Style and the Public Intellectual:  
Rethinking Composition in the Public Sphere

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In 2005, contributors to the Writing Program Administration Listserv (WPA-L) responded angrily when Stanley Fish, in a New York Times op-ed piece, derided decades of composition scholarship by stating that "content is a lure and a delusion and should be banished from the classroom." In its place Fish advocates "form," his term for the grammar he asks students to use as they construct a new language. In his column, "Devoid of Content," the renowned literary scholar laments the emphasis on content in composition courses because of what he argues is the field's mistaken belief that "if you chew over big ideas long enough, the ability to write about them will (mysteriously) follow." He thus exorcises intellectual concepts, anthologized readings, controversy, and everything else except "how prepositions or participles or relative pronouns function." While compositionists' opposition to Fish's critique of "so-called courses in writing" is to be expected—in a letter to the Times, Deborah Brandt states that "what Stanley Fish teaches isn't writing"—their reaction is surprising in one respect: Fish had made almost the same claim three years earlier in the Chronicle of Higher Education, where he writes that content, useful initially to illustrate syntactical or rhetorical points, should then be "avoided like the plague" ("Say"). If Fish is merely rehashing an old argument, what accounts for the outcry over his later column only? On the WPA list, one contributor suggested that the problem was its public circulation: "Because it went to The New York Times, it circumvents the entire academic community and speaks directly to an audience that already believes that academics don't know what they are doing, especially when it comes to writing" (Galin).
Unfortunately, Fish’s commentary on the discipline is far from an isolated occurrence. In what seems at first to be nothing more than a relatively short *New Yorker* book review of a “throwback” style guide for college students, former CUNY English professor Louis Menand, now at Harvard, ends up defining rhetoric and composition for readers—and his account is anything but flattering. Menand’s review of literature professor David Williams’ how-to text, *Sin Boldly!* *Dr. Dave’s Guide to Writing College Papers* is, simply put, a critique of composition studies, and what is particularly distressing is the way in which the staff writer for the *New Yorker* uses the piece to introduce the field in ways that are reductive, outdated, and unsupported by disciplinary scholarship. Take, for example, this early paragraph in Menand’s article:

Rhett Comp specialists have their own nomenclature: they talk about things like “sentence boundaries,” and they design instructional units around concepts like “Division and Classification” and “Definition and Process.” These are trained discipline professionals. They understand writing for what it is, a technology, and they have the patience and expertise to take on the combination of psychotherapy and social work that teaching people how to write basically boils down to. (92)

Even though Robert Connors countered the assumption that composition uses a modal (division and classification, for example) and, by extension, current-traditional, approach to writing instruction in an award-winning essay published in 1981 (“Rise”), Menand nonetheless makes that implicit claim with impunity in the pages of the *New Yorker*—not to mention reducing writing, without complicating the notion, to merely “a technology” (see Ong 81–83). The staff writer then goes on to devalue the writing process: “Students are often told, for example, to write many drafts. . . . Here is a scandalous thing to say, but it’s true: you are reading the first draft of this review” (94). In this statement, Menand contradicts a common practice—revision—that not only compositionists, but most professional writers, generally take as a given. He further misses the point of revision when he asks, “Would you tell a builder to get the skyscraper up any way he or she could, and then go back and start working on the foundations?” thereby eschewing the more fitting comparison of a writer to an architect who may produce a number of preliminary designs before deciding on a “final” one that might be subject to additional changes (93). Menand’s somewhat flippant charge that writing instruction combines “psychotherapy and social work” is exacerbated when he equates practices like free writing (“the whole ‘get your thoughts down on paper’ routine”) with “the psychotherapeutic side of writing instruction”; attributes difficulties in invention to “subconscious phobia”; and suggests that composition’s efforts to improve the “flow” of writing will allow student writers to “conquer their self-loathing and turn into happy and well-adjusted little graphomaniacs” (94).

While Fish and Menand’s negative portrayals of composition studies are admittedly tongue-in-cheek at times—Menand even suggests that Williams’s book “will be helpful mainly as a guide to writing college papers for Dr. Dave” (94)—no such mitigating factor is at work in Heather Mac Donald’s 1995 *Public Interest* article “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” which plays off *Newsweek*’s 1975 cover story with the same title announcing the nation’s so-called literacy crisis.2 Mac Donald quickly reveals her ostensible purpose: to condemn composition studies for what she suggests are college students’ declining literacy skills: “In the field of writing, today’s education is not just an irrelevance, it is positively detrimental to a student’s development.” In her polemic against composition’s supposed role in the decline of literacy, Mac Donald—trained in law and now a fellow at the Manhattan Institute—critiques the outcomes of the Dartmouth Conference and the process movement as a whole: “Dartmouth proponents claimed that improvement in students’ linguistic skills need not come through direct training in grammar and style but, rather, would flow incidentally as students experiment with personal and expressive forms of talk and writing.” Hence, Mac Donald obviously attributes the decline in literacy to process movement practices like free writing and the emphasis on “growth” in student writing.

Despite Mac Donald’s apparent interest in student literacy, however, a close reading of her article reveals her real intention: exposing what she calls the disappearance of “objective measure[s] of coherence and correctness” in writing instruction. In other words, when Mac Donald suggests that “elevating process has driven out standards,” by “stan-
Composition's Displaced Public Intellectuals

The answer, I suggest, involves one of the chief dilemmas facing composition studies today—the field's lack of public intellectuals, which Fish, in a different forum, defines as "someone who takes as his or her subject matters of public concern, and has the public's attention" (Professional issue). A crucial question, then, is, where are composition's public intellectuals, and why does the field need them so urgently today? I am not the first person to pose this question about the dearth of public intellectuals in composition. In a College English review essay, Frank Farmer asks how composition can reconstitute the concept of the public intellectual to achieve its own goals: "How can we define—perhaps more accurately redefine—the public intellectual to meet our needs and purposes in our moment?" (202). Christian Weisser, whose work on public intellectuals makes up part of Farmer's review, calls on compositionists "to rethink what it means to be an intellectual working in the public sphere today" and suggests that one place to look is in "sites outside the classroom in which this discourse is generated and used" (121, 42). Weisser hypothesizes that in composition the sites of "public writing" and "service-learning," in his estimation, "might very well become the next dominant focal point around which the teaching of college writing is theorized and imagined" (42).

