

LINGUISTICALLY-ORIENTED PRE-WRITING
INSTRUCTION FOR COLLEGE FRESHMEN

by

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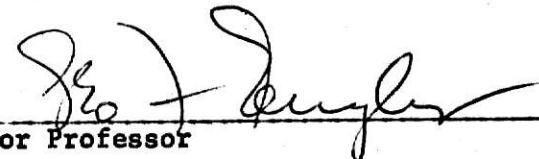
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Introduction.

Richard W. Hall, who was teaching English at Inter-American University, San Juan, Puerto-Rico at the time he wrote it, published an article entitled "No Room in a Culture of Talents" in the December, 1972, issue of College Composition and Communication which voices the concerns of many teachers and administrators about the dilemma both student and school are faced with when the student demonstrates a deficiency in ability to perform college-level work. Deficiencies are most apparent in the area of language, as is indicated in Hall's account of one of his encounters with a student:

Last term I had a student who had been born in Puerto Rico but moved to New York when he was ten. Now, at age twenty-one, he was back in Puerto Rico. Like many others caught in a commute between two cultures, Julio had a poor command of both Spanish and English, especially in writing.

Julio came to see me one morning to talk over his problems. He was having trouble with all his courses. He talked for a while, and then, suddenly, his eyes became unfocused and he stopped. Just like that. One minute he was speaking freely about his language troubles, his slow reading, his difficulty in concentrating, and the next minutes we were sitting side by side without contact. I tried to reach him several times but failed. Julio had dropped out of the conversation. After he left I sat puzzling, then chalked it up to shyness and the generation gap.

Some weeks later I came to a different conclusion. As Julio had recited his list of woes in his poor English, I had listened with sympathy--for a while. But then something happened. Without being aware of it, I moved away from him. A slow reader? Linguistically handicapped? Can't organize his thoughts? The notion never quite came to the top of my mind but it was there just the same: Not College Material.

Julio, with the extreme sensitivity of his kind, sensed my shift in attitude seconds after it happened. After all, he had about fifteen years' experience watching teachers' eyes glaze, their heads bob, their mouths set in a concrete smile. He knew where I had gone better than I did. Why continue talking?

I write this not for the satisfaction of confessing in public,

great as it is, but because the train of thought that ensued led me to some painful probes into my own attitudes. What did I really believe about Julio and his intellectual powers? What was my idea of a university? Where did my responsibilities begin and end? Above all, where did I stand on the environment-heredity issue?¹

This is typical of the kind of soul-searching that is going on currently in institutions of higher education about such matters as open admissions policies, budgeting for remedial programs, tutoring arrangements, etc. Basic to these explorations are philosophies of the purpose of higher education, the nature of the learning process (environmental factors vs. hereditary factors), and the validity of the I.Q.

In the minds of Americans the fulfillment of the "American dream of ever-rising expectations"² depends directly on college education for all. Open admissions policies in many tax-supported institutions as well as in some privately-supported or church-supported institutions attests to the widespread endorsement of this philosophy in modern American society. Tax-payers are understandably reluctant to yield up more and more of their tax dollars for state-supported educational institutions if their own children are barred from entrance. The philanthropist who supports the private school does not feel so much pressure to be democratic in his concerns, but church-related colleges are expected by their constituencies to practice Christian charity in their attitudes towards admitting students who may or may not be "college material."

Hall notes that educational thought in the United States has taken some polar swings on the issue of environment vs. heredity in learning. At the turn of the century, the theories of Darwin and Spencer were applied to the school-room. Through a process of natural selection, the students of "good stock" and high innate ability had emerged and were the rightful heirs of good colleges. Examination systems and elite schools were geared to discover and encourage these gifted few.

However, environmentalism followed closely on the heels of this, gaining ground steadily. This is reflected in the burgeoning of compensatory programs, which reached a peak in the mid-sixties.

The swing is now back to the former position--that heredity is the basic factor in academic performance. Hall states that the correlation between the intelligence of parents and child is .8 for the population as a whole, which means that the differences in I.Q. among people, on the average, are 80% inherited.³

The validity of the I.Q. as a reliable measure of the individual's innate ability has been under fire in recent years. It has been demonstrated that the I.Q. can sometimes be raised by administering certain training, and the phenomenon of a child scoring at a much higher or much lower level after a lapse of a few years has been frequently reported. There is at present much uncertainty as to the measurability of the learning potential of a child.⁴

Important as all of the above concerns are to the field of remedial English, they are not the basic concerns of this paper. The facts are that institutions of higher learning do feel responsible to "remedy" learning deficiencies of their entering students; they do make judgments about the potential of those students on the basis of standardized aptitude tests.

