Textbook review for inReview
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The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing (2003), by John D. Ramage, John C. Bean, and June Johnson, works well in the developmental and first-year composition classrooms. Now in its third edition, the text guides writers through a variety of strategies and processes for sound, rhetorical content, emphasizing repeatedly, throughout twenty-seven chapters, the components of “purpose, audience, and genre” (xxxviii). Though I am not required by my department or program to use the text, I have selected it for the past few years, as many of many colleagues have, for my WAC 101 (WAC 101 is the first class in our stretched-out version of ENG 101) and English 101 courses. Students in these courses primarily engage in expository writing assignments, and The Allyn & Bacon text includes a number of writing projects, readings, and sample, student papers to aid in their progress and hopeful success with their writing. In fact, when I teach the two-semester Stretch sequence of English 101, a program designed for students who may need extended time to develop their composition writing skills, I find that the text contains enough relevant and useful information for students to use for the entire year.

Though I tend to skip around within the text and for the most part do not use chapters chronologically, I do begin earliest class discussions with the opening chapters. “Chapter 1: Posing Problems/The Demands of College Writing” contains some valuable information for the new college or university writer. The authors begin by providing a type of rationale for an introductory writing class—students forced to take composition do seem to want that quite often—and then move onto a discussion of open and closed forms, replete with readings and a writing prompt to close the chapter. (The authors characterize open form as “narrative based” (16) with an implicit thesis and closed form as structured with an explicit thesis.) Because students should be reminded that academic writing, for the most part, is formal and therein
“closed” in nature, the information here is beneficial. To liven up our discussions even more, as I review these areas with my students, I include examples of open and closed forms of poetry to demonstrate distinctions. At first they seem spooked by examining poems—after all, what does poetry have to do with a writing course?—yet within a short time, they are explicating and more importantly, identifying the respective features of closed and open verse, enumerated deftly on page 16. Thereafter, they recognize which form to use based on the nature and formality of individual writing assignments.

As much as I utilize this and other chapters in the text, chapter one introduces a characteristic of the authors/text that might be monitored. In all fairness, I can imagine the difficulties in creating a rhetoric for first-year students. Ideally, the text should challenge its readers while not being too pithy or inaccessible. And Ramage, Bean, and Johnson do an exceptional job with this balance for many aspects of the text. However, I find myself puzzled by some of the writing project prompts and perhaps even more so by their explanations and accompanying ideas. Since I stress how good writing possesses simple diction, clear sentence structures, and straightforward ideas, I want the text I use to do likewise. But as early as page 19, I think unnecessary confusion surfaces.

On the plus side, I applaud the topic of the “brief writing project,” which asks writers to pose and explore questions without providing answers or solutions. Such an exercise forces the writer to be restrained and focused in his/her essay, universal objectives for us all I would argue, and the assignment is to be applauded for that. Where I take issue, though, is in the literal description because it is wordy and complicated. Earlier in the chapter, on page 12, Ramage, Bean, and Johnson present categories of types of questions, so students can distinguish those reflecting pure-knowledge from those concerning practical-application or values. Since this is
the first chapter of the text, the explanation seems a bit elaborate and students become distracted with types of questions and categorizing them, rather than the points of the chapter and assignment, namely that writers often pose questions for the sake of exploring issues, and they need not seek out solutions all the time.

