

CHAPTER 3

THE COMPOSING PROCESS: MODE OF ANALYSIS

The purpose of this chapter is to delineate dimensions of the composing process among secondary school students, against which case studies of twelfth-grade writers can be analyzed. As with some of the accounts of the creative process in chapter 1, the premise of this chapter is that there are elements, moments, and stages within the composing process which can be distinguished and characterized in some detail.

This delineation is presented in two forms: as an outline (see pp. 34-35) and as a narrative. The use of an outline, which is of course linear and single layered, to describe a process, which is laminated and recursive, may seem a paradoxical procedure; but its purpose is to give a category system against which the eight case studies can be examined. The narrative portion, in contrast, is an attempt to convey the actual density and "blendedness" of the process.

Although this category system is set forth before the analysis of the data, it was derived from an extensive analysis of the eight case studies. The procedure for analyzing the data was inductive; the presentation is deductive.

Dimensions of the Composing Process among Twelfth-Grade Writers: A Narrative

The first dimension of the composing process to note is the *nature of the stimulus* that activates the process or keeps it going. For students, as for any other writers, stimuli are either self encountered or other initiated. Either the student writes from stimuli with which he has privately interacted or from stimuli presented by others—the most common species of the second being, of course, the assignment given by the teacher. Both kinds of stimuli can be nonverbal or verbal, although it is an extremely rare and sophisticated teacher who can give a nonverbal writing assignment.

All areas of experience, or fields of discourse, can provide the stimuli for writing. It is useful to pause here to present the schema of

Dimensions of the Composing Process among Twelfth-Grade Writers: An Outline

1. Context of Composing

Community, Family, School

2. Nature of Stimulus

Registers:

Field of Discourse—encounter with natural environment; encounter with induced environment or artifacts; human relationships; self.

Mode of Discourse—expressive-reflexive; expressive-extensive.

Tenor of Discourse

Self-Encountered Stimulus

Other-Initiated Stimulus:

Assignment by Teacher—external features (student's relation to teacher; relation to peers in classroom; relation to general curriculum and to syllabus in English; relation to other work in composition); internal features or specification of assignment (registers, linguistic formulation, length, purpose, audience, deadline, amenities, treatment of written outcome, other).

Reception of Assignment by Student—nature of task, comprehension of task, ability to enact task, motivation to enact task.

3. Prewriting

Self-Sponsored Writing:

Length of Period

Nature of Musings and Elements Contemplated—field of discourse; mode of written discourse; tenor or formulating of discourse.

Interveners and Interventions—self, adults (parent, teacher,

other), peers (sibling, classmate, friend); type of intervention (verbal, nonverbal), time of intervention, reason for intervention (inferred), effect of intervention on writing, if any.

Teacher-Initiated (or School-Sponsored) Writing:

(Same categories as above)

4. Planning

Self-Sponsored Writing:

Initial Planning—length of planning; mode of planning (oral; written: jottings, informal list of words/phrases, topic outline, sentence outline); scope; interveners and interventions.

Later Planning—length of planning; mode; scope; time of occurrence; reason; interveners and interventions.

Teacher-Initiated Writing:

(Same categories as above)

5. Starting

Self-Sponsored Writing:

Seeming Ease or Difficulty of Decision

Element Treated First Discursively—seeming reason for initial selection of that element; eventual placement in completed piece.

Context and Conditions under Which Writing Began
Interveners and Interventions

Teacher-Initiated Writing:

(Same categories as above)

6. Composing Aloud: A Characterization

Selecting and Ordering Components:

Anticipation / Abeyance—what components projected; when first noted orally; when used in written piece.

Kinds of Transformational Operations—addition (right-branching, left-branching); deletion; reordering or substitution; embedding.

Style—preferred transformations, if any; “program” of style behind preferred transformations (source: self, teacher, parent, established writer, peer); (effect on handling of other components—lexical, rhetorical, imagaic).

