still provide a Rhetorical Index which places the essay under three different modes, two patterns of development, and one genre.

Of the twenty-four readers I examined, sixteen (two-thirds) were organized around rhetorical categories in their primary tables of contents, including modes of discourse dating back to Alexander Bain. Of those sixteen, three classified "Once More to the Lake" as narration, four as description, one as exposition; one identified it as a personal essay, one as a classic essay, one as autobiography; one used it in a category for "remembering" and another for "elaborations" while yet another simply placed it in "Further Reading." Three more votes for narration came from alternative listings in a thematic reader, an authorial reader, and the process reader; two thematic readers identified it as "autobiography," and one authorial reader labeled it both reflection and comparison/contrast.

Several texts place the essay in more than one category, confounding the labeling: for example, *Themes and Variations*, which identifies it in the primary table of contents as "expository," also catalogues it in an alternative table of contents under "Narration," "Comparison," "First Person

Perspective," and "Point of View" (but not under "Reflecting" or "Description"). The editors of *The Bedford Reader*, who identify it in the text as "Description" only, admit in the instructor's manual (where student readers won't encounter it) that the essay is "too marvelous to be a reasonable model for student writers" and "exhibits a whole array of rhetorical methods: description, narration, exemplification, comparison and contrast, definition (of a familiar American experience)" (Kennedy, *Instructor's Manual* 17); however, because in their view "in nearly every paragraph, description predominates," "Suggestions for Writing" attached to the essay ask for descriptive pieces only.

In all of these books, the rhetorical category in which the essay falls depends on the editor's concept of what rhetorical categories are—modes, genres, patterns of development, or combinations of the three—but few of the editors acknowledge that range of classification to the student. Regardless of the complexity of the essay, most editors tend to design their writing suggestions to encourage composing activity in the specific category in which it appears in the table of contents.

As with rhetorical categories, the editors of these anthologies are divided about the themes of "Once More to the Lake." Only three collections are expressly thematic in organization, but two-thirds of the entire number offer alternative thematic listings, often placing the essay under several different themes. In those fifteen thematic listings, it appears under "Autobiography" (four times), "Nature" (five), "Childhood" or "Children" or "Family" (five), "Self-Discovery" (four), "Mortality" (six), "Sports and Leisure" (three), "Places" (three), "Humor," "Relationships," and "Love and Brotherhood" (one time each). Perhaps predictably, in many of these anthologies "Once More to the Lake" is omitted from categories into which other anthologies place it—*Essay 2*, for example, lists it under "The Threatened World of Nature" but not under "Growing Up American" or "With Family and Friends"; *Read to Write* lists it under four different headings but not "Autobiography" or "Death"; *The Rinehart Reader* lists it under "A Sense of Time" but not "Americana," "The Self," or "Relationships: Family and Friends." Such inclusions and omissions, when surveyed in this fashion, demonstrate how the

arbitrariness of such classifications, whether thematic or rhetorical. Clearly such classifications, so demonstrably contradictory, misdirect the student's attention to the essay by making it representative of a narrow category rather than interactive with the reader.

Apparatuses

While classifications are suggestive of ways student readers should approach composition readings, a study apparatus likely guides them to engagement with the selections. Although some anthologies simply try to engage the student in dialogue about the readings or suggest "lines of inquiry," as one text puts it, most anthologies have a study apparatus that attempts to lead the student to understand a work in a certain way or to notice certain features it displays. The apparatus suggests the way the editors have perceived their audience and the purpose to which they are putting the readings. Gould and Gould have suggested that college readers ought to be evaluated on criteria "highlighting features that might foster those proficiencies of active reading discussed by Bleich, Rosenblatt . . . and other prominent theorists" (204–5). In addition to explaining the reasons people read, explaining and guiding students through the reading process, and providing engaging selections, they argue that "[q]uestions for discussion following readings should engage deliberate critical response and should proceed according to a coherent developmental sequence" (207).

