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ABSTRACT
        There has been much discussion of what students need to know
to write effectively. An example of criteria is the requirements for the
Writing Sample of the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP). Students, unless
exempted, must write an essay that meets this standard before they can
receive an associate diploma or enroll in junior-level courses in public
colleges and universities in Texas. A comparison of the TASP criteria with
the contents of more than a dozen recent handbooks for college composition
students was made. The instructor's annotated editions of popular handbooks,
publishers' bibliographies for teachers and other sources for references to
unused approaches and contents that might contribute to the development of
students' writing abilities were also examined. For each requirement, a
summary was made of: (1) what the handbooks cover, especially new concepts;
(2) what relevant research is recognized by the authors but does not appear
in the student pages; and (3) what one alternative, modern functional
linguistics, could offer if the appropriate pedagogy were developed and
teachers were taught how to apply what is already known. A list of the 19
handbooks and textbooks examined is attached. Contains 22 references.
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# Themes in English Handbooks

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Abstract:        **Themes in English Handbooks**

There has been much discussion of what students need to know in order to write effectively. An example of criteria is the requirements for the Writing Sample section of the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP). Students, unless exempted, must write an essay that meets this standard before they can receive an associate diploma or enroll in junior level courses in public colleges and universities in Texas. I compared the TASP criteria with the contents of more than a dozen recent handbooks for college composition students. I also examined Instructor's Annotated Editions of popular handbooks, publishers' bibliographies for teachers and other sources for references to unused approaches and contents that might contribute to the development of students' writing abilities.

For each requirement, I summarize (1) what the handbooks cover, especially new concepts, (2) what relevant research is recognized by the authors but does not appear in the student pages, and (3) what one alternative, modern functional linguistics, could offer if the appropriate pedagogy were developed and teachers were taught how to apply what is already known.

# Themes in English Handbooks

In fact, theory has flourished and moved on through several

revolutions in the last thirty years, but pedagogical practice, as

experienced by most of the four million or so students who take

first-year college composition every year ... remains recognizably

close to where it was before the revolution started .... many writing

teachers continue to rely heavily on ... techniques long questioned

by most of the scholars who publish in the leading composition

journals and many of the teachers who read those journals ....

teachers expect most of all to see textbooks that cover familiar

territory, albeit territory often now considered by composition

scholars to be much less important than it once was. (Keene and

Voss 1997:121).

So say the authors of *The Heath Guide to College Writing*, recognizing that

overworked and part-time teachers lack time and motivation to risk investigating

alternatives. This opinion is supported by *The Bedford Bibliography*:

The materials available for study in this discipline are extensive and

include ... a flood of research on writing produced in our own time.

Dealing with this growing mass of material presents a serious

challenge to both experienced and inexperienced teachers of

writing, many of whom were trained exclusively in literary

studies.... (Bizzell 1996:v-vi)

Nevertheless, 30% of the handbook contents must change about every three years

so that new editions can appear. Many of the new topics have obvious value:

writing across the curriculum, computers, critical thinking, collaboration,

portfolios, new MLA form for citing electronic sources, and now some principles

of document design that have been known since 1980. These are worthwhile but

do not entail any fundamental change in approach. They do not satisfy the public

dissatisfaction with the quality of writing done by graduates. What other practical

developments should be getting into the handbooks? Would any kind of linguistics

provide help? Can we find an alternative approach elsewhere in the English-

speaking world? To do more than repeat reports of local handbook selection

committees, to do more than substantiate Keene and Voss's categorizing of the

market for composition textbooks as conservative (1997:121), let us compare

what handbooks actually contain with what they could present to be most useful to

students.

