



**The Function of Theory in  
Composition Studies**

**Raúl Sánchez**

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*for my family*

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## The Current State of Composition Theory

The function of theory in composition studies is to provide generalized accounts of what writing is and how it works. These accounts can both guide and derive from the results of empirical research and, in the case of student writing, from classroom practice. Contrary to the beliefs of some composition theorists, it is possible and, more importantly, necessary for composition studies to have an agenda for inquiry comprised of theory and empirical research in a mutually informing relationship. What is required is for all involved to acknowledge the necessarily contingent nature of both theory and empirical research. As Carol Berkenkotter pointed out long ago, the argument against empiricism is more appropriately directed at positivism, and as such it is one with which many empirical researchers in composition studies would agree (70). Once we, as theorists and researchers, have dispensed with any residual legacies of positivism, we should be able to proceed in good faith with the business of the field: to study writing by methodically observing and analyzing the many and varied instances of it (i.e., empirical research) and by making warranted, general, and possibly predictive statements about it (i.e., theory).

Of course, I have just described an ideal world of neatly drawn and readily agreed-upon categories. The real world of

scholarly inquiry is more complicated, more contested, and considerably more interesting than is the platonic scene depicted above. In composition studies, the boundary between those activities called “empirical research” and “theory” is on occasion breached, and to good effect. For example, an empirical researcher such as Linda Flower generalizes her findings in light of theory, and she explicitly frames her research according to theoretical formulations. Likewise, a theorist such as Susan Miller has brought considerable theoretical insight to bear on archival material.<sup>1</sup>

But such examples of our field’s potential for methodological richness and theoretical variety are exceptions rather than the rule. For some time, composition theory has been largely irrelevant to empirical research, and vice versa. The two seem to have little to do with each other. When empiricists need theory with which to ground their research, they seem to go elsewhere, lately to activity theory and other work outside of composition studies. Likewise, practitioners of composition theory often take it for granted that their colleagues’ empirical research has little to offer them, so they do not even read it. This split may be long-standing, but I believe it deepened in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when composition theory began to develop as an independent discourse.

As its title indicates, this book is about composition theory: its condition and prospects. It is an extended analysis of the consequences of a dominant theoretical disposition in the field, which I will begin to discuss below. It is also an argument for a different theoretical disposition. Of course, I hope that my argument will persuade composition theorists to think differently about their work than they currently might. And I hope it will allow composition theory and empirical research to interact more fully. Finally, I am interested in making it possible for composition theory to offer better descriptions of writing, accounts that better match the textual realities many people experience today, realities that increasingly outmoded adjectives such as “modern” and “postmodern” no longer capture. Toward these ends, then,

this book makes a somewhat ironic argument: namely, that the period of composition theory's ascendance coincides with its having stopped making trenchant theoretical statements about writing. The proliferation of composition theory, beginning in the early 1990s, was marked primarily by articles and books that applied existing theories from outside of composition studies to issues in composition studies, but it did not offer many genuinely new theoretical perspectives on writing.

Throughout this book, I will show how a very familiar and now inaccurate model of writing has persisted doggedly in composition theory despite the boom of the 1990s, despite the significant increase in the amount and variety of theoretical discourse in the field. I examine some key concepts that have informed composition theory since that time, showing how and why they did not result in different theories of writing. And, in a theoretical departure from the implicit premises of that work, I identify *theory* as a function of writing. In terms of our usual categories for thinking about theoretical issues, I consider my approach to writing and to theory itself to be neither essentialist nor anti-essentialist, neither modern nor postmodern. Such categories occupy the terrain of hermeneutics. And hermeneutics, I will argue, poses a major obstacle to the study of writing. In fact, a dependence on hermeneutics and its corollary, representation, characterizes the composition theory I wish to examine. This dependence limits composition theory's ability to describe the function and nature of writing in an increasingly networked world. In this world, the most striking features of writing are its sheer proliferation and its constant, rapid circulation. Neither hermeneutics nor a paradigm of representation is capable of recognizing, much less describing, the implications for writing of such an environment. In fact, this thoroughly ingrained hermeneutic disposition limits composition theory's ability to characterize writing as anything more than a technology of representation, a means by which to either transmit or generate that which is considered noumenal, abstract, or conceptual. In the chapters that follow, I will show how this disposition manifests in the

