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UNLIMITING WRITERS' AGENCY AND ALLEVIATING WRITER'S BLOCK

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

English Composition

by

Cassundra Lynett Flemister-White

June 2000

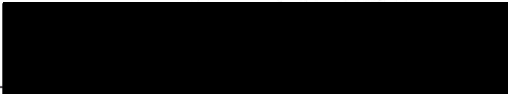UNLIMITING WRITERS' AGENCY AND ALLEVIATING WRITER'S BLOCK

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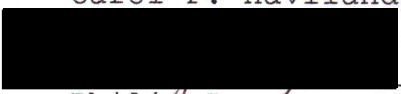California State University,

San Bernardino

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by

Cassundra Lynett Flemister-White

June 2000

Approved by

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Carol P. Haviland, Chair, English   Date

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Philip Page

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Kellie Rayburn

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines two causes of writer's block developed during the revision stage of the composing process: instructors' unexplained notations and unwanted voice alterations within students' texts. The study examines the emotions students experience caused by instructors' actions which Nelson and Rose say contribute to temporary and even permanent cases of writer's block.

After exemplifying the connection between emotions and writer's block, the remainder of the study focuses on finding solutions to these causes of writer's block. As a result of my research, I discovered the primary solution is communication between instructors and students.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my Savior, Jesus Christ, for guiding me through this project and for giving me the strength to persevere.

To Dr. Carol Haviland, Kelly Rayburn, and Dr. Philip Page, I give much appreciation for guiding me through this project.

Also, I thank my friends for lending their ears and time.

To

Mom, Aaron, Daron, and Aunt Julia

Thank you for countless hours of patience, help, love,

and understanding. Having you near made the time put into

this project more bearable.

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INTRODUCTION

During my course of study at California State

University, San Bernardino, discussions of writer agency in

the field of English Composition became my main field of

study. This interest was generated as a direct result of

being exposed to the topic in the Issues in Tutoring

Writing course and of becoming a writing consultant in

CSUSB's campus writing center.

As I conducted a number of one-on-one writing

conferences, I heard students divulge their concerns and

discomforts with writing for their English courses. Many

of these discomforts, the students reported, were directly

related to the level of communication, as well as the lack

of clarity involved in the communication between

instructors and themselves. Due to the size of most

university composition classes, the primary vehicle of at

least the first stages of communication transpired in

written form, as instructor's comments on writers' texts.

Upon familiarizing myself with the theories of writer

agency and becoming involved in discussions with

composition students about instructors' comments that were

designed to prompt rewrites, I became aware of a deeper

issue. Some of the students exhibited or relayed incidents of frustration, confusion, anger, bewilderment, and/or self-doubt. From my earlier studies of writer's block, these physical and mental conditions sounded familiar, thus prompting my research of a possible connection between writer agency and writer's block and then the writing of this thesis.

In chapter one, I will frame the study by defining agency and writer's block and then by suggesting the connections between the two with use of Anthony Giddens' Dynamics of Agency model.

In chapter two, I will discuss first the effects of some editorial markings, then the effects of altering students' ideas, and finally, suggest how students can avoid having their ideas altered.

In chapter three, I will suggest ways that composition instructors can communicate more effectively with students regarding the students' writing.

CHAPTER ONE:
CONNECTING AGENCY AND WRITER'S BLOCK

Defining Agency

Agency, defined by compositionists as the ability to act with some degree of control over one's actions and/or voice, has been a topic of discussion in writing/composition programs throughout the country. Some of these discussions explore the factors that limit agency, and it is one group of those factors that is my focus here: the instructors' written comments and textual changes that confuse, distort, or undermine the value of students' ideas.

From the first writing course students enter to the last, they encounter their instructors' editorial comments and textual changes and are often times uncertain of instructors' intents. This uncertainty has a range of debilitating effects, from causing students to question the worth of their ideas, to questioning their own abilities to compose and/or articulate their thoughts, and even to experience temporary or even permanent writer's block.

Even as students attempt to address instructors' well-intended editorial markings while reconstructing their

texts, they may struggle to retain their voices. The struggle is triggered from a lack of confidence, which often derives from interactions with previous instructors' editorial comments and the power instructors possess because of the hierarchical structure of the university classroom. Students hold fast to the conception that there will be a penalty if instructors' comments are not adhered to or accepted. Thus, instructors' editings are seldom taken as suggestions, but rather as commands. As Shaughnessy observes, "There is the urgency of students to meet their teachers' criteria" (8). (Unfortunately, most students who experience blocking operate either with writing rules or with planning strategies that impede rather than enhance the composing process (Rigid 390).) Consequently, this sense of urgency paired with the students' notions of their instructors' expectations is where the problems begin.

Writer's Block- The Phenomenon

The phenomenon of "writer's block," defined by Victoria Nelson as "the temporary or chronic inability to

put words to paper," (5) is caused by "feelings of anxiety, frustration, anger, or confusion" (Writer's 3). "Anger, fear, depression, even love are states in which a person's thoughts may be distorted and command over mental processes may be impaired" (Larson 19). These conditions can cause students to procrastinate about completing their assignments or miss assignment deadlines; they are not due to "a lack of basic skill or commitment" (Writer's 3). Additionally, blocks can have "more serious results: a growing distrust of their abilities and an aversion toward the composing process itself" (Rigid 389). The emotions that can lead to blocks can stem from a variety of causes; however, the cause that I will examine is the interaction between students and instructors regarding editorial markings made for revision purposes and alterations to students' texts. Examining the cause will be a step in toward finding solutions. Below is an example of how the interaction between students and instructors can result in a writing block.