To explore the adequacy and opportunities in handbooks, I compared some

recent popular handbooks with stated requirements that students must meet and

with an alternative approach. I examined fifteen popular handbooks for college

composition students, Instructor's Annotated Editions (IAE) of the handbooks

when they were provided, publishers' bibliographies for teachers, and other

sources for references to content that could contribute to the development of students' writing abilities. The material evaluated includes eight comprehensive handbooks of 700 to over 1000 pages with an instructor's manual, seven compact editions of 300-530 pages, and three advanced handbooks (Brown 1997, Reagan 1994, Rice 1992). They are listed with their length at the end of this discussion. Handbooks differ mainly in which items they select from a large pool. Their varied assumptions describe writing as an expressive process, a cognitive process, a socially empowering process, or a process of social construction (Fowler 1995: IAE 3-5). All include grammar and mechanical conventions, methods of development, documenting research, and the recursive process of planning, drafting, revising, and editing.

These handbooks are used in required courses with the primary purpose of preparing students to write in an academic style that can be adapted to the specific needs of their disciplines. These are the last writing courses for the majority of students, although advanced courses are available. A secondary purpose of these courses in Texas has been to help students pass the Writing Sample section of the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP), a requirement for receiving an associate degree or enrolling in third-year courses in public colleges and universities in Texas. Until regulations change to require earlier testing, students must take TASP before enrolling in a tenth hour of transfer credit unless they are exempt or take it before entering college. If they fail any of the sections, they must be in remediation

until they pass. In 1996-97, 14% failed the writing sample (National 1997:4).

The writing samples are evaluated for appropriateness, unity and focus, development, organization, sentence structure, usage, and mechanical conventions. The course should exceed the TASP requirements, but they will serve as minimal criteria for evaluating the contents of popular handbooks. For each requirement, I (1) summarize my findings about what the handbooks cover, especially what kinds of new concepts have appeared, (2) mention relevant research that the authors of handbooks recognize in their notes for teachers but exclude from the student pages, and (3) suggest further alternatives from one promising source in functional linguistics. Although most English instructors doubt that current linguistics has anything relevant, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) evolved in Australia for educational purposes and seems to have much to offer our required composition courses. It illustrates one alternative that could offer much if the appropriate pedagogy were developed and instructors knew how to apply what is already known. A brief introduction to this alternative, placed where it can be contrasted with current practice, can lead to a determination of whether it is worthwhile to consider developing a different approach.

This comparison includes only what the TASP test covers. The TASP test omits grammatical nomenclature, library research, and everything that is difficult to test quickly. Raters use the criteria for focused holistic scoring and do not consciously evaluate the position expressed in the essay. The test developers

(National Evaluation Systems, NES) trained me, validated my reliability in, and then employed me briefly one summer as an anonymous rater of writing samples. I sought the training to apply it to the first-year college composition course, the preceding developmental course, and remedial programs.

## 1. Appropriateness

"Students' writing samples are scored on the basis of how effectively they communicate a whole message to a specified audience for a stated purpose" (National 1996:31). The essay prompt asks a question, suggests possible approaches, and assigns a type of reader (often an instructor). The first characteristic evaluated is "Appropriateness--the extent to which the student addresses the topic and uses language and style appropriate to the given audience, purpose, and occasion."

Many handbooks assume that the student has the single purpose of fulfilling an assignment, not communicating thought, so they begin with finding and limiting a topic. A typical Instructor's Annotated Edition (IAE) emphasizes, "Effective writing is the product of interaction among the three elements of the writing situation: author, subject, and audience" (Fowler 1995: IAE 9). Nevertheless, neither this handbook's student section nor any other devotes more than 2% of the pages listed in the index or table of contents to purpose, audience, and situation or occasion combined. Adapting content to readers' needs gets a

little attention. The advice on adapting style to the occasion concerns jargon, pronouns, and some specific usages. One unusual compact handbook distinguishes academic style from less formal ones (Hairston 1997).