field's understanding of writing's relationship to concepts of *knowledge*, *ideology*, and *culture*, each of which has, in different ways, played formative roles in the development of composition theory since the late 1980s and early 1990s. Along the way, and then explicitly in the final chapter, I will argue that composition theory can break with the hermeneutic disposition and the paradigm of representation by acknowledging that traditional, conceptual tools for thinking about writing are instead products and functions of writing. This revisionist theory will also have the added benefit, I hope, of helping develop future empirical research, thus bringing into productive dialogue the two major branches of inquiry in composition studies.

### The Problem of Hermeneutics

In the simplest terms, we can describe the hermeneutic disposition as the steadfast and persistent belief in a consequential difference between words and things. In composition studies, most theoretical work subscribes to this belief and, in turn, to the assumption that writing's most salient feature is its ability to represent *something else*, something that is not itself related fundamentally to writing or language. In contrast, I take representation neither as writing's signature function, nor as an ontological given (as literary studies seems to do), but as a structural component within a general system of discursive circulation and dissemination. From this perspective, the function of composition studies, and of composition theory in particular, is to describe and explain all features of that general system. Such a mandate would compel composition theory to reaffirm writing as its object of study, and to reject a narrow emphasis on representation as the conceptual and analytical core of its project. In other words, the function of theory in composition studies would be to attend to more than just the politics of representation.

This reaffirmation of writing is necessary due to the current state of composition theory. In the place of writing, concepts

such as knowledge, ideology, and culture have claimed composition theory's attention as scholars have tried to explain how they appear to work through discourse. But it is a crucial theoretical mistake to assume that such concepts are fundamentally distinct from writing, that words and things are basically distinct even when closely intertwined. In doing so, we inadvertently take up familiar Platonic and Cartesian perspectives rather than generating perspectives that would be more appropriate to the conditions of Western civilization in the twenty-first century. As a result, composition theory is currently unable to account for the force and function of writing in a world that bears little relation to the one fantasized by hermeneutic theorists of the twentieth century, such as Hans Georg Gadamer, from whom so much of the current hermeneutic disposition is derived.

This chapter in particular attends to the "writtenness" of theory in order to frame the specific examinations undertaken elsewhere in the book. In claiming that knowledge, ideology, and culture are best considered not as ontological or epistemological concepts but as effects or products of writing, I am trying to make two points. First, I am offering a critique of certain theoretical assumptions about key terms in composition theory. Second and simultaneously, I am arguing for a different approach to writing—to the act or phenomenon of writing—than composition theory has put forth to date. By identifying *as* writing the theoretical apparatus brought to bear *on* writing, I hope not only to revise the particular components of that apparatus but also to re-envision the enterprise of composition theory. I want to propose a different theoretical practice, one predicated on a different, non-hermeneutic description writing. That is, I want to propose another disposition, a different way of writing and otherwise operating theoretically.

So, while the book as a whole proposes a different theoretical disposition toward writing, this chapter in particular urges a new approach to theory. Rearticulating both will require a good deal more than the familiar admission that most human activity requires or takes place through or in written or otherwise



signifying discourse. It will require more than a newly invigorated Writing Across the Curriculum theory, or any other theory that understands writing as either a medium or generator of *something else* that, in the end, is not the same as writing. For example, it will require the rejection of the belief that writing shapes thought in favor of the understanding that *thought* is itself a term, usually honorific, attached retrospectively to always-already-written texts: a term that, in turn, directs present and future uses and transformations (themselves always written) of these texts. In other words, describing writing in the way I am proposing will require composition theory to commit itself to textuality more thoroughly than it has in the recent past. It will require us to relentlessly and scrupulously bracket all *ideas*, to place in quotation marks (or italics) every deeply seated and casually assumed *concept*, even those around which composition studies has formed its intellectual and professional identity, such as *rhetoric* and *the subject*, which will be the topics of chapter 5, while chapters 2, 3, and 4 will address in detail knowledge, ideology, and culture, respectively. Each will be subjected to what I will call grammatological scrutiny.