In the midst of revising, students may block because

> the rules by which [instructors] guide are rigid, inappropriately invoked, or incorrect. A rigid rule is one that dictates absolutes in areas where context and purpose should direct behavior (e.g. "Always put your thesis statement at the end of your first

paragraph," or "Never use the verb 'to be'"). An inappropriate rule is a normally legitimate directive invoked at a questionable time and place in the composing process (e.g., "The length of sentences should be varied," invoked during the rough drafting). An incorrect rule is one that is simply not true (e.g., "It is wrong to begin a sentence with 'And'") (Writer's 4).

The interaction discussed above that exists between students and instructors can lead to what Frank Smith describes specifically as procedural blocks. According to Smith, "[w]riting blocks may be put into two categories, procedural or psychological, depending on whether we cannot decide what to write next or we cannot bring ourselves to write anything next" (129). Because this thesis is centered around students' involvement in revision processes, I will specifically explore procedural blocks.

When students encounter procedural blocks, at a global level they

> know and can specify very well what [they] want to write about; and at a focal level [they] have no trouble putting one word after another- provided [they] can decide what [they] specifically want to say. But [they] are lost at an intermediate level-for example, in deciding the exact direction in which [they] want a paragraph to go (130).

And when students are in the revision stage of writing and are attempting to address instructors' suggested changes and/or comments, they sometimes encounter a lack of

understanding

> because a set of alternatives confronts [them]
> without obvious reason[s] for the selection of any
> particular one; [they] have no text behind [them] to
> direct a decision and can see no particular reason
> ahead to prefer one alternative to another (130).

The most efficient way for instructors to help writers deal with this cause of writer's block is to open a line of communication to help them make choices in their writing that will best facilitate their needs rather than dictate changes or suggest changes without explanations. (Specific techniques for opening the lines of communication will be discussed in Chapter 3.) As Paul Smith writes, "if humans cannot operate with at least some measure of freedom and individuality,... they cannot be said to act at all" (Berlin 69). Smith's statement suggests that students who operate under the direction of instructors, without space to become part of the final project, act as robots, completing a project in a voice and style that is not their own. Thus, students give textual ownership to someone other than themselves.

Giddens' Dynamics of Agency Model

To further understand the dynamics of agency, how

opportunities for agency can be limited and how these
limitations can result in writer's block, an analysis of
Anthony Giddens' model proves useful. The primary purpose
of Giddens' model is to show the elements involved in the
concept of agency. As I explore each component, I will
demonstrate how areas can be manipulated to either limit or
enhance opportunities for agency.

THE DYNAMICS OF AGENCY

Institutionalized patterns
    (a) Regionalized contexts
    (b) Routinized contexts

↕

Interaction with others in
context (social system)

↕

Reflexive monitoring of actions

↕

Rationalization through
discursive consciousness

↕

Interpretation through
practical consciousness

↕

Unconscious pressures

↕

Unconscious motives to sustain
ontological security
(achieving trust with others
and reducing anxiety)

(Turner 531)

At the top of the model, Giddens separates institu-
tionalized patterns into two categories: regionalized
contexts and routinized contexts. Regionalized contexts
refer to patterns that are ordered in a specific area of
space, for example, a set of editorial markings utilized by
a specific instructor in a specific course. Routinized
contexts refer to those patterns that are predictable and
remain stable over time. These may serve as the outer
boundaries into which regionalized patterns may fit. For
example, APA or MLA formats are patterns that are
predictable and do not affect the regionalized patterns set
by instructors. Both patterns, particularly regionalized
patterns, are instrumental to students' opportunities for
agency. If instructors use editorial markings that serve
as regionalized patterns and explain the meanings of their
markings, thus keeping the lines of communication open
between themselves and their students, students will feel
comfortable when redrafting their texts. Lack of
explanations for the markings' meanings keeps the students
unsure of instructors' intentions and thus vulnerable to
voice alterations and writer's block.

In addition, the manner in which institutionalized
patterns are constructed affects agency. Unexplained or

tightly constructed patterns tend to limit opportunities
for agency, while explained and loosely constructed
patterns allow more opportunities. For example,
instructors who make editorial markings on students' texts
that suggest/demand changes but do not give reasons for the
unacceptability of what is written contribute to students'
self-doubt, frustration, confusion, anger, and
bewilderment. On the other hand, when instructors make
editorial markings with the viewpoint that they are
mediators between students and their texts, thus explaining
their markings and/or offering suggestions for enhancement
or correction, they can expect students to retain control
of their revisions, even when they work at the mechanical
level, correcting sentence structure or word usage.

Instructors who expect students to accept their
suggestions for changes to their texts rather than let
students choose the change most suitable for their needs
infringe upon the students' power over their voices. When
instructors usurp the power students should have over their
voices, whether intentionally or unintentionally, they
cause feelings of irritation, uncertainty, frustration, and
anger. These feelings can create temporary writer's block
because of the distress caused by a lack of communication

and the pressure students feel to improve their drafts. In essence, students find it difficult to improve when they don't understand the problems or when they feel deprived of the opportunity to choose.

