

AN EVALUATION OF THE TREATMENT OF STYLE
IN A TYPICAL COMPOSITION TEXTBOOK

by

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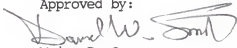
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Composition textbooks do not receive many favorable reviews from the critics. In general, those who write about these texts see them as out of date, misguided and unhelpful. Some argue that these texts are the primary authority for many instructors in how and what to teach, which, if true, would mean that the instruction in writing classrooms perpetuates discredited and unhelpful notions about writing. In this paper, I want to examine the treatment of style in one textbook, The Bedford Guide for College Writers (hereafter BG), to determine whether the general accusations critics make apply to its treatment of style. I selected this text for two reasons. First, after examining several composition textbooks,* I found BG to be typical of freshman rhetorics in its approach to writing and style. Second, since the authors of the text, X.J. and Dorothy M. Kennedy, are also the editors of The Bedford Reader (hereafter BR), I could look at the examples of good, professional writing they selected as models to see if the Kennedys' rules for good style were followed by professional writers. What I wanted to find out was whether the rules in BG were based on examples of good style in professional writing or something else. In my examination of BG, I will first note the critics' attitude toward and specific criticisms of composition textbooks, looking at where BG stands in relation to those criticisms. Then I will turn to the subject of style, looking at how the Kennedys define good style, where they treat style in their writing process, and how closely the models

* Texts I looked at include Writing With A Purpose, McCrimmon; Writing Worth Reading, Packer and Timpane; From Sight to Insight, Rackham; Elements of Argument, Rottenberg.

they have selected as examples of good writing for their reader support their rules for a good style.

Critics' attitudes differ when it comes to the question of how useful composition textbooks are in teaching writing. Some believe the texts are, by their nature, unable to serve any useful purpose in the classroom. One critic, in fact, goes so far as to say that "choosing a text in freshman English is a choice among variations in a bankrupt system" (Friedman 599). Different critics give different reasons for this view. Mike Rose questions a text's ability to teach the process of writing. He says, "Writing is simply too complex and unwieldy a process to be taught from a textbook" (Dismantling 70). Ruth Mitchell is more adamant than this, claiming that textbooks only confuse the student "because he looks for information to be memorized when there isn't any" (Mitchell 237). Kathleen Welch believes that the traditional "ideology" of composition texts is too established to be updated or reformed (Welch 1987). Others question whether or not composition research is what teachers want or will buy (Tibbetts and Tibbetts 1982), or whether the use of texts, no matter how poor or good they may be, are, in fact, that influential in the actual teaching and practicing of writing in the classroom (Miller 1982). Critics like these propose that we do away with the current textbook system in favor of books on theory for the teacher, hand-outs or workbooks for the student, and more emphasis on the written texts produced by the classes.

Not all critics, however, dismiss textbooks as hopelessly useless, but instead point out the shortcomings found in composition texts, evidently believing that they can be improved. These shortcomings

can be grouped into four general categories: a dependence on forms that are inadequate and outdated, a mechanistic approach to writing, a tendency to give advice that is too vague and simplistic to be helpful or too rigid to allow for flexibility, and a general failure in helping students write better. The first three problems are all evident in EG.

I want to point out first that EG attempts to be sensitive to some relatively recent developments in writing theory. Specifically, I mean that the authors have tried to get away from the emphasis on producing a neat, superficially correct written product which may lack any substantive content to an emphasis on the complex, messy process of producing something worth saying and saying it well. In fact, they have constructed their text almost completely around the process of "Generating Ideas," "Shaping a Draft," and "Rewriting." In their own words, "writing tends to be a matter of dashing off, crossing out, leaping ahead . . . trying a different approach, failing, trying yet another approach . . . working and reworking, scrubbing, polishing -- and perhaps, in the end, looking up the spellings of a bunch of suspicious-looking words" (2). The general idea is that good writers revise, and the Kennedys are trying to teach that. They also try to avoid taking a prescriptive, dictatorial tone: "Reading our advice on how to write won't make you a writer," they say (4), and writing can be done well in a variety of ways (7). These views reflect the Kennedys' attempt to be flexible throughout the book. In spite of these attempts however, I don't think they have succeeded in avoiding the problems that critics complain about.

EG's first problem is its dependence on forms, especially the

outdated Modes of Discourse. The Kennedys use these as the forms for their assignments, beginning with narration and proceeding through argumentation. In the Preface, they anticipate and answer the question, "Aren't these the same old modes of discourse?" (vi). Their answer is that they have presented the "modes . . . not as inexorable monoliths but as ways of thought that naturally occur in certain writing tasks" (vi). I'm not sure this answers the criticism of the modes. One textbook critic, Don Stewart, complains that the use of forms like the modes is a backwards approach to writing (Stewart 1982). In his review of The Bedford Reader (BR), he refers to an experiment conducted by the Kennedys in which they asked professional writers to write essays following each of the seven expository methods. According to the Kennedys, the writers "were dumbfounded. It was a new experience for them to be assigned not a topic but a method" (Stewart 65). This, Stewart says, is evidence of the "artificial and psychologically unsound" approach that the modes represent. On top of that, the Kennedys really do not treat these forms as ways of thinking that occur in certain writing situations. They use them to define the kind of papers the students are to write. For example, the assignment for Compare/Contrast reads, "Write a paper in which you compare and contrast two persons or two kinds of persons; two places; or two things" (BG 157). This is not a way of thinking; it is a form to write by.

