

# Disciplinary Literacy in English Language Arts

PETER SMAGORINSKY

As a high school English teacher from 1976 to 1990, I found myself in a recurring sort of conversation with colleagues from other subject areas. To illustrate, a friend of mine, an exceptional history teacher, complained one day about his student writers: “They have no idea of how to format references in their history reports, especially when it comes to using *Ibid* correctly. What are you people in English doing over there? *Aren’t you supposed to be teaching them how to write?*”

He assumed that English teachers teach writing in all of its glorious complexity so teachers of other subjects could assign writing, confident that elsewhere in the building they had learned how to do it, regardless of disciplinary variation in conventions. At that point in my career, and in the field in general, there was a widespread belief that writing knowledge is general, such that what English teachers teach is sufficient to educate kids about writing, no matter what the task or community of practice it engages.

That belief still exists. When I was proposing a book eventually published as *Teaching Dilemmas and Solutions in Content-Area Literacy, Grades 6–12* (Smagorinsky, 2014), one of the field reviewers, a district-level curriculum coordinator, was baffled by the assertion that each discipline operates according to particular conventions.

“Writing is writing is writing,” she said to my editor, with her opinion corroborated by a teacher she talked to in the hallway. What’s all this business about writing requiring differentiated knowledge in various subjects, situations, and



Peter Smagorinsky is a Distinguished Research Professor of English education in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at The University of Georgia, Athens, USA; e-mail smago@uga.edu.

readerships? If you can write, you can write. At least, that’s what she told my editor at Corwin.

It’s pretty clear that this person has never read my poetry, which would lead her to question her assumption that people who can write can write, no matter what the circumstances. My poetry lumbers along, a collection of poetic devices that never seem to cohere or say anything important or terribly poetic (well, my poetry is terrible poetically, but let’s not lose our stream of thought here). I should make this statement in the past tense, because I long ago abandoned the poem as a form of expression, just as I stopped trying to tune my own car engine when my old Volkswagen Beetle ended up sounding more like atonal jazz than a euphoniously orchestrated set of gears, cylinders, and whatever the heck else I was supposed to harmonize beneath the hood.

This disagreement about the nature of knowledge in how to write, especially within disciplinary communities, runs deeper than my simple narrative suggests (Smagorinsky & Smith, 1992). The idea that general knowledge about writing is sufficient is well established among writing teachers and theorists, with influential authors such as Peter Elbow (e.g., 1981) and Donald M. Murray (1987) arguing on its behalf. For example, Murray maintained that freewriting “is just as valuable a technique to use as a starting point for a term paper, a historical essay, or a review of scientific literature” (p. 42). Beliefs of this sort undoubtedly contribute to the curriculum director’s view that “writing is writing is writing.” No matter what the circumstances, a general writing process and general knowledge of writing conventions will suffice. Yet, even with freewriting to get me going, I still wrote clunkers of poems. It seems that there’s more to the equation than simply “writing is writing is writing.”

Possibly, it’s just a deficiency in my soul, but I suspect that there’s even more to my poetic struggles than that. My teaching and research mentor George

Hillocks Jr. built his career around the notion that writing must be differentiated according to tasks (e.g., Hillocks, 2007, 2011; Smagorinsky, Johannessen, Kahn, & McCann, 2010). To Hillocks, teaching kids how to write narratives is quite different from teaching them how to write arguments, even though the two genres share some conventions, such as rules of capitalization, although poets notoriously play with such rules to produce various effects.

Writing an argument, for instance, requires an author to warrant claims carefully to examples so the examples serve as evidence in service of the claims. Simply juxtaposing a claim and an example will not suffice, although Hillocks (2002) found that it indeed suffices in most state writing exams. I'll try to reconstruct a memorable argument made by one of my students in about 1980. The student was arguing that the State of Illinois should raise the speed limit on interstate highways (the claim) because during rush hour, traffic stalled and it took forever to get home (the example). By raising the speed limit, the student asserted, traffic would go faster and alleviate the traffic jams. The problem with this claim and example, which might actually be regarded as sufficient in the state exams that Hillocks critiqued, is that there is no warrant to explain why raising the speed limit would enable cars to go faster, when the problem was that there were too many cars converging on the same highway at the same time, some of which stalled or got into accidents. Raising the speed limit to 1,000 miles per hour would not change this problem.