Next, in Giddens' model, is the social system in which students interact. For my purposes, I will examine the interaction between students and instructors. The degree of comfort experienced by students is primarily created by their instructors and greatly affects their sense of freedom while composing. The comfort levels are results of the institutionalized patterns, which may be demonstrated verbally, non-verbally, or in writing. When students are encouraged to become active parts of their texts, they become more involved in their writings. When they feel alienated, they produce texts that do not convey their ideas the same way that texts written without similar constraints would. This goes back to the construction of regionalized patterns. If regionalized patterns are constructed for control purposes, thus discouraging students from using their own styles and creativity, the interaction in the social system will be minimal. Instead of students being able to use their own ways of communicating their messages through their texts, they will

be expected to adhere to their instructors' norms and preferences, which will thin rather than enrich their own and others rhetorical possibilities.

Reflexive monitoring of actions is yet another component of Giddens' model. This refers to the monitoring students do of "their own conduct and that of others. [T]hey pay attention to, note, calculate, and assess the consequences of actions" (Turner 531). As a result of monitoring, students decide whether to risk wandering outside the parameters set by instructors, and from instructors' conduct, students determine how costly their actions will be.

Two levels of consciousness influence monitoring. "One is discursive consciousness, which involves the capacity to give reasons for or rationalize what one does (and presumably to do the same for others' behaviors)" (Turner 531). For example, if students fear receiving bad grades, they will attempt to stay within the parameters of instructors' guidelines. The second influence, practical consciousness, "is the stock of knowledge that one implicitly uses to act in situations and to interpret the actions of others" (Turner 531).

Although many decisions made while writing are

conscious decisions, some decisions are unconscious, as noted in two places on Giddens' model. "The conscious and unconscious dynamics of agency depend upon the routines and regions provided by institutionalized patterns" (Turner 532). The unconscious acts work to gain trust in the institutionalized patterns and continue to work while students interact with one another as well as with their instructors. If students feel secure about instructors' motives and expectations, then they will feel confident while writing.

As the arrows in the model show, students can move in any direction while in the process of composing. Because many of the actions can occur simultaneously, students are able to be involved in more than one area of the model.

Giddens' model also shows how instructors' power within the classroom can positively or negatively affect writers' progress, textual interaction, and comfort-level while redrafting. The institutionalized patterns affect the interaction within the social system, which causes students to consciously and unconsciously monitor their actions as well as the outside pressures. A negatively constructed system may result in an unfavorable condition, such as a temporary or permanent case of writer's block.

CHAPTER TWO:
THE EFFECTS OF EDITORIAL MARKINGS
AND VOICE ALTERATIONS

Effects of Editorial Markings

In composition courses, instructors use a variety of
symbols, letters and abbreviations that comprise their
unique sets of editorial comments and markings. However,
when instructors fail to communicate the meanings behind
their markings and/or comments and do not give suggestions
for correcting errors, these comments sometimes appear
negative and leave students confused and unsure of how to
proceed when making corrections and/or alterations to their
texts. "Negative comments, however well intentioned they
are, tend to make students feel bewildered, hurt, or angry.
They stifle further attempts at writing" (Bean 241). And
simply editing or applying notations to students' texts
does not adequately equip them with the information they
need to enhance or correct their texts. Too often,
instructors expect students to demonstrate ways of
"knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and
arguing" (Bartholomae 134) that define academic discourse.
Spandel and Stiggins' study reveals the extent to

which instructors' comments confuse students (1990):

> Students were asked to describe their reactions to specific marginal comments that teachers placed on their essays- either what they thought the comments meant or how the comments made them feel.
> When a teacher wrote, "Be more specific," students reacted this way:
> *You* be more specific.
> I'm frustrated.
> I tried and it didn't pay off.
> It's going to be too long then.
> I feel mad- it really doesn't matter.
> I try, but I don't know every fact (Bean 240).

The students I interviewed reacted similarly.

View student text #1 in Appendix A for the editorial comment. The instructor uses the abbreviation "awk" to signify the awkwardness of the designated passage. Although "awk" signifies a problem, it does not tell the student exactly what the problem is, nor does it suggest how she can strengthen the passage. In writing, what is awkward to the reader may be perfectly clear to the student, as Flowers states in Reading-To-Write. Because she did not understand what was unclear to her instructor, she was unsure how to improve her text.

When the student arrived at the CSUSB writing center for her writing consultation, she explained her uncertainty about editing her paper. As I attempted to explain that

her instructor may have meant that she needed to rewrite her passages to make them clearer, she became frustrated because she thought she was being clear in the original draft.

The writing consultation ended with a verbal agreement that the student would attempt to reword the passage to make it clearer and schedule a subsequent consultation before submitting her revision to her instructor.

During the next week, the student returned to the writing center with her text--unchanged. After we discussed the lack of revision at length, I discovered that the student understood that the instructor did not understand what she was saying but did not know how to make herself clearer. This resulted in frustration and anger, which, the student said, made her unable to write. Consequently, she made no changes.

To resolve the impasse, I asked her, "Does the dog belong with the woman or with the restaurant?" and "Who is wearing the ribbon?" The student was able to answer the questions, but she did not understand why the answers weren't obvious to me or to her instructor. I explained, "The way it is written, your sentence could say that the woman with the pink-and-blue-striped ribbon ate quickly

while in the restaurant with the dog or that the woman with

the dog, who had on a pink-and-blue-striped ribbon, ate

quickly was in the restaurant. There are several ways the

sentence can be interpreted. In order for your readers to

know what you know, you need to specify who is wearing the

ribbon and who owns the dog."