Other Observed Behaviors:

Silence—physical writing; silent reading; “unfilled” pauses.

Vocalized Hesitation Phenomena—filler sounds (selected phonemes; morphemes of semantically-low content; phrases and clauses of semantically-low content); critical comments (lexis; syntax; rhetoric); expressions of feelings and attitudes (statements, expressions of emotion—pleasure/pain) toward self as writer to reader; digressions (ego-enhancing; discourse-related).

Tempo of Composing:

Combinations of Composing and Hesitational Behaviors
Relevance of Certain Theoretical Statements concerning Spontaneous Speech

7. Reformulation

Type of Task:

Correcting; Revising; Rewriting

Transforming Operations:

Addition—kind of element;

stated or inferred reason for addition.

Deletion—kind of element; stated or inferred reason for deletion.

Reordering or Substitution—kind of element; stated or inferred reason.

Embedding—kind of element; stated or inferred reason.

8. Stopping

Formulation:

Seeming Ease or Difficulty of Decision

Element Treated Last—seeming reason for treating last; placement of that element in piece.

Context and Conditions under Which Writing Stopped

Interveners and Interventions
Seeming Effect of Parameters and Variables—established by others; set by self.

Reformulation:

(Same categories as above)

9. Contemplation of Product

Length of Contemplation

Unit Contemplated

Effect of Product upon Self

Anticipated Effect upon Reader

10. Seeming Teacher Influence on Piece

Elements of Product Affected:

Registers—field of discourse; mode of written discourse; tenor of discourse.

Formulation of Title or Topic; Length; Purpose; Audience; Deadline; Amenities; Treatment of Written Outcome;

Other.

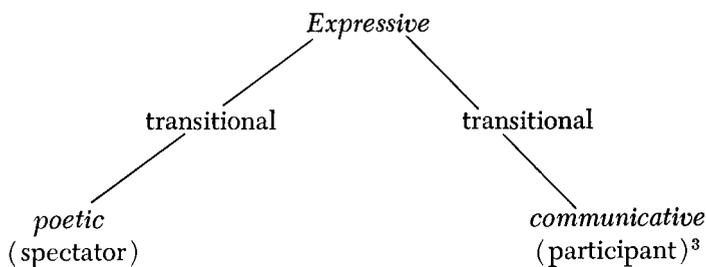
registers devised by the British linguists Halliday, McIntosh, and Strevens because of the applicability of their category-system to this inquiry.

Registers these linguists define as the varieties of language from which the user of that language makes his oral and written choices.¹ Registers are divided into the following three categories: (1) the field of discourse, or the area of experience dealt with; (2) the mode of discourse, whether the discourse is oral or written; and (3) the tenor of discourse, the degree of formality of treatment.

Although, to the investigator's knowledge, the three linguists do not attempt to specify the various fields of discourse, it seems a refinement helpful for a closer analysis of the composing process. In his essay on poetic creativity, the psychologist R.N. Wilson divides experiences tapped by writers into four categories: (1) encounters with the natural (nonhuman) environment; (2) human interrelations; (3) symbol systems; and (4) self.² For the analysis of student writing in this inquiry, "symbol systems" becomes "encounters with induced environments or artifacts."

Another useful refinement of the system of registers is to divide the category "the written mode of discourse" into species. In their speculations on modes of student writing, Britton, Rosen, and Martin of the University of London have devised the following schema:

Modes of Student Writing

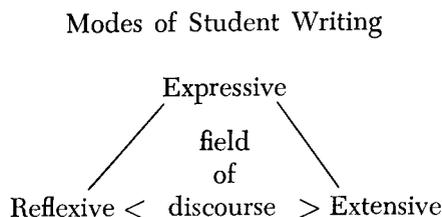


They regard all writing as primarily expressive—that is, expressing the thoughts and feelings of the writer in relation to some field of discourse. But beyond sheer expressiveness, writing evolves toward, or becomes, one of two major modes: *poetic*, in which the student observes some field of discourse, behaving as a spectator; or *communicative*, in which the student somehow participates through his writing in the business of the world. The many exemplars of writing

Britton, Rosen, and Martin regard as mid-mode they have called *transitional* writings. (One longs to give the two kinds of transitional writings exponents, as with Hayakawa's cow¹ and cow².)