Writers of narratives have no need to warrant examples for their claims, because storytelling rarely, if ever, requires them. In spite of this rhetorical fact, Hillocks (2002) found that some states require a five-paragraph theme rubric to be used for all types of writing, including narratives (e.g., I went to the store and did three things: found my items, purchased them, and walked out. Now I will write a paragraph on each, followed by a conclusion in which I will restate what I've just said). Hillocks further advocated for instruction in procedures for how to produce the

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elements that comprise a genre, rather than instruction focused on mimicking models of writing of the same sort.

Yet, as the conversation I had with my history colleague indicates, there are some tasks that are required in multiple disciplines that nonetheless take on a different form as they are composed in different subjects. Additional differentiation of knowledge is thus required. This idea got traction in the 1980s with the emergence of genre studies. This body of work conceived of genre as more than just the form of written texts: narration, description, argumentation, definition, and so forth. Rather, genres involve the role of texts as social action (Miller, 1984). An argument is not an argument is not an argument. Rather, arguing in the realm of literary criticism requires a specific understanding of what literary critics value (Fahnestock & Secor, 1991), one that is different from arguing to a judge when a lawyer presents a brief in a court of law (Stratman, 1990).

This differentiation in the general argumentative model derived from Toulmin (1958) suggests that there is a great deal of social knowledge involved in arguing properly and effectively. If I were to go on Fox News to discuss education, for example, I would need to practice raising my voice, interrupting other speakers, and not listening to my fellow panelists argue within their preferred genre of making points. This approach would serve me poorly in my doctoral seminars, which are designed to be deliberative, respectful, and tentative in understanding complexity. Moreover, I would surely be disciplined by the judge if I were to use Fox News argumentative techniques when engaging with foes and adjudicators in the courtroom.

By now, I hope to have convinced you that writing is not writing is not writing but that virtually any act of writing requires specialized knowledge. Broadly speaking, writing a lab report for a science class and writing a report on Ernest Hemingway—even though both are reports—require knowledge not only of how to freewrite or format a report but also how to write in ways that are in tune (Nystrand, 1986) with the expectations of readers from these various disciplines. A scientist anticipates that a lab report writer will understand the phenomena under study (e.g., distinguish between a liver and a kidney) and adopt the straightforward, clear manner of expression endemic to the sciences. The report might include illustrations or diagrams to make the concepts easier to grasp. In contrast, a report on Hemingway might go beyond simple summary and include an ironic treatment of

his alcohol consumption, critique his anthropocentric view of nature, and otherwise depart from unembellished, detached description.

What, then, does the teacher of English language arts (ELA) consider when undertaking instruction that is responsive to the obligations to disciplinary literacy? That question has gotten much harder to answer as composition knowledge has grown, including the expansion of composition to include all semiotic systems, not just writing (Smagorinsky, 1995). The discipline of English has come under continual revision over the years, with various summits held to reconsider its status and component activities. The field's evolution, occasionally at relatively revolutionary speeds, makes it difficult to define what counts as the province of ELA. I'll nonetheless try to sketch out the field's domain and what it means to be literate within it.

Traditionally, ELA has comprised the curricular strands of composition (historically, writing but now extended to include other semiotic sign systems, including those available in digital modes), reading (historically, literature, although including other culturally important texts), and language (historically, conventional grammar instruction but now, at least in some places, with attention to linguistic diversity, including dialects and the speech of English learners; Applebee, 1974). Although ELA may now be subject to broader interpretation, these traditional strands provide a good starting point for teachers in this domain.

