

# Defining Advanced Composition: Contributions from the History of Rhetoric<sup>1</sup>

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But that use of wit and knowledge is to be allowed, which laboureth to make doubtful things certain, and not those which labour to make certain things doubtful.

So then that knowledge is worthiest which is charged with least multiplicity.

Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*

Francis Bacon ushers in the Enlightenment when in 1605 he equates *advanced* knowledge with uniformity and universal principles, with certainty, with the schematization of diverse phenomena under the rubric of "simple Forms or differences of things, which are few in number" (2.7: 96). Later in the seventeenth century, the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge would reaffirm the importance of reducing and containing the diversity of the world, reinforcing the prevailing belief that intellectual maturity coincides with order, perspicuity, and closure, and calling for a reform of language that would "reject all amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style, [and] return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men delivered so many *things*, in an almost equal number of *words*" (Sprat 113). In general, these and other influential post-Cartesians associate less advanced intellection with "kalendars of doubts" not yet "thoroughly sifted and brought to resolution" (Bacon 2.7: 103), and they associate advanced intellection with statements of manifest unity and coherence expressed in precisely controlled language.

This post-Cartesian conception of advanced knowledge remains dominant today and informs our definitions of advanced composition. An advanced composition course often differs from a beginning course in that the former emphasizes reading, research, and topics of greater breadth, difficulty, and complexity, and it demands greater rigor in managing and reducing the complex; advanced students, that is, must demonstrate mastery of closure and conventions, from the arrangement of a formal argument to the small particulars of MLA style and documentation. In departments outside English, advanced composition is often the

label for upper-division practice in a schematic professional or academic genre; the advanced composition course for business majors, for example, might be an internship in report writing. And sometimes, advanced composition courses merely emphasize theme-writing of the sort required by graduate competency tests or graduate-school hurdles like the LSAT, drilling students in the prototypical Introduction + Examples + Conclusion formula.<sup>2</sup> In short, the products of advanced writers are expected to be more "finished" and "polished" than those of beginners. Thus, advanced composition pedagogy seems to mirror Bacon's notion that intellectual maturity is connected to consistency, coherence, unity, certainty, and resolution. I intend to propose a definition of advanced composition that calls into question these virtues of closure, a definition which can be drawn from the works of rhetoricians since Antiquity. For example, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero distinguish "advanced" from "beginning" rhetors by associating the former with tolerance for ambiguity and intolerance for formulaic discourse and its precepts. All three rhetoricians identify their worst students with obedient mastery of stock forms and formulae, and the very form of their own rhetorical theories—wandering prose that frustrates students who want their rhetoric quick and easy—questions the virtue of single-mindedness. However, these rhetoricians' conceptions of advanced rhetoric have been largely ignored, and the history of rhetoric has presented these thinkers as advocates rather than opponents of homogenized, rule-managed writing.<sup>3</sup> Looking to Plato's *Phaedrus*, Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, and Cicero's *De Oratore*, we can define advanced composition as *the open intellectual play of multiple perspectives*, a definition later reaffirmed by Montaigne, Vico, and De Quincey, who follow in the tradition of the Ancients by emphasizing discursive license and continuing to define advanced composition as endless wondering.

### Classical Perspectives on Advanced Composition

Plato's *Phaedrus* and Cicero's *De Oratore* both posit the mature rhetor as a lover of dialogue and persistent questioning who demonstrates inconclusiveness and uncertainty. In both works, this mature rhetor is counterpoised with the students who want clear instructions and prefer summary to speculation. The *Phaedrus* of Plato's dialogue, for instance, craves unambiguous advice about discourse. He is confused by Socrates' two speeches (critiques of Lysias's speech on love) that extend and complicate the nature of both love and rhetoric:

**Socrates:** Would you like, then, to take that speech of Lysias you have with you and the ones I delivered and examine them for points which illustrate what we may call art and the lack of it?

**Phaedrus:** Oh yes, that would be splendid! For what we are saying now is too abstract. We need some workable examples.

