

# A-B-D-C-E

## PART 6

### ...AN OPEN LETTER TO THE COLLEGE BOARD'S COMMISSION ON WRITING IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS & COLLEGES: YOUR CHALLENGE

**PART VI**

**AN OPEN LETTER TO THE COLLEGE BOARD'S COMMISSION ON  
WRITING IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES**

**YOUR CHALLENGE**



**W**E BEGAN, YOU'LL RECALL, WITH F.J. CHILD'S return to Cambridge in 1851 after his sublime sabbatical in Germany. And the first thing he did, before he turned away from teaching in order to catalog five volumes of Scottish and English ballads, was to eliminate Freshman Composition from Harvard's course of study.

Put into perspective, we can readily understand his reasons. It was impossible not to feel stimulated by the atmosphere of limitless creative possibility which the dynamic new German university system had just introduced into the world. It had taken the German-speaking states four hundred years to recover from the social upheavals wrought by the Protestant Reformation. Then had come Napoleon's occupying army. Winning the Battle of Leipzig had spelled liberation in more ways than one. Prussia, the dominant duchy in an as yet un-united Germany, had recognized Napoleon's defeat as an opportunity to institute sweeping social, political, military, and educational reforms. Thanks to Friederich Schleiermacher's Idealistic educational theories, unrestricted academic freedom would become official policy, first at the University of Jena, then at the newly established universities of Berlin, Heidelberg, Bonn, Breslau, and Munich. In this fertile environment, German physicists, chemists and engineers would close Germany's technology gap within twenty years. The concept of the research university would instantly take hold in the United States, and not just at Harvard's new English Literature Department. America's own great research-oriented public universities were a direct result.

The parallel between the explosion of intellectual creativity in the German Romantic Movement and the one that had occurred in Classical Greece 2,500 earlier is striking and unmistakable. Both were comprised of a loose confederation of states; both were united chiefly by a common language and

heroic mythology which deified the common man. Nineteenth century Germans were every bit as enthralled by the lofty system of abstract thought of Kant, Leibnitz, Hegel, Herder, Schlegel, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer as the Greeks had been by their philosophers. Romantic Germans adored finding patterns amid chaos. This will lead them to found a new discipline, the social sciences. It will also attract them to a subterranean vein of study: Goethe will raise Hell; Schliemann will excavate Troy; Einstein and Planck discover subatomic particles, Marx and Engels will plumb the Proletariat. Pain-wracked, doped-up Nietzsche will, in his study of the Dionysian and Apollonian principles, both give birth to tragedy and epitomize it, and Freud will reveal the Oedipus and the Elektra in all of us.

Above all, nineteenth century Germans love the emotion-stirring cadences contained in music. There is nothing like a good booming Beethoven symphony (especially if it's got an "Ode to Joy"); a Bach chorale, or a waltz. A good schmaltzy lieder; the sound of oom-pah bands, a rousing drinking song, all cause Teutonic collective hearts spontaneously to swell. The erotically charged epic operas of Wagner have a particularly hypnotic hold. "I know of some, and have heard of many, who could not sleep after it, but cried the night away," Mark Twain wrote, upon witnessing the feverish state of mass hypnosis that descended upon the audience of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, and Wagner himself thought he was unleashing on the world "something fearful" that could lead to derangement, even death to those who heard it. "Only mediocre performances can save me!" the composer wrote hysterically. "Completely good ones are bound to drive people mad!"

Make no mistake, as the Germans a few decades later were to discover, the Dionysian energy that is released when its cadence is invoked is exhilaratingly real and dangerous—to those whose goal is to lose themselves by merging into any collective swell—be it at a Young Hitler rally, on a hajj, or in a mosh pit.

But what if, instead, your goal were to *find* yourself within it?

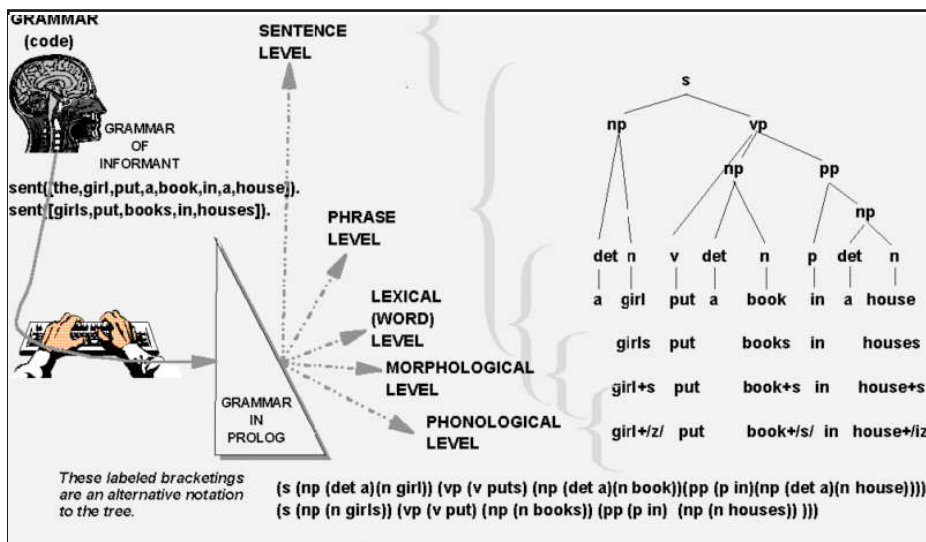
What would have happened, for example, if Herr Professor Child had seen teaching as his primary responsibility? What if he'd discerned within his students' compositions what they were really groping to say, then showed them how to tap the ballads within themselves? "*In quatrains use this cadence: 4 beats that alternate with 3; then rhyme them A-B-C-B, that alternately invoke 4 beats, then 3;*" he could have said. "*Begin your narrative abruptly, in the middle. Abandon linear time in favor of pointing to a deeper logic that expresses a universal, pre-verbal point of view.*"

What if he had known there is no dueling Manichaeian dualism between “creative” writing and any other kind? Conceivably, you would not have convened this commission!

