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Textbook Review

*Writing From Sources: 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*, Brenda Spatt

Many instructors of writing would perhaps argue about what freshmen college students lack the most these days in terms of developing a writing foundation that will enable them to manage the multitude of papers they will undoubtedly write throughout their college careers. Some might say “style and syntax,” while others would certainly say “the ability to hold a well-founded opinion.” But, as the author of *Writing from Sources* points out, the greatest deficiency is perhaps in the area of pulling information from disparate sources in order to synthesize a single, cohesive text. That is precisely the stated goal of this recently revised and updated (fourth edition) rhetoric/reader textbook, which includes additions such as understanding internet sources and using the latest MLA and APA documentation styles.

To teach these “analytical, organizational, and synthetic skills necessary for academic writing,” the textbook has broken the daunting task of writing a research article down into its smallest steps, which seem carefully scaffolded, if even at times inane. Take for example the advice in chapter one that reminds the student in red italics that: “When you outline, you are identifying the main points of a chapter or an essay...” (37). With this newly acquired knowledge, the student then proceeds to the exercise where they are asked, you guessed it, to outline an essay. Which is not to say that this is an unnecessary skill; yet, the formulaic exercise—I did this as a seventh grader some fifteen years ago—will undoubtedly convey a message that writing is not so much a process as it is monotonous. Still, loosely taking the advice of the miniscule, accompanying *Instructor’s Manual*, it would perhaps be okay to breeze

through this section (and others) as a way to abbreviate the ambitious 467 pages—expected to be covered within a 16-week semester.

Yet, for the beginning instructor, this textbook may be an extremely valuable tool, as it contains all the material necessary for an entire semester of freshman English Composition: readings, exercises, and writing assignments. The sequences themselves are set up in such a clear-cut manner that much of pain involved in lesson planning is removed. Throughout the semester students will complete four major writing tasks: 5<sup>th</sup> week, a single source essay; 7<sup>th</sup> week, a multiple-source essay; 12<sup>th</sup> week, a first draft of the research essay; 14<sup>th</sup> week, a final draft. This organized structure of major tasks, combined with the exercises and readings, which as the author notes (and he is not entirely bluffing), are both diverse and interesting, will ensure that a semester of college writing will not have been entirely wasted.

In fact, many of the exercises seem pertinent, and could be, at the very least, a valuable supplement for even veteran freshman composition teachers. Chapter two provides a useful task that not only asks students to introduce authored sources into their texts, but also provides a long list of words (other than “says”) with which to do this, such as: argues, establishes, asserts. This chapter also provides the somewhat meaningful advice, again in red italics, that “the citation should suggest the relationship between your own ideas (in the previous sentences) and the statement that you are about to quote” (109). While this may need some explaining to the students, the instructor is at least reminded to talk about details that might otherwise be overlooked in courses that attempt to have the students churn out piles of writing at the expense of learning something from it. And here is the real success of this textbook: the tasks are manageable and the goals realistic.

Obviously, what is omitted in this book is writing strategies for any genre other than the research essay; as such, the students using this text won't experience the subtle moves from writing for a smaller audience—themselves or their peers, perhaps—to communicating to a broader populace. The only audience that seems to matter here is the teacher. What this approach also ignores is the way that various forms of writing are connected to each other. Personal narrative, for example, could be addressed in order to develop the skills of leaving gaps, foreshadowing, and using specific details to create both interest and credibility—tools that could help the student to create a livelier research essay. So, even though the student is being given samples of writing that is provocative, if this textbook is followed to the letter, don't expect your students to write a paper that would be of much interest to anyone. In fact, no deep analysis on the methods of creating a narrative structure that *leads the reader* is ever addressed. This book is painting by numbers.

The most dissatisfying aspect here is the way that you want this textbook to really work, to have it not only function as a “tool” for creating a specific genre of paper that students need in order to succeed academically, but to have it exude a more epistemic approach by perhaps examining how the process of collecting and synthesizing research is also about personally making meaning out of all the information constantly collapsing on us individually and as a society.

In the end, then, what you have is a textbook that utilizes a fairly traditional, mechanical approach, all the while subjecting the student to such truths as: “Playing the lottery is not a subject that lends itself to lengthy or abstract discussion...” (232)—apparently the author has never considered the psychological devastation that occurs when a twenty-something year-old man is forced to determine whether to spend his last five bucks for the week on lotto tickets, cockroach killer, or pain-relief pills. But,

even if the exercises here are dry and overly confident in their authority, and the move-naming vocabulary somewhat decrepit (“brainstorming” as prewriting, for example), the scaffolded lessons, decent reader—themed so that students may use it instead of the library if the instructor wishes—and fairly realistic goals, make *Writing from Sources* a good beginning teacher’s text and perhaps a reasonable resource for veterans.