Wh-Questions in Teaching Composition

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and discovering rather than one meant predominantly for testing or demonstrating what students already know.

This is not to say that faculty in other disciplines are not good teachers. However, the background most of us have as college faculty—graduate school, career, job—was in many cases not designed to provide the knowledge needed for efficient and effective teaching. Many teachers have struggled to improve that situation in one or two areas of their competence; but the structures of traditional departmental organization still don’t allow us to trade information for improvement of teaching. One proposed solution to this has been the interdisciplinary program; but as Richard Larson observed, though this offers one new option for students, it still doesn’t speak to the heart of the problem. Since education still requires the student to concentrate on a discipline, the question remains: how is writing used in teaching various disciplines? Time must be found for teachers to stop and exchange approaches and ideas—not in general bull sessions but in workshops for developing practical methods and detailed analyses of actual situations.

I am not proposing that other faculty do the work of writing teachers. Rather—again as Richard Larson suggested—insofar as every course uses language as a medium for its material, every teacher should be conscious of how it is used, how it can be used, in his/her courses. One can envision workshops of immediate practical use. A study of dialects, for instance—not only Black dialects or working-class dialects but also language in various academic disciplines as special dialects—could help teachers understand students’ needs and approach the teaching of the dialect of their own discipline in a more conscious way. Some knowledge of linguistics could lead to helpful methods of “correcting” papers that could also lead students to “correct” their writing process. Workshops could aid teachers to develop units of study in which students formulate problems, write about them, propose solutions and general rules, observe and reflect on their own attempts, rewrite, etc. Teachers could thus use writing in their courses to make students’ learning more active and make the basic concepts of a discipline more integral to the students’ own thought processes. Such “teacher remediation” is only a small step toward the solution of a major problem in American education—that we so extensively train students to be passive. This is the same problem attacked in the experiments of the sixties, but perhaps we can now see that the solutions will not be quick or local, but must be basic and long term.

The movement of thought we have made, then, is from an actual conference on teaching writing, attended mostly by writing teachers, to an imagined conference of teachers in many disciplines. This places the actual conference of teachers in many disciplines. This places the actual conference in perspective. We encountered useful information and analysis, yet felt a sense of unfinished business. This was not because the ideas were inconclusive but because they pointed toward further work that simply could not be done by writing teachers alone. In other recent conferences, observers have reported lack of total agreement on how best to solve the problem of teaching writing. But perhaps no one neat system will be discovered for writing teachers alone, because writing depends on a whole context of audiences, expectations, and activities both contemplative and participatory. Our work, then, was not finally inconclusive. We know what we need to do next.

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WH-QUESTIONS IN TEACHING COMPOSITION

Wh-questions have had a long pedagogical history. Aristotle’s Categories, in all likelihood, grew out of his pondering their semantic nature, and school children of the Middle Ages learned, in part, to know their subject better by asking quis, quid, etc. of it. Beginning journalism students today, of course, are often taught to elicit information about a car wreck, or a political event, by asking what, where, why, etc. of it.1

1I am grateful to Mary Washington and to T. Y. Booth for their suggestions on how to improve the style and substance of this paper.
My students and I (in expository and technical-writing classes) make use of wh-questions in two specific ways: (1) to increase the “weight” of a subject, and (2) to aid in structuring information about it that goes into the final paper. We call these their “semantic” and “structural” uses, and discussions about them usually take from three to six class-meetings.

We usually divide our discussion of (1) into topics about (a) wh-questions as new information; (b) as one means of determining proper specification and generalization of the subject, and (c) as one means of contrasting the subject. By (a) we mean that each of the seven wh-questions (counting how twice, as quantity [how many] and as mode or intensity) should be seen as a way of eliciting new information about a subject. As a subject is “run through” the seven wh-questions, for example, “What is justice”? “Who is concerned with justice”? etc., and answered, more and more new information will come to light. Class discussions usually help sort out accurate from inaccurate information. To obtain complete information, I tell students they must at least run the subject through all seven wh-questions, not just some.

Using wh-questions to determine the kinds of specificity and generality a subject may need (b above) may be shown in class by students “modeling” their subject with series like (A) and (B) below:

(A) Question

What’s a witch?