### Grammatology and Writing

My interest in reformulating composition theory around a non-hermeneutic description of writing draws heavily on Derrida's earlier writings. Some might consider this work to be dated. After all, it is by now common to suppose that the lessons of what is called deconstruction have been thoroughly learned and even internalized by English studies and in the hermeneutically disposed quarters of composition theory. Scholars and theorists frequently claim to have "deconstructed" this or that concept, which act usually amounts, however, to some traditional form of ideological or philosophical critique. What passes for deconstruction is often little more than the familiar modernist

tactic of debunking or demystifying. In this way, deconstruction has been assimilated and domesticated into composition studies.

Derrida's early texts claim that writing is a paradigmatic human activity.<sup>2</sup> As he notes in *Of Grammatology*, writing "designate[s] not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible; and also, beyond the signifying face, the signified face itself" (9). A grammatological approach to writing proposes that writing itself underlies all the conceptual, theoretical, philosophical, and even rhetorical activity habitually brought to bear on writing, as well as on terms such as *language* and *discourse*. It argues that concepts in which composition theorists regularly traffic—*knowledge*, *ideology*, *culture*, and also *rhetoric* and *the subject*—are best approached not as concepts at all but as examples of, enactments of, writing.

One could, of course, argue that the force of Derrida's argument is diminished by the fact that he differentiates between two kinds of writing. On the one hand there is "arche-writing," an abstract (i.e., "non-empirical," to use his term) concept that sets in motion the very mechanisms of signification. It is, according to Derrida, "that very thing which cannot let itself be reduced to the form of presence" (57). On the other hand there is "the vulgar concept of writing," or "writing in the narrow sense," which derives from speech and is a product or function of logocentrism (56). According to Derrida, through acts of "historical repression" the vulgar or narrow form of writing has stood in for arche-writing, has been presented as the only possible kind of writing in order to conceal the writtenness of human activity (56). Thus, one could argue, arche-writing is not really writing, as people in composition studies understand it.

Furthermore, one could argue that Derrida's differentiation between arche-writing and narrow writing limits his work's usefulness for composition studies precisely because our field works with the latter rather than the former, which Derrida himself claims "cannot and can never be recognized as the object of a science" (57). Or, one might take the opposite stance and claim

that arche-writing, rather than narrow writing, is precisely the main thing to which composition studies should attend, that this catalyst of signification is the rightful province of a field that means to point out the writtenness of and in the world.

Each of these arguments rests on the assumption that the difference between the abstract “arche-writing” and the empirical, “narrow writing” in Derrida’s text is rigid and absolute. To be sure, Derrida’s theory requires the nonempirical “arche-writing” because it views empiricism suspiciously as a feature of phonocentrism and logocentrism. It sees the subject-object relationship required by and for empiricism as not being an ontological given, as not comprising the natural order of things. “Arche-writing,” or writing-in-general, is completely abstract, and because of this, postmodern composition theorists might focus on it at the expense of the empirical version of writing, thus moving away from considerations of the temporal, material act that leaves behind evidence of its having occurred. Arche-writing describes, according to Sharon Crowley, “human in-scription on the world’s surface” (4). As such, it can easily apply to any and all semiotic activity. Furthermore, any and all human activity can be described as semiotic, so one is always arche-writing.

But composition studies knows—or should know—that the details of the relation between arche-writing and narrow writing can be explored, both abstractly and empirically. Doing so might involve intentionally blurring the differences between the two, especially as their relations are pursued empirically, and as one tries to assign empirical dimensions to Derrida’s theory of writing. Derrida claims that grammatology cannot be a “positive science,” that it has no proper object of study precisely because the subject-object conceptual system is in question (*Grammatology* 74). But precisely because of grammatology, composition theory can recognize and elaborate the writtenness of the empiricist impulse in order to rearticulate empiricism itself as a form of writing. This in turn allows the notion of an “object of study” to become tactical rather than epistemo-ontological.