But, disregarding the anthologies' role in writing instruction for a moment, their role in reading instruction is often superficial and undeveloped. Some books see their goal as the training of functional readers and focus on such low-level reading skills as vocabulary and dictionary exercises—*Essay 2* sends students to the dictionary for words like "gunwale," "helgramite," and "flywheel" and asks them to explain how words like "placidity," "remote," "indelible," and "languid" "cluster around or relate to the central theme of this essay" (Guth 492); *The Responsible Reader* asks students to explain the way certain words ("dragonfly," "cultist," "fade-proof") "depend on [their] context for strength" (Ziff 97). Others seem

to assume experience in close reading and stylistic analysis, sending the students in search of evidence of diction, tone, metaphors, images, figurative language, parallelism, and repetition, engaging composition students in the same kinds of literary analysis found in introductory literature anthologies.

Textual analysis seems to be assumed to lead to interpretation of the author's intentions, motives, and strategies. For example, a number of the texts ask the student reader to explain the meaning of White's essay, but the texts have their own interpretations of its main idea or theme or thesis. One editor who asks that question in the apparatus of the anthology answers it in the instructor's manual (for the instructor, not for the student) by claiming the main idea of the essay is that even as we relive cherished experiences of childhood and see our behavior and feelings repeated in the next generation, we cannot stop or reverse time to escape our own mortality (Aaron, *Instructor's* 16). Another editor writes, "This essay touches on a universal human feeling—the sensation that time is slipping by, that our lives are spinning out their allotted spans every moment of the day" (Nadell 108)—roughly the equivalent to the previous statement.

However, other questions are more idiosyncratic. How can a student answer a question like the following: "In what sense is White's essay a parable? What does he gain by presenting his 'thesis' in this way rather than by presenting it directly?" (Winterowd 311), a question that assumes (alone in twenty-four texts) that the essay *is* a parable. What do you suppose the editor had in mind who asked: "In what part of his body did White feel the chill of death? In the context of this essay, why is this such an appropriate place?" (McCuen 401) or "When do people first become aware of their own mortality? What events or phases of life heighten this feeling?" (Nadell 108) or "Why is his son never described?" (Miller 98) or "What assumptions does White make about his audience?" (Miller 98). A number of hidden assumptions about writing, symbolism, and White's life are lurking in these questions. In addition to the customary demand to read the author's mind, the student must also be able to read the editor's mind.

It is small wonder then that, when asked about the apparatuses accompanying their reprinted essays, Richard

Selzer once claimed, "I read those questions and collapse in mad laughter"; and Gretel Ehrlich said, "When those anthologies come in, we get drunk and ask each other the discussion questions, laughing like hell." It is not only that, as X. J. Kennedy has observed, "the fallacy is in thinking that the author knows what he means," but also that there is a fallacy in thinking that the editors can lead students to the meaning (Ehrlich).

In texts which supply study questions, too little seems to be made of the vagaries of reader response. For example, Donald Murray tells of a student who, after reading the essay, "violently complained" that White was "too New Yorkish, too WASPish, too Eastern" and who subsequently led Murray to conclude that

perhaps we should read White as an ethnic writer and appreciate the qualities of his upper-middle-class, suburban-New York, East-Coast, white, Protestant background. They should not be seen, as they were for too long, as the model for us all, but as an interesting—and often imprisoning—way of life. (353)

Murray seems rather to have missed the point of his student's idiosyncratic reading of the essay—whatever the essay may be about, it hardly seems like evidence of an "imprisoning way of life" and Murray's ethnic pigeonholing distances the reader from the possibilities of connecting to it. Rather, the student's response illustrates the difficulty that arises when we do not expect readers to bring a set of preconceptions to their reading and when we are not provided with a means to deal with them in all their variousness; instead we fall back on two less attractive alternatives, either insisting that they conform to the editor's preconceptions or acquiescing to their (perhaps equally) idiosyncratic reading as a legitimate form of response for everyone.

The editor's own response determines the nature of the questions asked and the answers expected. Often the questions reveal the degree to which the editor is dependent upon her own explication of the text rather than a sufficient background in it. For example, one editor asks, "Why does White return to

the lake in Maine he had visited as a child? Why do you think he has *waited to revisit it until he has a young son to bring along?*" [my emphasis](Nadell 107). Clearly the editor has a specific answer in mind, one that ties in with her interpretation of the text. In terms of simply decoding the essay, the answer to the first question is one that White gives in its opening paragraph: that "the restlessness of the tides and the fearful cold of the sea water and the incessant wind that blows across the afternoon and into the evening make me wish for the placidity of a lake in the woods" (*Essays* 197). But the answer to the second question seems not to be because his son "had never had any fresh water up his nose" (197). In other words, the editor has begun to see the essay as a contrivance, an artifice with little relation to experience.

