

REVIEWS

Books That Have Stood the Test of Time



Ellen Andrews Knodt
Review Editor

From a discipline primarily interested in literature, English has expanded to encompass composition and rhetoric, basic skills, English as a second language, professional writing, writing across the curriculum, and gender and minority studies among others. The books reviewed here are among those that helped pioneer the expansion of English studies.

—EAK

Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing

by Mina Shaughnessy. New York: Oxford UP, 1977. 311 pp.

In 1977 when Mina Shaughnessy wrote *Errors and Expectations* for teachers of basic writing, very little had been written about the basic writer. Few textbooks were available for developmental writing students or written on a level accessible to them. In the last twenty years, authors have written numerous texts, studies, workbooks, and ancillaries aimed at teaching the basic writer. However, Shaughnessy's book continues to provide valuable information, advice, encouragement, and challenges for basic writing teachers.

Although educational theories have changed and the world has changed, the basic writer is essentially the same, except, perhaps, we now have more older

students and nonnative speakers than Shaughnessy and her colleagues had. No matter what the demographic profile, the basic writer still misspells words, misuses the comma, creates awkwardly structured sentences, and finds it difficult to write more than five to ten sentences on a single subject. Thus, Shaughnessy's advice in *Errors* can help today's teachers meet the continuing needs of basic writing students.

To help the instructor understand the reasons behind errors, Shaughnessy takes the reader on a tour of the basic writer's mind. Although she writes particularly for instructors beginning their work with basic writers, her advice serves as excellent reminders for "experienced" teachers who may have become static in their instruction or discouraged. Each chapter deals with a different set of student problems: handwriting and punctuation, syntax, common grammatical errors, spelling, vocabulary, and paragraph and essay writing. She fills each chapter with examples from student papers. In describing writing problems, she explains why the student makes an error and then offers practical and specific suggestions for teaching about each problem.

One important theme for teachers flows through her text: the basic writer can learn and, in fact, wants to improve his or her skills. Shaughnessy explains

that students don't merely throw punctuation into a sentence or simply ignore grammar rules. Usually, they make certain errors because they try to apply their own sense of logic or follow set rules without recognizing all the exceptions so prevalent in the English language.

Shaughnessy points out that basic writers have so many problems with the written language because they are unaccustomed to writing. Generally, students in basic writing courses are nonreaders as well as nonwriters. Moreover, she reminds us that many have poor handwriting because they don't feel comfortable with the skill of writing since they haven't been required to do much. Interestingly, her urging the use of typewriters was an idea ahead of its time. Those of us who teach in a computer classroom have witnessed the transformation that can occur in a student's editing and writing skills when his or her essay *looks* more professional.

Shaughnessy encourages teachers to help students decipher their own codes of error by tracing the reasoning behind the errors rather than overloading their heads with rules and explanations. However, she also cautions teachers not to set goals above the students' abilities. Shaughnessy's advice helps the teacher facing an essay filled with problems realize that many basic writers begin (and usually stop) writing before their ideas have time to develop fully. Thus, the lack of order may be surface level, or the writer could be following a pattern he/she is more familiar with, such as the spoken language or even a sermon. She encourages careful reading to reveal ideas that could be developed into a logical academic piece. Furthermore, a teacher can probably trace the lack of details to the student's inexperience in questioning his or her *own* ideas. Shaughnessy suggests that the teacher can help the students

write longer pieces by helping them gather and formulate solid ideas and opinions before they begin to write.

Shaughnessy concludes the book with expectations and describes basic writers as "a unique group from whom we have already learned much and from whom we can learn much more in the years ahead" (291). Indeed, many of us who have taught basic writers have recognized the need for qualities Shaughnessy promoted in the mid 70s: patience, respect for the student's individuality, and willingness to try new approaches.

All teachers can learn from Shaughnessy. Her analyses of student writing problems and detailed suggestions for helping students recognize and correct those problems make *Errors and Expectations* a must for teachers striving to guide their students toward success.

reviewed by
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Telling Writing

by Ken Macrorie. 4th ed. Portsmouth: Boynton, 1985. 300 pp.

A book that has stood the test of time for me is Ken Macrorie's *Telling Writing*, originally published in 1968. Its fourth edition appeared in 1985, shortly before I began my graduate studies. I was introduced to *Telling Writing* at California State University, Chico, by English professor Louise Jensen, whose enthusiasm for Macrorie's ideas was infectious. It soon came to me that *this* was what I wanted to do—teach writing. I have used the book whenever I could as a teacher of developing writers.

I submit that the great value of *Telling Writing* is in its unconditional belief in students, in their ability to write. Any teacher

who has been in the classroom for any length of time will have encountered students who seriously test this faith, but it's not a bad place to begin.

