
*Brief Description of the Textbook*

*The Student Writer: Editor and Critic* (5th edition) by Barbara Fine Clouse is an introductory composition textbook with many useful samples of professional and student texts. The book is clearly organized and is written in an accessible style. It is divided into three parts: “the basics of process and structure,” “patterns of development,” and “an editing guide to frequently occurring errors.” These three sections clearly signal that the book presents a modes-based approach with a process orientation. In this section, I describe each part, noting first the strengths of the presentation and then weaknesses, in the next section I briefly discuss the book’s theoretical underpinnings, and in the final section, I offer a few suggestions related to teaching with this book.

Part One of *The Student Writer* provides an overview of writing processes, and chapters on invention, organizing and producing a first draft, and revising and editing. Particular strengths of this part include the discussion and examples of varied types of prewriting strategies, possible ways to begin an essay, strategies for developing an essay, and possible moves to make in concluding an essay. These sections, which provide specific strategies, are useful for students to refer back to throughout the semester when they are looking for ways to expand their strategic repertoires or when they are faced with a problem they do not know how to tackle on their own. They are particularly useful in that they operationalize advice that students may have heard from previous teachers such as “develop your ideas,” or “try to engage your reader’s interest,” advice which points to a problem, but which doesn’t offer any solutions. In addition, the discussion of
writing realities provides reassurance to the students that writing can be a difficult, messy business, a welcome message for students who may be apprehensive about their abilities to meet the challenges that face them in their first-year writing courses.

On the other hand, Part One suffers from two particular weaknesses. Students need more guidance from the text on how to convert the wonderful, rich ideas that they generate in their prewriting into an organized essay. The text offers an example of how to get from a cluster (or mind map) to an outline tree, but a cluster already has an implicit structure with hierarchically ordered ideas. Students who prefer to brainstorm or just list ideas may not be able to see on their own productive ways to group those ideas; they could benefit from a worked-through example which shows how ideas that have been generated by brainstorming and listing can be selected and organized.

The textbook provides students with many opportunities to get feedback on their drafts from their classmates. The basic structure for this activity is presented very briefly as one of several strategies under “revising for effective expression.” This section needs to be given a more prominent place in the chapter on revising and needs to be expanded to give students a more helpful orientation to this important activity. In the current section, students are presented with four possible procedures, one of which is to assume the role of the teacher and mark up the paper, noting strengths and weaknesses. Other advice to students suggests that the readers should be telling them what is “right and wrong” with their papers. Both of these guidelines undercut the effectiveness of peer feedback on early drafts, where a reaction on what worked or didn’t for that particular reader is usually more helpful than comments which help them edit for correctness.
Part Two, the longest of the three parts, presents a chapter-length treatment of each of the traditional modes of development (description, narration, illustration, process analysis, comparison-contrast, cause-and-effect analysis, definition, classification, argumentation-persuasion), writing in response to reading, and writing the research paper. Each of the modes chapters follows the same basic format: brief discussion on audience and purpose, how mode X can be used with other modes, how mode X can be used in varied situations, and how to select and arrange detail for mode X. This last section is accompanied by an annotated student essay illustrating the mode, followed by professional and student essays to read and analyze. The chapter on responding to reading includes sections on “reading analytically, writing in response to reading (sharing personal reactions and associations, writing a summary, evaluating an author’s ideas)” followed by sample essays and suggested topics. “Writing the research paper” includes sections on the library, the research process, producing the first draft, documenting borrowed material, revising and editing, and a sample research paper.” All of the chapters provide a range of individual exercises, suggestions for essay and journal topics, peer evaluation activities, and topics for discussion in class.

The main strengths of the modes-based chapters are the samples of essays written by professional and student writers, which were chosen to illustrate the pattern alone or in combination with other patterns. The essays written by the professional writers are followed by two sets of questions: basic comprehension questions and questions which direct students to notice some of the features in the text or choices that the writers made. The essays by the student writers are followed by questions which help students evaluate these essays collaboratively. These questions are particularly valuable as they serve to train students to notice different features in the texts. Each chapter also has useful lists of questions (process guidelines) to help
students generate ideas for their essays and lists of things to look for when self-assessing their essays.

The discussions of purpose and audience however usually do not provide in-depth analysis. The cumulative result is that it appears that writers write in these patterns for the same reasons: to express feelings, to inform, to persuade or to entertain. Additionally, the target audience is always a general one, which combined with the generic purposes, would tend to lead to rather predictable papers. If students are guided to think more deeply about audience and purpose then they can come up with more interesting papers which they are more committed to: essays comparing/contrasting university and high school for high school students, to help prepare them for university or comparing/contrasting different trucks to help other students decide which kind to buy to fit their differing needs; process essays for babysitters who need to keep kids entertained on long rainy days or for guys on how to shop for gifts for their friends. The problem with audience and purpose as presented in this text becomes more problematic in the chapter on writing research papers, where the end product is likely to be a paper, written to a general audience to inform them. Without a deeper consideration of audience and purpose, students could easily conclude that the purpose of the research paper assignment is simply to make them to practice making note cards, learn how to find information on a topic and learn how to paraphrase and document outside sources. The chapter also needs to provide more support on how to strategically select sources so that students don’t do an exhaustive search on their topics, but rather define their task as to produce a researched paper that has a well-supported argument targeted at a specific audience for a particular purpose.