Handbooks seldom recognize the larger social contexts and purposes of composition that Cooper described as "The Ecology of Writing" (1986). The term GENRE has become a buzzword in professional journals since Miller defined genres as "typified rhetorical actions based on recurrent situations" (1984:159). Cultural, social, and political factors in the situation influence the form, substance, and options available. Explicit teaching of genre encourages students to become aware of those factors. Nevertheless, genre is listed in only four of the handbook indexes: Hairston (1993) and Kirszner (1995) associate it with literary analysis; Fulwiler (1997) suggests that texts can be changed to different genres for different audiences; and Axelrod (1994:5) defines the term most extensively, but instead of explicating predictable patterns of form and content or telling students how to observe or predict them, he points out that genre is learned by reading (1994:5). Most composition courses supplement the handbook with an anthology called a READER. One handbook includes two dozen models of writing, each followed by discussion questions (Kennedy 1997). These anthologies are interesting but often distracting and difficult reading. They parallel on a college level the whole language approach in elementary schools. Their popularity implies the value of genre knowledge and intertextuality, without the terms. The role and possibility of

explicit teaching of genre was debated in *Research in the Teaching of English* in 1993, and more research was requested by the one opposed, but the resolution has not appeared there (Freedman, Williams and Colomb, Fahnestock).

Purpose and genre are explicit in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). It recognizes three types of purposes (called metafunctions): conveying the subject matter, enacting interpersonal relationships with the addressee, and creating the appropriate type of text. SFL often illustrates contexts with a diagram of a series of circles of different sizes, each containing all the smaller circles within them. The largest circles represent culture and ideology. Within them lies a smaller circle representing the particular situation. Situations yield topics. Common situations yield the repeated idealized patterns of language called REGISTER; they involve a narrow field of experience, participants with specified relationships, and certain kinds of language. Particular combinations of these create genres. Each genre has options but requires certain types of contents, vocabulary, organization, and grammatical features. Students in Australia use lists of these requirements to help them write in patterns they have not yet read extensively. For example, they can be told the function of an explanation in science and social science, its generic structure or content, and its language features (specifically, "Focus on Generic, non-human participants, Use of simple present tense, Use of temporal and causal conjunctive relations, Use of mainly material (action) processes, some passives to get theme right," Cope 1993:241). This advice guides the inexperienced science

student who otherwise may attempt to explain some natural phenomena by telling a story.

Understanding when, where, and why different varieties of language are appropriate contributes to understanding many other issues, such as Ebonics. These understandings help students recognize and develop their own variations appropriate to the situation. Awareness of the differences between speech and writing in different contexts helps students maintain their self confidence as they distinguish their oral locutions from a mature written style.

## 2. Unity and Focus

The next criterion combines unity and focus in "the clarity with which the student states and maintains a main idea or point of view" (National 1996:31). Test ratings reward anything that contributes to fast reading. The evaluation system tries to get the raters to respond to a packet of twenty-five essays of 300 to 600 words (and take a coffee break) each hour. This task requires fast reading that critics may object to until they consider the real world. Business people do not want to waste time reading, so the test design does meet their needs.

Handbook sections on paragraphs usually include unity, COHERENCE, and development. They require a main idea in each paragraph, but few insist on a topic sentence there. Typically, they group transitions according to meaning; students often ignore differences (such as using *however* for *furthermore*). Most handbooks

emphasize parallel structure.

Some handbooks recommend repetition, but others advise avoiding it. Only one discusses COLLOCATION (Axelrod 1994). Handbooks recommend editing for COHESION to achieve coherence, but not to improve development. None tell how to check the completeness of the information to avoid the common fault of omission. A sidebar in a 1995 IAE recognizes linguistic research that is ignored in the student portion: "Two new [sic, Markels 1984 and Coe 1988] frameworks for describing patterns of coherence and development in paragraphs have recently been proposed. Both draw on current linguistic and rhetorical theory and are somewhat technical, yet they have considerable (if as yet undeveloped) potential for instruction. Both are worth a close look" (Fowler 1995:82). Problems in technicality and pedagogy are thus cited to justify omitting coherence and cohesion. These features have been emphasized in all editions of Williams' advanced guide, *Style*, since 1981. In 1989, Vande Kopple presented them to beginning college writers in a 230-page textbook on *Clear and Coherent Prose*. Perhaps these matters have been tried sufficiently and found too difficult, but perhaps the need is for better pedagogy and teacher training. Good coherence and cohesion would certainly help a student's TASP rating.