The second problem present in BG is the Kennedys' mechanical approach to the writing process. That is, they treat writing as a lock-step process. First, the writer generates ideas, then he shapes a draft,

and then he rewrites. They try to avoid making this impression by saying that no two writers use exactly the same methods, and that their stages "don't always follow like dog after cat after rat" (BG 7). But as you go through their book with chapter after chapter after chapter ordered by first, generating ideas; second, shaping a draft; third, rewriting; their denial begins to sound hollow. If a teacher or student follows their steps, what idea are they going to get about writing? That it is a complex, recursive process where writers struggle with and discover meaning, or that it is a rigid, lock-step formula for producing composition papers?

The third problem with textbooks is advice that is too vague and simplistic, or too rigid and prescriptive. BG is guilty of both. The problem of simplistic and vague advice is seen in admonitions that are sometimes laughable and completely useless, and which only reinforce the impression that writing texts are far removed from the realities of what writing involves. For example, after a brief discussion of the use of repetition, the Kennedys' parting advice is to "Break it out only when an occasion calls for it" (505). When is that, and how does a writer "break it out"? In their section on "A Writer's Tone," they discuss three kinds of tone that "can murder any piece of writing": the superior tone, the inferior tone, and the outraged tone (506). After prohibiting these, they conclude with simplistic and contradictory advice: "Pretend to no feelings you don't feel, and write in whatever words come naturally" (507). What if the writer feels outraged? Should he write in that tone? Which words are the ones that come naturally? Another simplistic statement about writing occurs in the section "Writing to An Assignment." Here the authors say, "Anyone who honestly wants

to say something can be eloquent' (23). Do they really believe this? Do they really believe that all there is to eloquence is wanting to say something, or that the lack of eloquence is always somehow a lack of motivation or honesty? And how does this advice work in a required course like freshman composition where the students have to write whether they want to say something or not? Such statements seem to reflect a lack of awareness and sensitivity to what hard work writing is for most freshman writers. This kind of advice ignores the student's need for instruction that is specific and concrete enough to be of some help. While the Kennedys are writing in vague, general terms that make writing sound as if it is something that just flows out of the honest, sincere mind of the writer, the freshman composition student is struggling with a paper his teacher has told him is unnecessarily repetitious or that needs a better tone. In the context of a real writing situation, much of BG's advice is of no help.

Not all of the Kennedys' advice is vague and simplistic, however; rigid, prescriptive rules can be found in their text as well. The text demonstrates a kind of split personality in its advice because the authors can't quite seem to follow through with their commitment to flexibility. They often start out with what sounds like a flexible approach, but they don't stick to it. For instance, in their treatment of the thesis statement, the Kennedys discuss how some writers state their thesis while other authors simply imply theirs. They point out that writing a thesis statement down can be helpful in clarifying thought and organizing the essay, but a writer does not have to feel bound to that statement in its initial form. They maintain this flexible, informed and realistic view of the thesis statement as something that can be helpful, and that

can be used in different ways, until they come to their suggestions.

Here the tone changes.

1. State [your thesis] exactly in as detailed and down-to-earth a way as you can.
2. State just one central idea - "Careless dumping of leftover paint has caused a serious problem in Georgia, and a new kind of biodegradable paint now looks promising" is too much.
3. State your thesis positively. "The causes of breast cancer remain a challenge for medical scientists" instead of "Medical scientists do not know what causes breast cancer."
4. Limit your thesis statement to what it is possible to demonstrate (472).
5. Set forth your thesis at the end of your introduction (491).

The Kennedys have changed to a prescriptive, dogmatic tone, laying down rules and guidelines when earlier, in their discussion of how writers use thesis statements, they had said the writer is free to adapt his thesis statement to his purpose and subject. Some of their advice is too vague to be helpful (what is one central idea?), others too arbitrary to be reliable. Some other examples of prescriptive advice that have to do with style are the following:

- In general it's a good idea to shun a long word or phrase when you can pick a short one. Instead of "the remainder," try to write "the rest" (EG 510).
- In particular, before using a new word ending in -ize or -wise count to ten. This will give you time to think of a different word (522).

Often their advice is given in a moderate, reasonable tone, but the

message remains the same: don't write this way, or write this way only. The problem with that, according to the textbook critics, is that the rules are not always reasonable or necessary, and will not apply to every situation. In other words, they lack context, and this is their chief weakness. In some writing, the writer will not be able to follow these rules because to do so will change his meaning or defeat his purpose, and why should he have to change? It seems the only reason would be to satisfy the idiosyncratic demands of a composition textbook or teacher.

I think it's clear that BG is guilty of many of the faults that critics find in composition textbooks. In fact, I would say that by and large, this text represents a fairly traditional approach. It does, however, have some redeeming qualities. The authors have certainly tried to be responsive to some current research and theory in the field of composition. I think that is a good sign. They have also tried to avoid being dogmatic, and although I don't think they have succeeded completely, in places they have managed to talk about writing in an informed, reasonable way. Don Stewart, in his study of 32 textbooks, provides a label that is useful in categorizing BG ("Textbooks Revisited"). He divides the texts he reviews into several categories, one being texts that are "slightly innovative." These books take a largely traditional approach, using the forms of discourse, adopting a similar pattern of organization, and approaching writing as "practical work . . . which can be learned by mastering a few essential principles" (454). However, they also offer some innovations that Stewart says "catch the attention of a textbook reader" (455). I think "slightly innovative" best describes BG. It is largely traditional, but some different approaches that are up-to-date and make some sense can be found in it. Now I want to turn

to EG's treatment of style.