Remedial English programs are conducted in many different ways in the colleges and universities in America. Many times the programs are as individual as the schools themselves. They range all the way from programs aimed at rather extensive restructuring of the student's understanding of English⁵ to "band-aid" operations offered at the student's option, not intended to rescue more than a small percentage of the low-achievers.⁶ The approach taken often reflects the philosophy of the institution concerning the nature of learning (heredity vs. environment), the purpose of the institution, and the responsibility of the institution to the citizenry or its constituency.

My survey of the literature has indicated that in many institutions the remedial programs use traditional methods, the same ones as are being used in the regular composition classroom, simply intensifying and individualizing the instruction. In others, the remedial classroom is a complete departure from what is taking place in the other composition classrooms.

I. The Nature of the Language-Learning Process and its Relationship to Remedial English.

A program for remedial English must be based on an attempt to analyse the cause of deficiency if it is to be effective. Basic to this is an understanding of how language is acquired by an individual.

The field of psycholinguistics has made significant advances in the last twenty-or-so years in the study of language acquisition. Transformational Grammar, that followed seminal publications of Harris (1957), Chomsky (1957), and Lees (1960), with its theory of competence (the speaker-hearer's intrinsic knowledge of his language) and performance (his use of language in actual situations) has exerted much influence in the research that has been done. Answers to all the questions have certainly not been found at this date, but many insights that are helpful in dealing with practical aspects of language learning have emerged.

It has become apparent that the child's ability to learn a language cannot be attributed entirely to operant conditioning and associational controls as described by Skinner (1957), though examples of this kind of learning are copiously exemplified in records of children's learning of grammar.

Reports of three significant research projects have produced some useful generalities about the ways in which children learn language. They are: "The Development of Grammar in Child Language," by W. R. Miller and Susan M. Erwin, published in The Acquisition of Language (1964); "Three Processes in the Child's Acquisition of Syntax," by R. W. Brown and Ursula

Bellugi, published in Harvard Educational Review (1964); and "The Acquisition of Syntax," by R. W. Brown and C. Fraser, published in Verbal Behavior and Learning (1963).

These studies show that in addition to the S-R kind of learning, a child very early is actively making an induction of the latent structure of his language. He seems to acquire first a coarse, rather limited grammar which he later refines by developing subcontrasts and formal distinctions.

Many theories have been proposed to explain why some students, even though they have been exposed to the same formal training as others, are not able to use language effectively, especially in the written form, when they reach college age. On the basis of the general principles of language acquisition just mentioned and on the basis of my own observations about college freshmen as I have dealt with them in the Writing Laboratory and the composition classes at Kansas State University and in special remedial sections of composition at Manhattan Christian College, I suggest the following possibilities:

1) Some interruption has taken place in the learning process. This might have occurred at a crucial stage in the language-learning process.⁷ Such an interruption might have been social, psychological, or physical.

2) He may have learned inappropriate patterns from his parents. The grammar⁸ he learned may not be "standard," and may have rules that do not exist in the grammar used in the context of society as a whole. If his parents were not native speakers or if two different languages were used in the home, his grammar may not match that expected of him in the college classroom.

3) His innate abilities may be below average. Unfortunately, language aptitude tests may not differentiate between 1), 2), and 3). Some of the research studies that have been done on the speech of retarded children might have a bearing here. Joseph E. Spradlin, Bureau of Child Research, University of Kansas, and Parsons State Hospital and Training Center, in his chapter

"Environmental Factors and the Language Development of Retarded Children," in Developments in Applied Psycholinguistics Research (1968) concludes that retarded children appear to develop language skills in the same sequence of stages as normal children but their progress is much slower and the maximum level of achievement is much reduced. Is it not logical, then, to conclude that there will be borderline cases, where the child is more able than what may be defined as "retarded" but less able than the student of average ability, and that some of the people in this category will aspire to a college education?

It should be noted that students in all three of these categories have probably experienced a long record of failure. Attitudinal problems will be common to all of them. The climate in the classroom will be a significant determiner in the success or failure of any program in English. This is something that cannot be written into a syllabus but will depend on the individual teacher.