This tendency continues in later chapters of the text, too. In “Chapter Six: Reading Rhetorically/The Writer as Strong Reader,” for instance, the authors stress the importance of strong, critical reading, providing a nice connection between the disciplines of reading and writing. The readings in the chapter, including “On Teenagers and Tattoos” by Andres Martin, “The Damnation of a Canyon” by Edward Abbey, and two on the pros and cons of smoking, generate excellent class discussions: Ramage, Bean, and Johnson have selected wisely. The organization of the chapter, however, is odd. First, the chapter at forty-three pages is long for this book, and it is almost overwhelming in its abundance of information and examples. (Typically, I gloss over portions of the chapter, such as “Using the Reading Strategies of Experts” on pages 115-117, since a more informal class discussion about the “dos” and “don'ts” about effective, academic writing dispels the information more clearly and directly.) I tend to modify the writing project, too, which is presented only five pages into the chapter. Here again, the description itself seems a bit wordier than necessary, and the phrase “strong response” seems a bit stilted. I like the premise of the assignment, namely that students should both summarize and analyze what they read, but the suggestion for the assignment almost asks students to create two parts: the summary is followed by the “strong response.” But, the divided nature of the assignment seems unnatural and atypical. Since we stress the need for cogent writing inclusive of strong transitions and connections, shouldn't the two parts be integrated, as in most critical writing assignments?
In addition, the materials that follow the writing projects are sometimes unnecessary. Consequently, students can feel lost, and they do not always read the most valuable parts of the chapter. For instance, the annotated drafts on pages 121-122, 124-126, and 131 provide the students with excellent global perspectives of how to draft, revise, and edit effectively. Really, the information in these sections is quite practical as is the material on pages 148-150. The list of questions on page 149, designed to aid the students in generating ideas, directly connects to the students' writing processes, whereas the discussion on “gist,” “does,” and “says” statements on pages 118-119 primarily equips the student with more jargon. (What is more important? Concentrating on what kind of label to allocate or learning to assess structure and content? It seems that where the authors are trying to elucidate for their audience, they are actually overcomplicating the idea.) Again, if we want our students to keep their writing lucid, cohesive, and accessible, then we should have them read like material. Ramage, Bean, and Johnson could easily modify—rather than expand, as they have done in this third edition—elements of their laudable and highly usable text, making *The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing* even stronger. Nevertheless, I will continue to use the book in my first-year composition courses, for its strengths and merits far outweigh any discrepancies, and I can always pick and choose what I want to include or to bypass in my teaching.

And I want to emphasize that with my WAC 101 (the first semester of the Stretch Program sequence where students complete three major writing projects and two portfolio analyses) and English 101 students alike, I have utilized a number of the text's writing projects including: posing a question (page 19, chapter 1), observing one place from two perspectives (page 92, chapter 5), summarizing and providing a short response (page 113, chapter 6), describing a significant, narrative event (page 154, chapter 7), depicting a surprising-reversal
pattern (page 199, chapter 9), analyzing two print advertisements (page 222, chapter 10), assessing the consequences or causes of an event, trend, or phenomenon (page 339, chapter 14), and taking a stand on a controversial issue (page 374, chapter 15). I stress this because with any shortcomings I encounter with the *Allyn & Bacon Guide*, I find the many positive, helpful features ultimately outweigh them. Truly, this is a very “workable” text, and since an essential aspect of effective teaching is flexibility, Ramage, Bean, and Johnson's college rhetoric fits right in: use it as it best meets your students' needs.

Perhaps my strongest recommendation for a writing project in the text is the image analysis assignment in “Chapter 10: Analyzing Images.” Though I would prefer if the ads for Coors Light and Zenith were replaced or simply eliminated—without fail, students find these more laughable than helpful because they seem awfully dated to them—the actual project of locating and analyzing print ads enables students to strengthen their critical abilities. Many of them have had some introduction to subliminal material, and since they choose the respective advertisements for the writing project, they seem more invested in the process. In particular, the discussion on pages 226-229 intimates the layers of visual images, that is to say, their figurative and symbolic or suggestive levels, and students become quite immersed in dissecting not only the ads they have chosen but those of their classmates. In the latest edition, Ramage, Bean, and Johnson have included an additional four magazine ads on pages 240-241 that are a lot more “hip” and in color, big pluses for students' interests and class discussions. Because the ultimate success of the chapter and writing project depends so much on critical thinking, it is a worthwhile section to utilize and an enjoyable one at that.