EG lacks an explicit discussion or definition of good style. In spite of that, its concept of what constitutes good style is clear from the beginning. The Kennedys, writing about what writers do, say, "They give order to their thoughts and they make a rough draft. Through more drafts, they make their ideas clearer" (7). Clarity thus is the quality of good style that EG emphasizes most. A good style is transparent and presents the least difficulty in the transmission of ideas from writer to reader. The Kennedys give some emphasis to other qualities -- liveliness (10), conciseness (13-14), and emphasis (13-14) -- but the highest idea is clarity. In the "Revision Checklists" that appear throughout the text, questions about clarity almost always appear. In one section in their rewriting stage, they ask, "If there are places where he or she (the reader) meets difficulty, how can you rewrite to make such passages absolutely clear?" (176). In the section on "Strategies for Shaping a Draft," the use of examples, stories and metaphors are discussed, and the primary purpose for using these tools is to first achieve clarity, then liveliness and emphasis. Another repeated concern that goes along with being clear is the use of details. "Do you need more detail in places, to make your vision clear and convincing?" the Kennedys ask (137), and keep asking throughout the text. Finally, they discourage the use of "There is" or "There are" and the use of "be" verbs (177) because they lessen liveliness and increase wordiness (509), which lessens clarity. All of these qualities of good writing -- clarity, emphasis, liveliness, conciseness -- work together in achieving a good style. As the Kennedys say, "Most good contemporary writers know that the more succinctly they can state an idea, the clearer and more forceful

it will be" (507).

What the Kennedys presents us with then, is an implicit definition of good style as plain style. The smaller the word (510), the shorter the phrase, the plainer the vocabulary, the more direct the syntax, the more transparent the meaning, the better the style. Good style is that which does not get in the way of meaning. I suppose it would be safe to say that the Kennedys would be most pleased with prose which calls the least attention to itself, which is even forgettable, so that all the reader notices and remembers is the pure idea itself. The Kennedys are right to encourage freshman writers to work for clarity, but their view of good style is weak at several points.

Plain style as good style is a weak position because there are competing views of good style which may be superior to the Kennedys'. Richard Lanham, in his Style: An Anti-Textbook, argues that views such as the Kennedys reduce style to "stylelessness" (6), teaching it out of existence. Their view, in his opinion, is one that says, "The best prose style is one that styles the least" (10). He believes that this emphasis on clarity, where only the thought counts, has helped foster an attitude of carelessness about writing in students. "The thought is what counts, so why should I care about good style or good prose," they think. He argues that the proper subject for a writing course should be style, and that the emphasis in teaching should be on the pleasure and joy of experimenting with language and style, not on reducing language to the minimum required to communicate. Another assault on the Kennedys' type of advice comes from Richard Ohmann. In his essay "Use Definite, Specific, Concrete Language," Ohmann takes to task those who dispense such advice for engaging in an "ideological activity" which suggests

"to students that they be less inquiring and less intelligent than they are capable of being" (390). His main assault is against the writing texts' negative attitude toward abstractions and generalities, and he argues that teaching students to always be specific and concrete overlooks the importance of using generalizations to make sense of and relate their experiences to each other. Abstractions have value in helping us to make sense of reality, he says, while the emphasis on using concrete, specific details can encourage a surface and superficial understanding of experience. To tell students to change their abstractions to definite, specific, concrete language in the name of clarity, Ohmann points out, not only changes meaning in many cases, but it also may negatively affect how students think about and view their world. Encouraging the use of details and discouraging the use of abstractions or generalities seems unbalanced to me since both are necessary in writing. Why is it that writing texts seem to put so much emphasis on developing the one and never give any guidelines on how to use and develop the other? In light of these protests, the Kennedys' apparently total acceptance of one kind of style as good style is questionable. Critics raise valid theoretical objections to it, and presenting it as some kind of unqualified good is irresponsible.

A second challenge can be made against the Kennedys' view of good style from the standpoint of rhetorical context. What makes one particular style a good one? Ross Winterowd says, "That style is best which conveys the writer's semantic intention most effectively to the intended audience" (87). Carl H. Klaus says, "We write for the occasion. Each set of conditions calls for a certain kind of verbal behavior, and the stylistic response if it is to be appropriate and effective

must come within these conventional limits" (8-9). Notice that such qualities as clarity, emphasis, or conciseness are not mentioned. Instead, good style depends upon the writer, the audience, and the kind of writing being written. No one good style exists that can be used in every writing situation. This means that plain style is not always best. According to Klaus, in "meditative prose, where the emphasis is not on the idea alone, but on the emotional and imaginative impact of the idea, the style becomes metaphoric, ornate, and self-consciously rhythmical . . ." (10). Whether Klaus' observation is widely agreed upon or not, its importance lies in how good style is defined by context. The Kennedys come up short when their approach to good style for meditative prose is compared with Klaus' approach. The Kennedys offer no guidance on how to fit the style to the writing task. Their emphasis is on being clear and adding details. The puzzling thing is that they obviously know better. In the assignment on writing from observation, they analyze two different sections of writing which describe horses, contrasting the styles. Pers Crowell's description of a Morgan horse taken from his reference book Calvacade of American Horses, is, according to the Kennedys, an objective description in which Crowell's purpose is simply to help the reader recognize one kind of horse. The text points out that this purpose affects the style, the kind of language he chooses to use. In describing the head of a Morgan horse, Crowell writes, "The head is rather short and broad, with heavy jaw, and exceedingly short ears set well apart" (67). The Kennedys compare this essay with a portrait of a draft horse, taken from Elizabeth Bishop's memoir, "In the Village." In it, the Kennedys say, Bishop gives a more subjective description. Her purpose is not just to describe the horse