## Writing

As I've noted, writing is not writing is not writing. Perhaps that's the most important lesson I think we can impart as teachers of writing. If we do so, our students will have more practical writing knowledge than at least one district curriculum director out there.

Yet, there is some general knowledge that students should know, such as how to begin and end sentences that make sense to other people and how those sentences function within the context of larger textual constructions.

However, the rules governing such conventions can be deceiving. To some teachers, no sentence should ever begin with a coordinating conjunction. And yet, that's how I have begun this sentence, and the sky is not falling as I type. We should never write using the comma splice, and yet J.K. Rowling, the

author of the Harry Potter series, does it all the time—and has become quite wealthy doing so. Nor should we write in fragments. Ever. Except when it serves a purpose.

Other rules have limitations as well. For example, long ago, the field learned from Hunt (1965) about syntactic maturity, which is the phenomenon that writers who use longer sentences, those that include a good many embedded modifying phrases and clauses and thus show a writer's dexterity with prose and ability to incorporate many ideas into a single sentence, are more mature writers, a result of which is that writing longer, more complex sentences has become a value, even though at times writing such lengthy sentences can make unnecessary demands on readers, suggesting in contrast that in some situations, writing shorter sentences is a better rhetorical decision, especially if the writer's goal is to create suspense, a good idea when writing a fictional mystery, if not a scholarly treatise, which it turns out may benefit from shorter sentences nonetheless so readers can more easily chunk ideas and information and digest it in pieces rather than one gaping syntactic bite, even though in doing so they might be judged as impressive because they include more T-units—"one main clause with all the subordinate clauses attached to it" (p. 20) as described by its architect—to be more mature, in spite of being more difficult to read and understand, suggesting ultimately that a truly mature writer knows that rules such as "longer sentences with more embedded clauses and phrases indicate syntactic maturity" should not be followed so strictly.

What ultimately matters, then, is that writers develop communicative competence: the ability described by Hymes (1966) that broadly refers to the knowledge of how to adjust one's speech (or writing) to suit the occasion, requiring knowledge of more than just a single "standard" version of English. This approach involves what I would call the need for people to become chameleons of convention: speakers who can adapt to new situations—from baby talk to Spanglish to formal English to sports jargon—smoothly and in relation to the expectations of other speakers. This knowledge also suggests when not to adapt to the speech of others. As a white man, for instance, I would be ill advised to enter a room of speakers of African American Vernacular English and gravitate to their speech and employ handshakes that I had learned on YouTube, lest I be considered an offensive interloper and cultural imposter. And rightfully so.

Unfortunately, even though this idea was established a half-century ago, it has made no headway in educational policy, which requires that students be tested only according to the single version of English outlined in textbooks. Even though this type of speech may actually be inappropriate in some, or perhaps many, speech communities as the vehicle of middle and upper class white verbal communication, it has been reified in schools as the only version of English worth knowing. That problem is also something that kids should learn to understand.

## Reading

The issues I've raised with respect to writing are paralleled in the realm of reading. Although ELA has historically foregrounded reading as a literary matter (Applebee, 1974), every anthology includes work from other genres, and if the Common Core State Standards survive, informational reading is a new priority. It makes sense, then, to frame the issues in terms of reading, broadly speaking, than reading literature alone.

Reading a poem—something I'm almost as poor at as I am writing one—requires knowledge quite different from reading instructions on how to assemble a cabinet or reading the material in a text-only video game (see Auerbach, 2015). Research confirms that just as strategic knowledge must become differentiated for writers taking on specific tasks for particular communities of readers, such knowledge benefits readers engaging with a broad range of texts (Smagorinsky & Smith, 1992).