A woman, usually old and poor, who is thought to possess supernatural powers.

Etc.

Why is a witch female?

It expresses men’s fear of women.

Etc.

How many witches, roughly, were there in the 17th century?

Etc.

And so on through all seven wh-questions and their answers.

The possible answers to (A) become a basis for class discussion. We try to establish which set of answers specifies, and which generalizes, the subject. We then use this information to advise the student where he should increase, or decrease, specificity and generality, how he might relate them, how he might use what he has to outline his paper, etc.

(B) Why

a1. Why did witch hunts begin when they did?

a2. Why were women, mostly old and poor, their usual victims?

a3. Why were witch hunts said to be motivated, at least in part, by reports of sex orgies in the rites of witches?

b1. How do witch hunts start?

b2. How does the typical witch hunt, in its historical origins, compare with the origins of today’s professional sports?

b3. How do we formulate questions to ask about the historical origins of witch hunts?

We use series like (B) (five series of the other wh-questions being omitted here) to identify questions that might produce inconsistent or unrelated information. In the discussion about (B), we agreed that the series b1-b3 was badly constructed, because the “start” of witch hunts (b1), “professional sports,” (b2), and formulating questions about the “historical origins of witch hunts” (b3) were generally unrelated—and would produce unrelated information about the subject. We also agreed that b1-b3 and a1-a3 were badly related. The student who
modeled these series was advised to revise b1-b3 to make it more consistent with “women,” the general context of “witch hunts” in a1-a3. Series like (B), I have found, allow a student to check the relatedness of his information two ways: in the way each member of each wh-question series is related to other members of the series and in the way that particular series as a whole is related to all the other six series, and they do it. Three members of each wh-question series are shown here; but we frequently discuss in class as many as six or seven. The increased number increases the problems of specificity and usually prolongs class discussion.

Finally, using wh-questions to make a subject heavier may consist of various types of contrast (c above): for example, using negative and positive predicates, “What is a just/unjust man”? “Who is a just/unjust man”? Or using predicates that “exclude” their opposite, “What is a real/counterfeit coin”? “Who makes real/counterfeit coins”? etc. These, I find, help the student see his subject in terms of its possible opposing qualities. A third kind of contrast involves bringing the subject under traditional concepts like part/whole, means/end, potential/actual, etc.: “How should the subject be described”? As means/end, part/whole, etc.? “Why should it be, etc.”? Students of technical writing, who commonly write about tools and processes, find part/whole especially useful. Concepts like potential/actual, means/end, etc. tend to be more useful to students of expository writing.

We usually discuss the structural uses of wh-questions under three heads: (1) position, (2) redundancy, and (3) quantity. Wh-questions, I tell my students, may be placed almost anywhere in a paper—for instance, in a title, “Why can’t Johnny read”? or at the beginning, middle, and end of a paragraph. In the following passage (Scientific American, August, 1975, p. 31), the author put three wh-questions at the end of a paragraph:

... detailed explanations of the development of double radio sources are in a far from satisfactory state... The difficulties can be highlighted by three questions: why are two radio components expelled in opposite directions from some galaxies? How are the components confined and prevented from breaking apart? How is energy... .

We think of questions like these as having a transitional function, as “summing up” information that preceded them and as “anticipating” what follows them. Some authors, we have found, use wh-questions like the above to make major divisions in their articles.

We define redundancy (2 above) as a function of wh-questions in repeating, for the purposes of greater intelligibility, the thesis of an article already given in predicative language:

**Predicative**

Violence should be eliminated from television because it causes crime.

**Wh-questions**

Why does violence on television cause crime?

How much violence on television does it take to cause a crime?

Etc.

One effect of this is to reduce the chances of offending the reader with a repetitive thesis. Wh-questions help obscure the fact that the thesis is repetitive.

Finally, we think that the quantity of wh-questions (3 above) one should use in a paper depends on the nature of the subject. Articles with unequivocal information about the subject may use none. Theoretical and controversial subjects may use them on every page. Wh-questions, for instance, are common in the Scientific American, but uncommon in journals like the Journal of Wildlife Management. As a rough guide, I ask my students to try to restrict themselves to no more than four wh-questions in a row and to restrict the total number of wh-questions to no more than 10% of all the sentences in their paper.

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