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Instrumentality

 IN THE 1950S FRESHMAN ENGLISH WAS CONSIDERED A “SERVICE” course, that is, one designated as the instrument by which students were prepared (or indoctrinated) for other disciplines in the university. From its beginnings, “English”—first literature and later composition—entered the college curriculum to serve ancillary purposes. In *Professing Literature*, Gerald Graff describes the “pre-professional era” of the early nineteenth century, during which literature served ends other than the understanding of literature itself. “There was nothing wrong with treating literature in an instrumental way—as an illustration of grammar, rhetoric, elocution, and civic and religious ideals” (19). Susan Miller cites George Gordon, a nineteenth-century literature professor at Oxford, who describes the “triple function” of literature: “to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the State” (*Textual Carnivals* 20). In less doctrinaire language, Arthur Applebee offers five reasons for the acceptance of English literature as a subject in the nineteenth century. “The teaching of literature for the first time met all requirements that could be put upon a subject for study: usefulness, discipline, moral value, interest, even patriotism”

(29). From its inception, English as a discipline (including composition) had to justify its presence in the curriculum by instrumentalizing itself.

In his dissertation, “Captive Audiences: Composition Pedagogy, the Liberal Arts Curriculum and the Rise of Mass Higher Education,” John Heyda documents the debate in early-nineteenth-century British universities over the relative merits of the classics or science as “centrally educative subjects.” William Riley Parker, Wallace Douglas, Gerald Graff, Susan Miller, and many others have noted that the history of English in American colleges—including the introduction of freshman English at Harvard in the 1870s—is in a way the story of English replacing Classics as the “centrally educative subject.” Within the English departments at American universities, one subject has carried the centrally educative (i.e., instrumental) function more than any other—the first-year course.

I use the term “instrumentality” to name the set of practices, common in American colleges and universities in the postwar era, by which academic literacy was inescapably reduced to a set of skills that students were expected to acquire by taking a particular course.¹ Once students had “had” this course, they were expected to be able to satisfy whatever demands for reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking they might encounter within or without the academy. A further consequence of instrumentality has to do with its impact on the notion of “literacy” within the academy. Because literacy became equated with broad notions of “reading,” “writing,” “speaking,” “listening,” or “thinking,” the entire topic, a potentially powerful location for intellectual investigation, was dissipated into the realm of mere technique. Almost anything could be invoked as an agent of such “skills”—as I explain in the next chapter, “Priority,” which explains how attempts to find stable content for the course led to constant yet fruitless innovation.

This chapter will present the general goals—both those of the academy, and those of society at large—that students and teachers of freshman English assumed (or were assigned) during the postwar era. Given those goals, the course was invested with certain specific practices, both in the classroom and within the institution as a whole. Given the nature of the course in which they found themselves caught up, both students and teachers assumed instrumental functions within the academy.

In 1965 National Council of Teachers of English commissioned Robert Gorrell to write a chapter on introductory composition courses for its survey, *The College Teaching of English*. Gorrell identified the general assumptions concerning the freshman course:

In a sense, freshman English is popularly regarded as a kind of capsule liberal education, a way of filling the gaps that appear as specialization increases. The course is accepted and required with the hopes that it will work not one but a series of major miracles: that it will change the language habits of many students so that they will become adept in the dialect of standard English, that it will produce students who have ideas, can find facts to develop them, and can organize and present material clearly and persuasively, that it will train students to read expository prose rapidly and accurately and also to appreciate and interpret literature, that it will make students think clearly and logically, and so on. (92)

The outcomes Gorrell mentioned—proficiency in standard English; thinking, fact-finding, organizing; reading speed, accuracy, and interpretation; logic—are not content-specific. Unlike courses in other disciplines, freshman English existed to satisfy the demands of the student's real reasons for attending the university. Freshman English was a means to what students themselves and the faculty acknowledged as more important ends.

Gorrell's statement also illustrates the tension that the instrumental function of the first-year course causes. On the one hand, freshman English assumed the duties of providing a "capsule liberal education," the locus of academic literacy. Gorrell's phrase "produce students" suggests that it was not intended to convey a particular body of information or even to deal with a body of information; rather, it served to remake persons in an academic image and likeness. On the other hand, Gorrell states the impossibility of a single course producing such effects. For freshman English to "produce students" as expected would constitute "a series of major miracles." As would-be miracle-worker, freshman English became a scapegoat for the rest of the academy. It was necessary as an instrument of academic literacy, thereby relieving all other disciplines from responsibility for the quality of students' spoken and written language. It was also necessary as a place to direct the blame when

mass-produced graduates failed to live up to expectations that hearkened back to a golden age when all students supposedly achieved the kinds of competencies Gorrell describes.