Cohesion is analyzed in SFL research in much greater detail than native speakers of English need for most of their writing. Halliday and Hasan's 1976 landmark *Cohesion in English* has probably been the biggest influence of SFL on

our handbooks, increasing the attention given to transitional expressions. Nevertheless, they miss the connection pointed out at the end of *Cohesion in English*, that the cohesive ties only reflect the cohesion that is already present; they do not create it (Hartnett 1985). Both revision and development benefit from simple cohesion analyses.

## 3. Development

The testing guidelines define development as "the amount, depth, and specificity of supporting detail" (National 1996: 31). The handbooks teach development with patterns such as description, cause-effect, and comparison-contrast, or problem-solution and evidence-conclusion. Some recommend brainstorming, looping, clustering, talking, reading, journalist questions, critical thinking, writing journals, and use of computer programs. Aristotle's TOPOI is mentioned rarely, only in a few notes to the instructor, but not in these student texts. Christensen's GENERATIVE RHETORIC of the paragraph and the sentence (distinguishing periodic and cumulative sentences) survive from 1963 and 1965 in only the most comprehensive handbooks (for example, Hacker, 1995, and Lunsford, 1992 and 1995). The handbooks often stress development with many specific details, denigrating generalizations. Only a few mention NOMINALIZATION, and most of what is said about a NOMINAL style is negative, although it impresses readers in the professions. Some advanced textbooks, especially those for technical

writing, value nominalizations, but proportionately few students enroll in those courses.

An alternative for invention and development is the TAGMEMIC approach of considering something as a particle, as a wave, and as a field, presented in *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* (Young, Becker, and Pike 1970). The 1994 edition of *The Bedford Bibliography* commented, "This textbook, seldom used in undergraduate courses, has been the most influential work on invention and persuasion methods derived from psychology and linguistics" (Bizzell 27). The comment relates to a 1980 explanation: "its terminology is too difficult for most students and ... some elements in the nine-part scheme are redundant" (26). The 1996 edition changes *has been the most* to *was a very (62)*. Simplified tagmemic exploration was included in earlier handbooks, but not in the current ones.

Development is specified in genre, but SFL goes beyond content and organization. SFL calls topic sentences HYPERTHEMES (Martin 1992:437). THEMES in SFL are not assigned essays nor literary ideas but what appears at the beginning of a clause as orientation and point of departure. SFL has analyzed patterns of the beginnings of sentences as their thematic development (Fries 1995). In passages that have a single method of development, themes reflect that method. The ends of sentences express newsworthy points. The information there gets emphasis and is ready for further development in the next sentence. Information flows most easily from what is already accessible and needs no further introduction

to what is less likely to be on the reader's mind; it flows from what the reader already knows to what the writer wants the reader to remember. Management of the order of information in a sentence contributes to interest and readability.

Community college students can learn to apply thematic structure to check the development in their work. They use a split-column landscape layout with the beginnings of sentences in the left column and the remainder in the right (Hartnett 1998). Without using the term *Theme*, they discuss the beginnings of a sentence, which usually includes the subject, in contrast to the remainder, usually starting with the verb. Then students can learn to extend the discussion, often with a generalization that nominalizes a previous verb. Nominalization is an essential characteristic of intellectual writing, especially in science, humanities, and administration (Martin 1992:138). These students, like those in Australia, benefit from using nominalizations in essay examinations and in writing in their careers. However, they do need further advice against overuse of nominalizations to obscure relevant information, as in bureaucratic gobbledygook. To use a nominal style appropriately, they must also learn to apply critical insights to realize what information is obscured by structures such as nominalizations and passives.

## 4. Organization

The fourth characteristic is "Organization--the clarity of the student's writing and the logical sequence of the student's ideas" (National 1996: 32). Many

handbooks combine organization with development or treat it separately first. It may involve outlining. Some good handbooks contrast tentative rough outlines with formal ones, and a few recognize that computer organization checkers and clever students write the outline after the draft. Some advise on contents of introductions and conclusions.

