

# Sweetland

GAYLE MORRIS SWEETLAND WRITING CENTER

March 1999  
Volume 2 Number 3

**Sweetland  
Writing Center  
/ English  
Composition  
Board**  
1139 Angell Hall  
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umich.edu  
http://www.lsa.  
umich.edu/ecb

**Writing  
Workshop  
Winter 1999**

Monday  
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.  
Tuesday  
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.  
Wednesday  
9 a.m. - Noon  
and 3-5 p.m.  
Thursday  
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.  
Friday  
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.

**Please call  
for a Writing  
Workshop  
appointment**

**Peer Tutors**

Sunday-Thursday  
7 p.m. - 11 p.m.  
444C Mason Hall

**Michigan  
Online  
Writing Lab  
(OWL)**

owl@umich.edu  
OR  
http://  
www.lsa.umich.edu/  
ecb/help/  
owl.html

## FELLOWS' ANNUAL DINNER

Present and former Sweetland Seminar Fellows are invited to an annual dinner, which is an occasion for communication about writing initiatives and innovations across the College. This year's keynote address was given by James Selvin, Georgetown University. The full text appears below, punctuated by snapshots of the Fellows' reception.



John Sweetland and Theresa Tinkle



Karen Miller, James Selvin, George Cooper

## Letter to Maggie

James Selvin, Georgetown University

*What I want to do tonight is share with you a letter I am writing to a former student of mine, in response to one from her asking a very common question—one I have received at least a hundred times as department chair and director of the writing program: What should she do to prepare her students for writing in college? I have always found the request somewhat exasperating—as the issue is so complex. After all, I asked myself, would anyone write to the Chemistry department to find out in a nutshell what prospective students need to learn in high school? Well, I found out, people do write to our Chemistry department, and our Chemistry department writes back. My colleagues in Chemistry found my reluctance to do so just another sign that the humanities, and especially English, had become such a muddle that we couldn't even explain ourselves to sympathetic colleagues. So I decided to respond to Maggie's letter. Since I am in the process of writing it and since I think the question she raised bears on the work of the Sweetland Writing Center, I want to look at it with you and invite your comments and suggestions. High school students are not Michigan first-year students; but many of the issues are the same. So here it is.*

Dear Maggie,

I can't speak for your students, but I can try to speak about mine—what I hope they had learned and what they need to unlearn, or at least complicate. What matters in college writing, more than any writing they have done before and perhaps more than any writing or speaking they will do later, what matters is *evidence*. The excitement of the academic life—of academic writing broadly conceived—is in the making of stuff (data, events, passages from a text, the work of other writers) into evidence. This is true of all disciplines, and it is as true of personal writing as it is of professional writing. **Making stuff mean something is at the heart of the writing that gets admired at the university.**



Theresa Tinkle, Chris Glew, Graham Denham, Vicki Allison

Although we tell students that theses and topic sentences and transitions and clear (even elegant) sentences are important (because they are), what really matters is how what I am calling (with my usual intellectual sophistication and precision) “stuff” becomes evidence. Now my students think that assertions are what matter. Theses. Topic sentences. Big ideas. Even small ideas well expressed. I believe they think that because they have been taught to think so—by their teachers in high school, and by mass culture (ranging from the most serious public-affairs television to advertising). Struggling with 135 students a semester in five classes, teachers have been delighted to find meaning asserted coherently and cohesively in their students' papers. Sometimes a paper just having a thesis that is connected to its several unfolding paragraphs is a rare delight to behold. Politicians, pundits, advertisers have in common a studied commitment to assertion, often at the level of the sound bite. Neither evidence nor competing assertions make any difference, except as part of a staged drama. One notices with a kind of ghastly respect how politicians manage to turn serious questions into occasions for saying whatever it is they want to say; how they ignore counter arguments

and just say whatever it is they want to say; in short, how they just keep saying whatever it is they want to say. So, while it is often said that our students don't have theses, I would counter that they have thousands of theses, that their minds are cluttered with theses, that simply accumulating theses is the lifeblood of their everyday lives.