Students not born when his words were written still connect with Macrorie in amazing ways. Years later, I'll encounter a former student who will mention "Engfish," a code word of sorts that makes us members of a kind of fraternity. Engfish is the term Macrorie coined to describe the phony, pretentious and vacant writing he so despised (11-14). As a teacher, I got my first taste of Engfish on the first day of the first class I ever taught when a student wrote: "I have embarked on the objective of attaining a degree in liberal studies with a goal of becoming an elementary school teacher." Had I encountered this student in the hallway and asked him what he was doing in college, he would never have responded with such highfalutin language. Which is Macrorie's point.

I like to talk with my students about Macrorie's description of "most good writing" as "clear, vigorous, honest, alive, sensuous, appropriate, unsentimental, rhythmic, without pretension, fresh, metaphorical, evocative in sound, economical, authoritative, surprising, memorable, and light" (31). There is much in this definition to admire and discuss. Invariably, students will question his inclusion of "unsentimental"—understandably, as *Telling Writing* is full of student writing that is emotional and sentimental (I suspect Macrorie meant to say "overly sentimental").

Telling Writing contains useful sections on self-editing, presentation of dialogue, and peer response. Of great importance, today's students still respond to Macrorie's admonition to "speak in honest voices and tell the truth" (15). While the examples of his own students' writing are in some

ways dated in a book so old, their honesty and power survive. Much in the same way that the value of *Telling Writing* as a developmental text endures.

reviewed by
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Writing without Teachers

by Peter Elbow. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. 224 pp.

In a reckoning of books which have withstood the test of time, Peter Elbow's *Writing without Teachers*, first published in 1973, holds a special place. Excitingly different, and destined to become hugely influential, it began with a manifesto:

Many are now trying to become less helpless, both personally and politically: trying to claim more control over their own lives. One of the ways people most lack control over their own lives is through lacking control over words. (vii)

Elbow sought to show his audience, whom he defined as "young people and adults in school, but especially young people and adults not in school," how to gain control over words. Addressing this "huge and diverse audience" directly, he stated his desire to help them "actually generate words better—more freely, lucidly, and powerfully: not make judgments about words but generate them better." He also sought to help improve their judgments in deciding which parts of their own writing to keep and which parts to throw away (viii).

In *Writing without Teachers*, Elbow declared as his enemy the concept of writing as a two-step process in which one first figures out what to say and then puts it down in writing. He found this method to be backwards, for "meaning is not what

you start out with, but what you end up with.” Describing writing in terms of processes like cooking and growing, he gave practical steps for producing *something* in desperate moments and set forth a method for successfully composing in four one-hour blocks. He established practical guidelines for running a teacherless writing class and invented a type of listener feedback he styled “giving movies of your mind” through “pointing,” “summarizing,” “telling,” and “showing.” Most of the book’s ideas became quickly and widely popular, and continue to be so. We see freewriting, writing to discover meaning, student-centered writing groups, and emphasis on revision everywhere we turn.

And why *have* these ideas stood the test of time? For one thing, *Writing without Teachers* offers the appealing notion that writing can be important to one’s self and that writing is a way of thinking. This book also offers hope to writers who struggle—and all writers do. Elbow sets forth the liberating idea that “if you are having special difficulty in writing, you are not necessarily further from writing well than someone who writes more easily” (viii). The honesty of this book and the author’s willingness to share his struggles with writing command respect.

Perhaps the strongest reason for the popularity of *Writing without Teachers* is that its methods work so well for so many students. Freewriting and personal writing are powerful tools for reluctant writers, and they appeal greatly to young students who want to talk and write about themselves. And because what the student knows and writes so clearly *matters* in Elbow’s pedagogy, many students become more engaged in their learning, inspiring and liberating their teachers.

A new edition of *Writing without Teachers* came out just last year. The popular

online bookstore Amazon.com offers space for readers to review books; however, as one might imagine, books on composition seldom excite comment. A notable exception is *Writing without Teachers*, which has earned an enthusiastic four stars from two readers. One says:

Since I first read *Writing without Teachers* in 1985, I’ve written—or helped write—proposals that have won 8-figure engineering contracts. (Yes, that’s SIOM+.) Prior to reading this book, I’d never written a winning proposal. I owe Peter Elbow a lot! (A reader)

The test of time? The jury is in. Not only has *Writing without Teachers* found a permanent place in classrooms across the nation, it has withstood the 8-figure test.

reviewed by
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Structured Reading

by Lynn Quitman Troyka and Joseph W. Thweatt. 5th ed. Upper Saddle River: Prentice, 1999. 364 pp.

Lynn Quitman Troyka’s *Structured Reading* is still among the best reading texts available today. Grounded in psycholinguistic theory, *Structured Reading* is based on the principle that readers improve not by reading about reading but by receiving guided, hands-on experience reading complete selections. This reading skills building text has met the needs of developmental students since 1978.