Organization is integrated with content also in SFL's genre descriptions.

## 5. Sentence Structure

The fifth characteristic is "the EFFECTIVENESS of the student's sentence structure and the extent to which the student's writing is free of errors in sentence structure" (National 1996: 32). This characteristic is clearly the most difficult in an alternate multiple choice subsection of the TASP test which is considered only when two ratings of the writing sample are close but disagree on whether it passes. Only 24% of students passed this subsection in 1997, although 55 to 61% passed the other subsections (National 1997: 7). Although the criteria mention "effectiveness" of sentence structure, the evaluation is primarily a hunt for errors and awkwardness. Students are never required to state "rules" or to use definitions or labels for parts of speech or sentences, yet handbooks abound in them. They are the home of prescriptive grammar rules. Often handbooks provide exercises listing sentences with errors but no context for purpose or meaning.

Some of the biggest glossaries define NOUN PHRASE or VERB PHRASE, but

the terms are rare elsewhere. Current handbooks do not mention FORM CLASSES or

DEEP OR SURFACE STRUCTURES or other elements from transformational or

generative grammar. Chomsky's work is not referenced at all in the

instructor editions, but Halliday is cited twice in one handbook (Lunsford 1992).

Noguchi is cited in IAEs in three handbooks, but his method of using TAG

QUESTIONS to identify sentence structure (source of the method below) is ignored

in both IAEs and never gets to the students (Fowler 1995, Hacker 1994, Lunsford

1992, 1995).

Most handbooks give special attention to problems of speakers of other

languages, either in boxes integrated in the text or in a separate chapter or

appendix. A few handbooks have a separate ESL index (Fulwiler 1997, Hodges

1994, Reagan 1994). Usually only the ESL sections explain auxiliaries and tense

variations, although testing includes tense choices. A few handbooks explain the

difference in tenses for current action, but they list specific vocabulary to be

memorized without generalizing about meaning.

None of the handbooks distinguish the type of verb for mental activity that

projects independent clauses, a common source of serious punctuation problems.

A few present differences in patterns of verbs in unexplained lists. Some

distinguish linking verbs from all the rest because of pronoun cases after them.

Handbooks vary in the amount of information on topics like the meaning of modal

auxiliaries. Many urge care in choosing strong active verbs but ignore

inappropriate predication or treat it as carelessness, although slow or

inexperienced writers often forget how their sentence began and cannot recognize

the problem when they edit.

A functional approach to sentence structure classifies types of verbs and

sentence parts in different, stimulating ways to show the constraints on lexical and

grammatical choices. It is more interested in function than in form; in language as

is architecture, form follows function. It relates grammar to meaning. Sentences

report a happening or fact, who or that take part in it, and the conditions for it.

SFL identifies three parts of sentences: PARTICIPANTS, which are the traditional

subjects and objects; PROCESSES, expressed as verbs; and CIRCUMSTANCES, using

traditional prepositional phrases, adverbs, and adverbial clauses. This approach

encourages writers to express their main idea in the basic parts of the sentence and

to express other information in modifiers and embeddings that usually need not be

differentiated in composition courses.

SFL recognizes the analytical value of TAG QUESTIONS (Halliday 1994:73).

In conversation they emphasize the central idea of a statement (Don't they?).

Students can pencil in tag questions to analyze a possible sentence. If they cannot

tag it or if they can make more than one tag question, they may have less or more

than a single sentence. They can identify the referent of the pronoun in the tag

question as the subject of the sentence, and they relate the auxiliary verb in the tag

question to the complete verb (Hartnett 1998). In addition, they use tag questions

to check on features like subject-verb agreement. A split column landscape layout for the sentences of a composition draft encourages students to check the sequence of tenses and appropriate predication. This type of analysis bypasses the confusing, conflicting traditional latinate definitions of parts of speech. Although the single tag question method does not work easily with all types of sentences (such as WH-questions), it can inspire thoughtful analysis of the majority of statements in student writing. Its pedagogical uses need continued development.