Now, I recognize that delivering a simulacrum of support for their theses has become a feature of successful high school writing (just as such a simulacrum is a feature of political discourse and advertising). I am not equating the three (I respect the work of high school teachers and the ingenuity of advertising), but that all three share this feature marks the pervasiveness of the problem. Thanks in part then to admen and political hacks, most of my students come to college with an aesthetics of the essay form (or formula), a sense of its features as if they were literary or public-relations exercises and not forms of demanding and exciting intellectual labor.

September 4 will be the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first college class I ever taught. I taught that class in an open-admissions program at Lincoln University, the oldest historically Black college in the U.S., where my students came with serious “writing problems” that required (though the term was and is suspect) “remedial” help. They had not been prepared to spell, or compose and arrange sentences, or organize paragraphs, in ways that matched the requirements of standard written English. They lacked, in other words, the training provided my students today. But nearly all of them possessed an awareness of evidence and were quite alert to the slippages between assertion and support. And they were particularly adept, as I remember, at locating and expressing the slippages in my own thinking. Those were the days.

We easily think of those students as “remedial,” but have a harder time thinking of today's “mainstream” students as “remedial.” Yet they are. My students at Georgetown don't care about ideas (if they care about ideas at all) in the way faculty members do, though they can place ideas in papers. The students I am talking about today are remedial students in a much deeper sense than my students thirty years ago because, despite the surface correctness of their prose (maybe because of it) they are much further away from the intellectual culture of the academy, at least as this is professed in the liberal arts and sciences.

They lack a sense of the importance of evidence. What I mean by evidence is the intersection and inter-penetration, perhaps better expressed as the dialectic, of thesis and development (elaboration, exemplification, illustration). There is no evidence without a thesis; but, more important, there is no thesis that isn't constructed and made possible

by the evidence and penetrated by the evidence.

I wish my students could distinguish between having a point (or having a thesis) and making a point (or a thesis). (It is curious that the phrase, “making a thesis,” is not idiomatic, and yet it is the heart of academic work.) We all have points but don’t often make them. The distinction is important because most of my students believe that the goal of a paper is to express a point you have, rather than to make a point through the marshaling of reasons, explanations, clarifications, and supporting details. In short, I think we get ourselves into trouble whenever we tell students that a paper should “have” a thesis: it makes the thesis seem like a property of the paper rather than the goal of the work that is the paper.

The possibility that this was the defining difference between mass culture and academic culture, the main thing my students needed to know to be prepared for college, dawned on me while channel surfing some weeks ago. I was, as it were, participating in mass culture in one of its most compelling possibilities, and I came upon a re-run of *Columbo*. I was reminded that while in graduate school, this was the show with which academics most regularly “made an appointment.” (“Making an appointment” is a popular concept in Media Crit. to identify those shows we make a special point to see, around which we might be said to build our schedules and so our lives. *Homicide* now has this status in our family, as does *Sesame Street*, the two high-quality urban dramas on TV.) As I say, *Columbo* had this status some generations ago, and may still have it for those free in the afternoons and having access to cable. What was innovative and seductive about this show was its format, which began with the dramatization of a murder in plain view of the TV audience, long before *Columbo*’s character made an appearance. We therefore began with the facts of the case, and through careful but predictable direction, we were able to focus in on the evidence that would give the murderer away. Close-ups of a glove left behind at the scene of the crime, for instance; an answering or video-tape machine tape left running. The drama of *Columbo*, then, was not learning who murdered whom but watching *Columbo* learn that—watching him attend to the clues that combined to form the evidence for his (and the show’s) conclusion. What the audience did, more exactly, was watch *Columbo* watch; we looked at him looking, and we did so from the superior, omniscient position that is every academic’s fantasy (such is the state of our fantasy life). We observed his observing from the most fantastic of situations: because we knew all, we could focus on how he came to know. Observing and knowing really mattered (there was a killer on the loose); and there was always a right answer, always something to be found that brought closure. Precisely because academic culture is never like that—we are never omniscient, our work is

almost never a matter of life and death, our conclusions never entirely conclusive, never closing on exactly the right answer that will effectively eliminate the need for any further work in our fields—because of all that, we found *Columbo* a weekly delight.