but to communicate her feelings about the animal. This affects her style. Her description of the draft horse's nose reads, "His nose is supposed to feel like velvet and does, with ink spots under milk all over its pink" (68). The Kennedys observe then, that each writer's style is affected by purpose and context. After this discussion however, the Kennedys ignore the matters of purpose and context until the rewriting stage where they ask one question: "If you are writing a subjective description, allowing your feelings to show, what might you do with the language of your paper? Would any figures of speech -- and comparisons -- lend life?" (81). Their awareness that rhetorical purpose and context affects style in specific ways in model essays doesn't seem to carry over into their instructions to student writers. As a result, the Kennedys teach what is an all-purpose, generic style that I suspect leads to bland, colorless, and dull writing. It seems to me that if writing courses are at all aimed at teaching students about what writing actually involves and about how to write well in actual writing situations, such an approach is a disservice to the student. The student needs to be taught that good style depends on the writing situation and that a good writer is one who can adjust his style to fit that situation. It makes more sense for student writers to be taught how to adjust their style for different rhetorical situations than to present one narrow view of good style. I believe that Lanham's suggestion that students be encouraged to "play" with language represents a better approach.

Some, however, may point out that composition courses are primarily designed to help students write in academic prose so they can please their teachers, pass their courses, and receive their diplomas. And

the plain style, they say, is the best method for achieving this end. But is it? The Kennedys' definition of good style is assumed to be the most effective way for students to write in school, but others have raised questions about that assumption. In 1981, Rosemary L. Hake and Joseph M. Williams published a report on their research into what kind of prose style teachers actually prefer and reward in the classroom. The purpose of the study was to determine if verbal prose ("direct, simple, concise and plain") was rewarded above nominal prose ("indirect, complex, wordy and inflated"). They created several sets of essays which differed primarily in style and submitted them for evaluation to English teachers who were not aware of the real purpose of the study. Hake and Williams conducted four separate experiments, using teachers from high school, junior college, and senior college. In each experiment, the teachers preferred the nominal version of each essay over the matching verbal version by awarding it higher scores. In other words, the teachers, who encourage the Kennedys' kind of plain style and discourage the more abstract, wordy style, actually gave better grades to the writers who wrote in the style the teachers discouraged. What effect is this likely to have on the student? Hake and Williams comment, "We might now reasonably wonder how often students generalize that the rewards go to those papers with inflated prose, that a pretentious and wordy style equals good writing" (440). We might also reasonably wonder how often students read texts like EG and sit in classes taught by teachers whose view of good style is informed by such texts and then try to reproduce such a style in that class and others only to be graded down for it. If it happens often enough, those students will quickly realize that writing texts and teachers are inconsistent and out of

touch with the rest of the educational world. After all, teachers and texts might be blind to the reality of the writing context, but students who care about their performance in the class quickly learn how to adjust their style to fit the expectations of the teacher.

BG's definition of good style seems clearly inadequate. Since it is only one style, it is too limited to fit all writing situations, which is what the Kennedys try to make it do. In trying to make plain style do this, they have to keep their directions fairly general which results in instructions and ideas that are often too vague to be of much help. Of course, a writer wants to be clear, but how to do that and what to be clear about in different writing situations requires different stylistic choices. The Kennedys do not offer any. Since students will write in different styles in their composition classes, if there is any variety in the kind of writing required, and since they will be required to write in different styles in college or in their professional lives, they ought to be taught what good style is and how to write with it in the different writing situations they will face. To say that good writing is primarily clear and concise writing may be true in some sense, but more importantly it is both too limited and too general, and as a result is not much help. Unfortunately, the same thing can be said about how the Kennedys fit stylistic decisions and concerns into their treatment of the writing process.

As I mentioned earlier, the Kennedys place a lot of emphasis on the writing process. Writing is "a matter of thinking and rethinking in words" (2). Writers generate ideas, put words down on paper, cross out, rearrange and so on. The question is where does style fit into this process? The answer in BG is "towards the end." Good style,

according to the Kennedys, is a matter of being clear and concise. Making writing clear and concise involves adding details, cutting out unnecessary phrases or words, and changing unfamiliar terms to more familiar terms. So style becomes something worked on at the revision stage, after generating ideas and shaping a draft. The Kennedys stick very closely to this approach throughout the text. Revising is putting your ideas in the most emphatic order, developing your thoughts further, and making your attitude toward the subject clear (13). Editing is also important, and it involves correcting any problems that might prevent the reader from understanding and enjoying your writing (13), and making changes that will help your work to be "clearer, less wordy, and more vigorous" (498).

The problem with this approach is that the Kennedys are overlooking such matters as audience, subject, and purpose. They do say a few things about the reader, but in almost every case the writer doesn't need to think about him until it's time to revise. "Imagining a reader's reactions to your work can help you revise," they write, and if you don't know who your reader is personally, you should "try to step into the shoes of some other intelligent person -- someone like yourself" (11-12). In response to one professional writer's advice about imagining a hostile reader's response, they say that such advice is good, but they "suggest you apply it only when your paper is nearing its finish" (12). They qualify this advice a bit, saying a writer may wish to consider the reader "from time to time" as he gathers material and writes, but probably the best time to imagine a reader's response is when the writer rereads what he's written (505). In a few of the assignments, EG provides the student with an audience and a purpose:

explain a subject to a student from overseas (190), write for an audience of interested fellow students (209), and try to convert an audience of readers you know to your opinion (274). But in only one of these instances do the Kennedys follow up on the writer's audience or purpose by discussing anything like tone or the writer's attitude toward the reader except at the revision stage, and even there the effect of audience and purpose on style is treated as negligible.