One of the best non-essay-centered features of the text is its last section, “Part Six: A
Guide to Editing.” Included here are six different handbooks, which address issues of proofreading, grammar, mechanics, and style. Though the focus of a composition classroom should not be any of these areas exclusively, too often these problem areas surface in our students' writing. And this portion complements nicely rhetorical and composition teachings. For example, if after grading a set of papers I notice that I have written the comment “subject-verb inconsistency” on half of the given essays, I can direct my students to pages 764-768 in “Handbook 4: Editing for Standard English Usage.” By no means does this explanation seem exhaustive in its discussion; rather, it serves as a review for first-year composition students. Of course, the expectation of such students is that they understand and utilize conventions correctly, but as English teachers, we realize all too often that their skills need sharpening. Thus, I incorporate portions of Part Six when necessary—if comma usage is slacking or fragments abound, for instance—and am grateful for such a reference tool in a required text. Color-coding Part Six, moreover, is an excellent decision. In recognizing its differing tan-colored pages, those who choose not to use the ”Detailed Contents” or “Index” sections can quickly locate the reference areas they need. Oftentimes, I will make notes on students' papers to look at specific pages in this section, as too frequently, they are unaware that this resource exists in their heavy textbook.

Moreover, since we do at least two peer-revision workshops per essay, “Chapter 18: Writing as a Problem-Solving Process” is directly relevant to my students' work. On pages 490-496, Ramage, Bean, and Johnson cover central issues of effective groupwork. Too often, students believe that they should be passive in the workshop environment: in their minds, they need to read quickly and to write comments only. But the authors of the Allyn & Bacon text clarify the need to make ”writerly comments,” ”to point out where the draft needs more work
and to brainstorm with the writer possible ways to improve the draft” (490). They accentuate the aims of being constructive, helpful, and thoughtful, so students approach the revision workshop actively and empathically, benefiting greatly from their text's guidance. Since I do not allow students to submit workshop drafts without internal comments or more-than-one-word answers to questions I might assign, I am encouraged by the “Writing as a Problem-Solving Process” chapter. Perhaps, composition teachers do think alike.

Other chapters I incorporate throughout the semester are 19 (“Composing and Revising Closed-Form Prose”), 23 (“Using, Citing, and Documenting Sources”), and 27 (“Assembling a Portfolio and Writing a Reflective Self-Evaluation”). Introductions and conclusions are continuous sources of frustration for first-year, composition students. Thus, pages 512-515 and 541-543 serve as welcome complements to in-class discussions and workshops. Students become aware of the distinctions and differences between these two, crucial elements of strong writing. Instead of writing duplicate paragraphs to frame an essay, they can begin with a paragraph that “capture[s] [the] reader's interest” and “[gives] readers a sense of the whole” (514-515) and close with another that leaves the reader thinking about the ideas they have presented in their essays. As writers, they improve the clarity of their arguments, and as teachers, we welcome their abilities to see the separate and imperative roles of the two paragraph types.

Finally, if assigning any work involving research, ”Chapter 23: Using, Citing, and Documenting Sources,” is a must. Typically, little if no research is an expectation of WAC 101 or English 101, and because of this, Ramage, Bean, and Johnson's provision seems quite adequate. Typically, I ask my 101 students to include a single source in the final essay of the semester; this seems a good way to initiate and to prepare them somewhat for English 102. I
review chapter 23 with them and therein advise them to use that section as reference while
drafting their papers. So far, they—and, in turn, I—have had success. At their basic level of
researching, the chapter answers pretty much all of their questions, and descriptions are clear and
accessible, so students can follow along easily.

Thus, I recommend *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing* as much for teachers with
little experience as those who have been instructing for years. The reiteration of the concepts of
purpose, audience, and voice throughout the text, the straightforward and practical nature of it,
and the variety of suggested assignments and readings qualify the thoughtfulness and experience
of its authors. Surely, one can get quite theoretically focused

with *The Allyn and Bacon Guide* in the first-year classroom, but I find that many of the elements
of strong composition and rhetoric are inferred, so students need not be centered on theory as
much as focused on the application and synthesis of the elements of academic writing.