

Textbook Review for *inReview*
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John Ramage, John C. Bean and June Johnson *The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing*, 3rd edition New York: Allyn & Bacon/Longman, 2003 831 pages

The *Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing (ABGW)* is now in its third edition. June Johnson from Seattle University, who contributed to the previous edition, is now listed as a co-author along with John D. Ramage and John C. Bean. Published by Pearson Education (2003), the text comes in three versions: the original (comprehensive) edition (which includes a handbook), the “brief” edition without the handbook, and a new “concise” edition that does not include the chapter on writing for special occasions (e.g., essay examinations, writing portfolios). The second edition of *ABGW* has proven to be one of the best-selling “aims-based” rhetorics on the market and one version or another of the new third edition is currently being used by well over 200 community colleges and universities throughout the United States. In fact, until we authored a custom textbook here at Texas Tech University, the *ABGW* was the only textbook we used in our English 1301 (introductory Freshman Composition) course. Useful and quite comprehensive, the textbook can be used in a variety of different first-year writing programs, but its sheer breadth ensures that most writing instructors will have to choose judiciously which sections of the text they will use and which they will ignore. The size and scope of the text means that much that will be left unused and our experience here was that the size of the text led to some dissatisfaction among both instructors and students. Nevertheless, it is a textbook that can support a number of different approaches to first-year writing.

The original or comprehensive text is organized into six parts. The first part, an introduction to rhetoric, was one that we found most useful here at Texas Tech. The authors discuss the challenge of “problematizing” Freshman writing topics. Taking their cues from Paolo

Friere, Ramage, Bean, and Johnson discuss how students are to become actively engaged in topics, how they must learn to “look deliberately for questions, problems, puzzles, and contradictions”(9). The discussion of audience is particularly strong, but one wishes that this same rigor had been applied to the discussions of genre and style. The discussion of genre is somewhat brief and confusing, as it tends to depict the topic as little more than a choice between closed and open forms. Similarly, style and voice are conflated and, while the section on document design that follows is interesting, style itself is given short shrift compared to the information presented about font, graphics, and layout, topics that seem more appropriately placed in an introductory technical communication course.

Part Two of *ABGW* is concerned with writing projects. Here, the authors begin with a rather detailed and informative discussion of writing strategies. What follows is an assignment that asks students to write two descriptions of the same object or event, one with positive and one with negative connotations. This assignment has become part of our own first-year curriculum here at Texas Tech and, coupled with the “rhetorical analysis” of the two descriptions *ABGW* encourages students to write, our experience has been that this provides a strong foundation for the assignments to follow in our 1301 course. Ramage, Bean, and Johnson depict effective writers as also being “strong readers” and, by asking students to closely read (and comment on) the descriptions they have written, the relationship between reading and writing is made manifest. Composing peer critiques is also handled with good detail. While the authors do return to a discussion of genres (e.g., autobiography, exploratory essays) in this section, the descriptions are still somewhat thin and tend to gloss over many of the important conventions of each genre. There is, however, a delightful discussion of adding “surprise” to an essay and several fine sections about synthesizing ideas from other sources, including the uses of numerical data. There

is a somewhat “glitzy” section on visual analysis that, while appealing to the reader’s eye, seems oddly-placed in the context of a textbook that seeks to instruct the novice writer. While the authors are quite correct in their assertions regarding “visual persuasion,” such chapters might have, again, been better-placed in a textbook on technical communication or even in a “Freshman Comp II” text.

This same Part Two of the *ABGW* also contains a chapter on “Classical” argument. Although the model of argument presented here does, at times, tend to conflate the classical approach to argument with approaches such as Stephen Toulmin’s, the discussion here of using evidence to bolster one’s claim is clearly-worded and strong. As in many argument texts, the discussion of warrants seems relatively weaker than those devoted to claims, evidence, and rebuttal. Nevertheless, refutation and concession are covered effectively. The “advanced considerations” in argument theory (including logical fallacies) is short and might well have been omitted without any damage to an otherwise fine discussion of argument. Teaching these logical fallacies in our introductory Freshman Composition course here at Texas Tech has proven difficult for many instructors and, perhaps, this is content area that should come later in the rhetoric curriculum.

Part Three of *ABGW* involves composing and revising. The authors return to the notions of “problematizing” and audience they introduced so skillfully in Part One. The discussion here seems to draw a great deal from Nancy Sommers’s 1980 “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers.” Extensive revision is encouraged and students are made aware that such revision clarifies audience and purpose and is not simply aimed at reducing errors in a paper. Structure and transitions are also discussed in a clear and informative fashion. My chief criticism of the chapters in Part Three is that the authors tend to spend an inordinate amount of

time discussing “expert moves” which many students will not master in an introductory writing course. For many students, discussions of the “ladder of abstraction” might be a more effective feature in Freshman Composition II or in another advanced composition or speech course. Here, the discussions of these concepts along with the flow charts and diagrams that accompany them seem more suited for an appendix to the text as the majority of students who use *ABGW* will not have much use for them.

Part Four of the *ABGW* is titled “A Rhetorical Guide to Research” and tackles the issues of finding and evaluating outside sources, citation, and documentation in research papers. Ramage, Bean, and Johnson suggest that the use of outside sources is not so much about *finding* answers as it is about *making* answers (577). Most of our incoming freshman students here at Texas Tech seem to find library research tedious and pointless (and I’m sure the views they express are typical of most Freshman attitudes). Through linking library and internet research to notions such as critical thinking and knowledge creation, the authors encourage an active approach to finding sources and depict the research process as one involving expressions of autonomy on the part of the students. Included is an especially strong discussion of reading sources “rhetorically” and we have found their ideas well-suited to classroom discussions of problems in using internet sources. The discussion refers at some length to the skills obtained in Part Two during the writing of the positive and negative descriptions. Part Four challenges the students to read outside sources with an awareness of the author’s “angle of vision” (578). The authors list seven “essential skills” for novice researchers and devote one chapter in Part Four to each of these skills. While all the discussions are well-written and engaging, two of these “essential skills” warrant a more detailed discussion here.