By providing all students at the academy with a “capsule liberal education,” freshman English also undertook the task of advancing the dominant political ideology. After World War II and the ensuing East-West tension, American higher education assumed its share of responsibility for fostering democracy in a world that tended toward less valid, more dangerous ideologies. Society in general and colleges in particular expected that graduates would provide the enlightened leadership that participatory government demands. As the instrument of academic literacy, freshman English bore the brunt of these expectations. In “Rhetoric and the Quest for Certainty” (1962), Hans Guth summed up the role of the course as an instrument of local-level democracy: “No college department . . . recognizes as its specialty the responsible use of language in nontechnical communication. On the other hand, our graduates, as school board members, newspaper editors, PTA chairmen, and chamber of commerce presidents will participate in such communication—though they may never have been led to examine its rhetorical structure for moral implications” (135). Guth connected the responsibility of freshman English to produce academically literate students with the university’s responsibility to produce good citizens. No other discipline was willing to “deal with such matters as the byways of innuendo,” but Guth saw that if teachers mustered their “self-confidence and self-respect,” “Freshman English, which at its least inspiring dwindles into a service course, can be a crucial part of a student’s liberal education” (136). Only the course that touches *all* students—freshman English—could prepare the citizenry for the rhetorical demands of modern citizenship.

In “The One-Legged, Wingless Bird of Freshman English” (1950), Kenneth Oliver connected freshman English with citizenship in broader terms, but in doing so invested the course with even greater responsibility as an instrument of democracy. Arguing against Harold Allen’s proposals to base the course on communication theory, Oliver wrote: “Either Americans will continue to discover and express their own personal, individual experiences, convictions, points of view, regardless of what sways the crowd, or collectivism will strengthen its hold upon both ideas and action. . . . Vigorous, effective, sincere personal expression

may lead to that maturity of thought which can prevent from developing Hitlers and Politburos at too tragic a rate among us" (5). It was not enough to produce graduates who could run newspapers, school boards, and chambers of commerce. For Oliver, the fate of democracy—and therefore of the entire world, given his culture's understanding of the American experience during and after World War II—depended upon the personal expression that no course taught or promoted, save freshman English. Only if individuals learned to express their "inner selves," Oliver claimed, could society stem the tendency toward the horrors of "collectivism." Oliver's words suggest the seriousness attached to the course. He saw it as the sole instrument within the academy by which democratic ideology could be promoted.²

Notably, Oliver does not claim that "discover[ing] and express[ing] . . . personal, individual experiences, convictions, points of view, regardless of what sways the crowd" would help Americans address other social issues that provoked public debate in the 1950s. In their papers, students often addressed topics such as McCarthyism, the perils of the atomic age, racism, anti-Semitism, and sexism, but teachers and administrators did not use freshman English as a forum for these issues.

In subsequent chapters, I will use examples of student writing on controversial topics to explain how the course did not employ such subjects (or the controversial books and articles often used as models) as topoi at which genuine public dialogue might commence. Instead, the discourse of freshman English included them as it did the notion of a "liberal education" so as to contain and neutralize them within the prevailing social and political ideology.

Commentators such as Guth and Oliver called attention to the significance of freshman English in American democratic life, but the language of catalogues and textbooks obliquely devalued the course. Those who taught freshman English characterized it as a temporary means to the permanent, truly valuable ends of an academic education.

Discussing the place of literature in English A, the freshman course at Northwestern, Harrison Hayford (1956) acknowledged that the course must serve the needs of students whose interests lie in disciplines other than the liberal arts, such as commerce, journalism, education, engineering, music, or speech. He commented: "It would be impossible to do in one basic freshman course all the things that validly might be

done. . . . We emphasize composition because we think it is what the students most obviously need and what focuses the educative processes germane to the area most usefully for them and for us as their teachers" (45). Students in English A needed composition, in other words, to further their careers as managers, journalists, teachers, engineers, musicians, or performers, both in the academy and afterwards.

The University of Illinois *Stylebook of English* (1951) introduced students to their work in Rhetoric 101 and 102 with these words: "Good English, spoken and written, will be expected of you as a college graduate. Almost every survey of the requirements for success in any career emphasizes the necessity of capable expression of facts and ideas. . . . To assure your preparation for the future, the University requires you to express yourself in clear, concise English" (University Senate Committee on Student English 1). The *Stylebook* deems literacy important because it serves practical purposes in the students' futures. No matter which careers students may pursue, they must "express [themselves] . . . in clear, concise English" in order to succeed. Without doubt the *Stylebook's* assertion is valid to the system within which it was constituted. Management, law, science, engineering, medicine, all professions require (or at least are facilitated by) a command of "good English, spoken and written." However, except for departments within liberal arts such as English itself and a few token experiments elsewhere,³ colleges or professional curricula within the university did not assume responsibility for developing the literacy of their graduates. Responsibility for academic literacy remained within the boundaries of freshman English.

