

# TEXTBOOK WRITERS AND TEXTBOOK PUBLISHERS: ONE WRITER'S VIEW OF THE TEACHING CANON

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Textbook publishing is a specialized and mysterious kind of business—in some ways as mysterious as trade publication. However, unlike the trade business, textbook publishing is geared to an unusually specialized market, a market that chooses books not for individual use but for use by groups of students. It is a market that is, as a result, surprisingly inflexible on the one hand, because we continue to teach from books we know well, even when somewhat dissatisfied with them. It is remarkably unpredictable on the other hand, because we grow tired of teaching from “well-worn” books, instantly it seems.

For writers, compilers, or editors of textbooks, the challenges and constraints are notable. First of all, senior editors at major houses like Harcourt Brace; Holt, Rinehart and Winston; Houghton Mifflin; Little, Brown; McGraw-Hill; Norton; Prentice-Hall; Scott, Foresman; and St. Martins must develop textbooks for their lists that promise to sell, because their companies are, after all, in the business of selling books to make money. They cannot afford to produce a composition book whose approaches are unusual if college teachers will not buy it. They cannot afford to publish an

essay-reader if it does not provide the balance of authors and selections that will make it successful in the current market. They cannot afford to market anthologies that serve an audience that is too narrow. They cannot afford to keep works of literature—those favorites that have become the “textbooks” of our literature classes—in print if they do not regularly sell, and sell well.

*Specialized, inflexible, yet unpredictable*—these words describe well the market for textbooks. *Successful*, when seen in financial terms, is the word that most honestly describes the works that textbook companies want to develop and publish. But how do textbook companies bring these two elements together? How does the business orientation of textbook publication affect authors, compilers, and editors? How do decisions made in the offices of major publishing houses affect us as college teachers of composition and literature? And most importantly for this discussion, how do the decisions of authors and editors—based on the assumed contingencies of the marketplace—help to establish a loose equivalent of a canon?

My work with publishing firms may not be wholly representative—hence the subtitle “One Writer’s View”—but as an example it may shed some light on the teaching canon of composition texts and the reading canon of essay-readers and anthologies.

I began my work with publishers as a graduate student at the University of Illinois, commenting on manuscripts and book proposals in written reviews and in discussion groups at meetings like CCCC. For stipends, I continue to review book manuscripts and respond to questions posed by authors as well as editors. What do they want to know?

In review questions for composition texts—rhetorics, rhetoric-readers, handbooks, casebooks, and workbooks—certain topics surface repeatedly, with one question assuming understandable dominance: “Are the elements of composition sufficiently covered?” From my comments, which naturally compare a manuscript with texts that I know, and the comments of other reviewers, patterns, of course, emerge. Composition books must treat prewriting, thesis, audience, organization, content, revision, sentences, usage, diction—and even mechanics.

The patterns of the past, mercifully influenced by current research in composition, have created a recognized and accepted

set of principles to be discussed. An author would be very brave or very foolish to ignore the assumed teaching canon of composition; and an acquisitions editor would be very cavalier to offer a contract to an author whose book did not fit these implicit but very specific guidelines.

Is there room for new or varied approaches within these constraints? Yes—and no. In matters of style, presentation, and design, there is certainly a great deal of freedom—as current books suggest. Books that are formal and theoretical succeed, just as informal and practical books do. After all, thousands of college teachers, working with students of varied abilities, will choose books to suit their different needs and teaching styles. And yet the rhetorics on the market today, even with their differences, remain remarkably similar.

Let me give an example of how these similarities emerge. In working on *The Beacon Handbook* for Houghton Mifflin, I was given great freedom regarding *how* I presented materials, but I had limited choices in *what* materials to present. I was able to incorporate “written-in” changes in sentences, to replicate the messiness of revision; I was able to include paragraph-length samples for student work with revision, to provide important practice in a context. I was able to use student samples rather than professional ones to illustrate methods of paragraph development.

But I wasn’t given much freedom on what key sections to include. At the draft manuscript stage, for instance, I did not include a section on spelling. I felt, and still do, that lists of commonly misspelled words serve little real purpose and that spelling rules for English have so many exceptions that they are essentially valueless for most students. My editors pointed out the omission of a section on spelling, however, listened to my rationale, and suggested that we wait for reviewers’ comments. As they expected—and as I suspected—twelve of fourteen reviewers noted that spelling was not treated. As a result, a section on spelling is now in the text. I had the freedom to present the section as I wished, certainly, but I did not have the freedom to omit it. Such is the nature of textbook publishing: a traditional teaching canon *has*, in fact, been established, and ignoring teachers’ expectations—even with secondary sections like spelling—is not worth risking potential sales, either for an author or for a publisher.

