

Textbook review for *inReview*
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Trimbur, John *The Call to Write*, (brief edition) New York: Longman, 2002 768 pages

OK, I admit it; I'm promiscuous when it comes to composition textbooks. There is no programmatic directive on textbook choice, except that it be a text that helps to meet the objectives of the course. So, every semester or two, bored or disillusioned by my current textbook choice, I skim through a number of books, hoping to find that one true love—a text that is grounded in the rhetorical theories in which I believe, and that offers students information sufficient to help improve their critical writing, reading, and thinking skills while being engaging enough to keep those students reading the text. Having just gone through that selection process again, I am poised to start my rhetorically based first-year writing course with "someone" new. This year, I'll begin using John Trimbur's *The Call to Write*, Brief Second Edition (Longman, 2002) because I've "fallen in love" with its strong rhetorical foundation, the wide variety of genres it offers, and its foci on visual rhetoric and online communication. My call to write this book review—"the felt sense that something needs to be said" (xxxv)—comes then from that glow of young love, untested by the trials of resistant readers and even more resistant writers. Nevertheless, as I write, I will try to see beyond the first blush of romance to see the faults of the text—that is if "my true love" has any . . .

Trimbur's text, which is available in three versions (differing in length), two of which are in their second editions, claims as its goal "to offer teachers and students a range of activities grounded in rhetorical traditions and the accumulated experience of successful writing instruction" (xxxvi). A list of its features quickly confirms the efforts toward that goal, including an emphasis on the rhetorical tradition, collaborative learning, ethics in writing, visual design,

and the integration of reading and writing. Part One: "Writing and Reading" focuses on that integration by prompting students to examine their own literacy practices, while providing strategies for enhancing the critical dimension of their writing and reading skills. For example, the assignments in this part focus on analysis, directing students to analyze literacy events, rhetorical situations, and arguments.

One of *The Call to Write's* most distinctive features is its genre-based focus, in both its instruction and writing assignments. Part Two: "Writing Projects" has chapters on letters; memoirs; "public documents," which includes position statements; profiles; fact sheets, FAQ's, brochures and Web sites (new to the second edition); commentaries; proposals; and reviews. These genres are ones that can prepare students not only for writing in an academic setting, but also in the lives beyond school; thereby making the connection between the personal and the academic, prior experience and learned knowledge.

Evidence of Trimbur's rhetorical focus is not limited to self-reported intention. Throughout the text, readers find frequent references to the components of the rhetorical situation, the Aristotle's appeals, Toulmin argument (now frequently embraced by rhetoricians as a complement to or replacement of Aristotelian logic). In fact, each of the genre chapters in Part Two includes a topical heading of "Rhetorical Analysis." Familiar, too, to most rhetoricians is Kenneth Burke's cocktail party analogy, contemporized for students by Trimbur.

As for the efficacy of the text's organization, because one would almost always have arranged any composition textbook's topics differently had he or she been the author, flexibility within the text is a more important quality to consider than sheer organization. For example, in my syllabus, students will be reading Chapters One, Twelve, Five, Seven, Two, Three, Eleven, and Six—in that order, with parts of Chapters Eight, Fourteen, Fifteen, Sixteen, Nineteen, and

Twenty-One inserted throughout the term. But in someone else's class using the same text, that order would likely be quite different—omitting some chapters I find integral to the course, and including others I find not so crucial. Several of the chapters in Part Three: "Writers at Work" are ones that are particularly likely to feel misplaced to one searching for a text that presents topics in what he or she perceives to be the "right" order. Chapters Twelve: "Case Study of a Writing Assignment," which discusses the writing process by chronicling one student's process throughout the writing of an essay, and Thirteen: "Working Together: Collaborative Writing Projects," are both ones the subjects of which may well seem foundational to a writing course, and thereby more appropriately presented earlier in a course. Chapters Fourteen: "The Form of Nonfiction Prose" (new in this edition), which focuses on essay and paragraph organization, and Fifteen: "Communicating Online: Writing in the Age of Digital Literacy," seem more aptly placed chronologically within the text.