Freshman English, then, assumed general goals as a capsule liberal education and as an introduction to political and professional discourse. Given these goals, the content of the course—reading and writing—becomes instrumentalized. Reading becomes the means to getting at what is important in substantial subjects; writing becomes the expression of the content one has learned. Prefaces to the anthologies used in the freshman course describe reading as a method, or tool. Myron Matlaw and James Stronks, the editors of *Pro and Con* (1960), state: "Reading with greater comprehension will not only improve your grades and help you in all your college courses; it will, beyond these short-term benefits, stimulate your mind and broaden your understanding and experience" (xiv). Like an investment, literacy produces both short-

and long-term profits. To use another metaphor, literacy is an obstacle to be overcome in order to obtain both external and internal benefits. In *Readings for College English*, a text used at Northwestern in the early 1950s, John C. Bushman and Ernst G. Mathews describe the value of their book in improving students' reading skills: "The discussion questions in this book present 'laboratory' work in the techniques of good reading; the patterns established are for the most part transferable to all types of reading" (ix). Here, reading is presented as a scientific endeavor. Students arrive at general principles via laboratory experiments and then apply them in the "real" world.⁴ Both sets of editors encourage the students to consider the material their texts contain as having only temporary value. Having completed the course, students retain a general sort of skill, or power; in and of themselves, the actual selections they had read have no intended value. Learning to read as a college student, then, is a means. Once a student has succeeded in freshman English, she or he is capable of achieving much more important ends, such as social or professional position, specialized (and therefore valuable) knowledge, or economic or political power.

Like reading, writing also became an instrument. Oscar J. Campbell's "The Failure of Freshman English" outlines the two major objectives for freshman courses in English: development of mechanical skill (the less important) and training in thinking. Regarding thinking, Campbell claims that the freshman course is meant to allow the student new to the university "opportunity to articulate [his new intellectual acquisitions]." As an instrument of articulation, writing becomes a secondary or supportive skill by which primary or significant "intellectual acquisitions" can be transmitted (177–85).⁵ Herman Bowersox, head of the freshman English program at Roosevelt University, wrote in 1955 that the purpose of the freshman Composition course is practical—"to provide the student with skill in the production of the kind of discourse, chiefly exposition and argument, that he needs in his other classes and in later life" (39). As part of the content of a course that is itself an instrument for the rest of the academy, writing becomes a tool. This tool will undoubtedly prove useful to those who acquire it, but it has no particular interest for anyone but those who must teach the students to use it.

The mechanistic undertones of freshman English reveal an instrumentality that extended the responsibility of those who taught the course

far beyond the limits of their classrooms. Even though they had no control over students who had completed the course, teachers found themselves responsible for writing performed across the entire range of the university's offerings, and for the progress of students as they advanced toward graduation. Sometimes teachers of freshman English were implicated by forces outside their control, such as complaints of students' illiteracy from other faculty members or employers of the university's graduates. Sometimes they implicated themselves.

In March of 1960, the Senate Committee on Student English in the undergraduate division at the University of Illinois, Chicago (Navy Pier),⁶ distributed a copy of a memo that Donald W. Riddle, head of the Division of Social Sciences, had distributed to his department. Riddle had given an exam on which five of twenty-one students exhibited "deficiencies"; two were so poorly written that he lowered their grades. He took it upon himself to inform his colleagues, the committee (and indirectly, the rest of the faculty), of the problem. In his memo, Riddle explained his approach to poor student English, which included marking all errors in spelling and grammar, lowering grades due to substandard writing, and using the "yellow slips," stickers that staff from any discipline could use in order to refer a student to the English department for remedial help. The committee's use of Riddle's memo illustrates the practical effects of instrumentality on students, teachers, and on the institution.

Riddle felt a certain responsibility to further academic literacy; otherwise, he never would have written the memo. Nevertheless, he did not perceive that his responsibility lay in dealing with the source of the problem. He wrote, "I do not assume the duty of teaching rhetoric. But I consider it my duty to cooperate with the Committee on Student English." He could spot problems in his students' writing, but either could not or would not deal with their causes. For that, individual students were referred back to the Department of English, and the problem of illiteracy itself was turned over to the Committee on Student English. The committee used Riddle's experience as an example of what other faculty should do, in particular that they should use the yellow slips so that students who needed another dose of freshman English could get it. Everyone involved—Professor Riddle, the members of the committee, the faculty at large who read the memo when the committee distributed it,

even the students who had written poorly in the first place—turned to the designated instrument of academic literacy for the solution to their problem.

