

# One Response to the Crisis Discussed in Writing in the Classroom

by Prof. Bruce Gans  
Wright College  
Chicago, Illinois  
Bmg1030@hotmail.com

## A Frank Discussion of the Problem

Arguably the single central course offered in American community colleges is the standard composition course, which at Wright Community College is called English 101. This course is universally required. This is because the purpose of the standard composition course is to discharge a community college's central responsibility: to educate and train students to be literate and to enable students to acquire the minimum levels of writing and reading skills to perform college-level work. Unlike other required courses at community colleges, it has no substitute and the standard composition class *is impossible to place out of*. So acute is the crisis in literacy in the United States that every student enrolling at Wright and other community colleges for the first time is required to take a writing placement test, and the highest placement a student can aspire to is English 101; *the student must get a grade of C or better for this course to count for graduation*. Shakespeare himself would be required to enroll in it were he to return to earth for the sole purpose of entering a community college. To underscore its unique centrality, the standard composition course at Wright and elsewhere is employed as *the core benchmark and gatekeeper of academic standards*. Students are barred from enrolling in most college-level courses in the City Colleges of Chicago until they can at least qualify for English 101

As a result, it is self-evident that the literacy of millions of students is influenced by what is—or is not—taught in standard composition courses. Typically, a standard composition course today attempts to achieve its goals by requiring students to write and revise roughly a half dozen or more 350–500 word essays. Each essay typically is designed to provide students with practice in applying the best-known modes of expository organization—comparison and contrast, personal narrative, classification and division, process, and so on. In order to help students generate topics for essays, develop a thesis, recognize and reproduce strategies for organizing and presenting ideas, and begin to cultivate an appreciation for good writing, the standard composition course requires students to study and discuss various readings in a textbook.

It is here that the standard composition course today wretchedly fails its students and wastes a golden opportunity to challenge, stimulate, and inspire students and to expand their cultural and intellectual knowledge. The standard course should prepare students for other courses where complex reading will be assigned to them, and where students can raise their academic skills by meeting the challenge of the figures and ideas they encounter there.

There are several reasons for this failure. One fundamental reason is that standard composition textbooks present model essays that are not challenging essays at all. Invariably, they are newspaper and magazine articles carefully selected to present a uniform list of hot-button current events topics that all but insist students respond to them

in a way that perfectly reproduces the political orthodoxies of the textbook authors. Despite all the hypocritical claims of the textbooks that tout the authors' belief in free inquiry, the books make it crystal clear how students are expected to think—or be ashamed of thinking—about the issues presented, which invariably include illegal immigration, affirmative action, diversity and multiculturalism, abortion, war, the oppression of women in America, Iraq, and other political hobby horses.

Intellectual distortions and the suffocation of free critical inquiry have resulted from the reduction of the standard composition course to newspaper articles advocating approved positions on hot-button topics. This same trend is also subtly reflected by the sorts of articles that these textbooks *strictly avoid* publishing for consideration by students. Textbook sections on race and racism or the oppression of women do not explore these practices in Third World societies, for example. Articles that raise questions about the United Nations and its passivity during the genocide in Rwanda offer another point of view to which students will never be exposed in standard composition textbooks.

Self evidently, what students need is to be exposed to important and perennial issues that are set in a time and a place where neither the political preferences of the faculty or the students will function to effectively preclude dispassionate and objective inquiry and critical thinking.

Nevertheless, it must be kept firmly in mind that the central problem with standard composition courses is *not* that they have degenerated into one-sided and scrupulously vetted political forums falsely presenting themselves as stimulating opportunities for free inquiry that inspire the deeply buried writer in all students. The central problem is that while journalism is an honorable profession which performs a central public service, the universal adoption of it by *English* departments deprives students of the benefits of the special expertise of English faculty, who can initiate and guide students in mastering a realm of knowledge and culture *that the students are not going to get anywhere else*.

English department faculty can engage students with some of the most beautiful and profound texts ever written, the existence of which students never before suspected. And in the process, students are also given the opportunity to gain the skills to understand such challenging texts and to be confronted by the large and fundamental questions they raise.

One consequence of this phenomenon, as Professor John Briggs has pointed out in his report listed elsewhere on this web site, is that today's English 101 composition course is typically *taught without requiring students to read any literature whatsoever*, let alone literature that is indisputably great and intellectually challenging. The highly damaging consequences of failing to teach students how to read serious literature are inevitable. The capacity to read serious literature is a skill that has to be acquired through hard work, and it takes root and grows only by reading and talking and thinking about the serious issues that great literature contains. When this skill is not taught, and students are not even made aware that a body of books exists which contains the greatest thought accumulated and transmitted over thousands of years and many generations, students are not going to leave such classrooms equipped to do serious reading. They will leave the classroom without even the awareness that great literature can play a central role in making them more aware of the human condition while also leaving them more effective thinkers and writers, since no amount of technical skill can compensate for a mind with nothing in it to express.

And indeed, as the National Endowment for the Arts report on this web site points out, reading among the young has significantly declined over the recent past. Editorial writers commonly observe that this decline is due to factors like iPods, chat rooms, and other new forms of technological diversion and entertainment. But before these things there was television, and before that movies, and before that listening to the radio: forms of escapism have always existed, and where they do not exist people seeking escape will invent them. What is new is students being systematically, if unintentionally in some cases, deprived of exposure to and training in rich and complex texts of universal meaning.