If we turn to a sub-market of composition—the essay-reader—

we can see a similar but somewhat varied set of expectations. The primary questions for assessing a reader are these: "Are the readings appropriate? Is there enough variety in the selections?" I, and other reviewers no doubt, look for a representative sampling of periods, a mix of selections by male and female authors, a sense of ethnic diversity, a variety in the lengths of the selections, and a combination of traditional selections and new ones. These elements, which serve as points of comparison with other essay-readers, affect my responses to a manuscript, even before I consider the pedagogical apparatus that it contains. What surprises me, although perhaps it should not, is the sameness of textbooks of this kind.

Let me illustrate this point with a bit of informal research. Several years ago, the editors at Prentice-Hall asked me to consider doing an essay-reader. I did not eventually pursue the project, but to prepare for meetings at Englewood Cliffs, I examined twenty readers then on the market—all, by the way, still in print. What I discovered offers insights, I think, into the established canon of current essay collections:

The titles of the most frequently used essays will seem as familiar to you, no doubt, as they did to me:

- Bruce Catton's "Lee and Grant: A Study in Contrasts"
- Joan Didion's "On Going Home"
- Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail"
- Jessica Mitford's "To Dispel Fears of Live Burial"
- George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" (surely the most often reprinted essay in this list of exceedingly popular works), "A Hanging," and "Politics and the English Language"
- Alexander Petrunkevitch's "The Spider and the Wasp"
- Judy Syfers' "I Want a Wife"
- Mark Twain's "Two Ways of Seeing a River"
- Tom Wolfe's "O Rotten Gotham—Sliding Down into the Behavioral Sink"

Add to this list of most-often-used essays the names of authors who seem to appear in almost all of the essay-readers, even though specific selections vary:

- Maya Angelou, Isaac Asimov, James Baldwin, William F. Buckley, Jr., John Ciardi, Arthur Clarke, Loren Eiseley, Fran

Lebowitz, Margaret Mead, Neil Postman, Richard Rodrigues, James Thurber, Alvin Toffler, and E. B. White.

What do these repeated selections, as well as repeated authors, suggest? What do they tell us about essay-readers in particular and compilers, editors, publishing companies, and teachers in general?

First, they tell us that textbook publishing is in some respects derivative, imitative. That should come as no surprise, really, because one company will naturally try to capitalize on the successes of another. And nothing is easier than including in an essay-reader works successfully incorporated in an already established book. It is simply a matter of requesting permission from an author or publisher to reprint a selection, writing a sizeable check (once a work becomes popular, the permission fee naturally goes up), and sending a printed version to the compositor—often photocopied from the competing book.

Second, repetition tells us implicitly which combinations of selections are popular with teachers and successful with students. After market analysis, the results can be quite explicit:

The Kennedys' *Bedford Reader*, for instance, has a 14% market share.

Trimmer and Hairston's *Riverside Reader* garners 13% of sales.

McKuen and Winkler's *Readings for Writers* has an 11% share of the market.

Decker's *Patterns of Exposition* has 8%.

Eastman, et al's *Norton Reader* accounts for 8% of essay-reader sales.

The fact that these five books account for over 50% of the market for essay-readers is important on at least one level: it suggests what the best combinations of selections are, helping to establish a canon for at least this kind of textbook.

Third, repeated selections and authors tell us that publishing houses—like other businesses that sell products—give us what our purchases indicate that we want, not what we say in reviews, in journals or in personal comments. As a reviewer of manuscripts, I have grown tired of seeing “On Shooting an Elephant” and “The Spider and the Wasp,” and I say so in my comments. I ask why

compilers of readers cannot find a new narrative piece or a new essay to illustrate process analysis. Yet as long as teachers order essay-readers with these selections, these selections will undoubtedly continue to appear.

So far, I have addressed teaching materials for composition texts and selections for essay-readers in terms of marketing, rather than in terms of theoretical, critical, or aesthetic assessments. That is no accident—no unreasoned omission.

In fact, critical assessments *do* play a part in textbook writing and editing, but they become important only when they influence sales. Most composition books, for instance, include a variety of prewriting heuristics, not only because authors and editors are strongly committed to these methods of discovery, but also because the market now demands them. When strategies for teaching composition change—and they surely will—many of the heuristics presented in textbooks today will be dropped—without guilt, without remorse, without hesitation.