While Weisser's observations are promising, however, he bases his thinking in part on one of Fish's highly problematic claims, that is, "academics, by definition, are no candidates for the role of the public intellectual!" (118)—an assertion that Fish, by virtue of his public work alone, clearly refutes. In a different context, Richard Posner also counters Fish's contention. In his book Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline, Posner states, "Being an academic public intellectual is a career, albeit a part-time and loosely structured one," and he goes on to suggest that academics are needed most as public intellectuals in areas that require expertise "beyond the capacity of the journalist or other specialist in communication to supply" (41, 45). Within the context of composition studies, public intellectuals can accurately convey the field's theoretical knowledge about writing to the general public. For instance, when the widely circulated editorial by Fish appeared, it prompted one New York
Times reader to write and advocate resurrecting the anachronistic practice of “teaching sentence diagramming as a prerequisite to proper writing” (Fahy). Compositionism is ideally situated to counter just this type of public representation. As Weisser suggests, “Public writing consists of more than expressing your opinion about a current topic; it entails being able to make your voice heard on an issue that directly confronts or influences you” (94). Applying this idea to public discourse would certainly answer Farner’s call for composition to re-create the public intellectual to fit its disciplinary needs, and, one might add, the needs of the public.

Given the field’s lack of public intellectuals, what might account for the apparent disconnect between the discipline and public discourse? Clearly, the history of composition studies itself, including its gendered beginnings, offers a place to begin to answer that question. As Susan Miller asserts in Textual Carnivals, the field’s identity is “deeply embedded in traditional views of women’s roles,” a fact Miller says has led the field to try to “overcome this ancillary status” and to redefine itself “in more crisply masculine, scientific, terms” (122). In tracing the tendency to identify composition with these qualities, Miller suggests that “like women in early communities that depended on their production of live births, composition teachers were at first necessarily placed where they would accrue subordinate associations that were no less binding than those still imposed on women” (127). Miller’s connection of composition teachers to a subordinate status resonates with Michael Warner’s notion of a “counterpublic.” In his work Publics and Counterpublics, Warner, borrowing from Habermas’ analysis of the public sphere, suggests that “some publics are defined by their tension with a larger public” and argues that “this type of public is—in effect—a counterpublic.” He goes on to state that a counterpublic “maintains, at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status.” In addition to sexual minorities, Warner cites “the media of women’s culture” as one example of such a counterpublic (56). For his part, Posner indicates that a gendered divide similar to that postulated by Miller and Warner exists today in the realm of public intellectuals as a whole, with women constituting just 15.8% of the total number Posner studied (207). Indeed, if we can extrapolate Posner’s statistics to what Miller calls the “female coding” of composition (123), it may help explain the lack of public intellectuals in the profession at large and the predominately male pool of non-composition-trained public intellectuals who seem to “speak for” the field.

In addition to disciplinary associations based on gender—and what Warner might deem composition’s status as a counterpublic—composition’s sometimes contentious relationship with literary studies, the field to which Fish and Menand belong, may account for what often appears to be the absence of recognition for composition’s independent disciplinary expertise. Thus, for example, in explaining the field to the public, Menand, a literary scholar who has taught composition, reveals his lack of knowledge of composition’s theoretical underpinnings. Worse yet, he depicts the profession as one without any theory to be taken seriously. Fish, meanwhile, in addition to attempting a kind of one-upmanship of composition studies through his “form is the way” approach, implies that composition is not doing its pedagogical job: “Students can’t write clean English sentences because they are not being taught what sentences are” (“Devoid”). While compositionists may be tempted to discount these characterizations from those whose scholarship falls outside the field, Menand’s critique nonetheless gains the patina of legitimacy by virtue of his role as a respected Pulitzer Prize-winning author and New Yorker writer, while Fish’s proposal, based on responses from readers, seems to be enthusiastically embraced. It’s evident that a well-educated audience is hearing Fish’s and Menand’s views with no comparable response from composition professionals. This public discourse shows what happens to disciplinary ethos when compositionists become merely “these new writing clinicians” (Menand 92) under the acerbic pen of public intellectuals with an attentive audience.

The Role of Style

What has brought about this state of affairs? Why as a profession are we still searching for a valid public forum in which to express our views? If we accept Fish’s definition of the public intellectual as someone who takes up matters “of public concern,” the issue seems clear: As a field, we
have not addressed those topics the public cares most deeply about and, as a result, to use Fish’s corollary, we do not have the public’s ear. What are the topics that most concern a public audience? Even a cursory analysis of Menand’s review, Fish’s editorial, Mac Donald’s Public Interest piece, and regular public pronouncements on the decline of reading and writing offers a plausible answer: the areas that seem to be of chief concern outside the field are literacy, style, and grammar and usage. While much of the outcry over reading and writing issues seems to fall under the province of literacy, I argue that style, often viewed through the lens of literacy or of grammar and usage, is of paramount importance. Mac Donald’s article, for instance, suggests her interest—albeit a narrow, reductive one—in style. Menand seems to care most about the grammatical aspects of writing when he suggests that using red ink or lowering a grade for confusing “it’s” as the possessive of “it” amounts to “using a flyswatter on an ox” (92). Yet, his deft use of metaphor here actually shows his interest in style. Similarly, he approaches the topics of “voice” and imitation (aspects of style) when he critiques Williams’ preference for “voices that are out there,” like Camille Paglia’s: “It is not completely settled that even Camille Paglia should write like Camille Paglia; what can be said with confidence is that she is not a writer whom college students would be prudent to imitate” (94).