When she began to realize her instructor's and my

confusion, she was able to write "clear" sentences by

breaking the elements down. We worked on her revision

until she was satisfied that her editing allowed me to

understand her ideas.

The difference between the communication the student

had with me and with her instructor was that, in our second

consultation, she was able to ask questions and get answers

until she understood the problem. Giving students

opportunities to answer questions about their texts offers

them hope rather than frustration or anger that is

generated by comments that do not explain themselves.

Getting instructors to explain why they are confused is the

key.

Situations similar to this one are not uncommon. As a

writing consultant, I heard many students complain about comments that do not provide useful revision directions. Students came into the writing center seeking guidance before or after they attempted to address the issues on their own. Many of them tried to revise their texts and came in demonstrating emotions of frustration, anger, bewilderment, and/or resentment toward their instructors. When I asked if they attempted to write, some simply answered, "I couldn't," while others commented, "I tried, but I didn't get far."

From these conversations, I learned that "RO" tends to solicit the same response as "awk", when it is not accompanied with correction rules.

View student text #2a in Appendix A.

Because the student understood "RO" to mean run-on, she was able to edit her text.

View student text #2b in Appendix A noting the commas she added, in an effort to correct the run-on. Thus, substituting one error for another. Her second error shows her lack of understanding of sentence completeness.

Therefore, when she received the text the second time, she acknowledged the "cs" marking but was still at a disadvantage because she did not know its meaning nor did she have an opportunity to discuss her text with her instructor before the revision was due. Fortunately, she had scheduled a writing consultation and was able to bring her text into the writing center.

When she arrived for her appointment, she appeared calm, but as she began to relay the details of her two previous drafts, I realized she was perturbed. She also revealed her need for instructors who explain their editorial markings in an effort to assist students with their revisions.

During the consultation, she stated, "If it wasn't for your help with explaining the connection between run ons and comma splices and then how to correct them, I would have been stuck." I interpreted "stuck" to mean "blocked." Although a block is usually associated with a lack of ideas to communicate, both Victoria Nelson and Mike Rose argue that it can also mean an inability to communicate ideas, as with the students who had trouble punctuating their texts. When students do not understand their instructor's

notations, they can become blocked, preventing them from editing their texts.

Just as students get frustrated from not knowing how to correct punctuation errors from instructor's notations, they also get frustrated and confused when they attempt to follow rules they don't fully understand. Here is Mike Rose's account of one of his student's writing experiences:

> The first two papers I received from Laurel were weeks overdue. Sections of them were well written; there were even moments of stylistic flair. But the papers were late and, overall, the prose seemed rushed. Furthermore, one paper included a paragraph on an issue that was never mentioned in the topic paragraph. This was the kind of mistake that someone with Laurel's apparent ability doesn't make. I asked her about this irrelevant passage. She knew very well that it didn't fit, but believed she had to include it to round out the paper. "You must always make three or more points in an essay. If the essay has less, then it's not strong." Laurel had been taught this rule in both high school and in her first college English class; no wonder, then, that she accepted its validity (Rigid Rules 394).

Although Laurel was not in freshman composition, like the two students I consulted, she said her struggles with instructor expectations were just as frustrating and stemmed from her freshman composition instructor. Unless college and university instructors are clear during the revision stages, students may experience frustration at various stages in their academic careers that may have been

prevented early.

These three incidents (mine and Rose's) may appear trivial to students who are accustomed to editorial markings and are adequately equipped to revise, but freshman composition students who have not been exposed to university English classes or do not fully understand the academic rules of writing are not easily placed at ease. Incidents of this nature create students' uncertainty, which leads to anger and frustration, which can lead to a temporary inability to compose or even a refusal to engage in writing altogether.

Voice Alterations

Alteration of students' voices within their texts is another editing act that causes discomfort. Although not necessarily intentionally, instructors may change words within students' texts, intending to enhance but, consequently, altering students' intended messages.

According to Flower and Hayes, students want to explore and express their voices: "[writers'] motives are located within our language, a language with its own requirements and agendas, a language that limits what we

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might say and that makes us write and sound, finally, like someone else" (128). However, when instructors change students' texts to make them "sound better" or provide clarity, they may be limiting rather than benefiting their students. If students do not want to put their time and energy into texts in which they simply sound like other people, if they want their opinions and ideas to be heard, instructors must find ways that allow students to attain their desired ends. To find ways to help students achieve their desires, instructors can look at their writing patterns.

Students' writing cycles are recursive, not only in relation to their processes, but, also, to their emotions. They receive assignments and form opinions about the issues they will discuss in their texts. Their opinions and emotions are formed from their cultural, ethical, and practical backgrounds, as Giddens states: "the notion of action has reference to the activities of an agent, and cannot be examined apart from a broader theory of the acting self" (50). When students compose, they bring their entire selves to the task, not only the intellectual components.

Next, students attempt to capture their thoughts on

paper. How much they struggle with this part of the

writing process depends upon how well they can work within

academic conventions and can manipulate them to their

advantages. Their familiarity with conventions also

determines how many of their concerns are included in their

papers. As students reconstruct each successive draft,

working for grammatical, syntactical, structural, and,

often times, political correctness, they may begin to lose

their voices. Their focus begins to change. When they

receive assignments, they view them as writing

opportunities in which they can articulate their innermost

ideas and values. In contrast, at the conclusion of the

writing process, they comply with demands for correctness,

discarding portions of text that instructors view as

unclear or needing changes. When students shift into

instructor-appeasing modes, they alter their messages and

surrender agency.