Seven years earlier (18 December 1953), Fred Faverty, chair of the English department at Northwestern and head of the Committee on Students' Use of English, received a memo very similar to Riddle's from Economics professor Frank W. Fetter. He had been moved to write because "two recent student reports . . . spurred me to organize some ideas that I have expressed in silence to myself a number of times." He was bothered by the carelessness he found in the papers, which were poorly organized and contained many errors in spelling and syntax. The students offered excuses—they had not been asked to write a paper since freshman English and were out of practice; no other professors had criticized their work; if the content of the paper was accurate, they presumed that formal errors made no difference. Fetter noted that many faculty had seen such deficiencies and heard such excuses, but they had taken no action because the College of Liberal Arts lacked a clear mechanism for reporting substandard writing, and because the problem was so widespread that they did not know where to begin. He proposed that Faverty's committee develop some sort of "short printed form" that faculty could use to report students who produced "deficient work," and proposed that Faverty approach the dean of the college to make a statement clarifying "that the improvement in the student use of English is not just a policy of the English department, but is part of the educational program of the College of Liberal Arts."

In effect, Fetter was asking for the same sort of response to the problem of poor student English that Riddle had sought. Like Riddle, he tried to deal with the problem that arose in his own classroom and also tried to encourage his colleagues to do their share to help students improve the quality of their writing. Neither he nor Riddle, however, sought noninstrumental approaches to the problem of student writing. Neither acknowledged that he may have given assignments too ambitious for the length of time students had to write them, that his students may have been unfamiliar with the conventions of writing in his discipline, or that he had assumed improperly that a single introductory course could furnish students with such "training in English" that they could produce skillful prose wherever it might be called for. Instead, the in-

cidents were used to intensify pressure upon the freshman English course and its teachers to deal with the problems of academic literacy, and so absolve others of responsibility.

Another incident from the files of the Senate Committee on Student English at Navy Pier illustrates instrumentality in a different way. In their annual report to the faculty at the end of the 1953–1954 academic year, the committee proposed a plan for “attempting to establish next year the tradition that students here use good English in all their University work.” This plan consisted of a promotional program featuring stories in the student newspaper and a series of posters placed around the campus each week encouraging a heightened awareness of the advantages of correct and forceful expression. Their memo states, “During one week, for example, the program may stress the fact that vocational and social advancement may be helped by good English and hurt by poor English.” In this case, freshman English instructors were spared responsibility for coordinating the program, but the promotion itself becomes a surrogate for the course. Those who would attempt to “establish . . . [a] tradition” of literacy by means of advertising believe that good English will come about via the operation of an instrument. Academic literacy, itself an instrument, is to be achieved instrumentally. The archives do not contain any further mention of this program, but Riddle’s memo six years later suggests that students had not yet been led to establish the desired tradition.

At Wheaton College, the Department of English itself raised the issue of seemingly incompetent writing among juniors and seniors. Instructors had noticed that other departments were accepting writing that would never be tolerated in Writing III and II2 (Wheaton’s name for freshman English). The English faculty felt frustrated because the work they had put into developing the writing skills of freshmen had been wasted when their colleagues allowed upperclassmen to backslide. The minutes of the department meeting on 20 May 1955 report the thoughts of one professor: “Why [can’t] we . . . maintain the same high standards in other departments’ courses? Is it honest to give a young man a diploma (which indicates that he has satisfied the English Department requirements), and then let him go into a pastorate and mangle the church bulletin?” The moral urgency expressed at that meeting led them to bring their case to the entire faculty. The agenda for the faculty

meeting states that the Department of English wished to present “the need for every faculty member to cooperate in keeping the level of written English at Wheaton as high as possible.”

Confronted with the limits of their power as instruments of literacy, those responsible for freshman English did not absolve themselves of responsibility for students no longer under their control. Instead, the Wheaton Department of English accepted the responsibility imposed upon them with a zeal that reflected the evangelical temper of the college. They perceived their duty not only to offer a course, but to ensure competence in academic literacy for all students. Their colleagues at Illinois shared a similar self-perception. *Standards in Freshman English*, published at Urbana in 1956, stated that once students had completed Rhetoric 101 they “can, and will henceforth, write correctly and effectively even under pressure” (3). Their colleagues in other departments gladly let the English faculty attempt to enforce such dictums.

