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Review of Making Sense of It, Steven Zemelman

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Review

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the pros and cons of various methods of responding to student writing. She is a strong advocate of the student-teacher writing conference as the most effective mode of evaluating student writing.

Ms. Neman gives equal weight to the vexing problems associated with assigning grades. Rather than dispensing with the issue of grading by advocating a pass-fail system or deploring the negative effects of grades on the teaching process, she faces the issue squarely, on the assumption that it will not "go away." She argues convincingly that what is important in grading is consistency and fairness, and proceeds to demonstrate that both are achievable.

While there has been no shortage over the last five years of important publications in the field of composition teaching, including anthologies of provocative articles, collections of bibliographic essays, and books summarizing research and new theories of rhetoric, there is no modern methods text as firmly rooted in scholarship as *Teaching Students to Write*. Beth Neman intersperses each of her discussions of methodology with references to the relevant research in the field. Her summary of the research on the effect of grammar instruction is a particularly good example. Although methods texts such as *A Writer Teaches Writing* by Donald Murray and *Teaching Expository Writing* by William Irmscher conform to current composition theory and research, they are primarily valuable because they give us the personal insights of two master writing teachers. In contrast, *Teaching Students to Write* provides a discussion and synthesis of ideas gained from personal teaching experience and study of the recent literature on curriculum and learning theory, instructional systems, and composition theory, as well as the literature on composition research and closely related disciplines such as linguistics.

I believe that the weaknesses in *Teaching Students to Write* stem from the author's efforts to remain encouraging while exposing some of the most disturbing dilemmas of the composition teacher. In several places in the book she implies that certain skills involved in the teaching of writing can be easily acquired, for example, the ability to arrive at reasonable goals for each student and the ability to analyze student papers. She says, "Once we are certain that our aims are realistic in terms of the particular student we must insist that these aims be achieved." Regarding the problem of responding quickly to student compositions, she says, "Although the inexperienced teacher might find the first few attempts at responding to compositions 'cold turkey' a bit harrowing they will soon get the knack and gain the self-confidence to carry it off with aplomb." Would it were so that in the brief time we have to get to know our students we could form reliable judgements about their potentialities and become adept at analyzing student papers on the spot after "a few attempts." In these, and a few other cases as well, I believe that Beth Neman underestimates the difficulty of learning to perform certain complex teaching operations with skill and confidence.

These minor weaknesses do not diminish our impression that we have a book from a teacher who has "been there." When she says, "A teacher needs a far stonier heart than mine not to feel a surge of sympathy towards those profoundly post-assignment faces," those of us who have taught writing read on with the assurance that Beth Neman understands our concerns. We find that *Teaching Students to Write* goes a long way towards alleviating them.

Making Sense of It, Steven Zemelman (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980, 196 pages).

Reviewed by Elaine Chaika, Providence College

The *Preface* to this text states that its purpose is to teach grammar in the context of the

process of writing, rather than as an activity in itself. Further, the *Introduction* promises that it will show the student "an approach and a method . . . for language learning *in general*," as well as ". . . to make you independent of *this book* as well as of other teachers, to help you develop your own learning strategy . . . and decide for yourself what is appropriate" (p. 14). Such a text, especially one written in as lively a style as this one, is long overdue.

The author's aim is furthered by his casual, intimate tone, and by his consistency in addressing the reader as *you*. Also, the book presents exercises throughout, some of which elicit analysis by the student, and others which ask the student to transform sentences in various ways. Many of these are very useful, especially those concerned with expansion and reduction of sentences, dangling modifiers, nominalization, and diction. Even so, the book fails in its stated purpose on several grounds.

First, and perhaps most important, although it promises to teach students how to analyze grammar, the grammatical analyses it offers are either weak or non-existent. Nor does the author ever mention principles of discourse that help determine which transformations should be selected. A case in point is his treatment of the passive (pp. 47-53). Rather than showing the student the basic sentential positions and how they can be changed, he relies on traditional semantic definitions. Except for noting that the passive is frequently used by scholars, he never mentions the conditions that properly elicit its use in modern English. His claim that the "*by me* is often forgotten" (p. 48) constitutes his entire explanation of agent deletion. Since one reason for such a transformation is to imply an agent or cause without actually having to name it, this is actually misleading. Similarly, he spends a good deal of time on verb recognition and correct use of irregular verb forms, but nowhere mentions the factors leading one to choose each tense, mood, or aspect. He perpetuates the misleading notion that emphasis is achieved by putting an item first (p. 18), and nowhere has any discussion of focusing transformations, such as extrapolation and dummy *it* and *there* subjects. His discussion on pronouns shows no understanding of their use as devices for cohesion. Perhaps worst of all, given his stated intent, he labels misplaced modifiers and improper deletions as *awkward sounding* (p. 39).