Similarly another editor asks: "Why do you imagine White returned to the lake with his son rather than taking a friend along or even going alone? . . . *What purpose does his son's presence serve?*" [my emphasis] (Ziff 97). She seems to assume that the son's presence is not an historical fact but merely a literary device by which White can pull off this exercise in "remembering" or "self-discovery," the classifications she gives the essay. In either case, clearly the questions direct the student toward the concerns and the interpretation of the individual editor rather than toward a universal agreement about the essay's "meaning" among editors or toward a reliable strategy the student might use with similar essays.

Providing a Context

Study questions that ask the student to guess the motivations behind the author's inclusions of information or choices of language and style not only invite them to commit the intentional fallacy but also divert them from understanding the circumstances under which the work was actually composed by an essayist addressing a certain kind of reader on a certain occasion under certain conditions. David Tedlock has bemoaned the lack of attention in anthologies to the author's original audience, arguing that by omission they "misinform students about how writers recognize and write to particular audiences" (212-13). Indeed, a great deal about the

circumstances of composition is omitted, perhaps because, as Tedlock asserts, "too many of us still approach composition as literary scholars, for whom the text is a timeless creation, rather than as writers working at particular times" (216). Often in these texts the attempts to inductively lead the student reader to discover the "strategies," "methods," "techniques," or "purposes" of a specific text seem to draw on imaginative interpretations of authorial intention—in other words, on current-traditional models of textual analysis. As Kathleen Welch has complained, "published texts show us on every page, with every justified margin, that writing requires no context . . . that famous writers do not set up their work and that they do not think about context" (273). The strategies and methods that emerge in textual analysis are treated as readily adaptable, almost fool-proof techniques, and ignore the evidence that, as Laurence Behrens has observed, "E. B. White's meditations on democracy, on humor, on progress and change . . . draw on years of experience, of absorption of reading and sense impressions, of professional training and discipline" (565). The sense of a context for "Once More to the Lake" is one of the most obvious omissions in the readers I surveyed.

As the evidence of White's own collection of letters and of Scott Elledge's biography make apparent, White began going to the Belgrade Lakes resort in 1904, when he was five years old, and returned to it often throughout his life. He wrote about it in the journal he kept as a child, in the self-published "travel brochure" he wrote for a friend in 1914, and in letters to Harold Ross in 1927, to his older brother Stanley White in 1935 or 1936, and to his wife Katharine on 24 July 1941, during the trip that produced the essay. At the time of the trip White was forty-two years old and his son Joel was ten. White was then living on a salt-water farm on the coast of Maine and writing a monthly department for *Harper's Magazine* entitled "One Man's Meat" in which he often explored personal and timely experiences. In none of those columns, which eventually included "Once More to the Lake," nor in any of his literary writing does he ever mention his son or his wife by name. "Once More to the Lake" was written within weeks of the Belgrade Lakes trip with Joel, in order to meet his column's August 1941 deadline; it

appeared in *Harper's* two months later, on schedule, in October 1941 and was reprinted in White's hard-cover collection, *One Man's Meat* in 1942. The same version appears in *The Essays of E. B. White*, published in 1977, from which all but one of the anthologies surveyed reprints it.

The range of information provided about White and the composition of "Once More to the Lake" varies markedly among these anthologies. The most thorough introductions are in collections organized around authors; *In Depth*, for example, has a four-page overview of White's writing, and *Modern American Prose* has a three-page introduction—since they are introducing several selections they are not necessarily focused solely on this essay, but they tend to give the reader a more thorough background on White than the other anthologies. In most other cases head notes tend to be biographical and bibliographical, frequently with some sort of critical evaluation of the essay or White's career or an introduction to the essay itself. The details vary greatly, but generally the head notes say little about the circumstances of White's column, and some never mention either the magazine or the original book collection. Since the essay is almost always reprinted from *The Essays of E. B. White* (1977), the dateline "August 1941" (sometimes printed as part of the title) usually indicates when the essay was written.