Clyde Kilby and other members of the Department of English at Wheaton requested the opportunity to present their plea at a general faculty meeting. During three separate sessions in early 1956, Kilby called for a number of changes in the policies of the college, including requiring all faculty to scrutinize student work for correctness and style; setting up auxiliary services such as a referral system, remedial courses, and a writing clinic; and various hortatory efforts on the part of the administration to encourage better writing. Kilby’s requests produced predictable results. The faculty asked the English department to develop and distribute a checklist that professors could attach to student papers. Any students reported as deficient by two or more of their instructors would be remanded to the English department.

The checklist itself (nearly identical to forms used for the same purpose at Urbana and Navy Pier) contained a statement in boldface capital letters followed by three evaluative comments:

THE ENGLISH IN THIS PAPER IS UNACCEPTABLE

— It appears to be the result of carelessness. In the future I shall expect you to write with more care.

— The English in this paper is so poor that your grade has been lowered.

Write with more care.

— You should take this paper to the English Department, where corrective measures will be suggested. Do this within the next week; then return this paper to me.

The checklist itself suggests how the faculty in disciplines other than English read student writing. Detached from the texts themselves, “English” is an added feature to their “real” substance. Other disciplines disavow problematic discourse and remand it the English department. In the marginal space occupied by freshman English, teachers assumed the roles of police or physicians. They had to work with language that the rest of the academy refused to recognize because it violated laws or displayed such a lack of “health” that it needed therapy. Students who exhibited carelessness knew the law, but disregarded it, like motorists who run stop signs or ignore the speed limit. Students who displayed “poor” English revealed a deeper problem, a deficiency due to substandard nurturing or lack of development.

Three years later, in the annual report of the English department for 1959–1960, C. J. Simpson, the acting chair, suggested how attempting to highlight the problem of student writing at Wheaton only drove it further into the shadows. In that year, only ten students had been reported to the English department as deficient in their writing. Simpson commented, “Ten is not a large number. It seems to mean that in general our students write quite acceptably, or that some instructors are quite lenient in the standard of writing they will accept. I fear the latter is more likely to be true than the former.”

Instruction in writing at Northwestern University also bore the imprint of instrumentality. In 1935 the faculty established a Committee on Students’ Use of English. This committee exercised the “power to make and enforce regulations necessary to secure a reasonable command of English by students whose work is reported to it.” Unlike its counterpart at Illinois, the committee at Northwestern wielded only symbolic power.⁷ It seems to have produced only one regulation, a warning in the university’s catalog of undergraduate offerings: “No student seriously defective in the use of English, either spoken or written, will be recommended by the faculty of the College of Liberal Arts. Written papers seriously defective will not be acceptable in any department of the College and work unacceptable on this score will be reported with the

evidence to the committee" (from "Minutes of the Faculty of the College of Liberal Arts," Northwestern University, 10 December 1935). Although no evidence reveals that a student was ever reported to the committee, let alone not "recommended" (presumably, for graduation), documents from the university's archives suggest that the "students' use of English" did not meet the faculty's standards.

In his annual report to Dean Simeon E. Leland in 1961, department chair Jean Hagstrum discussed the continuing dissatisfaction with English A10 (English A had been renumbered in 1956):

The problems that continually arise in English A10 are among the most complex that we as an English department must face. . . . I am convinced that the American freshman, even in a university with a selected enrollment, is badly in need of a year of instruction in written exposition. It will not do to say, as some have, that our students are getting better in English. Admittedly they are. . . . We recognize now that the use of language is like the wearing of appropriate clothes in only superficial ways. The highest use of language, on the contrary, represents the activity of the mind on its newest frontiers and is inextricably related to the entire educational process. A good university ought not to abandon compulsory exposition as its students get better but ought instead to lift the course to their level and beyond—and give everyone an opportunity of taking it. Such a course would be of inestimable value during the rest of the student's academic career and, if he is in a position of responsibility, during the rest of his life.

As Guth and Oliver had suggested, Hagstrum saw the course as a tool not only for academic success, but also for all of the other activities a college graduate might encounter in life, especially those of greater social value and responsibility. Moreover, Hagstrum's statement reveals the boundless expectations invested in the course. No student lay beyond the need for freshman English. As students grew in their skill, the responsibility of the course grew all the greater. The more proficient the students became, the more important freshman English became.

In 1968 Northwestern rethought its educational philosophy. Hagstrum headed the faculty committee that set forth "new approaches to undergraduate education at Northwestern." One of the new approaches the committee enacted was the demise of English A10.