The deterioration of the standard English 101 composition course is of such long standing that its low status and importance in four-year institutions is evident in the people chosen to teach such courses. In four-year institutions the courses are invariably taught by graduate students, people who with the best intentions nevertheless have little to no teaching experience, whose maturity level is only a few years beyond that of their students, and whose academic careers are by their nature too brief to have afforded them the time to have read widely and deeply enough. Frankly, in four-year institutions, the standard English composition course is viewed with snobbish contempt by the tenured faculty; it is trivial, burdensome grunt work, worthy only to be taught by graduate students, who do so to earn stipends for tuition and who fully intend to leave standard composition in the dust the moment they themselves get full-time academic jobs.

In community colleges, English 101 courses are likewise avoided by tenured faculty in favor of reading and other writing courses in which the standard composition paper grading-load is high and the intellectual content of what is taught is intentionally unchallenging, since the underlying assumption is that community college students are incapable of reading anything else.

### **A Brief Discussion of the Remedy**

A core goal of the National Great Books Curriculum Academic Community is to enable students and faculty to be able to engage in pedagogy that will, to the highest degree possible, nourish the spirit and enlarge the intellect by working with texts that contain the best that has been thought and said, and in so doing to increase the students' practical mental skills. This can best be achieved by dropping from standard composition books altogether the newspaper and magazine articles that focus on hot-button political issues and popular culture topics. Instead, students should be exposed to the writings of Great Books authors. The advantages of such an approach are clear. Free inquiry is far more likely to occur when the issues being presented are perennial questions of the human condition, rather than current controversies where students are far more likely to merely parrot the received wisdom of their families and friends and community; where dissenting students are more likely to feel intimidated about taking on a room full of opponents; and where discourse is far more likely to be replaced by highly charged emotional diatribes.

Beyond this, by reading and thinking about the Great Books students will not only be far more likely to have the opportunity to think dispassionately, but they will be thinking about something of perennial and not passing importance. Who today remembers the once-standard composition hot-topic issue of Elian Gonzales? Who five or ten years from today will recall Terri Schiavo? By contrast, students exposed for the first time to the

models of discourse and the moral insights of Plato or Abraham Lincoln or Shakespeare will remember them with good reason, having been touched by them in a central part of their being.

What follows below, then, is an effort to provide a far more meaningful and much-needed Great Books alternative to the standard English composition course that is typically required at community colleges and four-year institutions nationwide.

It is entitled: English 101 with an Emphasis on Classical Rhetoric.

Its goal is to present the teaching of standard composition skills in the context of a living and diverse tradition of formal rhetoric that dates back two millennia. This context gives students an opportunity to view Composition 101 skills as something greater and more meaningful than simply a collection of practical skills. The course also introduces students to the major uses to which rhetoric has been put—judicial, deliberative, and invective, as well as the more familiar modes of comparison and contrast, personal narrative, and so on. The idea is to give students an overview of the philosophy and the major uses to which rhetoric has and is still being put. This has the potential to inspire a greater appreciation of composition and to see it in a more systematic way.

## **Benefits of the Course for Students and Faculty**

1. *This course aims to increase students' cultural literacy and hence accelerate their orientation and level of comfort and self-confidence in courses outside the English Department.* Each essay assigned will contain a set of study questions involving small amounts of research to help prepare students for English 102, which has a research component. For example, students will be introduced to classical Greece (i.e., the Athens of Plato), the Enlightenment (i.e., the constitutional debates of America's Founding Fathers), and the modern American civil rights movement (together with its antecedents in the doctrines of Gandhi and Jesus).

2. *This course will increase students' critical thinking skills.* The Great Books focus on the largest and most basic questions of human existence, questions which by their nature are many-sided and forever open-ended. Through their examination of these texts, students in the class will be exposed to questions such as "What is the greatest good for the greatest number?" "What is true happiness?" "Is a utopian society possible?" "How ought a person to properly look at death?" "Is the truth worth dying for?" Moreover, because the emphasis is on classical rhetoric, students will also be required to analyze each assigned text to identify the rhetorical strategies and methods of organization employed and the reasons behind their use.

3. *The emphasis on classical rhetoric in this type of course is expected to help students by engaging in cross-curricular studies.* For example, in one course being offered in Spring 2005, students will be studying excerpts from J.S. Mill's *Utilitarianism*, James Madison's "The Federalist No. 10," James Baldwin's *Black Boy Looks at White Boy* " Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Mark Twain's "Letter to the Earth," and Plutarch's "On Contentment." Thus, students will be exposed to work in the fields of philosophy, political science, American history, English, and ethics. *In short, the students will leave having gained an introduction to the issues in other fields of study*

*with which they will later be engaged, or they will increase their skills in areas in which they already have previous experience.*

4. *This course should increase reading skills.* As Edward P. J. Corbett, the author of *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, has noted, the more reading a person does of rich and complex texts, the greater one's vocabulary incrementally grows. For a student, this gain has the effect of compound interest. As a student's vocabulary grows through reading complex texts, the student is more able to read with comfort and comprehension ever-more complex work, thus receiving ever more rewarding intellectual pleasures and enrichment from exposure to the most important ideas. This increased proficiency then enables a student to read with greater skill in subsequent courses and to accelerate this growth by being more likely to read serious literature as an ongoing leisure activity.

5. *This course has the potential of immeasurably increasing the intellectual stimulation and creativity of faculty, and hence becoming a source of professional growth, satisfaction, and new involvement in the act of teaching.*