The same pattern, of course, is true in regard to essays in readers. The standard canon of yesterday's essay-readers—readers most easily represented by early editions of *The Borzoi Reader*—included many fine pieces, pieces noted for their style, for their intellectual vigor—in short, for their aesthetic and critical value. The first edition of 1966, for instance, included these selections:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The American Scholar"
- Sigmund Freud's "Instinct and Civilization"
- an excerpt from Albert Camus' *Reflections on the Guillotine*
- Bertrand Russell's "The Committee of 100"
- Walter Lippmann's "The Nature of the Battle Over  
Censorship"
- Thomas de Quincey's "The Literature of Knowledge and the  
Literature of Power"

If the canon of essay-readers were, in fact, determined by critical or aesthetic judgments, these fine works would be included still. Yet they are not. Instead, essays like these have been replaced with essays by Woody Allen, Carl Sagan, Andy Rooney, and other popular writers. My point is not to denigrate the works of contemporary writers, for their essays have value for today's students and teachers, but rather to suggest that the reading canon of textbooks is more flexible, more varied, and less rigorously evaluated

than the literary canon. In part, this occurs because editors are more market conscious when they publish essay-readers than they have to be when they publish anthologies or independent pieces of literature. Compilers and editors change selections, quite simply, to keep pace with the times, and few editors, I suspect, mourn the loss of an Emerson, Camus, or Russell.

My comments may suggest that textbook publishing creates a narrowly conceived canon, and in some respects it does. Yet modifications within the teaching canon of composition texts and the established canon of essay-readers *do* occur, and the influence on college teaching can be positive. As a result of the early successes of a few process-centered composition books, almost all rhetoric texts are now informed by recent research—as heavy revisions of even standards like McCrimmon’s *Writing with a Purpose* have illustrated. The surprising initial response to the *Little, Brown Handbook*, with first edition sales of well over 100,000 copies, jarred the handbook market; and handbooks, including my own, now include much broader coverage than did handbooks of fifteen years ago. Essay-readers now include a much wider range of authors—including, of course, more women and minorities. In a sense, publishers have followed the lead of scholar-teachers in these areas, but publishers only modify texts when sales (or the possibility of lost sales) require them to. But when the market begins to change, and the textbooks with it, even the most intractable of teachers must inevitably follow. Think, for instance, of writing teachers who even today remain product centered in their work with students. What books could they possibly use? I can think of no major books that would allow such teachers to remain locked into an outmoded strategy for teaching writing. Publishers it seems cannot afford, in terms of either reputation or finances, to lag behind when changes in focus are signaled by sales.

As a writer of college textbooks, I have at times felt controlled by my publishers. The research chapter of *Sharing Ideas*, my first book, was dropped because Holt’s market analysis suggested that the division into which the book logically fell did not require a section on research. In preparing *Resources*, a research casebook for Houghton Mifflin, I was asked—translate that as *told*—to reduce the interdisciplinary readings from an original 350 pages to a final 250 pages. These decisions were, for all practical purposes, out of my control.

Yet as a pragmatic writer and teacher, I have adjusted to what might seem—on one level at least—the dominance of publishing firms. However, I must honestly acknowledge that the editors and marketing people at Holt and Houghton Mifflin have at their disposal more information about textbooks sales and market needs than I could hope to have. My choices of what material to include and how to include the material, in short, depend on personal preferences and instinct; theirs depend on systematic evaluation. As the compiler of interdisciplinary readings, I searched for an ideally broad range of selections, while the editors at Houghton Mifflin wanted to see a reasonably broad range of selections that could be—importantly—incorporated in a book of moderate size and price. Their sense of practicality, then, won out over my sense of thoroughness.

These comments shed some light, I hope, on the world of textbook writing and textbook publishing. They reflect, of course, my special perception of the relationship among authors, editors, classroom teachers, and—by implication—students.

A critical issue which we must remember is that the publishing industry follows the marketplace, and through our book orders, we college teachers can create change. The current focus of current rhetoric texts illustrates that change will come if we indicate, through our book orders, that we want change. When we continue to order the same books, however, we create stability within the market, as the long-standing sales of Norton anthologies illustrate.

Our choices of textbooks, consequently, empower us. What we choose to order determines what is successful in the market. And what is successful in today's market determines what will appear in future books. We signal, through our choices, which texts will appear in new editions, and we determine how writers, compilers, and editors will proceed in their future work. Collectively, we *are* in a position of considerable power, and textbook writers and textbook publishers must, of necessity, follow our lead. Quite simply, together we determine what is written and what is published—and establish our own teaching canon.

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