The English Department has now abandoned the monolithic, multi-sectioned freshman course in composition for a series of courses that illustrate the range and method of modern scholarship in English. . . . Although it will offer advanced work in composition to interested students, the English Department can no longer be expected to serve as the stylistic and compositional chaplain to the entire University. It must . . . not consume all its energies in a service course of dubious benefits. (*A Community of Scholars* 14)

In abolishing English AIO, the faculty avoided the problem of instrumentality, but did not resolve it. They admit the bankruptcy of an instrumental approach to academic literacy (“a service course of dubious benefits”), but frame the issue not in terms of the function or value of language within the academy but in terms of power and obligation. The English department excused itself from duties as “chaplain”—the military or hospital officer who does not fight and die, or dispense cures and perform surgery, but only “counsels the suffering.” Instead, the members of the department become implicated more thoroughly in the “real work” of the academy, where they could expend their energies in ways more suited to their talents and dispositions. Perhaps they were wise to escape the dilemma of freshman English, but their action does not solve the problem Hans Guth raises of “teachers [who] are understandably reluctant to leave the solid ground of a rigorously defined specialty and venture into the area where students learn to distinguish the responsible from the irresponsible” (“Rhetoric” 135). The Northwestern decision to limit the English faculty to what they considered their proper discipline reveals one way of avoiding the problem of instrumentality. No one articulated the perception that the freshman course resided in an inextricably instrumental position, and that the only way to escape that trap was to abolish the course. Nevertheless, from a critical perspective forty years later, we can see that the department at Northwestern intuited the inherently instrumental paradox of offering such a course.

The very existence of the University Senate Committee on Student English at the University of Illinois (Urbana) exemplifies how freshman English served as an instrumental agent of academic literacy. Executive Secretary Jessie Howard documented the history of the committee in “The Qualifying Examination in English: Background” (1962).

She located its origin in the “criticism of poor English among many of [the university’s] graduates” in the late 1930s. In 1940 the Board of Trustees pressured the university president, Arthur C. Willard, “to see that serious consideration be given to the matter” (University Senate Committee 1). A number of committees conducted studies of the problem and surveyed faculty opinion. As a result, in 1941 the Senate implemented a system by which freshmen were required to take two semester-length courses, Rhetoric 1 and 2. Those who scored low on the placement exam took a noncredit remedial course, Rhetoric 0, as well. Students who received a grade lower than a “B” in Rhetoric 2 took the English qualifying examination. Those who failed were assigned another semester of writing instruction, Rhetoric 5. Later, these courses were renumbered as 100, 101, 102, and 200. During its twenty-seven years of operation, the University Senate Committee on Student English implemented a number of projects in order to ascertain the level of students’ writing performance and to raise it. The committee published the *Stylebook of English*, a required text for all students at the university. It established a writing clinic where those not enrolled in rhetoric courses could remedy their writing deficiencies. It frequently scrutinized students and faculty alike through surveys and studies. It revamped the rhetoric offerings, eliminating the remedial course for freshmen and establishing an intensive publicity program in order to stimulate better teaching in the high schools. It tinkered with the relationship between the English qualifying examination and Rhetoric 200, eventually making the course optional.

Despite considerable efforts by the committee, the hundreds of instructors in the Rhetoric program, and the thousands of students who took the courses and exams, the committee’s own evidence suggests that during the postwar era students at the University of Illinois did not show improvement relative to standards of correctness and expectations that they write in a particular academic style. After a decade under its revised standards for student English, the committee issued “The University of Illinois Faculty Looks at Student English.” The report, based on a questionnaire distributed to the entire faculty in 1954, states: “The available evidence indicates that the problem of unsatisfactory student English still exists. Members of the faculty still express critical opinions of students’ English. Grades given in Freshman Rhetoric and English

qualifying examinations show that substantial portions of the student body lack the ability to write good English" (1).

In a document accompanying this particular report, the committee also analyzed responses to the question, "What is your reaction to the proposition that, as a University faculty member, you should accept some responsibility for improving the written English of your undergraduate students?" Although 58 percent responded "agree strongly," the committee concluded: "The fact that a faculty member proposes some measure for the improvement of student English or that he endorses such a proposal is no sign that he will help to put the proposal into practice" (16). The committee's own evidence revealed that every proposal for enlisting faculty cooperation in improving or maintaining students' English—publishing the *Stylebook*, distributing "Pink Slips" (checklists similar to the "yellow slips" used at Navy Pier), distributing background studies and suggestions for incorporating writing assignments into courses outside the Division of Rhetoric, conducting faculty symposiums, engaging in various types of publicity—proved ineffective. As did their colleagues at Wheaton, Navy Pier, and Northwestern, those responsible for freshman English at Urbana found that the rest of the faculty claimed to value "good English," but even in the face of obvious deficiencies were not willing to displace the responsibility for teaching good English away from a single, instrumentally conceived course.