The unique features of *Structured Reading* are a major reason for its overwhelming success. First, the text begins with an introduction that explains and illustrates concepts presented throughout, assuring that students are taught concepts before they attempt to use them. Secondly, the

systematic and recursive format of the 30 high-interest, moderate-length reading selections and accompanying comprehension exercises make for ease of instruction. Selections come from textbooks and everyday sources, such as magazine and newspaper articles, and prove appropriate for both the adolescent and the adult student who needs to gain practice, confidence, and skill in reading. Fostering analytic and critical thinking, comprehension exercises include "Central Theme and Main Ideas," "Major Details," "Inferences," "Critical Thinking: Fact or Opinion," and "Critical Reading: Writer's Craft." Of equal importance, questions for these exercises vary and include multiple-choice, completion, true-false, and not discussed short answer. By following consistent format throughout the text, students—working independently or in groups—find it easy to understand assignments and to adjust to the text sequence. Other key features which account for the text's success are the complete dictionary entries for difficult words and prereading activities that use visuals such as cartoons, posters, and advertisements to give insight into each selection and appeal to students.

Over the years, modifications to the textbook have been minimal, except for updates to reflect changing times. Of the selections that have remained throughout the history of the text, many have a multicultural theme. Some of the newer selections highlight the elderly, stress management, wildlife preservation, and family conflict. A second major change is a "Reader Response" section which requires either oral or written responses to readings. Another key change has been an updating of the instructor's resource manual. Additions include: "Comprehension Boosters," an information processing activity for each selection, discussions of

innovative teaching strategies, and answer analyses.

Today, *Structured Reading* is in its fifth edition, and Troyka has taken on a coauthor, Joseph W. Thweatt. They have ensured that this textbook remains worthwhile and appealing.

reviewed by

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Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning

by Stephen D. Krashen. Oxford: Pergamon, 1981. (rpt. Prentice, 1988). 151 pp.

How do adults develop competence in a second language? This was the question addressed in 1981 by Stephen D. Krashen in his book, *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. The book earned the MLAs Kenneth W. Milderberger award in 1982 as an outstanding research publication in the field. The theoretical model put forth in this book has since stirred a good deal of controversy while at the same time revolutionizing ESL instruction.

Despite this controversy, Krashen's book has served a valuable purpose by identifying and prompting critical examination of a number of relevant factors in adult second language acquisition. The theories put forth in this book still heavily influence today's ESL pedagogical practices. Because more and more community college students are adults learning English as a second language, Krashen's book remains important.

The book presents a model that draws a distinction between second language *acquisition* and second language *learning*, stating that second languages are acquired on a subconscious level much like first

languages are and that explicit teaching does little to assist natural language acquisition. Krashen asserts that successful language acquisition requires only that learners be exposed, within the context of a low anxiety environment, to comprehensible input that is a bit beyond their present level of proficiency, designated as *i+1*. In support of this viewpoint, Krashen cites child language studies demonstrating that children understand language containing structure that is a bit beyond them with the aid of context (126). He contends that if the language student concentrates on communicating, everything else will follow. At the time of the book's publication, Krashen's ideas were revolutionary in that they challenged the prevailing pedagogy of the day, the audio-lingual grammar translation method, which held that explicit instruction and drill in linguistic forms, functions, and structures were necessary if students were to attain competence in a second language.

Krashen's model evolved from an interdisciplinary research base, combining findings from psychology as well as linguistics. He proposed that in addition to comprehensible input, affective variables such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence have a powerful effect on subconscious second language acquisition. In fact, he states that "attitude may be the single most important factor in second language learning" (38) because it enables the language learner "to intake and then to utilize comprehensible input for language acquisition" (37). To set up optimal conditions for language acquisition,

Krashen supports pedagogy that both supplies good comprehensible input and promotes a low affective filter. He believes that educators should avoid using classroom exercises that emphasize correctness because such exercises often place the student on the defensive and promote a heightened affective filter. To foster acquisition, Krashen argues that the target language must be used realistically and the learner must be involved and motivated to gain competence in the second language.

When Krashen published this book eighteen years ago, his ideas represented an alternative to the audio-lingual method of teaching second languages and its emphasis on repetitive drill and dialogue memorization. The principles put forth in Krashen's model were revolutionary and its claims sometimes too optimistic and far-reaching. Yet Krashen's work has been invaluable to the field because it stimulated much needed research into the variety of factors impacting adult second language acquisition.

The work continues to cultivate critical examination of the many factors involved in the process of developing competence in a second language. For this reason, the book remains a highly readable and valuable contribution to the profession, and one with which all who educate ESL students should be familiar.

reviewed by
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Editor Mark Reynolds serves 25th anniversary cake to Linda Jones (left) and TYCA Chair Ben Wiley (right) at the annual TYCA breakfast during the 1999 CCCC Convention in Atlanta.