To illustrate these scenarios, I will draw again from

my personal experiences as a tutor in the campus writing

center. I recall very few students asking if I understood

what they were trying to say in their papers or if a

specific phrase or tone achieved their desired purpose.

Rather, the majority of the students were more concerned

with adhering to academic conventions set forth by instructors. The following account of a writing consultation exemplifies this notion.

    The student entered the writing center quite confident that she had errors within her text. She had already submitted her final draft to her instructor but would be permitted to submit a subsequent draft. The student's first set of questions was about mechanics. She asked if her comma usage was correct and if she needed commas in places where there weren't any. Also, she was concerned about the transitions she had made between paragraphs and how she had connected and supported the assertions in her text. Her primary concern, though, was the way she initially put her ideas on paper; she said she wrote the way she spoke. I explained that it was not apparent because her sentences were grammatically correct and free from colloquialisms. Also, I explained that writing the way she speaks may be the best way to capture her thoughts on paper; and, in the event that she did use clichés or slang, she could make literal translations in order to retain her original thoughts. Then, once having her

thoughts on paper she would need to support her ideas and add transitions to connect them, which she had done.

Suggesting that the student use an alternate method of composing would have limited her opportunity for agency. It may have caused her to forget some of her ideas, thus changing her message while it was in the process of being written. In contrast, supporting her composing method helps her to retain her intended message.

In other cases, students show the same eagerness to be correct as they accept the advice of their tutors. For example, if tutors say, "Explain to me what you are trying to say in this sentence or paragraph," students are sometimes quick to reply, "Oh, maybe I don't need that sentence or information." From comments of this nature, I get the impression that they either do not want to take the time to formulate their thoughts or it would be a struggle to place them within academic conventions, a struggle for which they do not see the values or rewards.

In addition to students contributing to the alteration of their texts, instructors have a tendency to cause the alteration of students' texts unwittingly by adding or deleting words, which shift meaning. It may be

single words that are changed giving the overall message a slightly different slant than the student intended.

Regardless of how the textual alterations occur, they lead to alterations of students' voices. Referring once again to Giddens' model, many of the alterations are a result of students attempting to rationalize and interpret the questions and responses of the people who come in contact with their writings. In my experience, students view questioning as a sign that something is incorrect and needs adjustment. This misconception of ideas and lack of communication leads to voice alterations that change the message the students intended to present.

Below is an excerpt from a student's text that she brought into the writing center. After reading the original text, read the altered text, noticing the changes made to the underlined words or phrases. Notice how her message changes.

The following excerpt was taken from "King and Malcolm X: What's the Difference" (a student's paper).

Excerpt #1

In Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech it is easy to
identify that he is speaking to a variety of people and not
just to African Americans. I think he is in front of a
variety of people because of the way he presents himself.
He does not come out in front of his audience saying "I
hate you Hunkies," but he comes out in a respectable way
and still gets his message across. An example of this is:
"We can never be satisfied as long as a Negro in
Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he
has nothing for which to vote" (467). Not saying that
Malcolm X comes out and says, "I hate you Hunkies" but it
is easy to see that he is speaking primarily to African
Americans.

Altered Text (revised by instructor):

In contrast, Malcolm X comes out and says, "I hate you
Hunkies" but it is easy to see that he is speaking
primarily to African Americans.

Changing "not saying that" to "In contrast" alters the

student's message tremendously. The student is showing a

contrast between King and Malcolm X and a similarity

simultaneously. According to the student, neither speaker

says the words indicated, and her focus here is on the

speaker's intended audience. Changing the student's words

not only changes her message but also causes her to

misrepresent Malcolm X. Additionally, the changes caused

the student to feel confused and powerless. She did not

know whether to view the changes as suggestions or demands

she had to accept. Obviously, she needed to consult with

her instructor to get her questions answered. This example

shows how students' voices can be altered when instructors

attempt to make their texts clearer, and it illustrates the

feelings students experience as a result.

While simultaneously witnessing the discomforts other

students experienced during the editing stage, I

experienced similar discomfort during the initial stages of

my thesis writing. Before researching agency and writer's

block, I was interested in exploring a literature/

composition topic because I had a growing desire to

continue my education in the field of African American

literature. I believed a combined thesis would be a

perfect bridge from the MA in English Composition program

to the Ph.D. in literature program.

My initial thesis topic was, "A Rhetorical Analysis of

Disappearing Acts and How Stella Got Her Groove Back by

Terri McMillan". I was very interested in exploring

McMillan's use of streams of consciousness, polyphonic

narrators, and Standard English and Black Vernacular. I

was interested in exploring the reasons for her usage of

these writing techniques in order to discover the connection between them and her message.

To begin my discoveries of McMillan's techniques, I researched various dialects of the English language to determine whether she was using Ebonics and/or the Black Vernacular and whether there is a distinction between the two. I also researched the use of multiple narrators by reviewing previous works written on the topic.

After several brief discussions of my thesis idea with some of my readers and months of research, I began to compose my proposal. Upon submitting my initial proposal, I was asked to be clearer about my thesis intentions and to delve a little deeper into McMillan's strategies. After two rewrites and having one of my three readers read one of McMillan's novels, he suggested, "Maybe you should choose another topic, perhaps one you studied during the course of graduate study, because McMillan does not seem to have much to say in her novel and I can't visualize what you plan to do with it."