What the Kennedys do then is allocate stylistic considerations to the final stages of the writing process and treat them as a kind of tidying up of the paper. Such an approach clearly seems ridiculous when you consider how writers actually write. Did the Kennedys write their textbook and then go back to consider the reader? I doubt it. Most writers think about their reader, purpose and attitude toward the subject from the beginning, and the decisions they make about these rhetorical considerations affect what person they write in, what tone they try to adopt, what kind of figures of speech they use, and what kind of vocabulary they express themselves with. In other words, writers think about style from the very beginning of the writing process. I suspect that the Kennedys, like most writers, started with a very specific notion of who their audience was and what they were trying to do to that audience, and that this notion shaped and directed their writing from the earliest stages affecting tone, person and word choice. I believe they wrote their text with audience in mind and made stylistic decisions at every stage of their writing process. Since they write this way, why don't they teach their readers to write this way?

Of course, I am just expressing my opinion about how they wrote, based on my own experience. Is there any evidence that writers make

stylistic decisions before they get to the revision stage, or that alerting students to stylistic considerations during the initial planning and drafting stages helps their writing? Linda Flower and John Hayes, in two studies of the writing process, give us some answers to these questions. In one essay, "The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem," they look at how writers represent a "rhetorical problem" to themselves; that is, what do writers actually think about as they plan and write? To answer this question, they "collected thinking-aloud Protocols" from college students and writing/rhetoric teachers who were given the same writing assignment. They were then instructed to compose out loud as best they could. What Flower and Hayes discovered was that writers do think about stylistic concerns early in the writing process. They think about audience, what kind of effect they want to produce on the reader, how they want to represent themselves (persona), and how to produce a "formal text." In fact, according to Flower and Hayes, "one of the most telling differences between (the) good and poor writers was the degree to which they created a unique, fully-developed representation of this unique rhetorical problem" (25). This representation of the problem affected stylistic decisions such as using the appropriate tense and selecting the best phrases. The writers thought about persona, how they sounded or appeared -- "I'll look like an idiot if I say . . ." (24). They thought about purpose and reader -- "I'll change their notion of English teachers . . ." (24). Probably thinking about persona has the most effect on style in planning and drafting stages because how a writer represents himself depends mainly on word choice and tone. In fact, one student writer, as she planned and wrote, changed her persona and thus her style because she felt she was adopting

a "hypocritical voice of adulthood" (28). She finally settled on a new goal, noting,

I feel enormously doubtful of my capacity to relate very effectively to the audience that is specified and in that case, I mean, all I can do is, is just, you know, present myself, present my concepts and my message or my utterance in a kind of simple and straight-forward and unpretentious way, I hope (28).

These kind of considerations are distinct from the goal of creating meaning or expressing ideas, which is the primary goal that the Kennedys deal with early in the writing process. Good writers, however, deal with all aspects of the writing situation, matters of style as well as matters of meaning and organization, from the beginning to the end of the writing process. In fact, Flower and Hayes found in a different study that 60 percent of a writer's new ideas were the result of thinking about the larger writing situation (assignment, audience, goals) while only 30 per cent of the new ideas were generated by thinking about the topic ("Cognition of Discovery" 30). Compared to this evidence, the Kennedys' approach is misguided.

The second study by Flower and Hayes, "The Dynamics of Composing: Making Plans and Juggling Constraints," discusses the value of planning in order to reduce the cognitive demands of writing. Here also they used protocols to find out what writers think about when planning and writing. They divided the constraints of the rhetorical problem into three categories: integrating knowledge, using the conventions of written texts, and adapting to the rhetorical problem. The second category, textual conventions, included such stylistic concerns as "be

specific, repeat ideas for emphasis, refer back for coherence, don't repeat words/phrases in close proximity, and use 'correct' (?) wording" for one writer they studied. These are all adages she used in the protocol Flower and Hayes recorded as she wrote. They found she didn't just wait until the revision stage or the end of the writing process to work on being specific or clear. She worked on style as she planned and wrote. Flower and Hayes also point out, in direct contradiction to the Kennedys, that what a writer writes must ultimately fit his representation of the purpose, audience and persona for that writing situation, and they note further that "it [the rhetorical] problem can't conveniently be 'added' at the end, because, in theory, it should direct the entire process of generating knowledge and language" (40), a theory they have largely substantiated in their research I referred to earlier.

In short, writers do think about the writing situation and stylistic matters early in the writing process. In fact, early in the process the writer makes important decisions that affect style. To defer consideration of the audience until late in the process neglects the writer's purpose as a factor in writing, and to practically ignore the consideration of persona, as the Kennedys do, reveals a misunderstanding and a misrepresentation of the writing process. I think students deserve and need to be introduced and awakened to the factors that influence their stylistic decisions as well as shows what options they have. To a certain extent, students already show some awareness and sensitivity to the writing context when they ask the teacher what he wants and how he wants it done. The problem with leaving the context on a student/teacher level is that it is too limited. Flower and Hayes point out that the ability to use and develop a rhetorical problem to guide student

writing is very teachable, and, they believe a way to help student writing improve. A text that discusses, explains and shows teachers and students the kinds of decisions other writers make as they plan, draft and revise, especially as those decisions affect style, would be a help. I suspect that many freshman writers do plan in ways similar to those Flower and Hayes say good writers use but are unaware of what they do and of how their decisions affect their writing or how they could make better or different choices. Even a simple thing like the advantages or disadvantages of using first, second, or third person in writing is almost completely ignored by the Kennedys. Perhaps the teacher will fill in these gaps, perhaps not. But if the student is not told at some point that the use of first person contributes to a more informal, friendly tone that most readers prefer, and that this can be a decision he consciously makes early in the writing process, I doubt that he will figure that out for himself. In fact, he will not even learn to think about such matters, falling instead into old, familiar habits, which may be good or bad. If it is for better, and he receives complimentary remarks from his instructor on his essays ("I like your relaxed, friendly style"), or if it's for worse (Your tone is too stuffy, putting the reader at a distance"), the writer will not understand what exactly in his writing resulted in those remarks and he will be, I believe, just as mystified about writing and writing classes as he ever was.