The problem of style and the public intellectual is thus paradoxical: the very areas that seem to be of chief concern outside the field are generally disdained or ignored inside it. Our disciplinary abandonment of style in particular, I argue, has precipitated the incursion of the public intellectual into composition studies. Put differently, in its neglect of style as a topic of serious scholarly inquiry (as well as grammar and literacy, to varying degrees), the discipline of composition and rhetoric has ceded the discussion to others outside the field—generally to self-described public intellectuals like Menand, Fish, Mac Donald, and others. Hence, by adopting a hands-off approach to the study of style—and without putting forth our own group of public intellectuals to articulate composition’s theories and practices—the field is left with popular, and often erroneous, views that have displaced our own. This situation is part of a scenario that has led composition studies itself to adopt a reductive characterization of style—that is, as merely equivalent to certain current-traditional conceptions of grammar, usage, or punctuation (similar to Mac Donald’s, for instance). While compositionists do resist such portrayals—especially in light of our broader rhetorical knowledge of stylistic practices and recent scholarship on style (see, for example, Connors; Johnson; Micciche; Johnson and Pace; Duncan)—the field is, at the same time, paralyzed by it, powerless to refute popular, and often reductive, characterizations for which there is no public counterargument.

In light of this impasse, I propose that it is time for composition and rhetoric to take back the study of style—to redefine the way the conversation is being framed and to rethink that concept in the public sphere. The urgency of this “call to style” goes beyond a desire to reanimate stylistic practices in composition. Indeed, it implicates the politics of the entire field. I contend that one reason composition has been unable to make its case publicly in virtually any area of scholarship or practice, including literacy, is that it has failed to address the study of style (or to articulate a clear position on the difficult-to-limit area of grammar). Regrettably, our neglect comes at our own peril. In failing to articulate ideas about those language topics in which the public seems most invested, the discipline is left without sufficient credibility to bring up other concerns it considers pressing. What’s more, this lack of response from composition-trained public intellectuals makes it difficult to dispel pejorative constructions of the field—or outright neglect—from outsiders who treat composition as less than the transformative discipline it is. To reiterate, if one analyzes the nature of the public discourse on language issues, the majority of that discourse arguably concerns the study of style, often appearing in the form of grammar, punctuation, and literacy. When style is discussed, it is frequently associated with current-traditional approaches to the topic (see Mac Donald, for example). To counter this tendency, it is essential for the field to go public with a renewed emphasis on style and to employ its disciplinary expertise.

While composition as a discipline has recently expressed some renewed interest in the study of style, it seems safe to say that, since around 1985, the field as a whole has largely ignored stylistic theory and practice and rendered it invisible. In fact, even as the study of style
multiplied during the “Golden Age” of style (a fruitful period from the 1960s to the mid 1980s), some were already retrospectively labeling it a “static” practice or including it as part of “current-traditional rhetoric.” Mac Donald’s Public interest article attempts to make just that association while advocating the superiority of a product-based approach. Yet, I contend that the association of style with current-traditional rhetoric is not historically accurate. This period of style’s ascendency also included the development of what Connors has called “sentence-based rhetorics” (“Erasure” 98) or the practices of sentence combining, generative rhetoric, and rhetorical imitation, the first two largely concerned with syntax. Connors questions the disappearance of these stylistic practices from composition theory and pedagogy and begins the tangible reemergence of discussions about the role of style in the field. T.R. Johnson’s A Rhetoric of Pleasure: Prose Style and Today’s Composition Classroom and Johnson and Tom Pace’s Refiguring Prose Style: Possibilities for Writing Pedagogy offer an eclectic approach to studying style, while Richard Lanham’s The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information makes the claim that style and substance have, in effect, been reversed as we vie for attention in a technologically oriented society. Lanham writes, “If attention is now at the center of the economy rather than fluff, then so is style. It moves from the periphery to the center” (xi–xii).

The Status of Grammar in Composition Studies

In 2006, the WPA listserv responded quickly when an article about grammar instruction appeared in The Washington Post. In “Clauses and Commas Make a Comeback: SAT Helps Return Grammar to Class,” Daniel de Vise writes about a high-school English teacher in Virginia who has resurrected “direct grammar instruction”—in other words, non-contextual grammar drills—in his classes, apparently in response to the new writing section of the SAT that consists primarily of grammar questions. Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the article is an erroneous assertion de Vise makes about a supposed change in NCTE’s policy on grammar: “The National Council of Teachers of

English, whose directives shape curriculum decisions nationwide, has quietly reversed its long opposition to grammar drills, which the group had condemned in 1985 as a deterrent to the improvement of students’ speaking and writing.” As NCTE President Kathleen Blake Yancey wrote on WPA after the Post article appeared, “This claim—that NCTE has changed its stance on grammar—is false, and we’ve spent the better part of the day trying to get it corrected... You spend hours and hours trying to get some attention paid to what you stand for, and this is what they pick up. And of course, it would be about grammar.” While de Vise fails to cite specific authority for this claim, the article does quote Amy Benjamin of the Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar, a group affiliated with NCTE, who tells de Vise that “our time has come.” However, Benjamin’s group—which de Vise says has evolved into “standard bearers” on language issues—does not speak for the national organization of NCTE, and is clearly at odds with NCTE on this issue.