The question is, what can be done to "remedy" the acquisition of language by students in these three categories. If there has been an interruption in the learning process, a reconstruction of the basic structure of the language, beginning at the phonetic level, might function to correct usage. The same procedure could be followed with students who fall in category 2). If an inappropriate grammar has been learned, perhaps a new one could be acquired. Those students who fall in category 3) are probably not "college material," and should be advised of this as early as possible, as soon as it becomes apparent that they are not likely to succeed as college students, so that they can be guided into careers they can adapt to.

Who will decide which students should be turned to other careers? The dilemma of open admissions still has not been solved. I propose that there be built into the program in freshman English some mechanical device

that gives each student an opportunity to prove himself, with automatic elimination coupled with counseling if he does not make the grade. This could be the making of the pre-writing course prerequisite to regular composition for all students who score below a certain level on standardized entrance tests in English, with a limitation of two semesters in pre-writing before he is dismissed.

I propose, then, that a course in Remedial English should consist of training in the basic structure of the English language, including both instruction in the language, allowing the student to "intellectualize" the grammar, and drills to help him cut new "grooves." This course should be preliminary and prerequisite to his enrollment in regular composition courses and should be offered pass/fail to remove the pressure of competition for a grade, taking into account that the student's record of failure in the classroom is one of the largest obstacles to be overcome by the teacher.

II. Linguistically-Oriented Pre-Writing Instruction for College Freshmen:
A Syllabus.

In the attempt to analyse and categorize influences which prohibit development of fluency in spoken and, particularly, written English, I have deliberately avoided a consideration of the effect of classroom instruction on the student's performance, except for the allusion to attitude on page 6. The conditions described in categories 1), 2), and 3), on page 6 are present when the child enters school. Perhaps the teaching in the classroom, beginning with the first grade could work to alleviate; it probably does, in some cases. This paper is concerned with proposing courses of action for those students who have emerged from their twelve years in public school without having found solutions.

However, in choosing between several alternatives what that course of action is to be, a history of the teaching of English grammar in America should be considered.

H. A. Gleason, Jr. starts chapter one of his Linguistics and English Grammar (1965) with this statement: "Few subjects have had so ambiguous a place in American education as English grammar."⁹ He goes on to point out that "in prestige, it is near or at the bottom among the numerous subjects of the modern curriculum. It would hardly occur to anyone to pick grammar out as the characterizing feature of any level of American education. The term 'grammar school' is an anachronism. Yet it is symbolic of the teaching of grammar, also incredibly anachronistic."¹⁰

As the western frontiers began to be settled, the desire to provide at least rudimentary education began to manifest itself in the form of crude schools, housed in rough buildings constructed by the citizens of the communities. The teacher usually had no special training; it was assumed that he did not need any. The parents watched over the teacher, judging his performance

and behavior. The curriculum consisted of Reading, 'Riting, 'Rithmetic, and Grammar.

Grammar was defined in the textbooks of the nineteenth century as "the art of speaking and writing English correctly."¹¹ Coupled with this definition was the notion that the body of grammatical knowledge was, like mathematical knowledge, complete and definitive. Add to this the conviction that there exists an absolute standard of correctness and the doctrine of prescriptivism emerges. Prescriptivism has had much currency in American thought from the very beginning, and it is espoused not only by grammarians and English teachers, but also by the American public. Parents expect the schools to teach their children to speak and write "correctly."

Unfortunately, defining "correctness" in language is virtually impossible, because language is constantly changing and dialectal differences are inevitable. What dialect is standard? Which innovation will become permanent?

A movement which has affected the schools in recent years has been educational research, the statistical study of curriculum, materials, methods, etc., against certain measurable criteria of usefulness. The success of traditional grammar teaching to produce "good," "error free" language has been shown to be, for the most part, ineffective. The reaction on the parts of many teachers and administrators to this revelation has been to curtail or eliminate grammar from the curricula; however, the public and school-board members have exerted pressure to retain it. A sort of stand-off has resulted from this. In many public schools, the English programs are characterized by a certain ambivalence, with the students the losers. (It is not unusual for a student to report to me that when grammar was on the schedule in his high school English class, they played ping-pong!)