In its attempt to deal with writing as a process, EG takes a step in the right direction, but it is a faltering step. The Kennedys present writing as a process, which is helpful, but the process they present is inaccurate and misleading. Whether it does more harm than

good I am not prepared to say, but I do believe that its attempt to lock style into the revision stage is a mistake. To write well, a writer must consider purpose, audience, and persona all the way through the process, and what he decides about these will have a great deal of impact on his writing style. In my view, the Kennedys' text fails again.

The final question I want to consider is whether the Kennedys' ideas about good style can be confirmed by looking at examples of professional writing found in the Kennedys' reader, The Bedford Reader (BR). It is reasonable to expect that rules which describe a good style would be drawn from and substantiated in published essays like those the Kennedys have gathered and put in their reader. Determining whether this is the case is my purpose in looking at some of the essays from BR. I have already pointed out the general nature of the Kennedys' concept of good style -- clarity, liveliness, conciseness, emphasis. They also include specific rules for improving style. Most of the rules I will refer to have to do with being succinct and cutting down on wordiness, which the Kennedys say will make the ideas in the writing clearer and more forceful, thus achieving their good prose style. Some of their specific suggestions are,

-Cut out "There is" or "There are" at the beginning of sentences.

"There are many people who dislike flying" can be changed to "Many people dislike flying" (BC 509).

-Change the verb "to be" to an active verb when followed by a noun or an adjective. They change "This construction is conducive to wordiness" to "the construction leads to wordiness" (509).

-When you have a clause that begins with a relative pronoun

you can cut it down to a phrase. "Bert, who is a prize-winning violist, played a work of Brahms" should be changed to "Bert, a prize-winning violist, played a work of Brahms" (509).

They also discuss euphemisms and jargon. They grudgingly point out that euphemisms can have humane and even legitimate literary uses, but their overall attitude is one of disapproval. A euphemism "is any highfalutin language that masks real meaning" (521), and "most of the time, a euphemism is far less effective than direct words" (520). Message to student writer? Don't mess with euphemisms. The same general attitude holds for the use of jargon (520). When a speaker or writer is using specialized language to communicate with an audience who is familiar with it, it's acceptable. But most of the time, jargon is language that is private, pretentious and needlessly specialized, blurring meaning and confusing the reader (520). Message to writer? Steer away from jargon. In fact, the Kennedys go so far as to say that even if you're writing to those who will understand the jargon, "plain words" would be better, but if you do use specialized terms, make sure you define them. These directives fairly represent the rules the Kennedys give for writing with good style. What I propose to do is to see whether one writer from the Kennedys' reader follows these stylistic injunctions in his essay. Then I will do the same thing with one other essay.

The first essay I chose to examine was "Once More to the Lake" (110-117), by E.B. White, considered by many to be a master of the essay with an impeccable style. Since White has such a good reputation as a writer, we should find that he avoids what the Kennedys warn writers

away from if their rules have any value. However, from the beginning of his essay, White breaks those rules. In his first paragraph, he uses forms of the verb "be" with a noun or adjective following three times in the space of five sentences. One example reads, "outside of that the vacation was a success and from then on none of us ever thought there was any place in the world like that lake in Maine" (BR 110-111). In the second paragraph he does it again; this time six instances of "be" occur. He also starts one sentence with "It is." "It is strange how much you can remember about places like that once you allow your mind to return into the grooves that lead back" (BR 111). He begins three clauses with relative pronouns; for example, "I took along my son, who had never had any fresh water up his nose and who had seen lily pads only from train windows" (BR 111). And he uses a term that could be considered a specialized term for boating -- "gunwale" -- without defining it. "I remember being very careful never to rub my paddle against the gunwale for fear of disturbing the stillness of the cathedral" (BR 111). This "woeful" account continues throughout the essay resulting in a grand total of sixty-eight uses of some form of the verb "be" with a noun or adjective following it, twenty cases of some form of the expletive construction beginning a sentence or independent clause, sixteen instances of clauses beginning with relative pronouns and fifteen terms that could be considered specialized terms (hellgrammite, plantains, sweetfern, needle valve, dead rudder, Ubangi, and others). This count doesn't include wording or phrases that look suspiciously like what the Kennedys warn against and which could be revised to better fit their ideal of clear, concise language. The result of this count is that White has not done very well by the Kennedys'

standards. However, since White is an admired and published writer, the fact that his essays appear in the Kennedys' reader with these "errors" in them does more to discredit what the Kennedys say than White's reputation as a writer.

However, if the Kennedys are correct, White's "errors" could be revised to make his writing less wordy and thus clearer and more forceful. Below are some of my attempts.

- 1) Changing "be" to a more active verb - "the vacation was a success" (110) to "we thought the vacation a success." I added a more active verb and also one more word.
- 2) Cutting out "There is" or constructions like it. "It was not an entirely new feeling, but in this setting it grew much stronger" (112) to "The feeling was not entirely new, but in this setting it grew much stronger." I have made the revision, but I have also left in "was" which, by the Kennedys' standards, should be changed to an active verb.
- 3) Dropping the relative pronouns at the beginning of clauses. "I took along my son, who had never had any fresh water up his nose and who had seen lily pads only from train windows" (111) to "I took along my son because he had never had any fresh water up his nose and had seen lily pads only from train windows." The revision is no clearer, and the word count is the same.