Evidence of the problematic nature of freshman English as an instrument of academic literacy also includes data concerning the students' performance and attitudes. Between 1947 and 1960, the percentage of students who failed the English qualifying examination rose from 13.3 (1946–1947) to 55.2 (1960–1961). In 1965 Wilmer A. Lamar and Ruth E. McGugan, of the Division of Rhetoric at Urbana, surveyed first-year students in Rhetoric 101 and 102, students who had taken the courses two or three years before, as well as the instructors. Of the older students who responded, 94 percent disagreed with the statement "Rhetoric should be required only of English majors," and 91 percent disagreed with "Rhetoric is a useless preparation for my career." These figures suggest that students from a wide variety of specializations perceived their experience in the rhetoric classes to be valuable. Nevertheless, 54 percent agreed with the statement "My writing is pretty much the same after the course as before." Fewer yet (41 percent) agreed that "I have continuously tried to improve my writing on the basis of this course."

Only one-third (between 30 and 35 percent) could agree with statements such as: “The writing techniques that I learned have improved my work, and consequently my grades, in other courses”; “the course improved my day-to-day use of correct grammar”; “the course caused me to change my style of writing”; or “I noticed that my spelling improved as a result of the course” (68–69). Like the faculty, these students claimed to have found value in what Robert Connors calls “composition-rhetoric,” but when pressed found little in their actual writing practices that revealed any real change. The students’ felt sense that the course had provided them with something useful belies Connors’s assertion that “during the Modern Period, it becomes a truism that student dislike for Freshman Composition is exceeded only by the dislike of its teachers” (*Composition-Rhetoric* 13). He acknowledges that “composition-rhetoric” fulfilled “potent social and pedagogical needs” (7), suggesting that even during the “modern period,” when Connors alleges that the course “remained a scholarly backwater and a professional avocation, a drudgery, and a painful initiation ritual” (14–15), a complex phenomenon was unfolding under the title “Freshman English.” Broad-brush labels such as “current-traditional rhetoric” and other generalizations about the post-World War II era mask the subtle interplay of experience among teachers and students of freshman English.

Ironically, a course that assumed the general goal of providing a “capsule liberal education” contradicts itself in two ways. The claims of service to the liberal arts and to democracy are belied by the specific issues with which freshman English teachers and students typically concerned themselves, like the correction of surface-level errors. Moreover, instead of fostering the beliefs and practices commonly held to be “liberal,” for example freedom and originality, as the instrument of academic literacy, freshman English became the agent of an ideology that reinforced strict rules and conformity.



NOT ONLY DID instrumentality motivate many of the practices of the course itself; it also affected the lives of the students and faculty involved in freshman English. When language itself is instrumentalized, those involved with such language also inescapably become instruments themselves.

No matter how humane or visionary administrators and teachers

might have been, the instrumental nature of freshman English reduced students to the status of raw material. They were valuable not because of their individual potential or innate worth as human beings, but because they were grist for the machine of freshman English. John Heyda refers to this aspect of the course when he describes the vacuousness of early-twentieth-century textbooks for freshman English: "In spite of the fine talk, by Channing [Boylston Professor of Rhetoric at Harvard from 1819 to 1851] and others, of social equality, justice, and the wonders of an 'improved society,' composition instruction had clearly failed to define the student as anything but an object, a mere tool of liberal educational policy" ("Captive Audiences" 149). The firm but friendly talk in textbooks and course materials about future academic, social, and financial benefits of having taken freshman English masks what students became within it.

Now and then, a submerged hostile reality broke the polite surface. Karl Dykema, who served as chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1953, wrote "The Problem of Freshman English in the Liberal Arts College" (1951). Dykema discussed the tension between the liberal rhetoric with which freshman English was presented, and the rigid expectations that students had to meet. He named as one undercurrent of this tension the survival of English departments themselves. "It is the special problem of freshman English in the liberal arts college to see that the course is so conducted that it will meet its proper objectives and yet not discourage students from electing courses in literature" (4). The "special problem" for the instructors, then, is to balance what they must do for the academy (indoctrinate the students rigorously in academic literacy) against what they would choose to do (attract large enough numbers to maintain courses in the fields in which they have been trained and which they wish to teach—in short, courses desirable to them). Students became tokens in this struggle between the beliefs and desires of the institution as a whole, and those of a smaller constituency of common interest, the Department of English.