One other factor has complicated public-school grammar. While literature has long been regarded as a serious academic subject, English

grammar never has, in this nation's educational history. It is not unusual for the teacher of grammar to have had no formal training in the subject since grade-school. This, coupled with the conviction that it is an exercise in futility anyway, has caused the teaching of grammar to drop to a very low ebb.

In the early 1930's, the National Council of Teachers of English commissioned Charles C. Fries to conduct a full-scale study to determine what grammatical material should be taught in the schools. The report appeared in 1940 as the American English Grammar. This was the first serious effort to make scientific, objective analyses of phenomena in American English, using linguistic methods with the purpose of constructing grammars for the schools. Since that time, progress has been made in the effort to make grammar teaching constructive rather than merely corrective. The most significant development has been the introduction of a program of textbooks designed to give the student in-depth instruction in a descriptive grammar of the language from third grade through ninth grade. This text was authored mostly by Paul Roberts and finished posthumously by his staff. In most colleges, a course in Modern English Grammar is now required to be taken by future teachers. Change and acceptance have come slowly. Implementation is even slower in coming. Teachers are not equipped to teach the "new grammar." Many of them are resistant to learning new principles. It is hoped that time and continued efforts will solve these problems.

Research and application beginning with Fries in 1940 and until the present have demonstrated the constructive effect of teaching descriptive, structural grammar based on realistic, scientific analysis of data. There are two major schools of linguistic thought concerned with constructing grammars of American English. They are the structural and the transformational.

Each of these developed from an earlier stage of development in man's attempt to discover the workings of his mind. The transformational theory harks back to a much earlier theory, one which was discarded as irrelevant for

many years, the theory of universal or philosophical grammar. The structuralist approach emerged from a conscious separation-off of surface-structure from deep-structure as the only valid means of getting at the grammar of a language. The earliest proponent of this concept was the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure.¹²

Huarte, a Spanish physician from the era of the renaissance, noted that the word for intelligence had the same Latin root as "engender" or "generate." He contended that this gives a clue to the nature of the mind. He distinguished three levels of intelligence: 1) the "docile wit," which fulfills the maxim that there is nothing in the mind that is not simply transmitted to it by the senses; 2) normal human intelligence, able to "engender within itself, by its own power, the principles on which knowledge rests," and "assisted by the subject alone, without the help of anybody, they will produce a thousand conceits they never heard spoke of . . . inventing and saying such things as they never heard from their masters, nor any mouth"; 3) true creativity, an exercise of the creative imagination in ways that go beyond normal intelligence. Huarte maintained that the distinction between 1) the "docile wit," and 2) normal human intelligence is the distinction between beast and man.¹³

The influence of these conclusions of Huarte is clearly seen in the theory that came to be known as "philosophical" or "universal" grammar. Philosophical grammarians (17th century) were interested not in a description of language, but an explanation of it. It developed in self-conscious opposition to a descriptive tradition that interpreted the task of the grammarian to be merely that of recording and organizing date of usage. The Port-Royal Grammar of 1660 initiated the tradition of philosophical grammar. According to that grammar, surface structure applies only to sound, to the corporeal aspect of language; but when the signal is produced, with its surface structure, there takes place a corresponding mental analysis into what we may call the deep

structure, a formal structure that relates directly not to the sound but to the meaning.

These concepts were a departure from the thinking that preceded, and, strangely enough, disappeared almost without a trace as modern linguistics developed in the late nineteenth century.

How does the Port-Royal theory relate to modern structural and descriptive linguistics, which restricts itself to the analysis of surface structure, to formal properties that are explicit in the signal and to phrases and units that can be determined from the signal by techniques of segmentation and classification? The restriction was consciously made and was considered to be a great advance.¹⁴ De Saussure held that the only proper methods of linguistic analysis are segmentation and classification. Using such methods, the linguist determines patterns into which the units fall. Modern structural linguistics has been faithful to these limitations, which were held to be necessary ones.¹⁵

In the late 1950's and early 1960's, generative grammar was introduced. Noam Chomsky's Syntactic Structures, published in 1957, harked back to Huarte's analysis of the working of the mind as "generation." He reintroduced the concepts put forth by the philosophical grammarians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and suggested that structural linguistics had dealt only with "a record of the data of usage and "had not offered an explanation for that data."¹⁶ He proposed that a return to the purpose of the universal grammarians would be "of interest for the information it provides concerning innate intellectual structure."¹⁷

The contribution of Transformational Grammar to the study of the acquisition of language is significant and, at this moment inestimable. For a long-range exposition of the structure of the language, the transformational approach would probably be the most effective of the two. Paul Roberts' series employs this approach. However, for the short-range, intensive kind

of restructuring desired in the pre-writing course, where we are concerned primarily with the final product, the "string," the surface structure, a purely structural approach seems most likely to achieve the desired results.

