

# 'WHY WRITE?': DRWS FACULTY PANEL

Six faculty members in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at SDSU responded to John Gage's article "Why Write?" at the department's annual Fall Conference. Three of their presentations follow.

## from MICHAEL BYBEE

"Why Write?"

Why write?

Why *write*?

Well, "it depends," as my freshman students tell me. It depends on what you mean by "write," doesn't it?

I read *College English*. I read *The Journal of Advanced Composition*. And when I read what these writers think writing is, I throw the journals across the room. With their notion of writing, I don't know why people would even put paper in the typewriter. Why even put ink in the pen?

How about academic writing? I ask my students, "What is academic writing?" They tell me, "Putting your teachers' thoughts in your own words." Sometimes they tell me, "Putting your teachers' thoughts in the teaching assistant's words."

Well, yes, I agree, but surely not in writing classes!

"Oh, no," they say. "In writing classes you do that *and* you make sure you have good grammar, spelling and punctuation!"

Okay, okay. I give.

But if *that's* what writing is, then why write? Why bother?

I had an undergraduate student from eastern Oregon who took my question seriously. He rearranged his chaw, spit into a Styrofoam cup, and scowling, said, "Cause if you didn't, your teacher would hand you your ass in a basket. That's why."

All right. I understand. But — But now think of writing in a different way. Don't think of writing as just producing some *product* that might appease the powers that be. Don't think of writing as going through some *process*. Think of writing as going through something in order to accomplish an end. You all know exactly what I

## from IAN BARNARD

### Orality and Literacy

I am as committed as you are to writing, the teaching of writing, and a belief in the value of writing and learning in writing. But when I read John Gage's piece I wondered why it is that the kinds of questions I have learned to ask about the orality/literacy binary, about the imperialist subsumptions and erasures that an uncritical or exclusionary celebration of writing effect — why these questions have not intervened into my thinking and practice as a writing teacher. When we teach literature now, and even when we teach teachers, we talk about oral

cultures and cultural productions, oral epistemologies and histories, oral paradigms and methodologies, oral values and pride. Shouldn't these understandings also inform our work as writing teachers, and, if so, how?

Gage's unfortunate wording in his assertion of the "nearly universal agreement that students should write" (715) seems to point to what otherwise appears to be only an underlying current in his essay, the orality/literacy binary, the concomitant privileging of literacy over orality, and the problematic alliance of this privileging with Western imperialisms and in-

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## from ANN M. JOHNS

My colleagues have already spoken eloquently about the Gage article, so I would like to make a more personal statement on the topic of this panel. In doing so, I am suggesting that our students can and should write for the same reasons that we do.

This presentation answers a question about me, and perhaps about all of you, as well: Why do I write?

1. **I write because I must**, particularly in my role as Assistant Dean. I write memos to the college undergraduate advisers. I write letters to students who are challenging their grades or unhappy about their educational experiences. I respond to e-mail messages from colleagues on

mean: Forty-three of you think that a certain paper deserves a grade no lower than a C. Well, I dissent! Boy, have I got an essay to write to you!

Writing in *that* sense has a purpose. Writing in *that* sense has an audience. And that audience — as you

and off campus. Every day, I am required to write for my job.

Our students should also be required to write every day. A number of studies show that students talk rather than write in most literacy classes. Isn't that a shame? It doesn't have to be this way. Students can be given a "quick write" on a reading as they enter the class; they can be asked to write their comments about a fellow student's paper; they can be required to write some of their essays in class. Requiring writing within, as well as outside of, our classes is one of our responsibilities.

2. **I write out of professional obligation**. Within the discourse communities within which I work, principally ESL literacy and English for

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very well know — is indifferent to my purpose. Or incredulous. Or outright hostile.

And I nonetheless want to convince you — my audience — that I'm right.

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## Bybee

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Why write?

Well, you know why. I don't have to explain to you. I'm not even interested in that subject anymore, what *motivates* someone to write. I want to talk about the *consequences* of writing like this.

When I try to convince an indifferent, incredulous, or hostile audience of something, I think very carefully about how I'm going to do that, about what evidence I have for my position, and about how I can best present it. I'm critical. Moreover, I consider my audience very carefully and consider what evidence my audience has for its position and can present against my position. I'm reflective. And with all that in mind, I reexamine my writing carefully, rethinking it and rewriting it. I'm reflexive. And sometimes, when I am at my best, when I am most critical, most

reflective, and most reflexive — Well, when I think that carefully, sometimes I actually change my mind.

Okay, so maybe not an F. Maybe only a D.

In other words, in *this* sense of writing — *real* writing with a purpose and an audience — writing is nothing more than critical, reflective, reflexive thinking.

Gage is right, then, that writing is (among other things) thinking on a page, thinking you can tinker with. It's not the case that better thinkers are better writers so much as better writers (in *this* sense of writing) are better thinkers. Writing better *compels* you to think better.

Stay with me now.

Aristotle claims (in his *Nicomachean Ethics*) that what distinguishes human beings from everything else in the universe is our ability to exercise reason. It's not that we

act according to rational principles. This folder (when I drop it) acts according to rational principles. But, unlike this folder, the digger wasp, and my home computer, human beings exercise reason when they decide what to do. Human beings think.

Are you with me here?

Gage says that better writing leads to better thinking.

Aristotle says that better thinking leads to becoming a better human being.

Bybee says —>

Bybee says that the course you are about to teach is the single most important course, not just in the university, but the most important course in the universe. It is not the *essential* humanities course. The courses you're about to teach are the *quint-essential* humanities courses, those that teach people how to become better human beings.