In my opinion, the comment about McMillan's writing seemed to be a personal opinion, which I do not believe plays a legitimate role in my thesis choice. Also, I did not understand how my intentions could be unclear when my

thesis was detailed. The reaction to my thesis idea took me by storm; I felt all my long hours of hard work being swept away. I felt my support group suddenly become opponents. My body was racked with tears, confusion, anger, disappointment, bitterness, and uncertainty.

On one hand, I wanted to leave the entire master's program; on the other hand, I couldn't let someone's biases prevent me from earning the degree I had dedicated myself to.

After crying, I immediately called my mother and relayed to her the horrible incident. I told her about how I had to select a new topic. That is the point when I realized that I was temporarily blocked from any ideas. I felt the one good idea I had was ripped away from me. I had poured my heart and time into one project, and I knew I wouldn't feel the same about another.

Days and weeks passed. Eventually, my mind became clearer as I began to push my emotions to the background. Again I reminded myself that I had made a commitment to myself to obtain a master's degree and completion of the thesis project was the only way to meet my goal. Therefore, I had to decide on another topic. As I went through my repertoire and reflected upon my past research

topics, I finally decided on agency and writer's block. Ironically, this topic fit my personal experience of blocking and voice alteration.

My experience, along with conversations I had with other students, gave me the desire to fully explore the connection between the two topics.

Avoiding Voice Alterations

Having discussed the causes of voice alterations, I will now examine ways to avoid unwanted occurrences. According to Giddens, "the notion of human action logically implies that of power ... 'action' only exists when an agent has the capability of intervening, or refraining from intervening, in a series of events so as to be able to influence their course" (256). Here Giddens asserts that students are not powerless and can control the outcomes of their written pieces. Below is a brief list of strategies students can use to ensure that their messages remain intact. (By no means is this list exhaustive.) (Chapter Three will focus on strategies for instructors.)

1. When instructors question the reasons pieces of information have been included in the text, students should explain the significance of the information and see if the information can be rearranged to show its own significance. If, after close examination, the information does appear to be extraneous, students may decide to discard it, but students should make the choice.

2. When instructors suggest a word to replace another word, before exchanging words, students should make sure the new word carries the same or a similar connotation as the word being replaced. Also, they should be sure that the new word creates the desired tonal or emotional effect, if any, as the word previously used.

3. At times students will encounter suggestions about changes in their overall structure. For example, a student may organize his/her paper by starting with the end of a story rather than the beginning, as William Faulkner does in "A Rose for Emily." As a result, the student may encounter suggestions to tell the story chronologically. In this case, the student should explain to the instructor that the pattern was chosen for a specific purpose and show how the ordering works to achieve the goal.

In the event that students encounter any of the situations mentioned above and feel powerless, they can take steps to recapture their control. Below are suggestions students can use to recapture their lost voices.

1. Students should talk to instructors who have usurped their power. They should explain the message they were trying to present in order to give instructors an idea of how they are attempting to construct their papers. The instructors may be able to offer suggestions to help them do this more effectively.

2. Students should talk to their peers, who may be able to give insight on how they could rephrase their sentences.

3. If they cannot take advantage of suggestions 1 or 2, then, they should leave their words the same.

CHAPTER THREE:
INSTRUCTORS CAN MAXIMIZE OPPORTUNITIES FOR AGENCY

Because instructors know that many freshman

composition students are unfamiliar with the notations

instructors write on their texts, many of these instructors

give students a list of general notations along with their

meanings (Appendix B). However, such lists fail to offer

the explanations and/or examples students need to make

informed responses. In addition to the lack of

communication involved in the writing process, at times

students surrender agency when they attempt to follow

academic guidelines that they do not fully comprehend; at

other times instructors limit agency by altering students'

messages when they attempt to make student's writing

clearer. Each of these situations can lead to students

experiencing writer's block.

This chapter, therefore, will suggest ways that

instructors can reduce the number of situations in which

bewildered students scramble resentfully to obey

instructors' commands as well as those that cause students'

texts to be altered in ways that change their intended

messages. To reduce these situations, instructors must

expand the lines of communication between themselves and

their students.

I. Helping Students Understand Sentence Level Notations Versus Scrambling To Obey

To clarify sentence-level notations, instructors can

use many options, including the following six:

1. Verbal Communication

Instructors can use the first class meeting to

verbally provide examples of the notations they plan to use

to signify sentence-level errors, what constitutes those

errors, and how those errors are corrected.

2. Use Examples of Errors on List of Notations

Instructors can provide students with a list of

examples of sentence-level errors and options for

correction on the list of general notations. Look at the

following example of a run-on sentence and the options for

correction, noticing the problem, the explanation of the

problem, the corrective options and their explanations.

Run-on- The boy went into the hallway he tripped on a
skateboard.

This sentence is a run-on because it contains two
independent clauses that are joined together without
punctuation or a connecting word. (Independent clause- a
group of words containing a subject and a predicate that
can stand alone as a complete sentence.)

Correction option #1- The boy went into the hallway. He
tripped on a skateboard. (Separate independent clauses
into two sentences.)

Correction option #2- The boy went into the hallway, and
he tripped on a skateboard. (Link independent clauses with
a comma and a coordinating conjunction.)