A. The Syllabus

The proposed syllabus is designed to be flexible as to time scheduling. Ideally, pre-writing should extend over the first two semesters of a student's enrollment. There are several advantages to this arrangement: 1) the student will have two semesters to "get his feet on the ground" as a student before he must compete for a grade in a writing course; 2) rapport between teacher and student becomes more significant over a longer period of time in the structuring process; 3) if the teacher is to be an important influence on the student's development, the student must trust him, and this takes time, particularly with students who already see themselves as failures. This is not always possible, however, and the amount of time spent on each unit must be determined by the teacher himself within the time units allotted for the course. This will involve some compression and some deletion.

1. Phonetics and Phonemics

It is not the purpose of this unit to teach the student to spell correctly. Some spelling misconceptions may be corrected in learning a realistic set of rules for the sound system of English, but learning to spell in English involves many more things than this and this thrust is eliminated from the pre-writing course and left to the teacher of the regular composition course to deal with.

The purpose of the unit on phonetics and phonemics is fourfold:

- 1) To make the student more aware of his language;
- 2) To make him a better listener;
- 3) To make him more discriminating about language;

- 4) To generate interest in his language.

COURSE OUTLINE:

- Class session #1: Lecture and Demonstration: "How Sounds are Made."
 #2: Test knowledge of previous lecture. Introduce vowels.
 #3: Drill vowels. Test knowledge.
 #4: Introduce consonants.
 #5: Drill consonants and vowels with dictation exercises.
 #6: Dictation drills.
 #7: Relate sounds to spelling system. Problems in spelling English.
 #8: Stress--Drills
 #9: Juncture--Drills
 #10: Intonation--Drills.
 #11: Test over unit.

2. Morphology

The most glaring errors made by these students are in subject-verb agreement, use of tense and vocabulary items. It is the purpose of this unit to get the student to intellectualize about these matters and then to participate in drills to help him fix acceptable forms in his own grammar.

COURSE OUTLINE:

- Session #1: Lecture on word classes in English.
 #2: Verbs and their paradigms.
 #3: Drills
 #4: Drills
 #5: Drills
 #6: Nouns

- #7: Drills
- #8: Drills
- #9: Adjectives--Drills
- #10: Adverbs--Drills
- #11: Determiners--Drills
- #12: Prepositions, Pronouns and Intensifiers
- #13: Drills
- #14: Test over Morphology.

A sample drill for the unit on Morphology is: dictate the infinitive form of a verb, asking the student to respond with present participial, past, and past participial forms, drilling both strong and weak verbs, for example:

Infinitive Form	Present Participle	Past	Past Participle
go	going	went	gone
walk	walking	walked	walked

3. Syntax

The purpose of this unit is to start with the basic concept of sentence (N+V+PV)¹⁸ and develop six basic patterns in English, then to expand the basic elements in those patterns until the student is drilling and composing sentences fairly complex in structure. Many important aspects of English syntax can be learned in this way, such as: word order, possibilities for expansion to express more and more abstract ideas, and the punctuation system.

COURSE OUTLINE:

- Session #1: The sentence in English.
- #2: Expanding the Noun
- #3: Drills
- #4: Expanding the Verb
- #5: Drills

- #6: Sentence Patterns
- #7: Drills
- #8: Drills
- #9: Expanding the Patterns
- #10: Expanding the Patterns
- #11: Drills
- #12: Drills
- #13: Combining the Patterns
- #14: Conjunctions and Correlatives
- #15: Sentence Connectors
- #16: Subordinators
- #17: Drills
- #18: Drills
- #19: Punctuation
- #20: Drills
- #21: Test over unit

A sample drill for this unit would be: Taking the basic sentence Boy threw the ball, expand the subject-noun-headword with a determiner, an adjective, and a noun as modifier in pre-headword position and with a prepositional phrase and an adjectivalized sentence pattern in post-headword position.