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tellectual universalizations. Perhaps, then, the ritual return to the Greeks in the essay is symptomatic not only of the culturally specific nature of this "universal" enterprise, but also of the quest for an origin that will always-already reestablish the priority of literacy: the essay moves from deploying writing as merely an example of one possible way of coming to knowledge ("These are available to be assessed only through some kind of performance, such as writing" — page 727) to the "commonplace" conclusions that "writing, more than any other task, brings one face to face with important human responsibilities" (732). Ironically, the occlusion of orality in this teleology is highlighted by the use of words like "saying" to refer to written representation (730).

I also wonder if the argument for the primacy of literacy is related to the privileging of "reason" as the way to and measure of valuable knowledge (see page 728), and, if so, what

kinds of implications this privileging and this relationship would have for the gendering of rhetoric, given the gendered identifications that are associated with the reason/emotion binary?<sup>1</sup>

Finally, as Gage writes, via Irmischer, writing is a "silent and solitary" activity (730) — at least this is how writing is institutionally constructed in our culture — and so his privileging of writing also perhaps suggests a retreat from the political when we compare this kind of writing to the political work associated with call and response and other oral traditions.

### Content and Form

It might seem odd to assert the evacuation of the political in Gage's essay, since Gage so passionately insists on the prioritization of ideas over technique in the teaching and evaluation of writing. I think that the important issues he raises in this regard are at the center of many of our concerns as writing teachers, but I also think that Gage finally falls prey

to the very ideology of technique that he claims to be contesting.

As teachers of writing we are used to saying (even when we don't really believe it) that students can write anything they want as long as they say it well, that they can take up any position on a controversial issue, as long as they support their argument, etc. We often say this in the usually vain hope that we will thus appear to be or actually be "unbiased." But, as Gage points out, "Behind every methodology is an ideology" (715), an axiom that applies a fortiori to pluralist methodologies that claim to be "unbiased" by inviting a supposedly infinite variety of viewpoints.<sup>2</sup>

So many of us still believe in the ennobling power of reading and writing, and Freirian argument for the necessarily liberatory potential of critical thinking, that it's often difficult for us to accept the kind of split between form and meaning implied in Gage's provocative insistence that "A stupid

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idea is no less stupid for having been written correctly, or eloquently" (721). What does "stupid" mean here? Doesn't it just mean an idea we disagree with?

Regrettably, Gage retreats from answering these questions by falling back on old clichés that only return us to the valorization of technique at the expense of ideas:

a good idea need only mean one that a student comes up with through independent thought and decides is significant enough to require communicating. (725)

Teachers, as members of the student's audience and yet as authorities on writing, should not think of themselves as "correcting" student compositions so much as explaining aspects of the student's writing which inhibit or enhance its communication. This means that they ought to comment on technical matters as

well as respond to ideas. They should respond as people who share and interest in the student's ideas and who are capable of judging those ideas based on the clarity of the writing and the adequacy of the support offered. (731)

By embracing only safe concepts like "support" and "clarity," Gage avoids the whole question of what a good idea is, how we should judge one "truth" against another, and so on. These are moral and political questions, surely, not questions of prose and adequacy of support. A quick survey of the texts we are using in our composition classes will doubtless indicate that we do see these as moral and political questions, and that we do want to teach our students ideas that we consider important — almost all of us assign readings that challenge conventional wisdom and grapple with pressing social concerns — but Gage's essay only leaves me more confused about how to infuse these questions into our pedagogies,

since he begins by urging us to talk ideas, but ends with the very obeisance to technique that he disavows.

<sup>1</sup> See also Adrienne Rich's argument that rhetoric marks an inherently male discipline.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Ohmann's *English in America* for a discussion of the kinds of political institutions and programs that this methodology undergirds.

### Works Cited

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Specific Purposes, I am asked to review manuscripts for journals, to complete external reviews of faculty as they come up for promotion, to evaluate grant proposals, and to prepare plenaries. This professional work consists principally of critique and encouragement, and I devote much of my time to it.

Our students should also write out of obligation: to their peers and to members of their communities. In addition to preparing careful critiques of their fellow students' writing, they should write encouraging or disparaging pieces to other audiences. Why not a letter to the *Aztec* or another newspaper about a topic that has stirred their interest? Why not write a letter to the CSU Trustees about tuition or remediation? Why not write a review of a concert for a fanzine? Writing can, and should, become a

duty for those who want to be active in a community.

**3. I write because I want to be part of the dialogue.** I want to "talk" to other texts and to those who write them. And I want my voice to be heard. Sometimes I write directly to another writer in a piece that is considered part of a "dialogue," but generally, my interaction with other writers involves citation or expansion of a theory or topic that has appeared in print.

Our students should also think of writing as dialogic. Many of their texts should "speak" to, and about, the texts of others. We assign reading in our classes not just to give students ideas, but to enable them to respond responsibly to the argumentation and ideologies of other writers, responses that are central to our RW 100 principles.

**4. I write because I love to see my work in print.** It's an ego thing.

When I get discouraged about how little I have accomplished in my short, professional writing life (about 10 years), I count my publications. I don't reread what I have written after it's in print because I am almost always disappointed, but I do like to see my name on a new publication.

Our students also want to be published; they also want their good writing to be public. During SDSU's 100th anniversary celebration, DRWS will sponsor a student writing contest and publish the work of the winners. Perhaps some day, we will have a publication for good student work completed in our own classes. In the meantime, our students have many other opportunities to be published, and we should encourage them to get into print. There is nothing that inspires good revising and editing more than possible publication!

**5. I write because it reminds**  
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