Correction option #3- The boy went into the hallway; he
tripped on a skateboard. (Link independent clauses with a
semicolon.)

Correction option #4- The boy went into the hallway and tripped on a skateboard. (Recast the independent clauses as one independent clause.)

Correction option #5- Because the boy went into the hallway, he tripped on a skateboard. (Recast one independent clause as a dependent clause.) (Dependent clause- contains a predicate and a subject but cannot stand alone.)

3. Reference Handbook

Instructors can maximize students' understanding of sentence construction by introducing and explaining how to use a reference handbook. Even if students do not recognize their sentence level errors as they compose, once their instructors point them out, they can correct them and learn how to avoid them in the future by using handbooks.

4. Peer Critique and Conference Sessions

Instructors who are willing to use class time to discuss students' sentence level errors but want to maximize the number of students who get help can use peer critiques and conferences to explain errors and options for

correction. Instructors, who can verify correct sentence construction, should always supervise these activities.

These strategies allow students to get feedback from their peers, while working collaboratively and learning from each other.

5. Sample Paper

Instructors can provide students, via either internet or hardcopy, with a sample student paper that illustrates commonly made errors along with a corrected version. Although this technique is useful for providing examples of corrected sentences, it does not explain the corrections or the errors.

6. Interactive Instruction Video

Instructors who do not like to use class time to discuss mechanical errors can place a video on reserve in the campus learning resource center showing an instructor assisting a student with the most commonly made errors. This technique allows students to improve their writing on their own time.

Instructors who use any of these options for

discussing and/or correcting sentence level errors will

provide students with tools they can use to help themselves

while revising. Equipping students to revise their

sentence level errors will help them to be successful not

only in freshman composition but also throughout the

remainder of their academic careers.

II. Helping Students Maintain Their Voices and Ideas

Because of the various instances that cause unwanted

alterations in students' texts, instructors should find

ways to expand the lines of communication. The following

categories offer suggestions for dealing with common

factors that contribute to textual alterations.

1. Instructor/Student Collaboration

One way to avoid textual alterations is for

instructors to encourage students to discuss their texts

with them, other instructors, or writing tutors. Also, if

instructors are unsure of what students are attempting to

convey in their texts, they can simply note on the text

that they don't understand and allow students'
opportunities to discuss their texts with them so they can
work together to make the text clearer while retaining
students' messages.

As instructors and students work together, they bring
their individual expertise, writing expertise (instructors)
and knowledge of the message (students). In the meeting,
they learn from each other while working collaboratively
and supplementing each other's weaknesses. Again,
communication is the key to avoiding voice alterations,
agency limitations, and ultimately, writer's block.

2. Discarding Ideas

At other times, lacking clarity results in students'
ideas being stifled and/or discarded before they are fully
explored or given a chance to blossom into a written text,
as with my initial thesis topic. In instances where
instructors are unclear of students' intentions, I suggest
they converse at length with students to discuss their
situations. If more communication had been involved in my
situation, I would have had the opportunity to understand
the instructors' perspective as well as have had them
understand mine.

3. Foreseeing Impediments

In most instructor-student relationships, instructors have more writing experience than students; thus, they are able to foresee impediments to students' successes. Instructors should delicately discuss these obstacles with students while being careful not to attack the students' ideas because, then, they would be inadvertently attacking the students. Students' writings are a part of them and they shouldn't be treated as unimportant. Students will be more grateful to have obstacles explained to them when their ideas are respected.

4. Unreasonable Topics

Sometimes students attempt to explore topics that prove unreasonable for their current situations, such as not being able to adequately complete research during the time frame of the assignment.

Read the following assignment along with a student's topic idea, noticing his extensive plan and the time frame allotted for the assignment.

Assignment- Read and analyze a short story, from the course reader, which mentions an object in the title.

Explain the significance of the object. For example, read
"The Cask of Amontillado" by Edgar Allan Poe and explain
the significance of the cask.

Length -2 pages; due in one week. By next class turn in
one paragraph explaining your choice of story and your
method for determining the significance of the object.

Student's topic idea- I will read "A Rose For Emily" by
William Faulkner and explain the significance of the rose.
To do this, I will read the story, research Faulkner's
background, read literary analyses of the story, interview
other readers, and conduct a survey.

In this case, the instructor can point out to the student
that although his efforts are well intentioned, a week is
not sufficient time to complete the research. The
instructor could also suggest that in addition to reading
the story, the student could choose one other research
method to support his analysis. This suggestion allows the
student to keep his original ideas while showing how it can
be done within the time frame.

5. Unnecessary Information

At other times, there may be unnecessary information included in the research that does not support the topic. Instructors who have years of experience can identify this information before students begin to research a topic with pieces of information that do not logically fit together.

The following example of a student's research topic illustrates this pattern.

I will research the ages that children are allowed to begin kindergarten, within each of the fifty states. I will inquire when the first laws governing age came into existence; when the last amendment was made, if any; what type of tests, if any, are given; and if there are any variation in findings due to ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or parent educational background. In addition, I will research the learning abilities of various age groups ranging from 3-7 to determine if the majority age of the states coincide with my findings.

This research topic includes two types of information: that which is necessary to create a full picture for the

student and that which is not necessary for this particular project. Also, there are categories of information that were not included but should have been. First, The instructor can also point out that not only are there different laws for the age of kindergarten students within each state, but there are laws within each county. This fact increases the locations the student needs for research.