It is important to acknowledge the extent to which the so-called “grammar question” remains particularly vexed in a field that has approached the subject with ambivalence for some time. For years, the study of style has overlapped with the discourse of grammar in a number of crucial respects. What the de Vise article shows, however, is that the public discourse about grammar tends to revive and, indeed, promote a prescriptive approach that the field officially abandoned long ago. Yet, even Menand assumes grammar’s centrality to the field when he tries to dispel some “grammatical superstitions” and then goes on to discuss the composition teacher’s “almost hopeless task of undoing this tangle of hearsay and delusion [that grammar and usage involve]” (92). Ironically, Menand’s review is concerned primarily with stylistic issues—not the grammatical ones with which they are often confused or conflated. Indeed, the continued misunderstanding of composition’s position on grammar suggests that this is another area in which the field could profit by clearly articulating a public position. Any examination of the history of composition’s relationship with grammar reveals the importance of the publication in 1985 of Patrick Hartwell’s article “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar” in which the author suggests that there are five different definitions of grammar, succinctly summarized by David Blakesley as follows:
(1) the set of formal patterns in which the words of a language are arranged in order to convey larger meanings; (2) linguistic grammar, which studies these formal patterns; (3) linguistic etiquette (usage [. . .] which is not grammar, per se); (4) school grammar (the grammar of textbooks); and (5) stylistic grammar (grammatical terms used to teach style). (195)

In his conclusion, which echoes some of the findings of a 1963 NCTE study by Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer, Hartwell argues that teaching formal grammar out of context does not help and in fact can harm the teaching of writing. He writes, “One learns to control the language of print by manipulating language in meaningful contexts, not by learning about language in isolation, as by the study of formal grammar” (125). Despite Martha Kolln’s challenge to that view in her 1981 article “Closing the Books on Alchemy,” the Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer position, reprised by Hartwell, has remained the field’s leitmotif on the role of grammar in composition instruction, as NCTE’s position statement affirms. Even though Hartwell’s conclusion that both style and grammar are inherently rhetorical may be accepted by most compositionists, however, I contend that when the “grammar question” arises in the public arena, it is not enough simply to reiterate Hartwell’s conclusions. Instead, I argue that the field must publicly articulate a view of grammar that others can better relate to and understand. Is it possible, as compositionist Janet Zepernick seems to imply on the WPA listserv, that our often visceral reactions to public assertions about grammar have contributed to our invisibility within the public sphere? She writes,

One of the public relations problems we face as a discipline is that instead of responding to the pro-grammar movement among non-comps by saying, “Yes, we see what you want. We call it X, and here’s how we do it and why it works so well when we do it this way,” we’ve generally responded by circling the wagons and writing diatribes against the grammar police.

Zepernick’s concerns seem precisely on point, especially in light of the regular recurrence of the topic in what might be called composition studies’ “private” sphere, the WPA listserv. In addition to discussions of the recent article on teaching grammar in high schools, list members responded en masse in 2004 when David Mulroy, in The War against Grammar, directly took on NCTE and what Mulroy considered the professional organization’s position that “instruction in formal grammar did not accomplish any positive goals” (15). Mulroy is effectively attacking NCTE’s official adoption of the 1963 Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer position that “the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible, or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in the composition, even a harmful effect on improvement in writing” (37–38). NCTE’s position so incensed Mulroy that, according to a review of the book, the author “set aside his special interest, translating Latin and Greek poetry, and devoted several years to researching the history of the study of grammar” (Reedy 15). In his book, Mulroy argues that university professors have ignored grammar instruction for the past seventy-five years and that the United States should adopt a policy similar to England’s National Literacy Strategy, which offers workshops for teachers “deficient” in their knowledge of grammar and punctuation. Nick Carbone’s response to the discussion on WPA-L is representative of compositionists’ position:

There is no war against grammar. There is instead a struggle to teach writing. That’s a different thing. In that struggle we’ve come to believe, based on sound evidence and experience, that grammar in isolation, rules-only, skill and drill as the best approach for learning the basics of writing doesn’t work. So teaching grammar for grammar’s sake in a course that’s a writing course or meant to help students write better, we’re not for.

In the aftermath of the WPA listserv discussion of The War on Grammar, Joe Hardin summarized his view of the field’s complicated position on questions of grammar and style. Hardin goes beyond Carbone’s statement to express the centrifugal effect of the term “grammar” as it draws a host of disparate ideas within its nomenclature, making it difficult for the field to articulate its position clearly:

It’s really a complex argument that is linked to the whole contemporary language theory. Many believe that it’s an argument against standards. It’s not. Many believe that it suggests that we abandon style and syntax and sentence-level work completely. It doesn’t.
It’s mostly an argument against the traditional way of teaching “grammar” and the goals of that tradition. It’s an argument for a correction of terms and what those terms imply—that traditional books teach is “usage,” not grammar, for instance. It’s an argument against the transferability of the rules-example-exercises approach to the production of good writing.

As Hardin suggests, the study of style (including syntax and sentence-level work) often gets indiscriminately wrapped up in the field’s general prohibition against formal non-contextualized grammar instruction. In other words, we have come to confuse style and grammar, conflating it in the same way that those without the training to know better do. What’s more, because the field has adopted various rhetorical approaches to grammar that fall more accurately under the rubric of style, my discussion of the field’s response to grammar—to the extent I discuss it here—relates to the study of style. In his article, Hartwell himself treats style (what he calls “stylistic grammar” or “Grammar 5”) differently from his other four categories of grammar and makes it clear that style is useful in ways that grammar per se is not. In fact, in his discussion of stylistic grammar, Hartwell writes, “When we turn to Grammar 5, we find that the grammar issue is simply beside the point” (124).

**Style, Grammar, Literacy, and Students’ Right to Their Own Language**

Part of the fate of style, grammar, and literacy in the field today originates in an important document promulgated by the Committee on CCC Language in 1974, the “Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” The resolution on language begins: “We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style.” CCC’s adoption of the Students’ Right resolution, with its affirmation of the diversity of literacy, style, and grammar in a multicultural society, precedes by a year *Newsweek*’s “Why Johnny Can’t Write” issue, which has resonated in the public sphere for decades (see, for instance, Mac Donald’s *Public Interest* article with the same title). In short, the connection between writing and “non-standard” dialects that the “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” supports has dictated disciplinary policy and thinking ever since. Among the points made in the document is that content should be emphasized: “If we can convince our students that spelling, punctuation, and usage are less important than content, we have removed a major obstacle in their developing the ability to write” (8). The statement about the importance of content is clearly at odds with Fish’s statement about form’s paramount place in composition classes and perhaps explains compositionists’ response to Fish’s op-ed piece. What’s more, the Students’ Right document, with its emphasis on content, may also help explain the resistance to style within the field itself. Paradoxically, however, what perhaps no one has recognized up to this point is that the Students’ Right document is fundamentally—and has been since its inception—an explicit and implicit call to style for the field.