Actually, changing these was not so easy. In some cases, changes add words, in others they mess up the rhythm and flow, and in others I wonder if I'm not tampering with the author's meaning and purpose. The problem that comes up when I try to revise White's writing has

to do with context. When the Kennedys show how to correct the usages they frown on in their text, their examples make perfect sense. But those examples have no context and no writer to protest in his defense that changing the words changes his meaning. The fact that the Kennedys ignore the issues of meaning and purpose in their discussions of how to revise these different "problems" to better create a good style seems irresponsible.

But what should we make of these stylistic gaffes on the part of E.B. White? Should we assume that these are the errors of an imperfect writer who was striving for that ideal style but fell short? As the Kennedys say, "No human being can write with perfect terseness, and even the best professional writers can't help using a few windy words" (BG 511). Is the message of White's "mistakes" that he too was only human. Obviously not. White does write with good style. His prose is clear, forceful, memorable, and suited to his topic and purpose. The Kennedys are the ones who are mistaken for not being careful enough to see if the guidelines they give student writers are actually descriptive of good writing.

The other essay I examined was "Behind the Formaldehyde Curtain," by Jessica Mitford. The Kennedys classify this essay as a process analysis. In BG, they give some specific stylistic guidelines for this kind of writing. The point of this, I believe, is to help the student avoid problems that are more likely to occur in some writing situations more than others. For the process analysis, the Kennedys warn against inconsistency of person (changing from "I" to "one" to "you"), too heavy use of the passive ("It is known"), and reliance on technical terms. Their advice is to stick to one person throughout the paper,

change the passive to active voice ("It is known" to "We all know"), and define any specialized words that might give your reader trouble (177). These are the rules; now to see how they measure up against Mitford's writing.

In her essay, Jessica Mitford takes a satirical look at the practices of the mortician's trade. The Kennedys introduce her essay, saying "'Behind the Formaldehyde Curtain' is a clear, painstaking, process analysis, written with masterly style" (BR 249). Well, we shall see. The first thing I checked was consistency of person. Mitford begins in third person, "he" and "one" and "they." She sticks to it for almost six paragraphs until she slips. "For those who have the stomach for it, let us part the formaldehyde curtain . . ." (251). Actually, this seems like a nice dramatic touch, giving the reader a sense of being invited to look with the author around the "curtain" to see what goes on in a mortuary, but she broke the Kennedys' rule. She moves immediately back to third person and stays there consistently for fourteen more paragraphs until she slips from third to first again. "On the other hand, we are cautioned . . ." (256). From that point on, she stays with third person. So Ms. Mitford has done pretty well, only two violations. I wonder whether the Kennedys would think these should be overlooked, condemned as careless, or simply revised. Both could be changed, "For those who have the stomach for it, let (them) part the formaldehyde curtain . . ." and "On the other hand, (one) is cautioned. . . ." But I would like to know whether these errors represent a serious transgression against the rules of good style. Frankly, I can't see what is lost by their presence or what is gained by changing them.

The second thing I checked for was the use of "passive" voice. The Kennedys don't provide a very clear explanation of what the passive is or why it is a problem. Their example only includes a passive, "It is known," at the beginning of a sentence, but I looked for this usage everywhere in Mitford's writing, except material she quoted. What I found surprised me. Ms. Mitford uses the passive construction 75 times in the space of 27 paragraphs or approximately 150 sentences. That comes to about an average of three times a paragraph or once every sentence. In one paragraph, every sentence that is not a quotation has a passive in it.

The patching and filling completed, Mr. Jones is now shaved, washed, and dressed. Cream-based cosmetic, available in pink, flesh, suntan, brunette, and blond, is applied to his hands and face, his hair is shampooed and combed (and, in the case of Mrs. Jones, set), his hands manicured. For the horny-handed son of toil special care must be taken; cream should be applied to remove ingrained grime, and the nails cleaned (BR 256).

Now the Kennedys say two things about this error in style. One, that "too heavy use" is a problem. They don't define what constitutes too heavy use, but the frequency with which Mitford writes in the passive must at least be close to too much. The second thing they say is to change the passive to the active, which I have done below with the example I quoted above.

The patching and filling completed, the mortician now shaves, washes, and dresses Mr. Jones. He applies a cream-based cosmetic, available in pink, flesh, suntan, brunette and

blond to Mr. Jones' hands and face, shampoos and combs his hair (and, in the case of Mrs. Jones, sets), manicures his hands. For the horny-handed son of toil, the mortician must take special care, applying cream to remove ingrained grime, and cleaning the nails.

The revision is not that hard to make, but I wonder if changing the sentences tampers with the author's intended meaning or emphasis. I don't think the changes I made do that, but in other instances I'm not so sure. The Kennedys don't discuss this possibility. In any case, Ms. Mitford's use of the passive breaks their rules, and probably she could have revised almost all of them. The fact that she didn't, and that a publishing company published her book, and that the Kennedys selected an excerpt from her book as an example of a good process analysis and "masterful style," makes me doubt whether their rules have any real value to anyone, including the Kennedys. Why do they forbid in freshman writers what they evidently accept or overlook in professional writers? They seem to be expecting more of composition students than they do of professional writers, and there is something backwards about that.