Part Three deals with common errors which students make: there are chapters on editing for word choice, sentence fragments, comma splices, problems with the verb (agreement and tense
shifts), use of pronouns, modifiers, punctuation, and mechanics. Each of these chapters provides many examples and sentence- and paragraph-level editing exercises for students to complete. Hillocks’ (1986) meta-analysis of the research on grammar instruction challenges the usefulness of these type of exercises, but some instructors may find them useful ways to treat the infelicities which occur in student writing.

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

*The Student Writer* exemplifies a current-traditional, process-based approach to composition pedagogy. Young (1978) characterized the current-traditional paradigm as being principally concerned with product: the modes (description, narration, etc.), particularly as they are realized in informal essays and “the” research paper; usage and style, defined rhetorically in terms of correctness, economy, and clarity; and analysis of discourse, focusing on words, sentences and paragraphs. To this current-traditional approach, an overlay of process-based strategies has been added as a partial corrective to the preoccupation with product that is usually associated with strict current-traditionalism. One of the common critiques of cognitive process research has been its emphasis on individual writers, which ignores social dimensions of writing and the socially constructed nature of learning. Here, that critique is addressed by the incorporation of collaborative activities, most notably the peer feedback that is recommended in each of the chapters in Part Two.

There is no commonly agreed-upon best pedagogy for teaching first-year composition as even a cursory glance at some recent composition pedagogy anthologies reveals (e.g., Wiley, Gleason, & Phelps, 1996; Villanueva, 1997; McDonald, 2000; Johnson & Morahan, 2002). Similarly, there is no commonly agreed on route by which students best learn how to write. For
example, questions related to how—or if—the use of models can facilitate student learning have received much attention throughout composition’s history (for two of these discussions see Hillocks, 1986 and Haswell, 1991), but again, there is a lack of consensus. The Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), however, offers us a statement of recommended outcomes for the end of first-year composition (2000). These outcomes are divided into four categories: rhetorical knowledge; critical thinking, reading, and writing; processes; and knowledge of conventions. Against the WPA Outcomes Statement, the book’s strength is clearly in its process orientation towards producing multiple drafts, developing flexible strategies for each subprocess (e.g., invention, revising, drafting), and learning to give feedback to other writers on their work—all outcomes related to processes. This analysis is consistent with the author’s stated purpose for the book as Clouse, in the preface, states that “The Student Writer: Editor and Critic aims to help students develop their own successful writing processes” (xxiv).

The book also addresses many of the outcomes related to knowledge of conventions. Chapter 14, which deals with the research paper, deals with how to document material from outside sources, the whole of the third part deals with common student problems with grammar, syntax, and punctuation, and many of the other chapters address issues related to structure and paragraphing. However, the book focuses mainly on informal modes-based essays, with one chapter devoted to writing in response to reading and one chapter devoted to the research paper. Using this textbook as is, students will not get much practice with the conventions and formats associated with a wider range of genres.

The outcomes related to critical thinking (which include reading and writing as a means of inquiry and learning, appropriately using outside sources, and developing an awareness of the complex interrelationships between language, knowledge, and power) are clearly not the main
focus of the book. Some of these outcomes might be briefly addressed in the chapters on the research paper and responding to reading, but students would not get significant practice in these areas as the main focus is on learning the modes.

Similarly the outcomes related to rhetorical knowledge would not be addressed given the emphasis on process and modes. These outcomes include the ability to “focus on a purpose, respond to the needs of different audiences, and respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations; understand how genres shape reading and writing; [and] write in several genres. Throughout the book, these aspects of the rhetorical situation are mostly held constant (with the exception of purpose for which we can choose between “to inform, to entertain, to express feelings, to persuade). In Part Two, the focus of instruction is on text features; there is a general lack of attention to the kinds of exercises or activities that would help students develop their abilities to shape their messages for particular audiences and purposes.

The outcomes statement is intended to “regularize what can be expected to be taught in first-year composition” (WPA 2000). The Student Writer seems to be primarily intended to be the text in the first of a two-semester sequence of first-year writing courses. If this is the case and teachers who agree that the outcomes provided by the WPA are desirable may want to give more emphasis to reading analytically, incorporating the ideas of others into students’ texts and writing for varied audiences and purposes.

**Practical Applications**

The book, as it is, can be a useful teaching tool. There is a wealth of material in each of the chapters in Part Two including essays written by professional writers and students, guidelines for helping students generate content for their essays and revision checklists to help them develop
effective revision strategies. There are also numerous suggestions for topics to write about. It is easy to use the material provided in a variety of ways so that students don’t get bored. To be used most effectively, teachers will need to structure their writing assignments to build on the process strategies presented in Part One so that students develop a range of strategies whether for prewriting, beginning or developing their papers, rather than continuing to rely on the strategies they bring with them from previous writing classes.

For teachers who want to more fully develop students’ rhetorical awareness, material presented in the text can be used as a starting point for discussion. The whole class or groups of students could work on brainstorming a topic targeted at a very specific audience for a particular purpose. Once they have a good idea of how that paper might be shaped, the teacher could ask them do the activity again, with the same topic but with a different audience and purpose. If the topic were, for example, plagiarism, students could brainstorm a paper written to university English teachers, explaining why some students plagiarize their papers and recommending steps the teachers could take so that students would be less likely to plagiarize. Then, students could brainstorm a paper written to other university students, explaining the effects of plagiarism and recommending what students might do instead of resorting to plagiarism. Both of these treatments fall under the mode of “cause and effect,” but students would be writing to specific audiences for particular purposes. To expand this assignment so that students get practice working with different genres, they might develop flyers to post in the writing center, or create a website with links to campus and Internet resources for students who are writing papers.

References