Rather than having the fully generative role that writers play in text production, readers must respond to textual cues to read successfully. One clear example of the differentiated knowledge required to interpret texts of different sorts comes from the reading of the genre satire. Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, for instance, was produced in the form of an argument that England could solve two concurrent problems—a food shortage and an overabundance of babies born to poor families—by having the wealthy eat the young of the poor. Without an understanding of irony and satiric devices, a reader might take this argument seriously. By producing his satire in the form of an argument, Swift had to understand the conventions of each, and in the process, he requires the alert and savvy reader to know how to recognize the conventions he embedded in his text to understand his point about the cruelty and inequity of his society.

Yet, according to the Common Core State Standards, students must learn to “read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 10). Enjoy those children.

General knowledge of how to read and decode texts is insufficient for recognizing Swift's satirical devices and intent. Rather, understanding the techniques of satire—exaggeration or understatement, irony, and so forth—is necessary to grasp the author's points. Broadly speaking, this necessity of reading with an understanding of textual conventions and what sorts of responses they are designed to cue remains an essential literacy proficiency.

Reading, however, requires more than an ability to decode these codifications. Many researchers—none, evidently, consulted to inform the construction of standardized tests—now are confident that reading is a constructive act, often requiring one not only to decode texts but also to encode meaning in them based on prior experiences (Smagorinsky, 2001). That is, readers animate their reading, especially of characters in narratives (generally fictional but those appearing in historical and news stories as well), by instantiating their own experiences into those of the characters to understand them better.

Readers may also promote their understanding through the constructive act of generating images to depict their understanding of how figures function in texts (Enciso, 1992). This interpretive work might come in the form of various artistic representations, including performances such as dance (Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1995) and rap performances (Anglin & Smagorinsky, 2014), material or visual art such as drawings (Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998), and virtual compositions produced through the increasing array of electronic devices (Hayles, 2005). This sort of transmediation (Suhor, 1984)—the reconstruction of textual meaning through a different semiotic system—has been found quite useful, if not necessarily essential, in promoting readers' interpretive work in relation to texts.

## Language

Language study, although seemingly simplistic as typically practiced in schools through decontextualized sentence analysis, is among the most vexing challenges presented to teachers of ELA. On the one

hand, ELA teachers tend to prize textbook English as the optimal medium for speaking and writing, a value that is inevitably embedded in any standardized test of verbal knowledge and fluency. On the other hand, linguistic diversity and situational dialects have long been recognized as having legitimacy of their own, going back at least to the 1970s (e.g., Committee on CCC Language Statement, 1974). The legitimacy of such language forms as African American Vernacular English, although recognized by many linguists in universities (e.g., Smitherman, 1977), remains in doubt in the formal realm of classrooms.

Racial, ethnic, and regional forms of English are not the only specialized versions of English. Just as teachers have their own specialized vocabulary for pedagogy—*scaffolding*, *WAC*, *multimodality*, and so forth—so do car mechanics, golfers, quilters, and virtually every other social group. Understanding that one word, such as *scaffolding*, changes meaning when used by teachers or window washers is a vital literacy skill.

What these examples all indicate is that Hymes's (1974) notion of communicative competency should be among the drivers for school language study. Those who accept this premise would view the idea that studying language in isolation from usage as fruitless and often counterproductive. Rather, students should develop a repertoire of speech patterns and conventions and know when each is appropriate.

## Conclusion

In this brief essay, I outlined what the school subject of English should consider when planning how to teach for disciplinary literacy. Given that this topic is more appropriate for a book-length exegesis than a short piece, I have undoubtedly overlooked much and shortchanged the rest. Nonetheless, I hope that these remarks can help ELA teachers conceive of their discipline such that kids advance their literacy development and, once outside the classroom, engage with the world through language and related modes of communication in ways that enable them to understand others and to express their own views with fidelity to their intentions and clarity to their listeners and readers.

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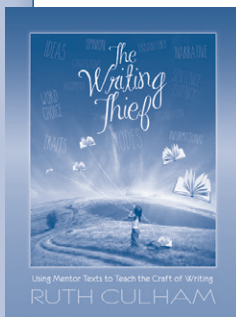
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