REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

Clear and Coherent Prose: A Functional Approach, William Vande Kopple, Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1989, 239 pages.

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Writing instruction continues to reflect critically on its recent historical roots in eighteenth and nineteenth century composition curricula. One common focus of this reappraisal is the ethics of error—what exactly constitutes error, as opposed to issues of style, and what redress should be applied. Writing theorists and instructors now eschew the traditional rote-learning of rules and its corollary—the mean strictures of assessment which attract much energy and person-power in the enterprise of maximizing and deploying the list of absolute errors that can be committed by student writers and tallied by evaluators. This yoking of error with punishment—failing, excluding, denigrating, and labelling the offenders—is seen as both misguided—since the traditional concept of error itself has been seriously called into question—and inhumane. Mina Shaughnessy's groundbreaking study of the effects of such punishment on adult black students and her powerful pedagogical alternatives have been felt throughout the profession (*Errors and Expectations*, 1977). Equally important, a more humanistic approach is solidly supported by sociolinguistic research that shows the arbitrariness of designations of error. Yet in spite of this research many writing courses and departments persist in assessment and teaching practices that institutionalize the spurious notions and lists of error that dominate current writing handbooks. Why does this apparent contradiction between theory and practice persist? And why does it thrive?

I would suggest that one reinforcing factor is the cycle of influence whereby instructors themselves, having been taught conventional attitudes towards rules of correctness (prevalent now in the rhetoric of literacy crisis), often lack effective alternative explanations of writing problems. Students

need convinc   and accessible articulation of why certain language choices are ineffective   effective. Nor are generalizations based on theory convincing by themselves. For example, well-intentioned but unelaborated reference to the rhetorical situation — to the readers and purposes of texts—is not a sufficient substitution: when so many of these phenomena are imagined, hypothetical, simulated, or constructed for an assignment, neither students nor teachers provide much in the way of convincing arguments when questions arise.

A writing instructor who wishes to steer away from traditional error instruction, yet who has experienced this sense of inadequacy in the face of genuine student inquiry, will welcome Vande Kopple's *Clear and Coherent Prose*: for while this text does not move into broad rhetorical territory, it does expand the field of explanation to embrace the immediate textual context of a document, and it applies these explanations to real examples of writing. Most important, Vande Kopple distances this textbook from rule recitation. He registers the futility of attempting to "describe incoherent prose" by "rely[ing] on vague expressions" such as "doesn't hang together" or giving useless advice such as "work toward more connections;" and he notes the inadequacy of typical textbook advice that disregards "other aspects of the structure and meaning" (p. 3). He provides instead a set of eight guidelines for coherent prose, each defined functionally in terms of the concepts of topic and comment and other pragmatic linguistic categories. Vande Kopple enlists a number of principles that explain why in context certain sentences and paragraphs either succeed or fail to meet coherence and clarity criteria that readers rely on and expect. Chapters cover the placement of topics and comments as indices of focus and emphasis, topicalization strategies, topical progressions, given/new structure, the use and misuse of given information, and the ethics of certain strategic uses of topic/comment and given/new structures.

As he presents his guidelines for coherence, Vande Kopple also scrupulously examines exceptions and shows them to be justified or unjustified on the rhetorical bases of the writer's purpose, reader expectations, and other contextual factors. He successfully ties these macro-textual phenomena to grammatical features at the microlevel of inter-sentence relations.

Three key themes underlie Vande Kopple's approach to coherence, all supported in the literature of cognitive psychology, sociolinguistics, and rhetorical theory: the role and nature of recall and memory in how readers monitor texts for topics and comments, and given and new information; the contractual nature of text conventions as shared expectations between readers

and writers; and the function of context in writers' linguistic choices. In par-
ticular, his emphasis on how readers process texts is paramount and repeated
throughout; for example, on the given-new contract between readers and
writers, he says:

> given information . . . will enable readers to locate the spot in their
> memories where they will be adding new information . . . . the given
> information should be easy to recognize. If it is not, readers will have to
> spend valuable time trying to figure out what point in their memories
> to attend to . . . . Readers proceed best when they first know where
> they will be adding some new information and then learn the new in-
> formation itself (p. 183).

Vande Kopple begins this student-centred text with typical though sim-
plified functional definitions: the topic is "the part of a sentence that tells
what the sentence is about" (p. 9); it is "usually the first noun or noun phrase.
. . . often identical to what traditional grammar calls the subject and its
modifiers" (p. 10). The comment comprises "[t]he elements in a sentence
that say something about the topic;" "[g]enerally, these elements correspond
to the complete predicate" (p. 11). He then, however, moves quickly to in-
troduce a series of increasingly detailed complications and exceptions that
motivate the way the text develops.

His discussion of these exceptions—covered under such topics as
metadiscourse, "orienters," recoverable material, and the use of it- and what-
clefts—also points up a major strength of this book, its clarity. Vande Kopple
achieves such readability through the emulation of his own advice on coher-
ence, a talent for explication, and the judicious use of taxonomy; for example,
in his discussion of metadiscourse he correlates the function of five different
sentence patterns with types of metadiscourse. Similarly, his approach to other
exceptions is always contextually explained. In his discussion of it- and what-
clefts he says:

> [T]here are at least two kinds of it-clefts, each with its own functions.
> What happens in the first kind is that writers mention something in one
> sentence and then later refer to it in the topic of an it-cleft right after the
> it is or it was. They go on to add a significant comment about the topic,
> a comment whose significance they often signal with the word indeed.
>
> For example, one of my students uses such an it-cleft in an essay on
> the total physical response method of teaching foreign languages:

> In the back of the room, the home base chairs should be posi-
> tioned. It is in these chairs that the students perform the actions to
> the commands of the teacher for all the others to see.