Most of the head notes mention White's books for children or his career at *The New Yorker*, but are generally sketchy about his career as an essayist. *Readings for Writers* claims "he wrote a number of essays for the section called 'The Talk of the Town' in *The New Yorker*. Some of these essays have been collected in *The Wild Flag*; it also mentions such other works as *Is Sex Necessary?* and *Here is New York* (McCuen 394), while ignoring *Essays*, *The Second Tree from the Corner* and *The Points of My Compass*, where White collected the kind of writing *Readings for Writers* is reprinting. (*Wild Flag* is a collection of editorials; *Is Sex Necessary?* is a humorous collaboration with James Thurber.) Such odd emphases suggest that the titles cited have been selected at random. *The Rinehart Reader* shows even less familiarity with White's work, insisting that White not only revised but also retitled William Strunk's *The Little Book* as *The*

Elements of Style (the title it always had), an odd and embarrassing piece of misinformation.

If the head notes are only occasionally more than perfunctory, the texts themselves provide little context for the process of White's writing. Only a third of the readers surveyed have additional material by White as well as the "Lake" essay. Of those eight, only three author-centered readers collect those pieces in one grouping; four of the others scatter additional essays in other categories and one simply follows the essay with an excerpt from a letter. Some of the additional pieces are themselves excerpts rather than entire essays—"The Ring of Time" is reprinted whole in only one of eight readers in which it appears; "Three NYs" is an excerpt from *Here is New York*. One reader cites and reprints White's letter to Stanley White about the lake in a section on the writing process, two hundred pages before the actual essay (Bloom *Lexington*). Only one of the eight readers includes drafts of a text White carried through the composing process, a piece written twenty years later, after White had retired and his composing process had changed; it is offered as a general model of the composing process (Hunt 6-10).

Suggestions for Writing

Given the lack of attention to composing processes that led to the composition of this essay, it should not be surprising that the focus of "suggestions for writing" in the anthologies I surveyed was most often either generic or imitative. The assignments frequently encourage the student to compose in a specific rhetorical pattern or mode using White's essay as a model. Consider the following example:

A high point of White's essay is the thunderstorm on a summer afternoon. Write your own description of a similar age-old natural event running its course—a blizzard, the first big rainstorm of a rainy season, a hurricane or the like. (Guth 493)

Clearly the assignment means to limit the writing narrowly to description. The contradiction lies in using as a model a work

that is not merely descriptive; White's description of the thunderstorm serves several purposes, including establishing the timelessness of such experiences as much as vividly recreating them. Moreover, White had recently experienced the thunderstorm when he wrote about it; the assignment assumes that students have well-stored and accessible detailed memories of "age-old natural events" like hurricanes which they can readily draw upon. It also assumes that students who successfully complete the assignment will be able to transfer their success at this piecemeal project to other work of their own. White's own thunderstorm description, however, is not prefigured in earlier works or drawn upon in later writing; it is generated solely to serve that essay.

Similarly, since the term "informal essays" is only introduced in the same editors' head note to "Once More to the Lake" and explained as essays that often "start with an account of everyday happenings but lead to more general thoughts or reflections . . . [and] have a light touch and a leisurely pace but nevertheless lead into a serious discussion of human life" (487), there is considerable challenge in an assignment such as the following: "Write an informal essay about a place, person, or event from the past whose memory continues to play a role in your thoughts or in your life" (Guth 493). How does the student interpret "an informal essay," as a specific literary form or a general description? How does the student dredge up a "place, person, or event from the past whose memory continues to play a role in [his or her] thoughts or . . . life?" Do such necessarily exist for the student? Does the student really want to share that information? What does "play a role" mean to the student writer? Such assignments have a number of assumptions underlying them that the student might not share.

The most common "suggestion for writing" is one calling for the students' own versions of "Once More to the Lake," recalling places they've visited twice, describing family vacation spots, identifying moments when they were "forced to think about mortality" (Nadell 108) or events "that marked [their] moving into adulthood" (Murray 353). Here the writing process is inverted, beginning with a description of the end product to be produced rather than with the writer's own experience. For example, one assignment instructs the student:

Give new meaning to an everyday event, as does E. B. White in "Once More to the Lake." Choose something that happened to you or that you participated in—at home, among friends, or on campus. By providing ample detail, as does E. B. White, you can make the familiar seem new and revealing. (Winterrowd 312)

Rather than follow White's own process of recording an experience that has personal meaning for himself and which perhaps consequently gave new meaning to an everyday event to others, students are asked to find something to give new meaning to—a challenge to the student far greater than that White himself faced.