Academic culture is all about looking and looking for. It is about the hunt for a conclusion, not about conclusions; it’s about the making of meaning, not the meaning. While we tell students more than they need to know about theses and the formats of our writing, about organization and lucidity and clarity (that is, about the form in which we make public our conclusions), what we value is something other than all that, though not unrelated to all that. The values of academic culture are not the conclusions we draw but the drawing of conclusions from the evidence before us—more exactly, the drawing of conclusions from the possibilities of evidence before us that we make into evidence enabling something worth saying.



Edie Goldenberg, John Sweetland, Ejner Jensen

In an age of academic professionalization, I think we have come to exaggerate the importance of exchange (and particularly the importance of undoing others’ unsatisfactory explanations) and to minimize the importance of discovery and the dialectical process of arriving at satisfactory generalizations. We talk a great deal about examining the assumptions behind a thesis, looking at the bias of the author we are reading or the work we are composing. That is an important thing to do, but it doesn’t necessarily clarify what is at stake in undertaking this critique. The point is not simply to identify bias but to explain what that particular bias does with the evidence to hand—how it misinterprets or inadequately explains the evidence, occasionally even distorting it. What is important is not that this thesis differs from my thesis, or this thesis is wrong because it depends on an ideology we do not like (academics spend their lives surrounded by different theses and unfriendly/unpalatable ideologies). What is important is that the thesis does not account for

the poem, the historical event, the chemical reaction, the urban problem, the election result, etc. The data incorporated into the essay is not adequately explained by the thesis that constructs that data as evidence. So it is not evidence, and lacking evidence, the argument fails.



Alice Reinartz, Brian Coppola, Elaine Pollack

All this concern with evidence applies to class discussion, which becomes a discussion when folks attend to evidence (and not just the assertion of theses). In fact, most real discussions are about what we would ordinarily call evidence, and here theses are what get contested in the face of competing accounts of the evidence or (more interesting this) competing determinations of what constitutes evidence. We all want students to respond to one another so that we as teachers don't become the mediator of every comment. But if the comment is only the assertion of a thesis, then the teacher's mediation is all that's available by way of affirmation or dissent. There's nothing to talk about. It is desirable but not sufficient to create a class culture in which diversity of views is celebrated and disagreement encouraged. If there is to be something like a dialogue among views and not just an exchange of views, we have to enable students to make their points, not just have points.

And this concern applies to examining carefully the documents we ask students to read. To read for the thesis is another way of saying to read for understanding, something which is of course useful. But it is not sufficient because our challenge to students that they "read critically" is thus understood as simply reading to determine whether one agrees or disagrees with the thesis. What gets shortchanged in this process is reading for evidence: attending to the ways in which support is provided such that it makes the thesis possible in an evident way.

Now it has not escaped my notice that by all appearances nobody believes the positions I am articulating; I draw this

conclusion based on all that I have read in composition textbooks, in course syllabi, in explanations to students about what it means to "write well" in a discipline (or at least in this or that particular course). Based on all the obvious evidence available to me, I have clearly gotten it all mixed up. This is particularly embarrassing for me since I am arguing both that this is what is most important and that this is precisely what everyone believes, though I admit it is what we rarely say. When we teach writing we rarely say that we teach evidence, the process of supporting, testing, and complicating conclusions. We assume the importance of this work but we don't teach it. Taking it too much for granted, and so neglecting it, could be the source of the problem, because what students have to learn to do well in our courses is to find out what to look for that counts as evidence for their assertions. Sadly, they usually have to learn these crucial skills on their own because everyone is so occupied with rhetorical formalities that substitute for the substance of intellectual work at the university. In other words, theses are in fact subordinate to support; hypotheses to experiments; conclusions to the process of grappling with details and particulars to make them meaningful. While the heart of the essay may in its form appear to be the thesis, the heart of the work (and so of writing in the academy) is the support. I should rephrase that and say that the heart of academic writing is the process of supporting, testing, and complicating theses, not just having them. If we could teach students to do this work—and like their teachers love it—we would really be preparing them for writing in college.

Yours sincerely,

Jim



John Sweetland, Ejner Jensen, John Whittier-Ferguson, Tobin Siebers