First, the discussion on understanding different kinds of sources is especially useful. Two tables provide an easy-to-read overview of print and internet sources. Considerable space is given to the *paratexts* of the print sources and students are encouraged to use these markers as guideposts in selecting sources. For example, students are encouraged to recognize how the conventions of a book produced by an academic press (e.g., university press on title page, documentation) differ from those employed by commercial publishers (covers designed for customer appeal) and what these respective conventions might tell readers about the author's angle of vision and rhetorical strategies. Similarly, students are encouraged to look for the differences between .com, .net, .org, .edu and other types of sites. Additionally, there is much helpful information here about using databases to search for information.

Helpful, too, is the discussion of using rhetorical knowledge to read and evaluate sources. Students are encouraged to read with their own goals in mind (i.e., what sorts of sources are more likely to enhance a specific topic or argument) and to read rhetorically and with a degree of healthy skepticism. Issues such as credibility and reliability are covered here and my students have found these discussions quite helpful in their search for outside sources.

Part Four ends with a particularly good overview of citation conventions and of MLA documentation. Examples abound in this section and all are easy to read and easy for students to emulate. Particularly good is the brief section on general formats for electronic sources. Students and instructors alike continue to evince some confusion about citing these sources and Ramage, Bean, and Johnson provide clear examples of how to cite websites, e-journals, e-books, databases, email, and newsgroup postings. APA citations are covered in an appendix.

Part Five of the ABGW covers "Special Writing and Speaking Occasions." As stated above, this chapter does not appear in the concise edition of the textbook but is featured in the

other two (original and brief) editions. The first chapter of Part Five covers oral communication (working in groups and giving speeches). While the chapter is well-written and contains much good information, some instructors might question its placement in a writing course. Indeed, while the authors attempt to draw some parallels between writing and speaking, the chapter seems better-placed in an introduction to a public speaking textbook. Much stronger and far more useful is the following chapter on performing well in essay examinations. The skills common to all essay writing are discussed but, more importantly, the authors identify three skills a student must develop to perform well on essay examinations. Remembering subject matter might have received a little more emphasis here as the authors do somewhat blandly note that essay examinations effectively limit student access to outside sources. Although students are encouraged to identify main ideas as they study, some concrete suggestions would have been helpful here. Tips for analyzing the actual essay questions (e.g., looking for cues in the wording of the questions) are presented much more effectively. A table on 706-7 lists typical verbs found in essay question (e.g., analyze, apply, discuss, compare/contrast) and offers students suggestions about how to approach such questions. The discussion on dealing with the time pressures of an essay examination is well-written but contains little in the way of new or helpful information for the student. Part Five ends with a chapter on reflective writing and portfolios that, frankly, adds little to what is a well-written and useful writing text.

The final section of *ABGW*, Part Six, is “A Guide to Editing,” a series of six handbooks that cover sentence structure, clauses and phrases, usage, style, and other topics. The authors cover five basic sentence patterns (a la Kolln and Funk’s *Understanding English Grammar*), parts of speech, person, and number. While my preference tends toward a more functional approach to grammar, the information presented here is quite helpful and easy to understand. The

handbook on Standard English is written with an eye toward how such things as misplaced modifiers and subject-verb agreement affect communication rather than appealing to any sort of prescriptivism. The examples provided are easy to understand and there are useful exercises that instructors can draw from for classroom presentations. There is little that is new in the handbook on style and I wished that the discussion on avoiding gender-specific language would have been more detailed as this is an area our students here at Texas Tech struggle with. The handbook on punctuation, however, is helpful and clear.

Included in each chapter of *ABGW* are short readings that provide clear examples for many of the points covered in the particular chapter. The student samples are quite useful in that, while these samples do represent effective student writing, most do not show a “professional” veneer. In other words, the quality of the student samples, while quite good, does not seem unreachable for most student writers. I must, however, take issue with the fact that most of the samples included from professional writers seem to favor a liberal or left-of-center ideological bias. While contributions by Florence King and Leonard Pitts, Jr. are included among the samples, many of the writing samples privilege pro-gun control, feminist, and environmentalist agendas. While I have no particular problems with students being exposed to well-written representations of these views, our experience at Texas Tech shows that our somewhat conservative student body often expresses feelings of alienation with what they perceive as a left-wing academic agenda. The *ABGW* could be strengthened by the inclusion of writing samples by responsible conservative spokespersons. Seeing well-written and fair argumentation on both sides of an issue might help to deflect attention away from content and more toward the craft of argument and persuasion. Additionally, it might help to make real the notion that “reasonable people disagree,” a phrase that has become somewhat of a mantra for rhetoric teachers on our campus.

Still, despite concerns about the size and scope of the textbook and the sorts of writing samples Ramage, Bean, and Johnson have included, the *ABGW* is a smart, thoughtful, and extremely helpful textbook for a variety of different approaches to Freshman writing instruction. While its adoption in any writing program will require that instructors excise much of its content, the strengths of the *ABGW* are such that the criticisms described in this article provide little to support *not* using one of the three editions.