**Socrates:** And by some special stroke of good fortune it looks as though the two speeches offer an illustration of how a man who knows the truth may play with words and lead his audience astray. It's the local divinities, Phaedrus, that I judge to be the cause of this; or perhaps the Muses' prophets, singing overhead, may

have breathed their inspiration into us; for I, at any rate, have no gift of speech.  
**Phaedrus:** All right, as you please. Just tell me what you mean! (262)

As Socrates continues to discuss the speeches on love, the responses of Phaedrus portray a student less interested in thinking things over than in merely assenting, whether he understands or not: "Yes"; "Of course"; "We certainly do"; "That's the way it is"; "Why, of course" (262-63). Phaedrus feigns complete understanding at every turn, revealing his strong desire for packaged knowledge and his impatience with being "led astray" from quick understanding by the intellectual play of Socrates, who knows that truth is broad and complex and can only be pursued through continual, irresolute dialogue. Further, Phaedrus is all too eager to admire the "outstanding quality" of Lysias's completeness: "Of all the points of the subject worthy to be enumerated, [Lysias] has neglected not one." But Socrates defines complete understanding as a worthy but impossible goal, approachable only through successive definition and division, in discourse that is always changing and that is "exactly attuned to every changing mood of the complicated soul." Truth is not reducible to summary; the investigation of truth is foreclosed by thinking, speaking, and writing that convert complexity and ambiguity to doctrine, that "lay down laws in written form." Writing that does not exploit the persistent curiosity (so striking in Socrates and so absent in Phaedrus) which defines philosophy "is a disgrace to the writer" (277).

Cicero echoes this theme in *De Oratore*, a dialogue that identifies intellectual accomplishment with the "knowledge of a vast number of things" refracted through a number of perspectives (1.5: 10). The mature orators Crassus and Antonius fill hours and days speculating on "the perfect orator," thereby demonstrating that this topic cannot be reduced to a system of precepts, and exasperating the students who are listening. By constructing his most inclusive work on rhetoric and eloquence as a dialogic drama of viewpoints, Cicero associates the accomplished rhetor—himself—with incessant, inconclusive discourse; and he dissociates himself from the younger Cicero who had written the formulaic *De Inventione* (1.2: 7), and from Sulpicius and Cotta, students who, like Plato's Phaedrus, want teachers to offer schematic advice amenable to efficient obedience.

Early in the dialogue, following Crassus's initial argument that the perfect orator must constantly pursue wide-ranging knowledge ("the reason and nature of every thing and of all sciences"), Antonius begins to respond that such a philosophical life is impractical: life is too short to occupy oneself with study, reflection, *and* action (1.18: 26). However, Antonius counters Crassus by demonstrating the breadth of his own intellect and experience and the power of his memory, thereby joining Crassus as one disinclined to take the efficient past way to a conclusion. For five excursive pages, Antonius reconstructs a past excursion to Athens, where he talked with "most learned men" who themselves recalled earlier gen-

erations of philosophers, reaching back to the origination of rhetoric with Corax and Tisias (1.18-21: 26-31). Thus, Antonius responds to Crassus in a dialogue recollecting another dialogue containing still further recollections of still other dialogues. Antonius's response is finally inconclusive and circular, ending where it had begun, with tribute to Crassus as the perfect orator.

The student Sulpicius protests that Crassus and Antonius should so "insensibly glide into a discourse of this kind" and asks to be taught "something worthy to be remembered . . . fully and exactly" (1.21: 30-31). When Crassus responds by further insisting that the accomplished rhetor must continually pursue unlimited knowledge, he is met with silence. Asked later to speak on the principles of style, Crassus digresses to a survey of Greek philosophy only to be met with another student demand for stock information, "the ordinary knowledge of common affairs" (3.36: 234). Through such conflicts between teachers and students, Cicero repeatedly associates "beginners" with a reductive view of rhetoric as an absolute system of set forms founded on "ordinary knowledge," and he associates "advanced" rhetors with a playful refusal to ossify thought and language.