What is important is that the organization of *The Call to Write* provides sufficient flexibility to support a variety of first-year writing courses. The "buffet" arrangement of the text: foundational reading, writing, and analytical skills first, a variety of genres grouped together next, followed by a variety of skills and concepts organized under the headings of "Writers at Work," "Guide to Research (Part Four), and "Presenting Your Work (Part Five) is presented in such a way that there are connections between chapters and sections, but in most cases they are not so tightly connected that one need have read the previous chapter in order for the latter chapter to make sense. For example, a student essay annotated in Chapter Three to demonstrate the parts of a written argument is profiled thoroughly in Chapter Twelve. While mention is made in its earlier usage of the latter, the essay is reprinted in both chapters to minimize the feeling of having missed something in an earlier (and possibly unread chapter), and to facilitate

easier referencing. Furthermore, a variety of guides are offered to facilitate choosing from among the buffet line, such as the "Guide to Writing Strategies" inside the front cover, the topical "Guide to Visuals" (xxxix), and the source "Guide to Reading Selections" inside the back cover.

Connections throughout the text are made too by the use of recurring headings and colored banners and textboxes. These visual and discursive cues help to provide the connections that may be lost without a simple page-by-page reading of the text. In addition to the "Rhetorical Analysis" headings, Part Two also features "Exploring Your Experience" and "Genre Choices," and many chapters throughout the text conclude with a brief section titled, "Reflection on Your Writing," closing each chapter with a prompt for students to reflect on what they have learned. Activities are announced within a blue banner, reading headings like "Working Together," for collaborative activities; "Exercises," or "For Critical Inquiry," and colored blocks—green for ethics discussions and gold for digital discussions—appear throughout the text like pop-up windows on a computer screen. These serve to visually break up the text, as do the documents presented on the page in their original format (such as including the text of a memo in a rectangular box, like a sheet of paper). The facsimile format of these examples makes their realness palpable, as well as making the text more visually appealing. Unfortunately, students may skip over this information, as one frequently does captions on illustrations or figures, so care should be taken to reinforce the importance of reading that material as well.

The visual design and layout of the text is in keeping with the text's strong focus on visual rhetoric. In addition to devoting a chapter (Chapter Nineteen) to visual design, examples of rhetorical texts used throughout the book are drawn from a variety of visual images, including art, advertising, and Web sites. As texts, these images help students to connect the concepts

taught in the course within their own lives much more readily than if Trimbur had included only traditional textual examples. One final visual connection that must be mentioned is the artwork used throughout the text. These images are part of collaboratively created murals done as part of the Public Works of Art Project in 1934 inside Coit Tower in San Francisco. About these, Trimbur writes, "Inspired by muralists of the Mexican Revolution—Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Jose Clemente Orozco—the artists who painted the Coit Tower murals sought to capture the social and political concerns of the Great Depression." Rhetorical images, collaboratively produced, answering the call to "paint" about social injustice, is quite in keeping with this text—connecting the art's past, to the present of students' lives, and to their futures.

The readings, exercises, and assignments themselves are varied and bound to relate to nearly all students. There are activities available throughout the text for both individual and collaborative exploration and application, and students of both genders; various ages; racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups should be able to make personal connections with many of the readings. All of the readings are short, in manageable chunks, making them easy for students to read, whatever their reading ability and/or attention span. Of course, there is also something to be said for challenging students with longer, denser readings. Trimbur seems to favor 5-10 paragraph readings (his activities frequently ask students to choose readings of that length to analyze), and while that is certainly appropriate for instructive purposes, students must be able to apply their newly learned and/or honed skills to more lengthy texts—if for no other reason than they will be asked to do so in other college courses. Another potential problem with the readings is that there may be a slight preference given toward readings that relate to younger students who have recently completed high school. However, this preference, if there is one, is only slight, and certainly in keeping with the statistical likelihood that those "traditional" students will

predominantly populate most first-year writing classes. Too, because there are numerous readings, instructors using *The Call to Write* could simply avoid any readings that seemed intended for a more "traditional" college student audience.

Despite its few foibles, *The Call to Write* (Brief Second Edition) is a textbook worthy of my affection. It is a rhetorically based text that offers students and instructors alike a wide variety of choices—in approaches, readings, assignments, and even presentation formats and media. Now my adoration needs to stand the test of time, and the test of those motley groups of students that populate our classrooms each term. They may find other problems, or they may identify other strengths of the text that will only deepen my love. The fact that so many others have used John Trimbur's, *The Call to Write*, in its various iterations since it was first published in 1999 may well be predictive of a long-standing relationship. Only time will tell . . .