Or, consider the following assignment:

Think of a favorite childhood vacation place and describe making a return visit now, bringing with you a younger brother, sister, son, daughter, or friend. The return visit may be either real or imagined, but be sure to describe the differences you observe and to comment on their significance both to you and to the person you have brought with you. (Wyrick 205)

White's experience, of course, was not imaginary, not just an exercise in writing, not an occasion to "pretend" he was living through an experience and to "make up" differences he can "imagine" observing—how do you comment on imaginary significances to imaginary persons on an imaginary trip and still be writing nonfiction? The circumstances of such assignments often contradict the ends they hope to achieve; the best the student can hope for is to write a good imaginary essay. Moreover, by focusing on the kind of essay they take it to be, in terms of either genre or theme, such assignments divert the student writer from attending to the processes through which the essay came into being, or adapting those processes in composing her own essay.

Rationales

Generally the suggestions for writing confirm William Woods' assertion that "Imitation is the rationale for anthologies: 'Read, analyze, and do likewise!'" (403), yet what the readings are meant to do may be more complicated than that. Many of the text features noted are influenced by the rationales behind the readers themselves, the goals their editors set out to achieve; these determine the focus of the apparatus, the design of the structure, the nature of the suggestions for writing. The premises upon which these texts are constructed vary widely, from the desire to teach critical reading to the desire to teach the essay as a literary form, yet the rationales they present to the students generally tend to echo one another. As one editor summarized readers: "You read in a writing course for three purposes. First, readings are a source of information Second, readings offer a perspective on a particular subject . . . [and] can serve as catalysts or stimuli to provoke writing Finally, readings offer models to a writer; they show you how another writer dealt with a particular subject" (Miller 1).

The argument for using the text as a source of reading is best represented by claims that "writing develops from reading: people who read effectively and widely will either write well already or be able to learn to write well" (Winterowd 1) and that reading "stocks the mind with information, understanding, examples, and illustrations" and "when you have a well-stocked mental warehouse, you tell truths, even small and ordinary truths" (Kennedy 2). The belief that reading serves as a stimulus for writing leads one editor to reassure students that "you will not be expected to duplicate these examples, but to mine them for ideas and inspirations that will help you to clarify your own thoughts and feelings for expression in prose" (Taylor ix); another asserts that "reading others' ideas can introduce you to new information, open your mind to new associations, give you new perspectives on your own experience . . . [it] reveals subjects for writing" (Aaron 1). Faith in the efficacy of models inspires one editor to testify that "the experience of carefully reading an excellent writer, noticing not only what the writer has to say but also the quality of its saying,

rubs off (if you are patient and perceptive) on your own writing" (Kennedy 2); another claims, "Each essay offers proven rhetorical designs that you can store away in your 'model-chamber,' ready at hand whenever you have a verbal edifice to construct" (Cooley 3). The balance among these principal rationales ostensibly determines the emphasis of the text itself.

However, in actual practice these foci are not the only determinants of the text. One team of editors assert of their anthology:

The selections will—because of their quality and timeliness—be eminently enjoyable to students and useful to instructors.

Seven short stories have been added to aid those instructors who teach short fiction in their composition courses. The argumentation section has been greatly expanded, and on three topical issues—the death penalty, liberal education, and bilingual education—paired essays present the opposing sides of arguments. Eight writers are represented by two essays each. We have been particularly conscious of maintaining a balance between male and female writers: forty percent of the selections in the second edition. . . are by women. (Heffernan vi)

Sorting through the motives behind this kind of selection process—to meet the demands of several different pedagogies, various political positions, and a range of philosophies—the reader may suspect that there is no real book here at all. Given that principle of selection, the place of an essay like "Once More to the Lake" in the student's education as a writer becomes even more problematical.

