

# Comp Quickreads

CSULA Department of English

May 31, 2010

## Joining the Cadre

### Comp Quickread Topics I Never Got To (until now)

The following topics were on my list at the beginning of the year, but never made it into print.

#### Plagiarism and Other Crimes

—I liked the title but never got around to the subject, which is too bad given the prominence of and misconceptions attached to plagiarism. The short version is that a first-year writing class is where a student is supposed to learn about plagiarism and how to avoid it. In a first-year writing class plagiarism is almost always a teachable moment.

#### Is There a Place for Timed Writing?

—I chose to avoid this topic because my answer is not constructive. I would argue that there *is* a place for timed writing and that should dishearten us. High-stakes timed writing is the site of our devil's bargain with the institution's need for easy assessment, which in turn rewards the glib and superficial and punishes the deliberate and thoughtful.

#### The Five Paragraph Essay Must Die

—I wonder what I intended to do with this topic? In reality, quite reasonable people argue for the utility of giving students temporary "crutches." Increasingly I feel that these and other shortcuts are almost like an abdication of teaching, a cynical or frustrated admission that some (or all) people cannot over time improve their writing. That timed writing is often invoked as justifying the teaching of the five paragraph essay is merely another indictment of timed writing.

Against all odds, we find ourselves again at the end of the school year, still open for business and still doing extraordinary work everyday. As my second year as composition coordinator draws to a close, I find myself reflecting on our composition program and the "dedicated cadre of faculty" who teach first-year writing.

That quote is found on the department's web site and in the most recent departmental program review self-study. While I am the author of both, I didn't write that phrase. In fact, when I first encountered it I stumbled at the word *cadre*, which struck me as a bit of English department flourish in the midst of bureaucratic emptiness. For me, *cadre* was a little too redolent of the military, of Navy SEALs and strike forces and elite teams on special missions. But the more I thought about it, the more I came to like this word. First, our teachers of writing *are* a cadre, a core team, an elite and highly skilled group with special expertise. They are also, in another meaning of the word, akin to revolutionary zealots—they are absolutely sure of the value of what they do even when that value is not always acknowledged by others. And let's be honest, we are at war with university administrators, with accrediting agencies, with our Chancellor's office, with public perception, and even with other parts of our own campus. We are at war with bad ideas and reduced funding, with shortcuts and cynicism, with well-intentioned policies and ill-intentioned mandates. In short, we need a cadre now more than ever.

I have also been thinking about what I'm going to do with my free time. (cynical laughter) My two years as composition coordinator will end this term, and while I have already started my new assignment as (once again) WPE director I know from experience that running the once a

quarter WPE is nothing compared with "coordinating" (whatever that means?!) a large and successful first-year writing program, an impossible undertaking I might add if not for a dedicated cadre of faculty. Besides everything else, these weekly *Comp Quickreads* have occupied much more of my time than I ever expected. I have learned a great deal both from preparing them and from the responses I have received. And I have been gratified by the responses, even the teasing (I think) by Margaret and David who queried each other in the hallway "Isn't that the author of the *Comp Quickreads*!" One reader noted with either awe or indignation, "How do you manage to treat every topic in the same number of words?" Some were quick to challenge my claims and call me on my at times simple and reductive thinking. Since my primary purpose in writing these weekly missives was to start or renew a conversation about what we do and how we do it, each response suggests that we have started that conversation and I hope we never tire of it.

Perhaps the more important purpose behind these short articles has been to begin to suggest the depth and complexity of writing and the teaching of writing. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, many very intelligent people believe that writing either can be taught by anyone or cannot be taught at all. Our students know first-hand the falseness of both of these claims, but like Obama's birth certificate or the five paragraph essay some ideas survive and even flourish in absolute and perverse contradiction of all logic and evidence. The truth is simple and inconvenient: writing and writing instruction take time; effective teachers of writing have expertise and experience; and a successful writing program cannot exist without a dedicated cadre of teachers.