In other words, the Students’ Right resolution proposes an interpretation of dialect, variation, and other language matters that suggest, in short, not only an explicit view of style—that is, “students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language . . . in which they find their own identity and style”—but an innovative one as well. The authors write that “in every composition class there are examples of writing which is clear and vigorous despite the use of non-standard forms . . . and there are certainly many examples of limp, vapid writing in ‘standard dialect’” (8). It seems evident, then, that if composition as a field embraces the idea of difference in various dialects, that idea is inextricably linked to the idea of variation as a fundamental aspect of style. Thus, it is crucial that compositionists rethink the idea of style in conjunction with “Students’ Right to Their Own Language”—rather than in opposition to it. Along the same lines, the authors of the Students’ Right document are effectively making an argument for style (while not necessarily calling it that) when they discuss the importance of embracing difference in student writing. That admonition occurs when the document describes writing in nonuniform dialects:

Many of us have taught as though the function of schools and colleges were to erase differences. Should we, on the one hand, urge creativity and individuality in the arts and the sciences, take pride in the diversity of our historical development, and, on the
other hand, try to obliterate all the differences in the way Americans speak and write? Our major emphasis has been on uniformity, in both speech and writing; would we accomplish more, both educationally and ethically, if we shifted that emphasis to precise, effective, and appropriate communication in diverse ways, whatever the dialect? (2)

Indeed, as the Students’ Right document suggests, the question of whether the form of a person’s dialect or home language can be separated from its content—and content in this case implicates a person’s very identity—continues to trouble composition as a discipline. Thus, “Student’s Right to Their Own Language” reflects the continuing relevance of the most important issue in style theory.

As part of reanimating style in composition, then, the field ought to draw more on the “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” and the guidance it offers. Now almost thirty-five years old, the document often seems to go unnoticed. In terms of its reception in the public sphere, it arguably serves as the basis of misconceptions about how the field treats writing and how it has construed the very nature of difference with respect to language, dialect, and style. Within composition studies itself, the document, unwittingly perhaps, has given impetus to a reductive view of style that is, ironically, just the opposite of what the document’s authors envision. It has perhaps produced an internal tension within the field that would, if explored more fully, help composition and rhetoric articulate far more clearly a position that could reinvigorate interpretations of style—and of the field—in the public sphere.

Complicating “Clarity” in the Public Sphere

As “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” suggests, the field of composition has a number of innovative ideas with respect to language that should be introduced in the public sphere, if only because they challenge conventional wisdom. One example of this is the complication of the notion of “clarity,” which is often taken as a given not only in public discourse, but in the field, as well. Take, for instance, Mac Donald’s Public Interest article, which begins with the assertion that “the only thing composition teachers are not talking and writing about these days is how to teach students to compose clear, logical prose.” Mac Donald’s emphasis on clarity in writing is echoed by Menand, who gives a list of speech characteristics that writing teachers should help students eliminate from their writing “in the interest of clarity”; these include “repetition, contradiction, exaggeration, run-ons, fragments, and clichés, plus an array of tonal and physical inflections—drawls, grunts shrugs, winks, hand gestures—unreproducible in written form” (94). Yet, the idea of clarity is, in fact, more problematic than Menand or MacDonald allows. At least one scholar, Richard Lanham, began to question the common assumptions about clarity as early as 1974. Recognizing that the term “clarity” itself is impossible to define (because it is a rhetorical concept that shifts), Lanham writes, “Obviously, there can be no single verbal pattern that can be called ‘clear.’ All depends on context—social, historical, attitudinal” (Style 33). Lanham reveals the chief principle he sees at work in most theories of clarity: the tendency to want to make writing transparent, or to have it seem invisible to those reading it, as if it points to some definitive underlying reality.

Thus, at least part of the problem in the disappearance of stylistic study, I argue, is that composition has essentially been interpellated by myths regarding clarity as well as other public myths about style. By “interpellation” I mean that there has been a tendency to accept prescriptive standards of grammar, punctuation, and style that support a reductive view of the canon. By “myths” I mean that frequent repetition makes so-called “rules” take on a life of their own, raising them to the level of prescription. As an example, in opposition to what many claim as the inherent transparency of a clear style, Lanham proposes instead the idea of an opaque style that calls attention to itself. He states, “Either we notice an opaque style as a style (i.e., we look at it) or we do not (i.e., we look through it to a fictive reality beyond)” (Literacy 58). Lanham recognizes that an opaque style is seen as “the enemy of clarity” and that a binary has developed favoring a clear or transparent style. “Transparent styles, because they go unnoticed, are good,” he writes. “Opaque styles, which invite stylistic self-consciousness, are bad” (47, 59).

Lanham’s theory thus complicates the notion of clarity in writing in important ways. He argues persuasively that the injunction to “be clear”
refers "not to words on a page but to responses, yours or your reader's" (Analyzing 2). In another nod at the inherently rhetorical nature of the concept, he goes on to suggest that the idea of clarity indicates how successful a writer might be in getting his or her audience "to share our view of the world, a view we have composed by perceiving it" (3). In Publics and Counterpublics, Warner offers a similarly rhetorical view of clarity: "It could be argued that the imperative to write clearly is not the same as the need to write accessibly, that even difficult styles have the clarity of precision" (139). Warner and Lanham's highly contextual view of clarity, however, differ markedly from the normal "take" on the notion, especially in the public sphere, where many writers, like Menand and MacDonald, accept as a given its relative merits. Lanham's view, on the other hand, reveals that the concept of clarity is not as simple as it generally seems, but is extremely complex and difficult to explain in a style manual or an easy-to-digest formula. If we take Lanham's argument seriously, then, the major proscriptions against "muddy" writing become mere shibboleths that displace more nuanced positions in composition studies about what it means to "be clear."