Once More to the Essay

While there seems to be considerable agreement about the reasons students should be assigned readings in a composition course—at least among those who edit composition readers and probably among those who assign them—there is little consensus about what kind of reading White's essay is and

what students ought to be gaining by reading it and using it as a stimulus to their own writing. But it is not merely a question of how composition anthologies treat "Once More to the Lake," although the essay may serve as an indicator of how other essays and articles are handled, or whether (as some people have suggested to me) the profession has gone on to newer, more contemporary concerns in composition readers. For one thing, the recent resurgence of interest in literary nonfiction, particularly the essay, has brought a revival of the personal essay and the memoir, of which this remains a potent and influential example. For another, anthology editors and publishers, perhaps reinforced by anthology assigners, still include it for teaching in new anthologies and newer editions of older anthologies—pulling off the shelf books I've received since starting work on this essay I find "Once More to the Lake" in four of the first six anthologies I come to with 1994–1995 copyright dates, including the following: the fifth edition of a book I have already cited in its third edition, published six years earlier with virtually identical comments and apparatus; a new thematic collection of readings on the environment (it is in the "Spirit of Place" section); and two new collections explicitly devoted to essays (under "Exploring Events" in one and "Establishing an Identity" in another). More important, in these brand-new collections, just as in many of the others I have examined earlier, I discover many essays by other authors repeatedly reprinted—in *Writing Exploratory Essays*, for example, White's essay appears under "Exploring Events" with essays by Alice Walker and George Orwell, is cross-listed with the Walker essay and one by Kesaya E. Noda in "Childhood and Growing Up," and then omitted from the "Cultures" listing in which Walker, Noda, and Orwell appear in. Given the repetition of material from book to book, we can focus the kind of comparison I've been doing here on any number of essays and articles.

The issue is larger than the teaching of E. B. White, because it applies across the board to any number of more contemporary, more argumentative or referential, and, yes, more multicultural essays. The moment editors select an essay for theme, structure, composing strategy, or style, or for the author's gender, ethnicity, or orientation, they skew reader's

responses towards a specific set of limited readings, channeling the interpretations readers are expected to give the work in order for it to exemplify the purposes it was selected to exemplify. More important, the moment teachers select a text because it exemplifies what they expect or require it to exemplify, they are accepting the limits the anthologies put on student readers' interpretation. Maybe that is what they intend to do, but, to paraphrase Robert Frost, before I put limits on the ways I ask my students to interpret an essay, I'd ask to know what I was closing in and what I was closing out, and whether I want those barriers erected in the first place.

It may be argued that, regardless of the rationale behind the text and the apparatus that supports it, the teacher has the freedom to ignore all that and simply use the essay to meet his own goals in the course. No doubt many teachers do exactly that, and one of the values of such anthologies is the wealth of good reading and good writing they offer. But because these texts do have so much agreement about their underlying rationale and because they are continually tested against the expectations of the classroom teachers who adopt them—that is, revised to be more marketable to a demographically-specific audience—I assume that a considerable number of teachers do use the organization and study aides in these anthologies as a means of organizing and administering their classes.

There has been a long tradition of doubting the value of anthologies to promote the development of writing skills. James Moffett has objected that models such as "Once More to the Lake" "merely intimidate some students by implying a competition in which they are bound to lose" (208); like many composition specialists, he has found no evidence of their effectiveness. Greenbaum and Schmerl, objecting to the assumption that, "if a student reads and is exposed to well-written prose, he will, as when exposed to the flu virus, catch a little of it," similarly argued against such rationales, claiming they were "the same theories that produced McGuffey's Eclectic Readers in the last century" (Greenbaum 58). More recently, after surveying the research on the relationship between reading models and composition, Hillocks found that research projects attempting to prove the efficacy of models in composition instruction routinely ended up with statistically

insignificant results. The best that Hillocks could say of the connection was that “while the study of models alone has a relatively weak effect on the quality of writing, and while treatments emphasizing procedural knowledge have very strong effects, we know little about the combination of the two” (238) and his research concluded that “although research indicates that emphasis on the presentation of good pieces of writing as models is significantly more useful than the study of grammar . . . treatments which use the study of models almost exclusively are less effective than other available techniques” (249). In the texts in this survey, the attention to published essays as part of a study of writing procedures is minimal; only Donald Murray’s *Read to Write* can be said to use the readings to exemplify aspects of composing processes. Rather my survey supports Kathleen Welch’s observation: “Of the hundreds of pounds of freshman writing books produced each year, few are constructed with any overt indication that composition theory has ever existed” (269).