To this investigator, the notions that all student writings emanate from an expressive impulse and that they then bifurcate into two major modes is useful and accurate. Less satisfactory are the terms assigned to these modes and the implications of these terms about the relation of the writing self to the field of discourse. The terms are at once too familiar and too ultimate. Both *poetic* and *communicative* are freighted with connotations that intrude. *Poetic*, for example, sets up in most minds a contrast with prose, or prosaic, although in this schema the poetic mode includes certain kinds of prose, such as the personal fictional narrative. Second, they are too absolute: rather than describing two general kinds of relations between the writer and his world, they specify absolute states—either passivity or participation.

The following schema seems at once looser and more accurate:



The terms *reflexive* and *extensive* have the virtue of relative unfamiliarity in discussions of modes of discourse. Second, they suggest two general kinds of relations between the writing self and the field of discourse—the *reflexive*, a basically contemplative role: "What does this experience mean?"; the *extensive*, a basically active role: "How, because of this experience, do I interact with my environment?" Note that neither mode suggests ultimate states of passivity or participation. Note too that the mid-modes or transitional writings have been eliminated from this schema as a needless complexity—at this time.

Subcategories can be established as well for the register, "tenor of discourse," which concerns the distance observed between the writing self and field of discourse, expressed by the degree of formality observed in the writing itself. Formality or decorum in written discourse can be established by one or more of the following means: lexical choices, syntactic choices, rhetorical choices. Obviously, the most formal discourse would employ all three means. The next question, of course, is what constitutes decorum for these three means.

Most past and current composition guides have been predicated upon the belief that there are established and widely accepted indices of written decorum and that student writers of all ages can learn and employ them. Levels of diction really refer to corpora of lexical items that are consigned some place on a formality continuum. Syntactically, certain orderings of words are regarded as more formal than others: the "balanced" sentence, for example, as against the "loose" sentence. Rhetorically, certain arrangements of sentences and the kinds of signals that precede and connect them are also regarded as more formal than others; for example, the use of explicit "lead sentences" and explicit transitional devices, such as *nevertheless* and *however*.

The teacher-initiated assignment as stimulus has specifiable dimensions. It occurs within a context that may affect it in certain ways. Included in this context are relationships the student writer may have with his peers or, more importantly—given the teacher-centered nature of very many American classrooms—with his teacher; the general curriculum in English being enacted, and the specific activities in composition of which the assignment is a part; and the other stimuli that have immediately accompanied the assignment, with the sequence and mode of these probably very important. As an example of the last: if a teacher shows a film as stimulus for writing, do her words precede the film, or follow it, or both? Here, as with the other dimensions specified, no research of any consequence has been undertaken.

Internal aspects of the assignment that may bear upon the student's writing process, and product, include the following specifications: (1) registers—the field of discourse, the written mode, and the tenor; (2) the linguistic formulation of the assignment; (3) the length; (4) the purpose; (5) the audience; (6) the deadline; (7) the amenities, such as punctuation and spelling; and (8) the treatment of written outcome—that is, if the teacher plans to evaluate the product, how—by grade? comment? conference? peer response? or by some combination of these?

The reception of the assignment by the student is affected by the following: (1) the general nature of the task, particularly the registers specified; (2) the linguistic formulation of the assignment; (3) the student's comprehension of the task; (4) his ability to enact the task; and (5) his motivation to enact the task. There is now some empirical evidence that not all students can write with equal ease and skill in all modes.⁴ For the less able student some species of mode present almost insuperable difficulties—for example, the impersonal argument in which the writer is to present "dispassionately" more than one side, or aspect,

of a case. Consequently, if a teacher gives an assignment requiring writing in this sub-mode, certain students may be unable to complete adequately, or even to begin, such an assignment. Along with being intellectually unable to perform the assignment, the student may also be unmotivated or psychically unable to perform the assignment. Such "blocks" may emanate from strikingly different sources: the student may find the task too boring, or he may find the task too threatening. He may not want to write, again, about his summer vacation or the function of Banquo's ghost; or about family life, if his father has just lost his job or if his mother has just threatened divorce.

