



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Perspectives on Research and Scholarship in Composition by Ben W. McClelland; Timothy R. Donovan

Joseph Harris

College Composition and Communication, Vol. 38, No. 1. (Feb., 1987), pp. 101-102.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0010-096X%28198702%2938%3A1%3C101%3APORASI%3E2.0.CO%3B2-J>

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Reviews

Perspectives on Research and Scholarship in Composition, Edited by Ben W. McClelland and Timothy R. Donovan (New York: Modern Language Association, 1985, 266 pages).

Reviewed by Joseph Harris, Temple University

The aim of this MLA collection is to give a broad sense of what the study of writing now looks like as a discipline. To do so, it brings together twelve essays which review recent work affecting writing in everything from rhetoric to literary theory to collaborative learning to computers. The result is a jumble, but an interesting one—and one whose eclecticism mirrors the current state of writing research pretty well.

The prevailing tone of the essays is scholarly, detached, and the focus of the authors throughout stays fixed on issues of research rather than problems in teaching. At worst, some of the essays lapse into simple listings of the present state of scholarship in this or that subfield, and there are times, when trudging through such inventories, that one can almost seem to hear the low hum of the word-processor beneath the prose. But the better pieces are more polemical, and in their arguments offer a view of what issues and conflicts are now shaping the field.

C. H. Knoblauch, for instance, inveighs against those formalistic views of language which try to separate out models and patterns of expression from the ideas they are meant to convey, arguing instead for an *epistemic* view of rhetoric which would insist on the intertwining of language and thought. And Anne Ruggles Gere uses her review of empirical research on writing to warn against studies based on the sort of rigid and naive view of science that restricts itself largely to things that can be counted: errors, text changes and the like. Far better for us, she argues, to accept instead the complex and shifting nature of writing, and thus to be content with making statements about it that are less universal but more nuanced, suggestive. Following her chapter is an astute essay by Lucy McCormick Calkins, in which she points out that while we have, on the whole, succeeded in defining a sense of what we're *against* in research (formalism, positivism, etc.), we have failed yet to articulate a full and coherent view of what we're *for*. It is no longer good enough, Calkins argues, simply to hail case studies and the like as brave breakaways from the hegemony of positivistic science. What we need to do now is to form our own sense of what counts as excellence in such studies, to set our own standards for a humanistic research that will be sensitive to contexts as well as to texts, to writers as well as to writings, to the act of observing as well as to what is observed.

But there seems to be no working consensus yet as to what the goals or methods of this new research should be. And while I can't imagine anyone objecting, at least in principle, to Knoblauch's insistence that language and thought always be linked together, much research still seems in practice to separate the two. The essays in *Perspectives* on cognitive science, technical communication and computers, for instance, all focus on attempts to develop and teach just the sort of formal models and strategies that Knoblauch argues against.

Perhaps the most useful way of looking at this tension is offered by Lil Brannon in her lead essay on "Toward a Theory of Composition." There Brannon suggests that most teachers of writing can be seen as belonging to either of two camps: one which sees its task as the transmitting of various strategies of thought and discourse to students; the other which essentially believes that our students already know the formulas, that what they really need is the chance to put them into meaningful practice. The same split probably holds for researchers too. There are those whose goals center on refining our models of discourse, and there are those whose interests lie more in the uses to which discourse can be put. *Perspectives* shows the tension between these two groups to be as yet unresolved.

The Variables of Composition: Process and Product in a Business Setting, Glenn J. Broadhead and Richard C. Freed (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986, 169 pages).

Reviewed by Jeanne W. Halpern, Purdue University

Reading *The Variables of Composition* is like climbing a mountain on a foggy day. You have a good chance to improve your technique and to see what's right around you, but you never feel the joy of discovery. You cannot appreciate being on the summit because the broad view is missing.

Readers interested in technique, in this case the computerized analysis of consecutive drafts of on-the-job writing, will find much to learn and use in this book. Nearly a third of the text and all of the 21 appendices are devoted to variables associated with revision, to their application in the study presented, and to the detailed results provided by the computerized textual analysis of proposal drafts. Another half of the book is devoted to presenting and interpreting these results.

In Chapter 1, "The Variables of Composition," Broadhead and Freed move beyond Lester Faigley and Stephen Witte's taxonomy of textual features of revision. They present a new method of analysis based on seven variables more applicable to writers' tasks and audiences in an organizational environment: impetus, item, process, norm, affective impact, orientation, and goal. Though similar in some respects to the Faigley-Witte taxonomy, the Broadhead-Freed method allows quantifiable objective processes of revision "to be linked to equally quantifiable interpretations of purpose and method" (6). The complex (and quite cumbersome) implementation of this method is explained in Chapter 2, "Methods of Collecting and Analyzing Data," with variables, sentence structures, and statistical analyses of results presented in the appendices.

The authors' explanation and interpretation of results in Chapter 4, "The Composing/Revision Processes of Two Management Consultants," summarizes characteristics (cultural norms, personal norms, and prose styles) of the two writers being studied and presents an analysis of eight proposals, four by each writer with three or four drafts of each. Though clearly biased in favor of the "more sophisticated, more polished, more elegant" (73) writer, Chapter 4 offers useful documentation on how writers improve their content and language to be more persuasive with readers and to respond to the requirements of the writers' organization. This chapter also highlights the strong individual differences between writers of the same level (both are vice presidents) in the same organization (an international management consulting firm) with the same goals (to win a contract) from the same kinds of readers (prospective buyers) and following the same general format (problem-method-implementation). Especially useful in Chapter 4 is the detailed evidence which enables the authors to challenge