The primary problem with this research project is that the age range the student has chosen to research is too broad. If the student is researching kindergartners, then he should only need to research the age before, the average age, and possibly the age after, resulting in an age range of 4-6, not 3-7. Studying three year olds and seven year olds would provide him with extraneous information that is not necessary for his study causing the piece of information regarding ages to be too large to fit comfortably into his overall research project. Discussing these issues with the student will help him to formulate his topic more concisely while retaining his original idea.

6. Lack of Knowledge

Another instance where students have problems with their research ideas, which may lead to being directed to another topic unwillingly, is lacking knowledge on the topic from lack of research. Often, students' time for research is very limited, and instead of adjusting their schedules to allow time, they attempt to write their papers anyway, simply because the subject is appealing, has been assigned to them, or primarily, is necessary for them to make their grades.

To change this behavior, instructors can point out why students must be knowledgeable about the subjects they write about by mentioning their credibility, their grades, and questioning what they stand to gain personally from writing the paper. Instructors should make students aware that the way to become knowledgeable from research is through analyzing and comprehending the information gathered.

7. Misunderstanding the Assignment

Yet another instance which often causes the alteration of students' ideas occurs when students do not understand what instructors are asking in the assignments. Review the

following account of a student's response to an assignment and the instructor's reaction to the response.

Assignment- Set up a case study that has not been researched extensively and state your findings.

Student's topic- I will set up a quantitative study to research the connection between self-esteem and academic performance. To do this I will change roles with a student and assimilate into her culture.

According to the student, after she submitted her first topic idea, the instructor returned her text with the following changes without explanation.

Changed text #1-   I will conduct a quantitative study by examining self-esteem and interpersonal skills.

The instructor changed the student's research topic from a connection between self-esteem and academic performance to a simple examination of self-esteem and interpersonal skills but offered no explanations for her change. The student did not understand her changes but accepted them and continued her project.

After each submission to the instructor, the student

was responsible for detailing the research method for the

study and resubmitting her topic. Once the student

fulfilled her requirement, again, the instructor returned

her text with changes and included no explanations.

Changed text #2-   I will conduct a quantitative study

examining how self-esteem affects interpersonal skills.

Again the student's text was changed, this time making

a connection between the two major components. Perhaps the

instructor was giving the student an opportunity to make a

connection between the two components after the first

change, but when she did not, she filled in the connection

herself. The instructor should have spoken to the student

and given her the opportunity to choose the connection she

wanted to research.

After receiving her text, the student detailed her

research methods and once again submitted her text. It was

returned with the following changes:

Changed text #3-   I will conduct a qualitative research

study which examines how children perceive their self-

esteem, as well as how others perceive their self-esteem, and how they feel these two views affect their interpersonal skills.

Not only did the student not know how to accept her new topic idea, but also, she had to reconstruct her method of research to accommodate the new elements of her topic. She experienced the same feeling of uncertainty after receiving the fourth and final change to her text.

Changed text #4-   I will conduct a qualitative/ correlational study by researching how children of alcoholics perceptions of their self-esteem, along with others perceptions of the children's self-esteem, affect their interpersonal skills and how others say those perceptions affect the children's interpersonal skills.

After the fourth change, the student said she was emotionally exhausted. Each time her text was changed, she felt more and more disoriented, but was not comfortable with approaching the teacher. She also said that she was furious about the changes, but she kept working on completing the project because she had to earn a grade.

When the assignment was issued, the student chose a topic that she was interested in with no regard to the amount of research that had already been done on the topic, therefore violating a rule of the assignment. When the instructor read the student's text, she could have noted the violation on the text, giving the student an opportunity to revise. The instructor could have also asked her to come in during office hours to discuss her topic. Either choice would have given the student the opportunity to choose another topic that suited her needs as well as following the guidelines set by the instructor without limiting agency. The instructor's actions did not allow the student the opportunity to choose. Instead, the student's opportunity for agency was limited rather than expanded.

Regardless of the writing situation, instructors and students should keep the lines of communication open. Instructors need to remember that effective communication is the sharing of ideas from one to another; it must flow both ways. If instructors provide students with opportunities to choose their topics, then they shouldn't deprive them of those opportunities later in the writing process. If students go astray, instructors should use

their knowledge of writing and research to steer them back to the right path by communicating their various options.

Writing can be a wonderful experience that students can treasure and look forward to. Somehow for some students the opposite effect has been created, and it's time for a change. Effective communication is the key to making that change. If instructors examine their teaching processes, they may find room for improvement that will benefit students in the entire writing process, particularly the revision portions. Instructors, as well as students, should also keep in mind that unless they communicate more effectively, the same problems as discussed throughout this thesis will continue to occur.

APPENDIX A
Samples of Students' Texts

Student Text #1-   The woman in the restaurant with the dog with a pink-and-blue-striped ribbon ate quickly.

Student Text #2a-   One account of the myth has the captives walking on the top of the water all the way back to Africa another describes how the captives flew over the water back to Africa the third account…

Student Text #2b-   One account of the myth has the captives walking on the top of the water all the way back to Africa, another describes how the captives flew over the water back to Africa, the third account…

APPENDIX B
Sample List of Instructors' Notations

awk	awkward, unclear
c. s.	comma splice
r. o.	run-on sentence
contr.	contraction (do not use)
?	unclear
frag.	sentence fragment
trans.	transition
v. t.	verb tense
prep.	preposition
d. p.	dangling participle

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