During a meeting at Wheaton College in 1956, the members of the English department were discussing the possibility of exempting some students from general education requirements, including Writing III and II2. One instructor, Helen Siml deVette, had been so successful in teaching expository writing that her students had been able to win prizes

in national competitions. She observed that it would be unfortunate to allow the fifty best writing students to escape the English department completely when they were the very ones who should be trained in writing. For this instructor, students were resources for the advancement of the program itself. She did not object because the talented students to be exempted would not be able to meet the requirements of the college, but because they would siphon off what little recognition freshman English had been able to achieve.

William Riley Parker has pointed out that students in freshman English became the capital upon which teachers and departments tried to base their power and status. In "Where Do English Departments Come From?" he describes the mechanism whereby the raw material of freshman English enrollees provided the basis upon which English departments became so prominent in the university. "It was the teaching of freshman composition that quickly entrenched English departments in the college and university structure" (11). It had an even more profound effect upon those who taught. Once students had fulfilled their requirements they were free of the engine of freshman English, but many instructors never escaped. Freshman English was staffed for the most part by the powerless of academia: graduate students, new faculty struggling for tenure, or those who had despaired of ever achieving a tenure-track position and were content with teaching only the required course. According to Robert Connors, what Oscar J. Campbell wrote in 1939 held true for the postwar era: "At the bottom of almost every large English department lies a kind of morass of unhappy, disillusioned men and women which poisons all its fairer regions" (*Composition-Rhetoric* 203).⁸ In his survey, Gorrell found this pattern of staffing to be one of the common denominators of freshman English across the nation in the 1950s. Ironically, the one course considered important enough to be made a universal requirement could only be staffed, for the most part, with conscripts. It is doubly ironic that the more conscientious these conscripts proved to be, the less likely they were to advance within academia.⁹ In "Freshman English in America" (1965), Martin Steinmann commented: "Often the able, conscientious teacher of freshman English never gets his Ph.D. At the end of seven years, or whatever the limit is, he is turned out of post-graduate school and his job and, while looking for work as a textbook salesman, copy-editor, or junior-college teacher, has ample

leisure to contemplate his folly" (393–94). Anyone who tried to work what Gorrell called the "several major miracles" expected of freshman English found that the demands of teaching the course left one unable to devote sufficient time to the work that would bring advancement, especially completing one's dissertation. Those who began in freshman English and survived usually did so by subverting the overt purpose of the course. They either taught just well enough to escape judgment as incompetent, or made the course into one they could teach comfortably, usually some sort of literary survey.¹⁰

A poll of the rhetoric staff at Urbana by Charles Roberts in 1942 revealed that their primary interests in high school had been books and literature. Virtually all had majored as undergraduates in English literature and were doing graduate work in order to teach advanced courses in literature. Few thought it worthwhile for the department to offer a graduate course in the teaching of composition. In "Provisions for Rhetoric and the Rhetoric Staff," a 1951 update of Roberts's survey, the University Senate Committee on Student English found that these characteristics had not changed in the intervening nine years and commented: "The teaching of rhetoric is likely to be regarded as only a chore, a temporary means of livelihood, a 'blind-alley job,' a dreary routine from which escape is to be found at the earliest possible moment" (4). In a paper delivered at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1958, Dudley Bailey clearly connected the instrumentality of freshman English as a course, and the instrumentalization of those who taught it. "Like the janitors, we provide a 'valuable service' for our various colleges. But we are not really a part of any of them. Our own colleagues in English look upon us with friendly toleration—if they are not overly candid—or outright contempt—if they are starchy and honest. Only at our conventions do we assume any importance in the scheme of things; and I have often thought of this convention as the largest wound-licking convocation in the teaching profession" (232).

The essential instrumentality of freshman English and its ramifications suggest why certain approaches to reform did not work. Plans to raise the self-expectations and performance of teachers or students of freshman English without seeking to realign the expectations and responsibilities for academic literacy within the university only made things worse. Plans for improvement in "literacy" that did not also deal with

the context within which freshman English had to operate raised the expectations of those implicated in the course, but could not possibly deal with the causes of their perceived inadequacies. As one member of the faculty at Illinois wrote to the University Senate Committee on Student English in 1955: "The present system of a Senate Committee on Student English is to blame. It perpetuates the problem by serving as a scapegoat, and thus encourages faculty irresponsibility" ("Background" 8). Instrumentality made freshman English a kind of tar baby; the more it was grappled with, the more inescapable the problem seemed to become.