Two other matters deserve mention in relation to Mitford's essay. They are the use of jargon and euphemisms. The essay violates the Kennedys' standards again by relying heavily on both. Mitford uses a lot of technical terms that go with the mortician's trade: "borax, phenol, augers, distend, stocks, somatic, subclavian vein," and so on. She uses these terms without definitions and on an audience that is not familiar with their meaning. That she is writing to inform lay readers about the mortician's trade makes her use of jargon more blatant

of a violation of the Kennedys' rules than if she were writing to morticians. What the Kennedys don't mention in their text is the fact that context can clarify technical terms, and that a writer may have some purpose in using jargon besides being pretentious. Regardless, Mitford uses the mortician's jargon and thus breaks the rule the Kennedys have set down as a way to achieve good style. The same thing can be said about the use of euphemisms. Mitford refers to the dead body as "Mr. Jones" instead of as the corpse. She calls the place where the body is prepared "the preparation room" instead of the undertaker's morgue. She describes the process of rigor mortis as the time in which the body "tissues have become firm and dry" enough for the mortician to begin his "restorative work" (254). And when the process is all over, the body lies in the casket "in an attitude of healthy repose" (254). Mitford clearly breaks the Kennedys' rule against the use of euphemistic language as a disguising of "real meaning." Other examples can be found, but based on what I have pointed out, Mitford's style does not meet the criteria for good style that appears in the Kennedys' text.

The amazing thing to me is that the Kennedys call her writing an example of "masterly style" in their reader, write a textbook in which they practically forbid usages that Mitford uses, and then include, after her essay, a brief section in which her purpose for using jargon and euphemisms is explained as her solution to the rhetorical problem of talking about the gruesome details of embalming without offending the reader. Her strategy was to draw "on lists of taboo words and their euphemisms as published in the trade journal Casket & Sunnyside," and in doing so she found they added a "macabre humor to the proceedings"

(261). In other words, by using features the Kennedys warn the writer against, Mitford created her masterful style, which was both clear and forceful, not just in making the mortician's practice clear, but also in making a gruesome subject palatable and in communicating her attitude toward the topic. Her purpose was not just to clearly explain a process; it was to mock and question an accepted practice. And I would argue that what makes her style masterful has very little to do with her using passive voice or switching from one person ("I" to "you") to another. Primarily what makes it an effective style is her use of language to suit her purpose. She doesn't follow all of the rules the Kennedys set down. She breaks some, but her style is still effective and the Kennedys recognize it. If this can be done, what use are their prohibitions?

The essays by White and Mitford do not substantiate the Kennedys' rules and definition of good style. Two thoughts struck me as I examined and revised parts of their writing. One was that to revise these writer's work to better fit the Kennedys' standard, besides being presumptuous, seemed to go against the natural sound of those writers' work and even against the way the language seemed to work. At times, using the verb "be" followed by a noun or an adjective is the most concise way to say what you mean as well as the most accurate and most appropriate. To add an active verb would confuse things. If that is true, what is the point of discrediting expletives or passives? Certainly, they can be overused or even misused, but so can every other kind of expression, and to say, as the Kennedys do, that avoiding them is best is much different from showing their legitimate uses. If professional writers use passive constructions, "be" verbs, and jargon,

and are published, why are freshman writers told not to? Such advice simply takes away, or tries to take away, what are legitimate tools for a writer to use. The thing to do is teach students when to use certain expressions, not forbid their use entirely. The other thought that occurred to me was that singling out such stylistic features would have a very limited value in teaching good style. I don't for a minute believe that E.B. White or Jessica Mitford's style is admired because they have fewer passive verbs or fewer expletives at the beginning of their sentences. Yet these are the kinds of things students are asked to work on in order to improve their style. I wouldn't say that the Kennedys' injunctions have no value. In context, teaching a student to cut down on passives or expletives may help. But to make revising these the main concern in being clear, forceful or concise seems to me to be straining at gnats and swallowing camels; such a perspective on the issue of style seems out of balance. What is needed is instruction and advice that gets at the real issues of style, not just these surface concerns.

In my opinion, the Kennedys' treatment of style has failed the test at all points. Their advice is open to the valid and repeated criticisms of textbook critics. Their view of good style is too limited. They fail to account for how stylistic concerns fit into the writing process. And they contradict themselves by approving of professional writing in which a reader can find usages they advise student writers to avoid. I do not mean to imply that the Kennedys don't know what they are talking about or that their advice is simply wrong. I am sure there are cases where students writers can profit and improve their writing by following what they say. However, I do

suspect that much of their advice is simply the repeating of traditional ideas that have not been examined or thought about very thoroughly. In general, their treatment of style is inaccurate, inadequate, and unhelpful. A student writer who uses their text may improve his prose style, but if he does it will be the result of practice or instruction from the teacher more than from the text.

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AN EVALUATION OF THE TREATMENT OF STYLE
IN A TYPICAL COMPOSITION TEXTBOOK

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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Abstract

In this report, I evaluate the treatment of style in The Bedford Reader, a typical freshman composition textbook, written by X.J. and Dorothy M. Kennedy. My primary purpose is to demonstrate that their approach perpetuates traditional views and approaches to style, largely ignoring current ideas and approaches to style. In order to demonstrate this, I first show that the Kennedys' text is liable to the common complaints composition textbook critics make about such books. Then I go on to show that The Bedford Guide's concept and treatment of style is not supported by either current definitions of good style, current views of how style fits into the writing process, or current examples of good style in published essays found in The Bedford Reader, edited by the Kennedys. My conclusion is that in spite of the Kennedys' apparent awareness of some current ideas in the field of composition studies, they restate, for the most part, traditional ideas and approaches which neither current theory or professional writing validate.