

A Bushwhacker's Guide to Academic Writing

by Michael Olendzenski

A sample of the opening pages

CHAPTER ONE

MEET THE BUSHWHACKER

Hello. I'm the bushwhacker, Michael Olendzenski. In this introduction, I want to step out from behind the mystique of authorship and provide what I think is useful information about who I am, where I come from, and what I'm trying to accomplish in the pages that follow. To begin with, I teach in the Language and Literature Department at Cape Cod Community College in West Barnstable, Massachusetts. I am currently on sabbatical for the second semester of my fourteenth year at the school. Besides Freshman Composition, each semester I also teach two Introduction to Literature, along with Shakespeare each fall and The Arthurian Legend each spring.

To begin again from the distant, not the recent past, I was educated K-12 in the Needham Public School System, located about ten miles southwest of Boston. After high school I attended McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, where I finished a B.A. and M.A. in English. Moving into the world of work, I became an educational counselor at a social service agency for adolescent wards of the province. The four years I spent with these young people was a revelation to me, as I joined with other caseworkers, delving into our clients' difficulties and trying to help them find paths out of the poisonous lives they were living. But that's another book, not this one. I came to the point at which I just couldn't do my job anymore, and I submitted my resignation.

At this point, having in no way planned it out in advance, I entered the teaching profession. A job ad appeared in The Montreal Star, calling for a highly motivated educational professional to work with elementary school students in something called The Educational Research and Demonstration Center, a department of SUNY Plattsburgh. For the next two years I learned about helping healthy young people find the best ways to learn. I was part of a teacher/researcher team, but I was also "Mr. 0" for a classroom full of fifth and sixth graders. I learned much of what I know about making a college classroom go well while working with those sometimes nerve-wracking, sometimes tears-of-joy-inducing spirits.

However, life being what it is, my school was shut down, after more than seventy years of

operation, by massive governmental budget cuts. I was cast overboard and scanned the horizon for new adventure. Sure enough, in my hour of need the classified ads tossed up a likely destination. The Boston Globe informed me that a town in Massachusetts was hiring high school teachers. Out went my application, and my career as a high school teacher was underway. For the next two years I taught tenth grade English, which meant British Literature, something I knew about from my studies at McGill. While it was wonderful to prepare the work of some of my favorite writers for class discussion, my experience in the classroom was less than delightful. The high school was overcrowded, running on double sessions, and too many of the students exhibited the kinds of socially pathological symptoms I had learned about when I was at the social service agency in Quebec. In general the environment inhibited healthy learning, and I felt a gradually increasing sense of drowning as the next two years passed. Besides the fact that I was working in a less-than-optimum learning environment, I came to realize that, although I felt comfortable discussing the literature stipulated by the school district for tenth grade English, I did not feel at ease with my attempts to help my students improve as writers. I corrected the errors that I found in their essays, but I did not know what to say or do to go beyond having them copy my corrections into their writing for higher grades. I lacked a conceptual framework within which I could teach writing as a subject, in the same way that I was teaching literature. The idea of returning to graduate school dawned within me, and for the first time, I knew what I wanted to be when I grew up.

I wanted to become the best teacher of academic writing that I was capable of. Oh, I had done well enough at the high school, but I had come to understand that I didn't know enough about what I was doing to do it as well as I wanted to. Something subconscious drew me to the idea of applying to The University of Florida. After all, going there would, at least geographically, balance off my days in Montreal. I decided to make the leap into the Deep South and sample the life down yonder. When the acceptance letter arrived, I packed my Chevette with as much as it could hold, and headed down 1-95, bound for Gainesville.

I was accepted into the English Department at Florida, with the promise of a teaching assistantship. As luck would have it, I was assigned to teach a section of Developmental English and to work in the newly emerging Writing Center. During the next six years I continued to teach composition courses and to work with a wide range of students in The Writing Center in one-on-one tutoring sessions. These students included Americans who needed help writing in their native language, and foreign students from South America, Vietnam, Iraq, Iran, Africa, Scandinavia, China, Russia and several other places around the world. Almost all of the foreign students were in graduate school, and their frustration with the English language was intense. Through my work as a classroom teacher and Writing Center tutor, I was able to test concepts I was learning in my coursework and to discover applications of these concepts as I helped hundreds of students turn non-standard English into acceptable academic prose. Increasingly, I found myself able to go beyond simply correcting the errors they were making. In the six years

that I spent studying and working in Gainesville, I became more and more able to describe the English language to my students coherently and comprehensively. I saw their writing change from tangled, unsuccessful attempts at communication to writing that was scoring high grades in the courses they were taking.

I left The University of Florida with just the body of knowledge that I had hoped I would find when I retreated from my brief career as a high school English teacher. I was working on my dissertation, a study of the effects of revision on the processes and products of college-student writing, to join the faculty of Utica College of Syracuse University as an assistant professor. It was there that I began to confirm the fact that I could teach composition as an academic subject in its own right. I continued to see my students' writing improve as they came into contact with the course I had designed.

Midway through the second year of my stay at Utica, I was told that my colleagues had recommended that my contract not be renewed, since I had not yet finished my dissertation. I had not endeared myself to several of the senior faculty in my department when I responded in a fiery way to two assertions made at one of our monthly meetings. The first was, "Writing cannot be taught; we simply sort out the good writers from the bad ones." The second was, "Any literate person can teach Freshman Composition; all that needs to be done is to read and respond to student writing." I was infuriated by such declarations of obdurate ignorance. In no uncertain terms, I scolded the tenured sources of these statements immediately to their faces. Then, I sent around a memo more fully expressing my shock and horror over these glib, erroneous statements. I should have known that I had sealed my fate, and when I received the "bad news" from the college president, I wasn't surprised.