Next, there are two possible preludes to the act of writing: *prewriting* and *planning*. *Prewriting* is that part of the composing process that extends from the time a writer begins to perceive selectively certain features of his inner and/or outer environment with a view to writing about them—usually at the instigation of a stimulus—to the time when he first puts words or phrases on paper elucidating that perception.

Planning refers to any oral and written establishment of elements and parameters before or during a discursive formulation. Prewriting occurs but once in a writing process; planning can occur many times.

Whether or not a piece of writing is self—or other-initiated affects both prewriting and planning. If the piece is teacher-initiated and if the assignment is highly specific, particularly as to a fairly immediate deadline, it is likely that the prewriting period will be brief—or that the paper will be late. Planning is intricately affected by the nature of the assignment as well. One way of regarding an assignment is as the part the teacher takes in the planning of a piece of writing. If the teacher's part is extensive—as in specifying registers, length, purpose, audience—it is obvious that the part a student plays in his own planning is diminished. There seems to be some evidence that a delicate balance, if not a paradox, exists in the giving of assignments. If the teacher sets too many of the variables for a piece of writing (we need to know far more about how many are too many, and which variables are more significant than others), some students feel too confined, too constricted by the limitations to write "well." If the teacher does not specify enough variables (again, how many are enough, and for what students?), the task may daunt at least some students by its ambiguity or by its degrees of freedom. If there are individual differences here, which students learn from highly specified assignments and which from loose assignments?

And if future empirical studies suggest giving more than a single assignment to accommodate these differences in responses, how can the teacher be certain there is some equality in the tasks he assigns? Again, far more research needs to be undertaken in this area of the teaching of composition.

For the phases of prewriting and planning, as in almost every other phase that follows, a category in the outline is "Interveners and Interventions." It is an extremely rare situation for writers, particularly student writers, to proceed from initial stimulus to final draft, or revision, without interruption. Rather, events and people—teachers, notably—intervene; and in major enough ways to affect the process of writing, and the product.

Interveners, for the purposes of this study, will be defined as persons who enter into the composing process of another. For student writers, interveners are most often two sorts of adults, teachers and parents; and one sort of contemporary, a friend. Who intervenes seems related to whether the writing is self-sponsored or school-sponsored, with teacher and parent, expectedly, intervening in school-sponsored writing; friend, in self-sponsored.

Starting is a specifiable moment in the process of writing—and the one perhaps most resistant to logical characterization and analysis. Certain psychoanalytic or certain learning theories provide explanations as to why a writer starts to write. If one accepts the major Freudian metaphor of the tri-partite self, starting can be regarded as the moment when the id, or the unconscious, is, in R.N. Wilson's terms, "the least amenable to ego mastery," and breaks through the controls usually exerted by the ego and super-ego.²

Because of the clearly profound, and opaque, nature of this moment, the kinds of elements that can be accurately specified, that exhibit themselves in behavior, are contextual—and, usually, trivial. Examples here are where, physically, the writer is when he begins and what habits or rituals he observes. Perhaps the most significant feature of starting that can be readily observed is what element the writer first places on paper, and where in the finished piece that element occurs, if at all.

For the purposes of this inquiry, eight twelfth graders attempt to compose aloud. The assumption here is that *composing aloud*, a writer's effort to externalize his process of composing, somehow reflects, if not parallels, his actual inner process.

At least three interesting questions can be asked about this particular, and peculiar, form of verbal behavior. First, are there recurring characteristics as one or more persons compose aloud? Second, if so, can a category-system be devised by which these behaviors can be

usefully classified? Three, can provocative hypotheses be generated to account for these behaviors?