4. Discourse Structure

There are many ways to approach teaching the writing of paragraphs. The approach used in the pre-writing course is based on three hypotheses about discourse and its structure. The first one was proposed by James O. Morgan at the Eighteenth Annual Roundtable of Linguistics at Georgetown University in 1967. He presents a preliminary analysis of the nature of

transitional devices in the structuring of paragraphs. This approach to structure is introduced as the occasion arises in the writing assignments, the students having their attention called to the possibilities for making the discourse more coherent by improving the use of these devices.

Frances Christensen, in his Notes Toward a New Rhetoric (1967) analyses the structure of the paragraph as follows: "The paragraph may be defined as a sequence of structurally related sentences . . . the top sentence of the sequence is the topic sentence. . . . the topic sentence is nearly always the first sentence of the sequence. . . . simple sequences are of two sorts--coordinate and subordinate. . . . the two sorts of sequence combine to produce the commonest sort--the mixed sequence. . . ." He goes on to show how this structure is modified in various ways. Such a descriptive approach to paragraph structure relieves some of the stigma attached to discourse-writing by students. They are able to feel free from dicta about how they should write and are helped to see that they already have the basic skills for producing acceptable, coherent paragraphs, providing those skills are polished and perfected.

The methods used in teaching writing at the discourse level to remedial students are derived from the behavioral approach to composition proposed by Robert Zoellner in a monograph entitled "A Behavioral Approach to Writing," in College English, January, 1969.

Zoellner defines a problem common to the regular composition classroom, but even more obvious in the remedial sections: the disparity between the student's ability to communicate his ideas orally and his ability to convey them with paper and ink. He concludes that composition teachers have confused an out-of-date metaphor, which he labels the "instrumental think-write metaphor" with the actual writing process. His analysis of this

phenomenon, as he states it on pages 270 and 271 of the January, 1969, issue of College English is as follows:

. . . we adhere . . . to an instrumental metaphor which establishes some largely undefined one-to-one relationship between the thinking process on the one hand and the written word on the other. This equivalence is evident, for example, in the majority of the textbooks that we assemble for our students. One could easily fill a five-foot bookshelf with high school and college texts which ignore entirely the act of writing, which have little or nothing to say about the action which stands as a central term between thought on the one hand and the written word on the other. The writer-as-actor seldom appears. Overwhelmingly, our textbooks--and the theory which produces them--are product-oriented rather than process-oriented, taking for the most part an artifactual and textual approach to the written (past tense) word and to the logical and intellectual imperatives which we assume can account entirely and completely for its genesis. The student is burdened with long chapters on "clear thinking" and "logical analysis"; we divert him with the Aristotelian elegancies of the outline, and immerse him in undistributed middles, ladders of abstraction, and squares of opposition. In all of this we are assuming that if we can somehow get the student to think clearly, he will thereupon write clearly. This is not only our great metaphor. It may also be our great myth.

When we return an "F" theme to the student, we are likely to tell him in our written comment that we failed the theme because he had not "ordered his thoughts properly" or had "expressed himself obscurely," forgetting entirely that these are mentalistic assertions which Pavlov (among many others) deprecated because of their logical circularity. To tell a student that his theme is unclear and disorganized because his thought is faulty is roughly the same as asserting that "Fred ate a big meal because he was hungry," or that "Frank struck out with his fists because he was angry." Such explanations explain nothing because we have simply substituted one verbal formulation for a given segment of human behavior for another verbal formulation of the same segment.

I do not suggest that as English teachers we stop talking about planning and organization; nor am I saying that logical thought has nothing to do with the compositional process. I am only suggesting that our present "think-write" instrumental metaphor ignores or glosses over certain central elements of the act of writing. What some of these elements are can be easily ascertained by simply observing a group of students writing an in-class theme or an hour's essay test. Here, for instance, is Student A, a bright and articulate senior: we are only twenty minutes into the hour, but already she has covered five bluebook pages, her pen moving effortlessly, swiftly, and without pause over the paper. Next to her sits Student B. From earlier class discussion I know that he is even more insightful and articulate than Student A; his vocal comments have suggested to me that he may be of graduate caliber. But something is wrong. He sits hunched intensely over his desk, laboriously drawing each word rather than writing it. He has covered only two bluebook pages, and I can tell from the expression on his face that he knows he's