The reason it is important to articulate such a position is that the meaning of "good writing" in the field is ultimately at stake. If style is not opaque or "ornamental"—in other words, if it does not call attention to itself in any way—then all that is left for us to discuss regarding "good" writing are the prescriptive views of clarity (and other myths) regularly reproduced both outside and inside the field. Taken to its logical conclusion, then, this conception of clarity implies that a clear style has no style and serves only as a mirror to an underlying meaning. This unquestioned acceptance of a transparent style, as Lanham points out, has read out of the equation any potentially interesting notions of an opaque or self-conscious style. As the clarity discussion demonstrates, the perpetuation of popular myths about style has unwittingly held the field hostage, rendering it unable to move beyond certain public perceptions despite the efforts of scholars like Lanham to challenge their underlying rationale and use. Indeed, in the public sphere, the field of composition might point to writing styles that are complex, nuanced, and yet highly effective at complicating and enriching the discussion of difficult ideas. Composition scholars could use the public sphere as a forum in which to explain the

value of styles that may not, at first glance, appear transparent or clear to most people.

One instance where the explanation of a complex, yet meaningful style would have been helpful is in a 1994 "Readings" section of Harper's Magazine that quickly betrays its real purpose: to make its subject, composition professor Victor Vitanza—and, in turn, the field itself—seem vain, inarticulate, and, in the form in which it's presented, unclear. Published under the title "Reading, Writing, Rambling On," the Harper's piece undermines Vitanza by taking excerpts from his larger interview in Composition Studies, conducted by Cynthia Haynes-Burton in 1993, without giving the broader context for his ideas. When, for instance, Haynes-Burton asks, "Who do you think your audience is?" Vitanza's theoretical response, reprinted in Harper's, shows some of his conflicted sense of the field: "I am always giving writing lessons and taking writing lessons. I don't know, however, if I am doing this now or if I am that South-American Indian chief in Tristes Tropiques that Lévi-Strauss indirectly gives writing lessons to. Perhaps I am both. Which can be confusing" (29). On the surface, of course, Vitanza's statements appear opaque, even comical, even though they are arguably a stylistic tour de force in which the author uses the rhetorical trope of periphrasis to show the difficulty of capturing the rhetorical situation of literacy, which he names "inappropriation" (52). Yet, the Harper's excerpt does not capture Vitanza's dilemma or his uncertain relationship with the very notion of "audience," which he examines at length in the Composition Studies piece. In a portion of that interview omitted in Harper's, Vitanza states, "I think that audiences are really overrated!" and one solution, he explains, is to rethink the relationship between writers and audiences (51).

Later, after Vitanza expresses doubts about how he positions himself as a researcher in the field, Haynes-Burton asks him to "please start over," and Vitanza's conflicted reply includes the following paragraph reproduced in Harper's:

Okay, so what have I said so far: I very consciously do not follow the field's research protocols. And yet, of course, I do: most other times, however, I do not. And yet again! Do you feel the vertigo of this? I hope that my saying all this, however, does not come across
as if I am disengaging into some form of “individualism,” or “expressionism.” for I do not believe in such a fatuous, dangerous concept as practiced in our field. (29)

In the context of the full interview in Composition Studies, Vitanza expresses the point of view that as a field, composition has always been positioned among research protocols borrowed from various disciplinary interests, and he is acknowledging how, as a scholar allied with postmodern theory, he is torn trying both to conform to and resist those protocols. Yet, by focusing on these contradictory positions without giving additional context, the magazine attempts to ridicule Vitanza’s equivocation. Nonetheless, his words express brilliantly the lack of clarity he obviously feels on this subject. Likewise, the debate over expressionism in the field is complicated by years of disciplinary discussion, and while Vitanza is in a camp that might indeed label expressionism “fatuous,” the Harper’s excerpt provides none of the background necessary for readers to understand its historical complexity, making the scholar again seem out of touch with the field—and certainly with his audience.

Ongoing Disciplinary Division

While much of the misunderstanding about the role of style in composition comes from outside the field, the abandonment of the study of style has led to the perpetuation of certain preconceptions from within the discipline as well. In a College English opinion piece, for example, Peter Elbow, one of composition’s best-known scholars, suggests that style is now almost exclusively a part of the “culture” of literary studies. In “The Cultures of Literature and Composition: What Could Each Learn from the Other?” Elbow, calling for a kind of revival of style in composition, suggests that currently it is literature—and not composition—that has “a culture that considers the metaphorical and imaginative uses of language as basic or primal” (536). In other words, Elbow suggests, the discipline of literary studies has become in essence the province of style:

The culture of literary studies puts a high value on style and on not being like everyone else. I think I see more mannerism, artifice, and self-consciousness in bearing . . . among literary folk than composition folk. Occasionally I resist, yet I value style and artifice. What could be more wonderful than the pleasure of creating or appreciating forms that are different, amazing, outlandish, useless—the opposite of ordinary, everyday, pragmatic? (542)

Granted, Elbow does not go so far as to dismiss the role composition plays in a so-called culture of style. However, his acknowledgment that the “culture of composition” does not ignore “metaphor and imaginative language altogether” is really so much damnation with faint praise (536; emphasis added). Echoing in important respects the same assumptions often made about the field in the public sphere, Elbow says that composition generally adopts a “literal language” that “seems to assume discursive language as the norm and imaginative, metaphorical language as somehow special or marked or additional” (536). Elbow’s concept of style is, of course, somewhat circumscribed in this instance, even though he suggests, as Lanham does, that style has an opaque quality he considers desirable. It’s clear that Elbow is advocating a revival of style, yet instead of looking at style’s important roots in composition, the only model he considers is literature.