By redefining concepts as discursive tactics within a general framework of writing, composition theory can move closer toward explaining what writing is and how writing works in the world. Writing happens, and composition researchers can watch it happen and make claims about it, or they can look at the artifacts it leaves behind and make claims about writing as a result. To do so with the disposition for which this book argues is to map the ways in which, for example, an act of writing can be considered a contingent and impossible attempt to fix meaning. It is to show how acts of writing try to present presence, the supposed existence of which is known only through prior acts of writing. This is perhaps most clearly the case in the writing of academic disciplines, which, according to Jonathan Culler, “must suppose the possibility of solving a problem, finding the truth, and thus writing the last words on a topic” (90). But it is equally the case in the economy of such forms of writing as e-mail, or any other genre in which the idea of “the last word” lingers, explicitly or implicitly.

But in most current composition theory, writing is not theorized in this way. In fact, writing is undertheorized when discussed at all. In its place are offered alternative terms such as *discourse*, *language*, or *signification*, which are variously thought to have more explanatory power than writing. Discourse, in particular, with its Foucauldian resonance, is intended to cover a broader range of culturally embedded signifying functions. Its scope is thought to exceed that of writing.

The motive for such substitutions is understandable. Many composition theorists have sought to connect our field’s interests to the cultural practices that comprise an increasingly complex, interconnected, and written world. They have rightly found fault with theories that attend to writing as though it were a discrete activity. And so in an effort to broaden the range, applicability, and potential influence of composition studies, they have changed the object of study on the assumption that the category of *writing* alone cannot describe the theoretical and cultural situations they see before them.

But writing can and does do this work. Furthermore, a reinvestment in writing might contribute to a revival of humanistic inquiry, and therefore of descriptions of human activity, all accounting for writtenness. *Writing* is almost exclusively our field's term, in ways that *discourse*, *language*, and *signification* are not. Turning the field's intellectual and disciplinary gaze back to writing gives composition studies the ability to articulate writing in new ways. It certainly gives composition studies the chance to move beyond the pervasive paradigm of representation with which the rest of English studies has been so long taken. It permits us to describe writing in different terms than it has heretofore been described.

In asserting that composition studies needs a different disposition toward writing, I recognize, as I noted above, that *theory* is itself a difficult term. I acknowledge that if what I am saying about writing is the case, then there probably is no theory as such, and that rather than theory there is instead writing that comes to be called theory. But the implications of such a predicament are themselves worth exploring, because most of us in composition studies continue to approach theory unproblematically from these outworn Cartesian perspectives that underwrite the representational paradigm. The old rugged *cogito*—the subject with a “mind” capable of perceiving objects “more rigorously and more distinctly”—is so deeply entrenched in composition studies that it is only with difficulty that we recognize it as a subject position at all. We are like the “modern philosopher,” whom Dalia Judowitz describes as trying to approach Cartesian reality from a position outside of its long shadow but “whose worldview is so deeply imbued with the notion of subjectivity that it becomes impossible to envisage and describe its origins” (1). We firmly believe, despite our postmodern claims, in the presence of *something else* beyond the veil of language, and we have described it as being fundamentally apart from our language use, and we believe it to be theory's task to define and explain this noumenal realm. Consequently, our inquiries into writing are devoted to articulating the deep divide between the *cogito* and

the world. And despite revivals of alternative voices from rhetorical history, such as the Sophists and Giambattista Vico, as well as the decade-long espousal of postmodernism by prominent composition theorists, the field has done little to produce a theory of the writing act that does not carry the epistemic baggage of this Cartesian ideology, filtered most recently through the hermeneutic disposition.

The same problem obtains for our descriptions of the subject, which demands as much theorization as did the traditional reading subject of literary studies. In composition studies, this demand is met, as I will explain in chapter 4, beginning with Janet Emig's *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*, on to Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, through David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University," and finally to Susan Miller's *Rescuing the Subject*. But, so far, not beyond. These works remind composition studies of its unique project at the same time that they serve as emblems of its difference from the rest of English studies, a difference evident in debates over the field's proper modes of theorizing, which have ranged from an empiricism informed by the natural and social sciences to a rationalism informed by the humanistic disciplines of literary theory and modern philosophy.