This comment is significant because performing actions in response to
commands is at the center of this method (p. 84).

In a discussion of why it may be justifiable to reverse the order of given-
new information, he explains that such violations occur:

> only when speakers or writers feel some pressure . . . . to select the
> correct entity or thing from several candidates, or . . . to correct a
> mistaken view by providing some new information. In all cases, though,
> they feel that they have to convey the new information quickly. And
> that urgency justifies expressing the new information before the given
> (p. 200).

Where Vande Kopple judges exceptions as unjustified, as in certain long,
complex, and delayed topics, he presents examples and suggests remedies.
As the title promises, much of the book is devoted to strategies for improv-
ing less than clear and coherent prose. Refreshing explanations of ambiguity
and redundancy, for example, emerge logically from the functional analyses
of how novice writers violate the given-new contract.

The last four chapters move beyond the immediate cotext of one or
two sentences, and examine the relationship between the functional elements
of the sentence and overall methods of development. The bridging concept
between these micro- and macro-textual phenomena is the rhetorical situa-
tion: as "writers think very carefully about the rhetorical situations they par-
ticipate in . . . , they decide upon or discover an overall method of devel-
opment" (p. 146); and "whatever method of development writers select, that
method will be closely related to what they focus on in sentences . . . in
topics" (p. 147). Vande Kopple proceeds to provide examples of how this
relationship functions—how certain text patterns of development are re-
sponses to rhetorical exigencies. In one section, he explains three possible
patterns of development applied to description: the personal narrative which
topicalizes the writer, the "guidebook" approach which topicalizes the reader,
and spatial organization which topicalizes the object of description (pp. 157-
58).

Throughout the book, but particularly in these latter chapters, Vande

Kopple refers to, but does not develop, the function of the reader's background or prior knowledge—stored in schemata or frames as knowledge structures—in how linguistic structures contribute to coherence. This extra-textual variable of coherence materializes peripherally throughout the book, and sometimes centrally as in the activation of universal knowledge in the inferencing of given information. At the end of *Clear and Coherent Prose*, readers might quite naturally look for a follow-up text on how coherence strategies function to provide these larger connections between sentence, text, and knowledge structures.

I would strongly endorse the use of this textbook in courses and programs for students dedicated to the seriousness of writing. It has become a powerful subtext for the students I teach in a college professional writing program, and I will use it again. In addition to its explanatory strength, each chapter is replete with a set of exercises that effectively lead students to an understanding of the text's discourse concepts. Some are challenging for students, but they are always accessible.

If a new edition is undertaken, however, I think certain revisions would enhance its efficacy as an introduction to the formal-rhetorical connections of effective writing. Vande Kopple could drop the overly cautious prescription that these guidelines apply exclusively to student *essay* writing; as he declares himself, his advice can apply equally well to workplace and technical writing: "Many of the problems that freshman writers . . . face, as well as many of those that students in advanced courses in exposition as well as business and technical writing face, are addressed here" (p. viii).

Second, the disjointed sections on ethics need serious emphasis and development if Vande Kopple intends to convincingly convey this ethical theme. He does examine how unscrupulous writers "smuggle" questionable assumptions into topics which are usually characterized by their givenness (p. 16); he explains how non-agent topics obscure the responsibility of agents (p. 37); and he even cites le Carré to show how what- and it-clefts can be used to disguise new information as given (p. 200). This ethical dimension is welcome, but one wishes it were less sporadic and more fully developed: to some extent the brevity and "in-passing" incorporation of these observations reinforce the perception of ethics in writing as a secondary and trivial issue. In technical writing the practical realities of ethical questions are problematic and complex. An expanded discussion of functional guidelines relating coherence and ethics would be most helpful in many professional writing classrooms.

Vande Kopple's treatment of coherence effectively displaces the

traditional ethic of error, and focuses instead on the *appropriateness* of language choices. Such an approach is much more amenable to social-rhetorical adjustment than is the debilitating judgment of error. He thus gives students and instructors a set of explanatory tools for elucidating strategies of coherence as more or less functionally appropriate, instead of as simply (and finally) right or wrong.

Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition. Susan Miller, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991, 273 pages.

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Contradictions beset the teaching of writing at colleges and universities. On the one hand, administrators, public commentators, and other dignitaries express respect for writing instruction: good communication skills are at the centre of a good education. Teachers of writing, on the other hand, are not at the centre of this enterprise. Their influence is instead marginalized by temporary contracts, by low pay, and by exclusion from the prestige of research. The material conditions of the job belie the words of lofty patrons.

Writing teachers live these contradictions, and the servility and embarrassments that attend them. And they live other perplexities, such as the oddly unresolved outcomes of the last decades of professionalization of writing instruction. Despite the scholarly values which "composition" has cultivated and tended in its recent history, and despite the born-again enthusiasms which have recruited students to new graduate programmes in rhetoric and composition, something at the heart of the project has remained unchanged: something lurking in those countless classrooms to which students are assigned, and in which writing is elicited from them and then fixed. And, despite composition's self-declared independence and status, it is still haunted by the dominance of the literary text on the one hand and, on the other, by the