By locating stylistic studies almost exclusively within the domain of literature, however, and by dichotomizing “literary” and “discursive” language, Elbow effectively creates a “divide” or schism between literature and composition that mimics the divide between popular and academic views of style in the public arena. In other words, Elbow seems to create a public within a public (see Warner’s “counterpublic”) in the academic realm itself. Like Fish, Menand, and Mac Donald, however—and indeed, as I have argued, like composition studies as a whole—Elbow is failing to account for the broad body of scholarship on style in the field. For example, as Lanham, Edward P.J. Corbett, and others have pointed out, a wide variety of rhetorical figures (tropes and schemes, for example) have been used throughout the history of stylistic studies and in the teaching of writing. Furthermore, by dividing literary or poetic style from what he labels composition’s supposed focus—which he regretfully calls an “orientation toward grammar”—Elbow clearly adopting a view chal-
lenged not only by many scholars in the field itself (see, for example, Hartwell, Carbone, Hardin), but by linguist Mary Louise Pratt. In Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse, Pratt critiques that very binary when she argues that the supposed division between “poetic” and “non-poetic” language is based on an unverifiable split between poetic language (the language of literature) and linguistics (everyday language, the so-called “discursive” language Elbow refers to as the province of composition).

According to Pratt, this “poetic language fallacy” is a false division because it presupposes certain elements unique to literary or poetic language and nonexistent in non-poetic language. Pratt essentially challenges the claims of the Prague Circle—a group of linguists and writers interested in language and linguistics in Russia during the 1930s—that there is a metaphorical langue/parole relationship unique to literature: “The fact that . . . there is a real langue shared by literary and nonliterary utterances alike is quite overlooked and seems almost irrelevant” (10). She goes on to argue that the faulty analogy between langue (as literary) and parole (as nonliterary) has widespread implications for style and underlies “the overwhelming tendency to view style as an exclusively or predominantly literary phenomenon and to equate style outside literature with mere grammaticality and conventional appropriateness” (15; emphasis added). Clearly, this is the very separation that Elbow makes when he writes about the difference between literary and conventional discourse (the discourse of composition).

Even though I obviously share Elbow’s claim that there is a problematic absence of attention to style in composition, I don’t see the stylistic schism he hypothesizes between composition and literary studies. Instead, I argue, the problem is the inability of compositionists to articulate a clear view of the value of stylistic study in the field. Elbow suggests that the existence of a gap in stylistic study is currently filled by literary studies. Yet, it is evident that public intellectuals outside the field—many of whom are not literary scholars—are filling this gap in their own way. Elbow, like Menand and others, simply represents a different instantiation of the same disciplinary problem: the inability of composition to use and articulate its longstanding knowledge base. The field clearly has a rich tradition in the study of style. By reclaiming it, composition studies has nothing to lose and much to gain, both immediately and over the long term, in asserting knowledge about practices of style that have a rich disciplinary history. Illuminating those stylistic traditions for the public would give the field a claim to the very expertise held by composition scholars. It would establish the importance of composition studies by reclaiming language concerns that are important both inside and outside the field. Compositionists would be seen as public intellectuals with valuable theoretical positions on an array of language matters, including stylistic ones.

Responding in the Public Sphere

If the field of composition is to write in the public sphere, it has to start somewhere. I begin that process here by responding to Fish, Menand, Mac Donald, and others who have represented the field—often inaccurately, in my view—in the public sphere. I aim to show the benefit of writing as a public intellectual in public discourse.

In making the argument that form in composition courses is more important than content, Fish is stating a notion that is far from new—and yet incorrect. Why? For years, a form/content dichotomy has existed, with “form” considered by some—like Fish—as a container that can be filled with any content. The idea that form (which includes style, structure, grammar, and so forth) can thus be separated from content led composition scholar Louis Milic to propose a “dualistic” view in the 1960s that he called the “theory of ornate form.” Milic states that form is separate from, and, he implies, more important than, content because “ideas exist wordlessly and can be dressed in a variety of outfits depending on the need or the occasion” (67). For Milic, then (and we can assume Fish agrees), the opposite idea, which states that form and content are inseparable because the two are an “organic” whole, is mistaken. If this “organic” theory, which he calls “Crocean aesthetic monism,” were correct, writes Milic, and there were, in fact, “no seam between meaning and style,” then even a small change in form would necessarily mean a change in content—and that implies there is no form (or style), but only “meaning or intuition” (67). Milic claims that ornate form is the only theory that
allows composition instructors to teach style by making it separate from content.

However, Milic’s idea is mistaken: form (style) and content (meaning) are actually inextricably linked, and here is the reason why. While it’s true that ideas can be put in any number of ways—indeed, this is the very notion of style—what Milic and Fish both overlook is that the form itself carries meaning. How so? When Fish dismisses “content,” he is assuming that words carry only a denotive (or explicit) meaning. This denotive meaning, like the form/content division itself, is based on a positivist assumption that sees language narrowly in terms of one possible transparent meaning. However, much of what we take to be meaning is not denotive at all. Rather, it is connotative (suggested or implied) and comes from various rhetorical elements—humor, irony or sarcasm, emphasis, and even ethos, or the credibility/character of the writer—as well as cultural and social understandings, and thus a great deal of connotative meaning is conveyed through form. Form itself, then, often expresses meaning above and beyond the denotive meaning. Take Fish, for example. His column for the Chronicle of Higher Education, written before his Times piece, is entitled “Say It Ain’t So,” an ironic title that in its lexical choice (“Ain’t”), its register (colloquial), and its use of allusion (kind of cultural “getcha”) conveys, through form, a great deal about his resistance to conventional wisdom. This is an instance, then, when the form, which is clearly significant in and of itself, works in conjunction with meaning, including the prior meanings attached to this expression without which the title itself would have a different meaning. Indeed, if Fish were to teach his students the way form can be used to alter meaning, it seems that he might reach a different conclusion from his decision to banish content from his classroom teaching.

If one idea could be said to characterize Menand’s ideas in his New Yorker review, it would likely be his reliance on psychoanalytical theory to describe the process of writing in composition classrooms. As a matter of fact, issues of writing have long been tied to psychology, especially in the study of the writing process. Yet, comparing writing to issues of psychotherapy is rare. It is true that in a special double issue of College English on psychoanalysis and pedagogy, guest editor Robert Con Davis concludes that “the problematics of psychoanalytic therapy (defined by ‘resistance,’ ‘transference,’ and ‘repression’) are the same as ‘the problematics of teaching,’” and Menand’s ideas seem informed by similar considerations (622). Yet, when he talks about writing pedagogy as a “combination of psychotherapy and social work,” Menand is actually more interested in portraying composition in one light—as influenced by the theory of expressivism, or a movement that focuses on the idea that writing involves exploring personal experience and voice (92). The expressivist movement has generated a great deal of debate even in composition, as Vitanza’s repudiation of it indicates, but Menand, as well as Mac Donald, confuse readers with their insistence that expressivist rhetoric, not to mention process, are the enemies of grammar and style.