### Composition's Theory

In light of the difficult theoretical situation I am describing in composition studies, it is disheartening to think of how long composition studies has been engaged with discourses of theory, considering the minimal effect this engagement has had. In fact, the familiar interpretation of composition's theoretical turn, as well as of its earlier empirical orientation, argues that theoretical and methodological diversity is one of the field's strengths. For example, Janice Lauer identifies composition's "multimodality" as a risky but ultimately beneficial characteristic, noting that the field "has maintained from the beginning what a number of

disciplines are just starting to admit—that many of their most important problems can be properly investigated only with multiple research methods” (25–26). But it is not clear whether this phenomenon, which Berkenkotter calls “epistemological ecumenicalism,” represents a novel attitude toward academic inquiry or a merely haphazard mingling of established theories and procedures (79). In particular, composition theory has exhibited a lack of rigor. As Lynn Worsham notes, many expressions of composition theory recklessly adopt postmodern terminology—including the term *postmodern*—without adequate reflection or contextualization (“Critical” 8). The field has been working at theory for too long to have gotten so little out of it.

For example, while landmark theoretical essays such as Maxine Hairston’s “The Winds of Change” and James Berlin’s “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” can be said to have taught the field to apply existing theories, they did not suggest how to write new ones. This absence is ironic, considering these essays’ influence on composition theory. Hairston’s may in fact have significantly helped cause the proliferation of composition theory that I am considering here. As we know, Hairston called for more empirical studies to be carried out for the purpose of solidifying what she saw as the field’s emerging sense of itself as a discipline. But while empirical studies might have been produced in response to her call, what is arguably most striking, memorable, and influential about that essay is its argumentative strategy. It borrows a theoretical concept from Thomas Kuhn and uses it to describe composition’s institutional disposition. Specifically, it puts forth the theoretical notion of the “paradigm shift.” In doing so, it inaugurates an enduring method for “doing” composition theory: take a term or concept from a more respected and respectable field such as philosophy and use it to illuminate some aspect of composition studies. Of course, this move was not novel; in the 1970s, people in composition studies had done the same with theory from the social sciences. And even the idea of borrowing from philosophy was not new. But Hairston did not test or otherwise interrogate her theoretical

framework before determining its applicability to composition's situation. She stated her understanding of Kuhn's concept and then simply asserted its relevance to the current state of the field. Soon there would be similar essays making similar moves but using different theorists from outside composition studies: Derrida, Foucault, Cixous, Wittgenstein, Irigaray, and so on.<sup>3</sup> The writer would summarize a concept and then assert that the concept shed light on a particular issue relevant to composition. Sometimes the application applied to a theoretical problem, sometimes a pedagogical or even administrative one.

James Berlin's equally influential article, "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," enacts a similar strategy, one that contributed to or at least exacerbated the split between theory and empirical research. By aligning what he called "cognitivist rhetoric" with capitalist ideology and the maintenance of an oppressive societal status quo, Berlin promoted a vision of composition that saw philosophical/ideological orientations as being embodied in particular research methods. The practitioners and researchers of cognitivist rhetoric, according to Berlin, were inevitably capitulating to the status quo by virtue of the kinds of questions they asked and the ways they set out to answer them. Berlin's strategy was straightforward: offer a short primer on Louis Althusser's theory of ideology and read current research in composition studies according to that framework. Thus, the essay was not, in itself, a new theoretical work on writing or discourse. Rather, it was an assertion of a relation between critical theory and composition practice. These forms of composition theory, of which Hairston's and Berlin's were only the most visible and persuasive examples, remain the predominant "methods" of theorizing in our field today.

Recently, Flower and others have reasserted the importance of empirically oriented theorizing.<sup>4</sup> Flower's "[o]bservation-based theory building" follows the lead of such feminist philosophers of science as Donna Haraway and Sonda Harding in their call to develop "more adequate images of objectivity" (106). According to Flower, objectivity is not what we thought it to be: an



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