A response to Plato and a sourcebook for Cicero, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* does not exploit dialogue as a genre but does make dialectical thinking a requirement for the rhetor who claims more than preceptive knowledge of the art. In his conclusion to the *Rhetoric*—"I have done; you all have heard; you have the facts; give your judgment" (1420b)—Aristotle suggests with a "textbook" peroration that rhetoric and judgment are simple matters of fact, adopting the very technique that orators find useful for closing debate and calling for an absolute verdict. Clearly, the attitude toward language and knowledge mimicked in this peroration is the same one we have seen in Phaedrus, Sulpicius, and Cotta, but it is an attitude that Aristotle refutes through the meandering irresolution that defines rhetoric in the *Rhetoric*. Aristotle's peroration leaves the dull novice with the comfortable illusion of closure and invites the more alert and curious to reconsider equating mastery with final pronouncements. The *Rhetoric* identifies rhetoric with inquiry: the function of rhetoric is "not so much to persuade, as to find out in each case the existing means of persuasion" (1355b). Sustained questioning—that habit of mind that contends with Aristotle's neat peroration—defines the style and substance of rhetoric:

The question whether a thing has or has not happened must be considered from the following points of view. . . . If a man was able and wished to do a thing, he has done it; for all men do a thing, when they are able and resolve to do it, for nothing hinders them. Further, if a man wished to do it and there was no external obstacle; if he was able to do it and was in a state of anger; if he was able and desired to do it; for men as a rule, whenever they can, do those things which they long for, the vicious owing to want of self-control, the virtuous because they desire what is good. (1392b)

For Aristotle, we can do no better than to require that students persist in

raising questions and practice "knowing" as inquiry. With a commentary that itself resists system and closure—full of always irresolute and incomplete lists of perspectives—Aristotle dissociates the aim, or "end," of rhetoric from final judgments.

### Assaults on the Classical Perspective

Despite the Ancients' warning mockery of eager decisiveness in their students, that quality receives continued emphasis in the formulary rhetoric and pedagogy that extend from the Hellenistic revisions of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* through the schools of imperial Rome and the medieval Church.<sup>4</sup> And the preference for language that maintains *established* knowledge gains popularity from the late Renaissance onward with the aggressive containment of philosophy and science. Peter Ramus's *Dialectic* (1546) is one of his influential assaults against broad and complex classical explications of rhetoric and logic. In response to a philosophical rhetoric whose "method" exploits the instability of knowledge, Ramus defines method in simple, absolute terms: "Method is . . . the arrangement of various things brought down from universal and general principles to the underlying singular parts, by which arrangement the whole matter can be more easily taught and comprehended" (Murphy 17).

In *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), Bacon refuses the strictly binary schemata that inform Ramus's construction of knowledge, but he echoes the call for an organized, methodized learning of truths that can be weighed, measured, and subordinated to universal and mechanical laws. Bacon associates immature learning with entertaining multiple truths: "Children at the first will call every woman mother, but afterward they come to distinguish according to truth, so experience, if it be in childhood, will call every philosophy mother, but when it cometh to ripeness, it will discern the true mother" (2.8: 104). Similarly, in *Discourse on Method* (1637), Descartes associates intellectual growth with the ability to reach uncontested conclusions.

Ramus, Bacon, and Descartes are founders of a powerful epistemology, adopted by the French Academy and the British Royal Society and leading to the association of ambiguity in thought and language with children and primitives. Hugh Blair supports this view in his tremendously popular *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres* (1783):

The Progress of Language . . . resembles the progress of age in man. The imagination is most vigorous and predominant in youth; with advancing years, the imagination cools, and the understanding ripens. Thus Language, proceeding from sterility to copiousness, hath, at the same time, proceeded from vivacity to accuracy; from fire and enthusiasm, to coolness and precision [and to] simple style, plain arrangement. Language is become, in modern times, more correct, indeed, and accurate. (1.6. 124)

### Sustaining a "Renegade" Tradition

While classical emphases on open discourse as the sign of intellectual

maturity still go unrecognized as civilization "advances," the equation of closure with ignorance has been pressed on by thinkers whose influence on education is, unfortunately, negligible. Following Ramus and preceding Bacon, Michel de Montaigne in *Essays* (composed and revised from 1572 through 1588, and first translated into English in 1603) continues the classical parody of the Phaedruses among us, who associate intellectual progress with patterned language:

They keep us four or five years learning to understand words and stitch them into sentences; as many more, to mold them into a great body, extending into four or five parts; and another five, at least, learning how to mix and interweave them briefly in some subtle way. (1.26: 124-25)

Writing here in "Of the Education of Children," Montaigne identifies the typical student of advanced composition as the master of a formula, as one whose education culminates in the facile rearrangement of standard rhetorical parts. Montaigne's own "development" culminates in insistent uncertainty, reiterated throughout his final essay, "Of Experience": "The inference that we try to draw from the resemblance of events is uncertain, because they are always dissimilar: there is no quality so universal in this aspect of things as diversity and variety" (3.13: 815). Diversity of experiences and ideas makes all assertions uncertain and fragile; further, positing any inference as more advanced or correct insists that language accommodates certainty. For Montaigne, language mocks certainty:

I ask what is "nature," "pleasure," "circle," "substitution." The question is one of words, and is answered in the same way. "A stone is a body." But if you pressed on: "And what is a body?"—"Substance."—"And what is substance?" and so on, you would finally drive the respondent to the end of his lexicon. We exchange one word for another word, often more unknown. . . . To satisfy one doubt, they give me three; it is the Hydra's head. (818-19)

Rejecting the language of disciplined judgments as fraudulent, Montaigne allies the strongest intellect with the endless generation of new perspectives:

It is only personal weakness that makes us content with what others or we ourselves have found out in this hunt for knowledge. An abler man will not rest content with it. . . . It is a sign of contraction of the mind when it is content, or of weariness. A spirited mind never stops within itself; it is always aspiring and going beyond its strength; it has impulses beyond its powers of achievement. . . . It is an irregular, perpetual motion, without model and without aim. Its inventions excite, pursue, and produce one another. (817-18)

Celebrating generative, variegated, unsystematic writing, Montaigne offers an implicit rebuttal of Ramus and rejects in advance Bacon's valorization of coherent knowledge.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Giambattista Vico begins a direct and explicit critique of Descartes. As Professor of Rhetoric at the

University of Naples, Vico delivers a speech, *On the Study Methods of Our Time* (1708), in which he cautions against the prevalence of Cartesian analytics, whose mastery he associates with adolescents whose narrow minds keep them from mature, copious discourse. Emphasizing the importance of topical invention (14), Vico proposes that students immersed in "the totality of sciences and arts" and aware that "probabilities are many" can contribute vitality to an intellectual community. Like the Ancients' students that he describes, Vico's ideal students would not practice the insolent ignorance or obedient silence typical of those controlled by formulaic knowledge:

They would not feel the impulse to step rashly into discussions while they are still in the process of learning; nor would they, with pedestrian slavishness, refuse to accept any viewpoint unless it has been sanctioned by a teacher. . . .

A five-year period of silence was enjoined upon all of Pythagoras' students. After that time, they were allowed to maintain what they had learned, but had to ground their reasons only upon the authority of their master. "He said it," was their motto. The chief duty of a student of philosophy was to listen. (19-20)

Identifying Descartes with Pythagorean learning and himself with the topical imagination exploited by Aristotle, Vico proposes that the conflict between ambitious ignorance and the art of wondering is not new, and he yearns for teachers and students who define intellectual progress as an ever-widening sense of complexity, aware that "nature and life are full of incertitude" (15).

By the early nineteenth century, when advanced education in rhetoric was identified with the "perspicuity and precision" stressed continually in Blair's *Lectures*, Thomas De Quincey eulogizes the "renegade" tradition I have surveyed here:

The rhetorician's art in its glory and power has silently faded away before the stern tendencies of the age; and, if, by any peculiarity of taste or strong determination of the intellect, a rhetorician *en grande costume* were again to appear amongst us, it is certain that he would have no better welcome than a stare of surprise as a postur maker or balancer, not more elevated in the general estimate, but far less amusing, than the acrobat, or funambulist, or equestrian gymnast. No; the age of Rhetoric, like that of Chivalry, has passed among forgotten things. (97)

De Quincey's own prose demonstrates the "inversions, evolutions, and harlequin changes" that define the lost art of rhetoric as he admits the futility of making or finding those rhetors whom Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Montaigne, and Vico would call masters of the art—rhetors for whom composition is "progress and motion, everlasting motion" (129). De Quincey looks into the nineteenth century of industry and science—and beyond, to the reign of bureaucracy and technology today—when he concludes that the "urgency of public business" makes virtues of efficiency and conviction and insists that "where conviction begins, the field of rhetoric ends" (82).