The dissertation was nearing completion, and I cast my net into the job market. One of the ads in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* said "Teach on Cape Cod." It went on to describe the available position in a way that seemed to fit me perfectly. My application was successful, and away I went to take up the duties that I still perform at Cape Cod Community College. At the end of my first semester teaching at CCCC, I flew to Florida and successfully defended my dissertation. In the years between then and now, I have honed my Freshman Composition course, adding and dropping pieces of it, always watching the results in what my students write for direction as I continue to improve the course. I am offering this book to Freshman Composition instructors and students, graduate students teaching Freshman Composition, faculty members working with those graduate students, and anyone else who would like to improve his or her understanding of and ability to create effective academic writing.

CHAPTER TWO

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The brief autobiography above suggests that my life has been an exercise in bushwhacking. I went from one opportunity to the next, not knowing how my journey would end up, but always aware that there was something interesting in each new incarnation I went through. As most people do, I had to cut a path through uncharted territory to discover what I was to become. On another level, my pursuit of knowledge related to teaching writing took me across the grain of the institutional organization of The University of Florida. During the six years that I spent there, I traveled an emerging path from the English Department through the Linguistics Department, finishing in the College of Education. I drew together the courses that I could see would take me through what became for me a wondrous interior landscape, reflecting from many directions on the nature of English, and the ways and means to teach it to others who wish to know more about it. Now I look back, and see that the track that I have bushwhacked leads students, if they will take the trouble to do the trekking, to a quick understanding of what I have come to know, and seeing that happen in the classroom has been a great reward for me. This book is filled with the content of the freshman composition courses I teach. My hope is that it will help students to do well in whatever version of this course they experience.

As for organization, what is to follow is divided in half. The first half of *A Bushwhacker's Guide* is devoted to helping students see the big picture, the lay of the land, the global view of academic writing. The first job for the student of academic writing is to distinguish it from all the other forms of writing. After that, the student has a much better chance of learning how to produce this quite specific kind of writing. The first half of this book, entitled "Rhetoric," is intended to help readers make the necessary distinctions and build a clear understanding of this writing genre. The second half of the book, "Linguistics," is a tour around and through the English language, showing how it works in ways far removed from the descriptions given in the many nearly identical handbooks that Freshman Composition students are required to use.

Information is also organized through a series of advance organizers, following the work of David Ausubel, in the form of charts and diagrams that are designed to give groups of related concepts a shape that makes it easier for students to remember and to appreciate relationships among the concepts. These advance organizers are mnemonic devices that allow the brain to chunk information for quicker storage and faster retrieval.

In terms of content, this book will be found to agree completely in a multitude of cases with what has been repeatedly set down for generations in the English composition handbooks that have come and gone. However, on several fundamental points, and not a few points of detail, my bushwhacking has brought to light the need to reexamine what is taught in school about the English language and how to use it to write well. The following list of statements reflects some of the differences between this guide to freshman composition and the standard English handbooks currently on the market.

Any course of study related to any type of writing must include, very early on, a big-picture discussion of purpose, content, and form.

Planning what to write involves both conscious and subconscious thinking.

The traditional "Modes Of Discourse" should never be presented as separate chapters.

In academic writing, the advice "write the way you speak" is ill-conceived and causes undesirable results.

Encouraging students to use Time or People or any other coffee-table magazines as the basis of their college research is a blatant indication that the source of the encouragement has no idea what the purpose of academic writing is, and represents an unacceptable watering-down of academic standards.

For excellent reasons, academic writing should maintain third person point of view throughout, except when there are excellent reasons for deviating from it.

There is no operationally valid definition of the meaning expressed by the phrase "grammatically correct English sentence."

The organization of all natural human languages is hierarchical.

Verbs are not "action words," and whether a verb expresses an action or not is irrelevant to the qualities that make verbs a separate part of speech.

A paragraph is a group of sentences that are all related to one another and to a central topic.

All living human languages are subject to two opposing forces, the synchronic and the diachronic.

Academic prose is reducible to fourteen infinitely recombinant structures: four kinds of clauses and ten kinds of phrases.

This book puts meat on the foregoing bones and provides students of academic writing with a map through the territory I have bushwhacked. Traveling the path I have uncovered is worth the effort, because those who can write well are far more likely to advance in life than those who cannot do so. The purpose of this book is to help students succeed as academic writers, and by implication to whisper sweet somethings into the ears of those who teach writing, and those who teach teachers of writing.

CHAPTER THREE

PURPOSE, CONTENT, AND FORM

Figure One is an advance organizer, a mnemonic device, containing all of the important concepts included in this chapter. By displaying these ideas in schematic form, the bushwhacker is giving students a way to remember them all at once. After reading the chapter carefully, students should attempt to produce Figure One from memory. This task may take more than one try, which is normal, because learning complex information typically requires repeated

exposures to the information, along with a method of obtaining feedback about how well the learning is going. By having Figure One hidden away, and then attempting to reproduce it from memory, the student enters into a productive study habit. When students are able to reproduce Figure One from memory, they are demonstrating to themselves that they have the information stored in a readily retrievable manner within their brains. Next, once the mental pathways have been established for reliable retrieval of the information, students should find people in their lives to whom they can explain the Purpose, Content, Form diagram. Class discussion should certainly include such a discussion, led by the instructor. This classroom activity provides students with a model for successfully carrying out an explanation of the theoretical model; however, there are multitudinous ways to do the explaining. As long as the explanation accurately accounts for all the elements making up the diagram, it serves as a demonstration of concept mastery, which necessarily consists of three kinds of ability: descriptive, interpretive, and evaluative. And the bushwhacker has come to understand that when students are able to demonstrate to themselves that they have mastered the important concepts in any subject being studied, then test-taking becomes a much more comfortable experience for them.

End of sample

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