

The Role of the Media in Distinguishing Composition from Rhetoric

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In his 1963 piece "Language Is Sermonic," Richard Weaver decries the manner in which rhetoric seems to have lost its place as a prestigious academic subject. He says, "Beginners, part-time teachers, graduate students, faculty wives, and various fringe people are now the instructional staff of an art which was once supposed to require outstanding gifts and mature experience" (203). Forty years ago, then, Weaver is concerned both that the subject of rhetoric has lost some of its luster because it has been given over to less qualified and less invested personnel than was the case in the nineteenth century and that rhetoric has been given over to those less qualified because it had already lost some of its luster. Weaver suspects that the reason for this change is a result of the academy's, and indeed society's, turn away from humanistic thinking and toward scientific, empirical thinking. In these comments, I will briefly consider Weaver's position on the role of rhetoric in the academy and contrast it to some of Sharon Crowley's fairly recent thoughts on the role of rhetoric—more specifically, the required first-year course in composition—in the academy. Then I will look at how rhetoric or composition has been viewed in the public sphere because of media filters as described by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky.

According to Weaver, as we moved into the twentieth century, society had become less interested in people's abilities to discover truths about themselves and more interested in people's abilities to invent, test, and evaluate. In fact, Weaver points out in his earlier work, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, that science has benefited from society's turning certain words into "god terms." A god term is "an expression about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate" (212). Two god terms he discusses at length are directly related to science: progress and fact. Both concepts are observable and measurable. To Weaver's way of thinking, we have become too readily seduced by the idea that everything of consequence can be observed and measured, that everyone, along with the school children of the 1950s, is rushing toward science and math at the expense of the humanities. Consequently, we are comforted by expressions such as "Many scientists believe" or "According to a recent study."

In her 1998 book *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays*, Sharon Crowley addresses the issue of the purposes of the required first-year writing course, the direct descendent of the rhetoric course described by Weaver. Rather than make her point by referring to those who teach the course as "fringe people" as Weaver does, Crowley describes them as "undervalued, overworked, and underpaid" before going on to discuss the general state of powerlessness that many such teachers have in the university or college setting (5). Crowley believes that humanistic goals still drive the first-year writing course, despite the more vocal, pragmatic methods. However, Crowley says, "A fundamental assumption of this book is that a humanist approach to the first-year course is not the best approach to teaching composition" (13). She feels that the humanist approach tilts the scales too heavily in favor of literature, of consuming finished texts rather than of producing new ones. Ultimately, she argues that the requirement of the first-year writing course be abolished because the requirement fosters the attitude that it is a service to the "important" courses in the university; thus, its teachers and researchers are somehow of less worth than their colleagues. Moreover, the course's assigned task of providing proper writing instruction for every conceivable academic and professional

situation is impossible; thus the course is open to unwarranted criticism from the public, usually from news columnists and other public writers.

Space doesn't permit me to provide too many examples of disparaging remarks made in the press, but it seems as though those remarks regarding writing instruction, fueled primarily by George Will (against multiculturalism), Thomas Sowell (politically correct conformity), and Cal Thomas (general decline in higher ed) in the 1990s, have abated somewhat and have been replaced by columns about affirmative action, grade inflation and standardized testing. Such a utilitarian and objective view of education in general and communication in particular as represented by these columnists easily lends itself to attacks from those in the general public who wonder why writing students fail to achieve supposedly universal standards of proficiency and who worry that college writing instructors are using their classroom time to achieve other—and politically biased—ends. Because this view perpetuated by such columnists suggests that communication is fixed rather than fluid, the columnists provide themselves and their sympathetic audiences many occasions to lament the uselessness of current practices in writing instruction.

Conversely, Herman and Chomsky provide a study of language that underscores the ways in which language is already biased. They explain that language as expressed through media outlets is crafted—or slanted, to use that notorious term—to suit the purposes of the outlet and that outlet's audience. In order for the news to be consumed, it must appeal to the consumer. Moreover, it must fit the philosophy of the corporation that owns the outlet, be that NewsCorp, General Electric, or Disney.

Herman and Chomsky identify a propaganda model, replete with "god" terms naming the five filters through which information generally must pass as it is disseminated by the mass media (2). Two of the filters are particularly germane to this paper: marketability and anti-communism. For the sake of marketability, any news medium must evaluate its audience for "quality," or buying power. Then that medium can report to its shareholders and advertisers that its audience is not only substantial in number but also financially powerful. One way to attract a large audience, of course, is to highlight an issue—like writing instruction—that is of importance to many people and to their financial well being.

Another filter that Herman and Chomsky describe is the almost blind devotion to anti-communism (29). Their 1988 book illustrates that often political identities are created by determining how far removed one is from supporting communism, and certainly political fortune rises in correlation with distance from the appearance of communistic ideals. In the post-Berlin Wall, post-USSR American culture, however, there have been new devils to take the place of communism. Still, any movement that is seen as a threat to capitalism, to collecting rewards such as education, work experience, and so forth, is communism by default. Therefore, a faulty educational system would harm society in much the same way that communism was thought to, by attacking the economic base grounded in capitalism and personal advancement.

The line from the media seems to be that language is transparent, and the university's job is to polish the language to such a degree that whatever reality it refers to can be viewed clearly. The media, according to Hermann and Chomsky, circle around stories that provide evidence of a

generation's inability to meet the demands of the marketplace, and their audience is generally the previous generation, those who have somehow met those demands despite their schooling. Thus, many colleges and universities respond by employing the underpaid "fringe people" for the utility courses and the so-called "polishing" work of composition, avoiding the expense of tenure or tenure-track faculty who teach upper-level or graduate courses in rhetoric, and who don't see language as transparent at all. The split, then, between rhetoric and composition is fueled in part by the pressure of the public to force communications studies to produce tangible, measurable results of universal competencies.

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