Classification of verbs by meaning helps non-native speakers of English learn grammatical patterns efficiently. SFL recognizes that verbs express three basic types of meanings (called processes): doing, being, and sensing. They are illustrated in a circular diagram on the cover of Halliday's *Introduction to Functional Grammar* (1994). The circle shows how their subdivisions blend into the next type: Basic groups for *doing, being,* and *sensing* subdivide into a sequence of *behaving, acting, creating, happening, existing, having an attribute, having identity, symbolizing, saying, thinking, feeling,* and *seeing,* which comes full circle and appears adjacent to *behaving.* Each type has its own distinctive uses and grammatical patterns. For example, the prototypical verbs of *doing* and *behaving* report actions in narratives; the existential verbs for *being, having,* and *relating* predominate in analysis and description; and mental operations such as *thinking, sensing,* and *saying* add ideas and lead in political news stories. This type of verb -- *sensing*-- can project another sentence without difficulty and sometimes

controls the order of information by reversing subject and object -- the cause of a

sensation and the senser. This type uses the simple present for current processes,

while another type -- *doing*-- uses the present progressive. Thus writers, especially

ESL writers, consider meaning to determine form.

## 6. Usage

The sixth characteristic evaluated in the writing sample is "Usage--the

extent to which the student's writing is free of errors in usage and shows care and

precision in word choice" (National 1996:31). The alternative multiple-choice

section more specifically requires "recognizing the standard use of verb forms and

pronouns; recognizing the standard formation and use of adverbs, adjectives,

comparatives, superlatives, and plural and possessive forms of nouns; and

recognizing standard punctuation." Students are asked to evaluate possible

changes in a passage of 200 words, but grammatical terms do not appear on the

test.

Handbooks are home to grammatical terms. One instructor's annotation for

the chapter "Understanding Sentence Grammar" concedes, "This chapter uses

almost entirely traditional terminology because such terminology, despite its

weaknesses, is still the most widely used and most likely to be familiar to students

and instructors" (Fowler 1995:152). It thus admits that it sticks with the

traditional because it is familiar, not because it is better. Formal latinate definitions

and examples are appended, supposedly repeated for students who did not learn this material earlier but who need it to comprehend the vocabulary in the body of the handbook.

Handbooks present prescriptive rules on what the test-writers call USAGE but which most people clump as GRAMMAR. Most of the subsections are titled with names of errors. Inside covers often index common errors. Verbs get the biggest coverage, and pronouns get the next most attention, 12 to 20% of the entire grammar sections.

All the handbooks urge SENTENCE VARIETY as an important aspect of style, but TASP does not test it. It may be a characteristic best developed later. It is almost the only advanced skill included in handbooks, which claim to be designed for lifelong use. The back cover of one urges students to keep the book for use "during the rest of your life" (Kirszner 1995). The handbooks teach that variety in the openings, structure, and length of sentences is important to avoid monotony. Perhaps monotony is a bigger problem for teachers reading many similar papers than for audiences seeking information. Handbooks never associate sentence variety with changes in content and order of information. Good students following handbook advice to vary their sentences have produced unreadable messes.

One strategy for teaching variation is sentence combining, which requires students to produce the longer sentences that are associated with syntactic maturity. Sentence combining made the extraordinary jump into classroom practice

in the late 1970s to teach transformational grammar, which, according to Bizzell, proved no more helpful than traditional grammar in improving student writing (1996:73). Sentence combining is not difficult to teach with examples. Students manipulate structures such as embedding, coordination, and subordination for the sake of manipulation, without considering meaning, context or purpose other than to illustrate features of grammar and style. One handbook includes 24 separate sentence-combining exercises (Fowler 1995).