This is where an important explanation is useful: Menand’s and Mac Donald’s characterizations of the field assume a view of writing based on current-traditional rhetoric, which emphasizes product over process, as Fish does in his New York Times op-ed piece. Current-traditional rhetoric is concerned with, among other things, grammar, usage, and mechanics—essentially aspects of language affiliated with the textual product rather than with the process of producing it. Menand’s critique of so-called psychotherapeutic approaches (voice, freewriting, drafting, revision)—along with Mac Donald’s criticism of the Dartmouth Conference—basically amount to the same thing: a desire to return to a strict emphasis on the textual product and to throw out the process writers use to achieve it. Why is that harmful? Research has shown that all of the techniques associated with “process” are useful to writers in accomplishing their writing goals. They are productive not only for student writers, but professional writers as well. The process movement has never ignored the textual product, but has looked at the individual, social, cultural, and public considerations that make up that text. When they write about the field, however, Menand and Mac Donald do not take these considerations into account, and therefore they dismiss a great deal of useful knowledge that has been acquired by writers and teachers over time.

It is the job of composition studies to develop writing through many pressures. In doing so, the field shares the same goals as Fish, Menand, Mac Donald, and others who have portrayed us in public: to produce excellence in writing. Like these public intellectuals, we want to help writers compose with attention to style and contextually appropriate
grammar and vocabulary. However, we have discovered methods for achieving good writing that allow writers to take into account the way they arrive at their product. Along the way, form and content—and everything that goes along with these concepts—are important to composition professionals and should be to all writers and readers everywhere.

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Notes

1. I am indebted to Utah State University Press for granting permission to reprint chapter 5 from my book, Out of Style: Reanimating Stylistic Study in Composition and Rhetoric (2008). I am grateful to JAC’s anonymous reviewers and, in particular, to JAC editor Lynn Worsham, who offered invaluable advice on restructuring parts of this article to broaden its reach. I thank Frank Farmer, whose thoughtful and enormously generative suggestions on an earlier draft have strengthened the article incalculably. I also thank Collin Brooke, Dana Harrington, Jim Zebrowski, and, especially, Louise Wetherbee Phelps, for their support of this project and for their prescient feedback on earlier drafts. Finally, I want to acknowledge my colleagues in the Department of English at the University of Houston, whose lively engagement with the ideas in this article generated productive discussions that continue to this day and that have set the stage for promising future work.

2. The journal The Public Interest ceased publication with its Spring 2005 issue, after 40 years. The founding editor Irving Kristol suggested that the journal did not have a particular ideology, but most would describe the journal as conservative or “neo-conservative,” and it’s clear that Mac Donald’s article presents a view of composition studies that is far from balanced.

3. As this article was going to press, the WPA listerv was discussing yet another characterization of the field in the public sphere. This time, the center of discussion was the article “In the Basement of the Ivory Tower,” which appears in the June 2008 issue of the Atlantic Monthly under the moniker of “Professor X.” Among the many disturbing claims Professor X makes, the author (apparently trained in literature only), who teaches composition courses at two institutions he calls “colleges of last resort,” writes: “Remarkably few of my students can do well in these classes. Students routinely fail; some fail multiple times, and some will never pass, because they cannot write a coherent sentence.” The assumptions the writer makes about the field and the way writing is taught in composition studies, as well as his overall lack of knowledge of the field and its theories—not to mention his condescending attitude toward students—makes his piece quite troubling, especially in light of its publication in a venue like the Atlantic Monthly.

4. Warner’s view of clarity is highly relevant to composition and rhetoric. He asks, for instance, “What kind of clarity is necessary in writing?” After stating the conventional wisdom that “writing that is unclear to nonspecialists is just ‘bad writing,’” Warner goes on to make an argument relevant to compositionists writing in the public sphere: “People who share this view will be generally reluctant to concede that different kinds of writing suit different purposes, that what is clear in one reading community will be unclear in another, that clarity depends on shared conventions and common references, that one man’s jargon is another’s clarity, that perceptions of jargon or unclarity change over time” (138).

Works Cited


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A Matter of Perspective: Cartesian Perspectivalism and the Testing of English Studies

Kristie S. Fleckenstein

In *The Painter’s Manual* (1525), a technical treatise written not only for painters but for all artists and artisans who depend on measurements in their daily lives, Albrecht Dürer provides a guide for applying the precepts of geometry to problems of perspective in art. Rediscovered in the early years of the fifteenth century and codified by mathematician Leone Battista Alberti in *On Painting* (1435), perspective concerns the rules by which the illusion of three dimensions is created on a two-dimensional surface. As Dürer explains and illustrates through woodcuts designed for his manual, mathematics, geometry, and technology can be used to resolve tricky problems with perspective. For instance, one woodcut depicts an apparatus supposedly invented by Dürer that enables an artist to plot an accurate outline of his subject, a lute. The artist, with his canvas attached to a frame from which it can swing to and fro like a door, uses a string, geometry, and an assistant to create a three-dimensional image on a flat surface. Another Dürer woodcut, published posthumously in the second edition of *The Painter’s Manual* (1538), highlights even more dramatically the interplay of geometric measurement and representation. Here an artist/draftsman views his subject, a semi-nude, reclining woman, through the screen of a grid arranged vertically in front of him and replicated in his graphed paper. Neat, orderly, and precise squares translate flesh into geometric and mathematical patterns.

I begin with this brief description of perspective in art to highlight the genesis of Cartesian perspectivalism, a visual habit characterized by