Composing aloud can be characterized as the alternation of composing behaviors and of hesitation phenomena of various sorts—that is, of verbal behaviors that *directly* pertain to the selection and ordering of components for a piece of written discourse, and those which do not.

Anticipating is different from planning in the following three ways: Planning involves the projection of a total piece of discourse; anticipating, the projection of a portion of discourse. Planning does not occur in the language of the piece; anticipating often employs the exact lexicon and syntax that will appear in the finished piece of discourse.

Finally, anticipating, as Jerome Bruner notes, shuttles between the present and the future; planning does not:

The speaker or writer rides ahead of rather than behind the edge of his utterance. He is organizing ahead, marshaling thoughts and words and transforming them into utterances, anticipating what requires saying. If the listener is trafficking back and forth between the present and the immediate past, the speaker is principally shuttling between the present and the future.... The tonic effect of speaking is that one thrusts the edge of the present toward the future. In one case anticipation is forced into abeyance. In the other it dominates the activity.⁶

Student writers frequently demonstrate the phenomenon of anticipation in their writing as they compose aloud. They anticipate the use of a theme or of an element, then return to the present portion of discourse, to fill out the intervening matter. There are clear signs of efficiently divided attention, as they focus upon the here-and-now while at the same time considering where the future element will eventually, and best, appear.

There are other strategies a writer follows in dealing with the elements or components of discourse: he can accept, and immediately employ, an element; he can accept, then immediately abandon or delete his choice (if too much time intervenes, the action becomes reformulation or revision); or he can combine the element in some way with other elements in the discourse.✧

✧ The kind of self-censoring that eliminates an option before it is uttered is outside the purview of this inquiry.

When dealing with syntactic components—and one must note at once that there are also lexical, rhetorical, and imagaic components these actions correspond to the basic transforming operations—addition; deletion; reordering or substitution; and combination, especially embedding.⁷

In his article, "Generative Grammars and the Concept of Literary Style," Richard Ohmann gives the following definition of style: "Style is in part a characteristic way of deploying the transformational apparatus of a language."⁸ As illustrations, he breaks down passages from Faulkner ("The Bear"), Hemingway ("Soldier's Home"), James ("The Bench of Desolation"), and Lawrence (*Studies in Classic American Literature*) into kernel sentences and notes that, for each, a different cluster of optional transformations is favored. The special "style" of Faulkner, for example, seems partially dependent upon his favoring three transformations: the relative, or *wh*, transformation, the conjunctive transformation, and the comparative transformation.⁹

There is no reason to believe that nonprofessional writers do not also have their characteristic ways "of deploying the transformational apparatus of a language," although these ways may be less striking, with less reliance on "a very small amount of grammatical apparatus."¹⁰ (Query: when teachers or critics say that a writer has "no style," is what they mean that the writer in question has no strongly favored ways of transforming?)

The next question, of course, becomes why one favors a given cluster of transforms. One explanation seems to be that a writer is following some sort of "program" of style, a series of principles, implied or explicit, of what constitutes "good" writing. For example, he might break the concept "coherence" into a set of behavioral objectives, such as "Be clear about referents" and "Repeat necessary lexical elements."

Composing aloud does not occur in a solid series of composing behaviors. Rather, many kinds of hesitation behaviors intervene.¹¹ The most common of these are making filler sounds; making critical comments; expressing feelings and attitudes, toward the self as writer, to the reader; engaging in digressions, either ego-enhancing or discourse related; and repeating elements. Even the student writer's silence can be categorized: the silence can be filled with physical writing (sheer scribal activity); with reading; or the silence can be seemingly "unfilled"—"seemingly" because the writer may at these times be engaged in very important nonexternalized thinking and composing.