Second, the text suffers from poor, even confusing organization. For instance, he discusses both prepositional phrases and nominalizations before defining nouns, and dependent clauses before defining what a sentence is. A section on changing verbs to nouns and vice versa occurs in the chapter after nominalizations. Immediately after a section discussing the merit of adding prepositional phrases, there suddenly occurs a discussion of the recursive property of language. The student is told that "within whatever unit you have, you can almost always incorporate another unit equally complicated . . ." Not only is this statement untrue, but the word *unit* has not been previously defined, nor has the process of incorporating.

Third, his own writing suffers from unclear pro-word* reference. For instance, immediately after a paragraph concerned with adding prepositional phrases, we find a new paragraph starting "This is an important aspect of language to be aware of" (p. 22). There is no referent to the pronoun, nor is there any bridge into the new paragraph. He uses "such a tone" (p. 47) with no prior or following mention of a tone, so that the pro-adjective *such a* has no referent. He is also given to non-sequiturs and asides, some of which contain unclear pronoun reference. For example, he ends a paragraph on English vs. declined languages by noting that English began losing "these endings as early as the tenth century and further changes are still occurring." He had not previously established that English ever had endings, nor what those endings were; nor does he ever mention this subject again (p. 132).

*Such as pronouns, pro-verbs (e.g. "do," "did," "so did," etc.), and the pro-adjective "such."

Fourth, important ideas are buried, unimportant ones given prominence. For instance, the idea that recursiveness gives us the power to be creative is buried in a long sentence in the middle of a paragraph, and never alluded to again. However, four pages are devoted to singulars and plurals (pp. 113-117). Moreover, he categorically states that our language determines our thoughts (p. 107). Such treatment of recursiveness vis a vis mechanics is hardly conducive to spurring students on to creativity.

In his effort to be chummy with his readers, the author does not hesitate to use cute neologisms such as *unconfuse*, *uncreate*, and "*stuck-point*," as well as forms which some purists still abhor, such as *liable to* for *likely* and *so* at the start of a sentence to mean "although" or "however." He frequently conjoins sentences with little regard for parallelism, as in "A neutron could never have a molecule within it; but language allows a more complex combining of parts" (p. 22).

Despite its shortcomings, the text raises many interesting issues; it simply does not handle them proficiently.

Basic Writing: Essays for Teachers, Researchers, and Administrators, ed. Lawrence N. Kasden and Daniel R. Hoerber (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1980, 185 pages).

Reviewed by Andrea A. Lunsford, University of British Columbia

The editors of *Basic Writing* promise much—a group of essays that will apply to teachers, researchers, and administrators alike and that will "reinforce one another, build upon common principles, and provide an assuring sense that teaching basic writing is a discipline." What the editors deliver is considerably less—an uneven text that offers contradictory advice to teachers, little new information for serious researchers in the field, and almost nothing at all for university administrators. Nevertheless, *Basic Writing* contains some excellent articles and a beginning bibliography. And as one of the first collections devoted to the field, this book deserves our careful attention.

The first section of the book, "The Basic Writer," includes only one article. But that article, a report by Sondra Perl based on her 1978 New York University dissertation, provides one of the high points of the collection. Thoughtful, thought-provoking, and eminently readable, Perl's report examines the writing processes of basic writers and offers evidence that, unlike beginners, these students come to the task of writing with definite strategies and basically stable composing processes. Certainly Perl's work adds significantly to what we know about basic writers.

The second section, "Successful Basic Writing Programs," opens with two articles that fail to meet the standards set by Perl. Both articles basically recommend the tried but untrue atomistic approach to the teaching of basic writing; both rest on unproven, perhaps unexamined, assumptions about the nature of learning in general and basic writers in particular. The third article in the group, "A Writing Laboratory Model," is written by Pat Hartwell, whose contributions to the field are numerous and of long standing. Unfortunately, this article does not represent Hartwell's most recent work; rather it describes a program developed almost ten years ago. Nevertheless, Hartwell's discussion is rigorous, and he includes shortcomings and difficulties of the model as well as its successes. Last in this section is Harry Crosby's description of one of basic writing's venerable old-timers, Boston University's College of Basic Studies. For those unfamiliar with this program, Crosby provides a capsule summary of a basic writing course that is integrally related to other college disciplines. But taken as a whole, this section presents a puzzle. Are these the *best* basic writing programs in the country? Are they all even successful, as the title of the section suggests? How is success to be measured? This section suffers most from lack of coherence.