**Y**OU, THE 16-MEMBER COMMITTEE ON WRITING in Our Schools and Colleges, have recommended:

1. that the nation’s leaders place writing squarely in the center of the school agenda and that policymakers at the state and local levels provide the resources required to improve writing;
2. that state and local education agencies work with writing specialists to develop strategies for increasing the amount of time students spend writing;
3. that governors, legislators, local school boards, and companies specializing in testing ensure that the assessment of writing is fair and authentic;
4. that the private sector work with curriculum specialists, assessment experts, and state and local educational agencies to apply emerging technologies to the teaching, development, grading, and assessment of writing;
5. that state and local educational agencies provide comprehensive professional development for all teachers to help improve classroom practice.

Well and good! I am personally excited. But what if, in addition, you defined your task as seeing beyond restricted punitive and obsolete system of diction of and usage, and above all, beyond the bankrupt five-paragraph essay?...What if we all grasped that the most basic building block is not the letter or the sound it makes but 1 / o // o / 1 ...that the grammar that gets invoked at this level could just as universally be applied to Traditional Chinese, the C-minor scale, calculus or to C++? and that when the resulting syllables, words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs are applied to a given form according to its function, the results are just apt to be a Java applet, a sonnet or a sonata?...What if by



—Diagram from NATURAL LANGUAGE COMPUTING : *An English Generative Grammar in Prolog*, (<http://www.nyu.edu/pages/linguistics/ling.html>) NYU Linguistic Prof. Ray C. Dougherty’s graphic explication of the theories of Noam Chomsky

“thinking outside the box” you began to teach beyond an ivy-covered brick-and-mortar university with a \$40,000+/ year price tag, but rather, via Internet, the freely accessible, infinite, interconnected universe?

Think what you could do *then* whenever you recognized a fresh connection, created a fresh metaphor, and aligned the steps you took to gain your insight into infinite new narrative patterns. Who would not want to be that Eleusian shamanistic guide?

Pie in the sky? Precisely. For we could philosophize and theorize, jargonize and proselytize till we were blue in the face, and still have failed to trace the true source of the problem to its roots. Here is the one question each member of the College Board Committee on Writing in Our Schools and Colleges must be prepared to answer before you take another step: *How’s YOUR writing? That’s right: Y-O-U?* Have you personally ever taken all five steps? Have you ever made the leap of faith between meaning and structure? Have you personally realized the profundity in something simple? Ever experienced the ‘shock of recognition?’

I realize as I respectfully address you, that I am someone you may be inclined to dismiss as being outside the pedagogical Establishment. But that is, in fact, my strength. It gives me the ability to see past insularity.

I know I can elicit from each individual one of you a self-understanding through your writing you cannot fathom... hmm, which perhaps makes *you* the (temporary) outsiders. I know I can share it with you, and more importantly, guide you to it. I also know that to have true credibility and success in our joint goal to improve writing in this country, before you yourselves go any farther, you *must* experience what it is I am talking about. In other words, I believe the true area of oversight is contained within #5 of your recommendation: teacher training. For a teacher who has immersed him/herself in the genuine creative process will automatically know that the solution lies in not necessarily doubling the time spent teaching writing, but halving, even quartering the number of writing assignments, so that the resulting outcome for every paper by every student can only be an A.

As you’ll see in the remainder of this electronic manuscript, the results attained by purposeful and intensive writing speak for themselves. In fact, the results are irrefutable!

To let those Greek-loving German Romanticists of one hundred fifty years ago have the last word:

Our aim is to do justice to the subject, not to level it down, simplify, or garble it just to make it easier. We did not ask, “Which view of it will make it easier?” We did not ask which view of the phenomenon must be taken in order to offer a convenient explanation

in accordance with some philosophy or other, but, on the contrary, what philosophy is required if we are to be equal to our subject, on the same level with it. Not how the phenomenon must be turned and twisted, oversimplified or distorted, so as to appear explicable at all costs by means of principles which are determined not to overstep, but in what direction we must enlarge our thoughts in order to stand in fit relationship to the phenomenon. Whoever and for whatever reason, shrinks from such an amplification of this thought should at least be honest enough, instead of pulling the phenomenon down to the level of his own conceptions and trivializing it, to count it among those things, of which there are still a great many for all men, that he does not understand; and if he is incapable of proving adequate to the phenomena in question, he should at least guard against uttering something totally inadequate.

—Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling as quoted in *Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*, C.G. Jung and C. Kerényi

You have come so very close in your report. But I also wonder if you realize your report's title points directly to the solution. There is indeed a neglected R. The neglected R is REwriting.

### THE UNIQUELY U. CHALLENGE

As an educator and/or a parent, you should not accept  
a single word of what you have just read on faith.

In approximately 5 sessions, Uniquely U. can personally guide  
YOU through the A-B-D-C-E process to produce writing at its real-est.

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*~Maxene Fabe Mulford*

*~Anand Ahuja*

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