### Dialogic Writing in Advanced Composition

The theorists I have discussed posit advanced thinking and writing as the opposites of ready conviction, and they challenge those of us who teach advanced composition to reconsider what our subject is and how it might be taught. Notably, each identifies close-mindedness in students and teachers with closed rhetorical forms, and each would replace the mechanical recitation of divisions and subdivisions with prose that moves through variegated substance. Further, the writing of each suggests that dialogue—understood as an interplay of voices and perspectives taking place in the mind of a single narrator (as with Aristotle, Montaigne, Vico, De Quincey) or among several characters (as with Plato and Cicero)—creates the dynamic rhetoric of open discourse; dialogic writing necessarily evades the consistency, coherence, and blindness of an insistent "thesis."

Teaching advanced composition may mean introducing "new" genres that require and enfranchise dialogic writing; the most obvious of these genres is the dialogue itself. Perhaps we need to encourage our advanced students to engage in their own dialogic writing. For example, the following is a dialogue assignment that encourages students to keep an issue alive; the definition of advanced composition that I have followed through the history of rhetoric is implicit in the topic and constraints for this assignment. Writing is identified with the "unexplored, unsettled, ambiguous, or confusing," so that our student writers—following Plato—practice

#### The Dialogue

**Topic:** An unexplored, unsettled, ambiguous, or confusing element of a subject that matters.

#### *Characters*

- 1) Three experts on your topic, each with a different viewpoint. These are *real* experts, with significant reputations and published work (which you have reviewed).
- 2) Two curious, critical, undecided students with a substantial interest in the topic.

#### *Constraints*

- 1) No one makes stupid or uncharacteristic statements.
- 2) No one wins; that is, no one view finally seems more intelligent, persuasive, or inclusive than the others.
- 3) Each character speaks at least three times, for at least half a page at each turn.
- 4) The experts occasionally quote or paraphrase themselves or each other; each character is familiar with the others' published work.
- 5) No one delivers "throwaway" lines or transitions, such as "How true, tell me more."
- 6) Each character's words are planned and crafted. This is thoughtful, deliberate writing, neither spontaneous nor casual, as if the characters had revised and edited their spoken words for publication (see, for instance, the occasional dialogues that have appeared in the "Forum" section of recent issues of *Harper's*).



writing as *engaged ignorance*. However, maintaining that ignorance means *research*; only by "piling up" (Montaigne's term) substantial and inconsistent propositions can students continue to think and defer its opposite—thoughtlessness. The students' research must be comprehensive rather than "focused"—their minds filled with a drama of voices.

In line with the letter and the spirit of the historical texts I have surveyed, this assignment insists upon *substance* while discouraging a particular *stance*. Further, with its emphasis on planned discourse, it encourages license without vagueness; thus, students are warned against words which "tumble out under the blindest accidents of the moment" (De Quincey 142). Following Aristotle and Cicero, they must know all sides of an issue. Following Vico, they must create a *sensus communis*, or common sense, by enlarging the lexicon of viewpoints that comprise human history and decisions. Following De Quincey, they must set aside conviction to practice rhetoric.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>I present some of the points in this essay more extensively in *The Art of Wondering*, without a focus on advanced composition.

<sup>2</sup>In the California State University system, for example, upper-division writing proficiency is required for graduation and has been measured by either a timed theme-writing test or in courses in formulaic composition. In either case, advanced writing proficiency is identified with efficient, regimented thinking.

<sup>3</sup>Knoblauch and Brannon present the classical tradition as many commentators throughout the centuries have portrayed it: as a collection of narrow, long-irrelevant rules and procedures. (See especially Chapter 2.)

<sup>4</sup>The pseudo-Ciceronian *Ad Herennium*, which identifies composition and oratory with strict arrangement, was the prototypical rhetoric throughout the Middle Ages.

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