Functional pedagogy helps students understand that sentences need variation when their meanings differ but parallel structure when meanings are parallel. Treating subjects and objects as participants guides word order, and making an appropriate choice of verbs can improve the flow of information. Students who put their drafts in a two-column landscape format have a centered list of their verbs in context to check for meaning, tense, and agreement (Hartnett 1998). Students use other techniques to check other usage areas. They can draw lines connecting a pronoun with its referent to check for presence, gender, and number agreement; they combine checking for case with checking the structure of the sentence to see the role of the pronoun. By associating modifiers with what they mean and what they modify, students can determine whether their forms need an -ly ending or some sort of subordinate structure. These techniques are still in the process of development, but they show promise.

## 7. Conventions

The last characteristic is "Mechanical conventions--the student's ability to spell common words and to use the conventions of capitalization and punctuation" (National 1996: 32). Only common words are penalized for misspelling because test-takers are not allowed to use dictionaries, spelling checkers, or other aids. Handbooks prepare students with rules, exceptions, examples, and usually a list of words that are often confused. It is hard to find explanations of patterns or even the historical logic of conventions.

The frequent advice to students to write as they talk causes them difficulty writing in a new academic style that they have not been reading. Even more basically, most students are not aware of the differences between speech and writing beyond superficial mechanical conventions. They assume that spelling, capitalization, and punctuation actually represent speech, not realizing that they replace it with visual cues that do not entirely parallel the audible ones. Many students assume that punctuation relates to the pace of speech, not to syntax or meaning. Others try to use intonation as a guide to punctuation without being aware of the nuances of pitch.

Conventions seem less arbitrary when meaning and the influence of context are considered. Readers expect conventions because of the situation and other texts they have read; INTERTEXTUALITY creates the conventions of audience expectations. It authorizes patterns that some writers have learned from their

extensive reading but that other students need to be taught explicitly. Although

mechanical conventions are least explicated today in the functional approach, it

seriously considers the influence of mode of communication. It could then ask

operational questions, such as "What do punctuation marks do?" Saying that

commas set off movable or optional segments is a useful simplification, although

not yet a perfect one (Uehling 1993:256-61, 274-5).

**Conclusion**

Handbooks are weak on purpose, genre, flow of information, and the

relation of meaning to the form of verbs, although alternative approaches exist.

Politicians, the public, and some English teachers are dissatisfied with outmoded,

unsuccessful approaches. A growing number of them want grammar related to

content, situation, and meaning, although they may not be aware that functional

linguistics provides many relevant insights unavailable in the handbooks that

faculty and students must rely on. However, because of the realities of the politics

and economics of English departments, handbooks are conservative (Keene,

1997). Change is difficult, but are politics and economics unsurmountable?

Faculty cannot be expected to teach more than they know. Teaching first-year

composition lacks status even in community colleges where the majority of

students (at least in Texas) take their final writing course. There it is not unusual

for more than 75% of the first-semester composition courses to be taught by part-

time employees, called adjuncts, who either have retired, have other work to do, or wish they had. Graduate assistants are unavailable there, and departments have a hard time finding capable adjuncts.

The alternative briefly described here presented is not yet perfected. It will take work to recognize the insights, select what is useful, translate technical terminology, and then develop appropriate ways of teaching, perhaps by trial and error. I've been trying. This is too much for current classroom teachers or in-service training alone; the universities must work on it. Even there change is difficult. Cazden reported that students in the Harvard Graduate School of Education, most of them teachers, were reluctant to consider an approach that would provide more help for students not in the mainstream, an approach different from the failing system they had experienced in grade school (1993: ix). Good green ideas are sleeping furiously. Shouldn't we awaken them?

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# Themes in English Handbooks

**Carolyn G. Hartnett**

College of the Mainland

Throughout my B.A. work at Eastern Michigan University, my M.A. in English from the University of Michigan, my Ph.D. in English Rhetoric and Linguistics from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and twenty-five years of teaching English, mainly to first-year community-college students, I thought there ought to be something better than traditional methods. An early retirement incentive and a change to Professor Emeritus and Adjunct Professor gave me the time to attempt improvements, especially applications of Systemic Functional Linguistics. When Olson and Taylor's *Publishing in Rhetoric and Composition* repeated the common complaints of local handbook selection committees, I decided to research the issue myself and offer something positive.

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