The attempt to teach critical reading may be valuable for readers; the attempt to apply literary approaches to nonfiction prose may be worthwhile for young literary scholars and critics; the attempt to provide a text for a course in the essay may be attractive; but none of these attempts do very well at getting at the center of the composition course—the student’s own writing. Despite claims of teaching students to read with “the writer’s eye” or to discern composing strategies through textual analysis, only a handful allow the student to apprentice herself to a specific writer, only a handful allow the student to approach the readings as a real reader might, only a handful present a context that helps the student understand the process by which that exemplary work came into being; all model analysis of the published text instead of the process that leads to the text, and few offer the possibility that real writing—writing that serves the writer’s needs and purposes, the kind that produced “Once More to the Lake” in the first place—will come out of the students. As Kathleen Welch argues, “[N]o writing textbook will work if it is not made secondary to continuous text production by class members” (279).

If writing teachers see the composition course as primarily a course in the students’ own writing rather than a course in

literature, multiculturalism, argumentation, or reading in which writing also occurs, then they need to recognize that being able to use these texts (rather than contravene them) requires them to examine the assumptions not only of the textbook editors but of the teachers themselves. In doing that they might consider the following:

- Decide first the kinds of writing and the kinds of writing development you want your students to experience; then design your syllabus around those things. Readings then are supplemental to writing, not central to the course.
- Ask yourself what you specifically want your students to get out of the readings, and try to identify readings that specifically illustrate or instruct them in what you want them to know. Shop for the anthologies on the basis of whether they have those readings or their equivalents, and then examine them to make certain they don't misdirect your students through classifications, apparatuses, contexts, and rationale.
- Consider ways of reversing the connection between readings and student writing, making reference to the readings when it helps students with what they need in their own writing rather than asking them to fashion their own writing to come out of published writing that met someone else's needs. I imagine a day when student writers themselves identify the readings that most helped them with their own writing—if you could make an anthology or course-pack like that in your own courses, you might have the most viable substitute for the commercial collections of readings.
- Ask yourself each time you give time to readings in class how that discussion was more helpful than having students deal with their own writing in small groups or in conference with you.

As Dennis Rygiel has pointed out, "the use of nonfiction in a composition course is not automatically a good; the decisive factor is what teachers have students do with the prose and how they have them do it" (392). Composition instructors ought to consider just how certain composition readers can help produce real writing in the classroom before they provide room in their syllabi for going, once more, to the essay.

WORKS CITED

- Aaron, Jane E., ed. *The Compact Reader: Subjects, Styles, and Strategies*. 3rd ed. Boston: Bedford, 1990. 71-78.
- Anderson, Chris, and Lex Runciman, eds. *A Forest of Voices: Reading and Writing the Environment*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1995.
- Behrens, Laurence. "Meditations, Reminiscences, Polemics: Composition Readers and the Service Course." *College English* 41 (1980): 561-574.
- Bloom, Lynn Z., ed. *The Essay Connection: Readings for Writers*. 2nd ed. Lexington, Mass: Heath, 1988. 90-99.
- Bloom, Lynn Z., ed. *The Lexington Reader*. Lexington: Heath, 1987. 232-237.
- Burt, Forrest D., and E. Cleve Want, eds. *Invention & Design: A Rhetorical Reader*. 4th ed. New York: Random, 1985. 133-141.
- Clifford, John. "The Subject in Discourse." *Contending With Words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Age*. Ed. Patricia Harkin and John Schilb. New York: Modern Language Association, 1991. 38-51.
- Clifford, John, and Robert DiYanni, eds. *Modern American Prose: A Reader for Writers*. New York: Random House, 1983. 211-220.
- Connors, Robert J. "Textbooks and the Evolution of the Discipline." *College Composition and Communication* 37 (1986): 178-194.
- Cooley, Thomas, ed. *The Norton Sampler: Short Essays for Composition*. 3rd ed. New York: Norton, 1985. 385-391.
- Elledge, Scott. *E. B. White: A Biography*. New York: Norton, 1984.
- Ehrlich, Gretel, Robert Fogarty, X. J. Kennedy, and Richard Selzer. "Writers and Their Works: An Extended Opportunity for Conversation." Conference on College Composition and Communication Convention. Chicago, 23 March 1990.
- Eschholz, Paul, and Alfred Rosa, eds. *Outlooks and Insights: A Reader for Writers*. New York: St. Martin's, 1983. 528-534.
- Faigley, Lester. *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1992.
- Fuller, John Wesley. "Prose Styles in the Essays of E. B. White." Diss. U of Washington, 1959.
- Gould, Christopher, and Kathleen Gould. "College Anthologies of Readings and Assumptions about Literacy." *College Composition and Communication* 37 (1986): 204-211.