The alternation of composing behaviors and of hesitation phenomena gives composing aloud a certain rhythm or tempo. It is interesting to speculate that a writer may have a characteristic tempo of composing, just as he may use a characteristic cluster of transforms.

Composing aloud captures the behaviors of planning and of writing.

Partly because of the very definition of reformulation, and partly because of the attitudes of the twelfth graders toward this portion of the composing process, it does not capture reformulating.

Writing and reformulating differ in significant ways. One is in the role memory is asked to play. Another is in the nature and number of interferences in the two portions of the composing process. In writing, the memory is seldom asked to recall more than the words and the structures in the given unit of discourse upon which the writer is working and, possibly, in the unit immediately preceding. In reformulating, the memory is asked to recall larger units of discourse for longer periods of time, against the "noise" of all intervening experiences. (In writing itself, the major form of "noise" seems to be the physical act of writing, the scribal activity.)

A third way they differ is in the relative roles of encoding and decoding in the two portions of the process. In writing, encoding—the production of discourse—is clearly dominant. Decoding during the act of writing for the most part consists of rereading one's own recently formulated, and remembered, words in short, retrospective scannings. In reformulation, decoding plays a larger role because of the intervention of a longer period of time and the consequent forgetting that has occurred. One becomes more truly the reader, rather than the writer, of a given piece of discourse—that is, he views his writing from the point of view of a reader who needs all possible grammatical and rhetorical aids for his own comprehension.

Reformulation can be of three sorts: correcting, revising, and re-writing. The size of the task involved differs among the three: correcting is a small, and usually trivial, affair that consists of eliminating discrete "mechanical errors" and stylistic infelicities. An other-imposed task, correcting is synonymous with composing in the minds of many secondary and elementary school teachers of composition. Revising is a larger task involving the reformulation of larger segments of discourse and in more major and organic ways—a shift of point of view toward the material in a piece; major reorganizations and restructurings. While others may recommend correcting, the writer himself must accede to the value of the task of revising. Rewriting is the largest of the three, often involving total reformulation of a piece in all its aspects; or the scrapping of a given piece, and the writing of a fresh one.

Stopping represents a specifiable moment—rather, moments—in the writing process because, of course, a writer stops more than once although the final stopping, like the first starting—the first placement of words on a page—has special, or exaggerated, characteristics. One stops

at the ends of drafts or versions of a piece of writing; he stops when he thinks the piece is finished—when he feels he has worked through or worked out the possibilities, contentive and formal, that interest him in the piece; he also stops for the purpose of presenting a piece in a given state for the reading—and, usually, evaluation—of one or more others.

These moments and motives for stopping do not necessarily coincide. Again, whether or not a piece of writing is assigned affects stopping as it affects almost every other phase in the writing process. If an imposed deadline forces the writer to submit a piece of writing for reading and evaluation before he is content with his formulation, before he experiences closure, states of tension develop that make the act of stopping painful, if not impossible. Hypothesis: Stopping occurs most "easily" when one's personal sense of closure occurs at the same time as a deadline imposed by oneself or by others.

The next moment to be noted is the *contemplation of product*—the moment in the process when one feels most godlike. One looks upon part, or all, of his creation and finds it—good? uneven? poor? If he has not steadily, or even erratically, kept his reader in mind during the process, the writer may think of him now and wonder about the reception the piece will experience in the world.

The final category concerns the *seeming influence by a teacher* or by a group of teachers upon the piece of student writing. There are five sources of information about this elusive matter of influences: student statement; student practice; teachers' written evaluations of former pieces, if available; student descriptions of composition teaching experienced; and, the most difficult information to obtain, what those composition teachers actually do in the classroom as they "teach" composition.

This chapter represents a theoretical sketch of one of the most complex processes man engages in. Although it is roughly taxonomic, it does not of course purport to be exhaustive. Nonetheless, almost every sentence contains or implies hypotheses upon which one could spend a lifetime in empirical research. Perhaps investigators other than the writer will find here materials for provocative questions and generative hypotheses about the composing process, particularly of students.