- Greenbaum, Leonard, and Rudolf B. Schmerl. *Course X: A Left Field Guide to Freshman English*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970.
- Guth, Hans P., and Renee Hausmann Shea, eds. *Essay 2: Reading with the Writer's Eye*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1987. 487-493.
- Hall, Donald, and D. L. Emblem, eds. *A Writer's Reader*. 2nd ed. Boston: Little, 1979. 441-448.
- Heffernan, William A., and Mark Johnston, eds. *The Harvest Reader*. 2nd ed. San Diego: Harcourt, 1991. 62-69.
- Hillocks, George, Jr. *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching*. Urbana, IL: ERIC, 1986.
- Hunt, Douglas, ed. *The Dolphin Reader*. Shorter Edition. Boston: Houghton, 1989. 587-593.
- Kennedy, X. J., and Dorothy M. Kennedy, eds. *The Bedford Reader*. 3rd ed. New York: Bedford, 1988. 110-118.
- Kennedy, X. J., Dorothy M. Kennedy, and Jane E. Aaron, eds. *The Bedford Reader*. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1994.
- Klaus, Carl H., Chris Anderson, and Rebecca Blevins Faery, eds. *In Depth: Essayists for Our Time*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1990. 704-709.
- Lutz, William, and Harry Brent, eds. *The Critical Reader: Responding Through Writing*. New York: Harper, 1990. 300-308.
- McCuen, Jo Ray, and Anthony C. Winkler, eds. *Readings for Writers*. 6th ed. San Diego: Harcourt, 1989. 394-402.
- McQuade, Donald, and Robert Atwan, eds. *The Writer's Presence: A Pool of Essays*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1994.
- Miller, George, ed. *The Prentice Hall Reader*. 2nd ed. Annotated Instructor's Edition. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1989. 90-99.
- Murray, Donald M. *Read to Write: A Writing Process Reader*. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton, 1990. 347-354.
- Nadell, Judith, and John Langan, ed. *The Macmillan Reader*. 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1990. 100-109.
- Rose, Mike. "Sophisticated, Ineffective Books: The Dismantling of Process in Composition Texts." *College Composition and Communication* 32 (1981): 65-73.
- Rygiel, Dennis. "On the Neglect of Twentieth-Century Nonfiction: A Writing Teacher's View." *College English* 46 (1984): 392-400.
- Smart, William, ed. *Eight Modern Essayists*. 5th ed. New York: St. Martin's, 1990. 80-86.
- Stewart, Donald. "Composition Textbooks and the Assault on Tradition." *College Composition and Communication* 29 (1978): 171-76.
- Strang, Steven M., ed. *Writing Exploratory Essays*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 1995.
- Sullen, Idelle, Edith Karas, and Raymond Fabrizio, eds. *The Inquiring Reader with Exercises*. 3rd ed. Lexington: Heath, 1979. 48-53; 451-452.
- Taylor, Ann M, ed. *Short Model Essays*. Boston: Little, 1981. 236-243.
- Tedlock, David. "Orwell's Anti-Fascists: Read Readers, Not UNCLES." *College Composition and Communication* 37 (1986): 212-16.
- Welch, Kathleen E. "Counterstatement." *College Composition and Communication* 39 (May 1988): 237-238.

- Welch, Kathleen E. "Ideology and Freshman Textbook Production: The Place of Theory in Writing Pedagogy." *College Composition and Communication* 38 (1987): 269-282.
- White, E. B. *Letters of E. B. White*. Ed. Dorothy Loblano Guth. New York: Harper, 1976.
- White, E. B. "Writers on the Writing Process: A Letter from E. B. White." *The Norton Sampler*. 3rd ed. Ed. Thomas Cooley. New York: Norton, 1985: 410.
- Winterowd, W. Ross, and Charlotte Preston, eds. *Themes and Variations: A College Reader*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1985. 300-312.
- Woods, William F. "Composition Textbooks and Pedagogical Theory 1960-1980." *College English* 41 (1981): 393-409.
- Wyrick, Jean, and Beverly J. Slaughter, eds. *The Rinehart Reader*. New York: Holt, 1989. 199-205.
- Ziff, Linda, ed. *The Responsible Reader*. New York: St. Martin's, 1988. 90-98.