

# TEXTBOOKS AND SUBTEXTS OR HOW TO CHOOSE A HANDBOOK

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Over twenty years ago, Walter E. Meyers pointed out that “no book touching so many students receives so little attention [as the handbook]” (“Handbooks” 716). In 1991, he reiterated his complaint: “how many teachers of freshman composition evaluate the handbook as carefully and thoroughly as they do the other textbooks they use?” (“Glossaries” 342). Meyers’s point is well taken. While most of us use complex criteria to evaluate course books generally, we tend to order our composition handbooks with less principled attention—perhaps choosing one, for example, because it “flip[s] open and stay[s] open.” We seldom consider what, beyond, say, uses of the semicolon and rules of documentation, handbooks teach our students. Yet handbooks teach our students a great deal, and what they teach is not neutral, but rather based on theories of writing and, indeed, theories of the world. I will, in this essay, argue for more careful evaluation of composition handbooks and offer a guide that should be useful in handbook selection.<sup>1</sup>

## Handbook Values and Measures

Defining the handbook is itself no easy task. Robert Connors describes the handbook as a “compendium of rules, models and exercises covering aspects of formal and syntactic convention” (87); he goes on to document the appearance of the rhetoric *cum* handbook, the handbook *cum* rhetoric, and the

full-sized text “masquerading” as handbook. The books we call “handbooks,” then, are various: some, like Donna Gorell’s *A Writer’s Handbook from A to Z*, are more or less pure “compendia”; others, like Laurie Kirszner and Stephen Mandell’s *The Holt Handbook*, are more ambitious, more comprehensive, and after a bigger share of the market.

Consistent with the theory of Carolyn Miller, Charles Bazerman, and others, in which genre is viewed as social action, my definition of handbooks is less formal than functional: handbooks are the texts we order primarily so our students have a resource on matters of grammar, usage, and other conventions of English; their *social* purpose is to standardize student writing.<sup>2</sup> While any handbook may have some of the discursive sections of a more elaborate composition textbook or rhetoric, it is a handbook by virtue of its doubly referential function: students refer to it, and it refers to an apparently external system of language.

The definition of handbooks as referential reveals a peculiarity of the genre: these are texts written to be *used* rather than *read*. And matching the fact that handbooks have no readers *per se* is the fact that they also, in a sense, have no authors. Ross Winterowd warns us against “generic” textbooks, “put together by in-house staffs after editors and publishers have scoured the profession for ideas” (414), but even handbooks more traditionally written become authorless, as they are commonly identified by publisher rather than by author, by agency rather than by agent. “The St. Martin’s,” “the Harbrace,” and “the Prentice-Hall” are a few examples.<sup>3</sup>

An effect of the readerless, authorless, and seemingly referential nature of handbooks is that we tend to see them as basically interchangeable. Although handbooks are reviewed from time to time in the professional literature, even reviewers, for the most part, seem willing to take them at face value. For example, Meyers himself comments on competing claims among handbooks with respect to the identification of usage errors (“Glossaries”). A typical observation of Dennis Shramek’s is that a particular author refers to adjectives, adverbs, and phrases before he has explained what they are (273).

Like Meyers and Shramek, most of us use pragmatic, explanation-based criteria for evaluating handbooks: Is the book complete? Do its explanations make sense? Are explanations followed by good examples? Are individual entries easy to find and not bogged down in terminology from other entries? And so on.<sup>4</sup> If these criteria are met, handbook selection frequently has nothing at all to do with the merit of a text: Will the book arrive on time if it is ordered late? Is it relatively inexpensive? Is it light enough for students to carry to class? These are not irrelevant questions, but they are not questions we ask as readily in the course of other textbook ordering. Indeed, some of us are so uninterested in the relative merits of handbooks that we do not order a set for our students at all, but rather ask students to buy something “comprehensive,” and suggest titles of a number of handbooks, available perhaps at used-book stores, that might be comprehensive enough.

Some instructors simply do not use handbooks, perhaps refusing their foundational or prescriptive claims. In a most persuasive diatribe, now almost thirty years old, James Moffett rejects all composition textbooks, objecting to the very notion that “the output of writing must be preceded and accompanied by pedagogical output” (201). Many instructors who do use handbooks do so reluctantly, perhaps thinking of them as somewhat pedagogically incorrect, handbooks seeming to belong to an era of *product* as opposed to *process* and therefore *passé*. Some of us, that is, want our students to have handbooks for the very reasons we disdain them: we don’t want to deal with rules and their violations; and if we can refer students with particular needs to the appropriate pages of a suitable handbook, we won’t have to.

Our ambivalence about using handbooks, along with our willingness to see them as interchangeable, has been both cause and effect of a devaluation of the genre. In the absence of clearly articulated handbook values, our sense of what might constitute a suitable handbook has been determined by the salience of the texts themselves (we have trouble imagining a handbook different from the ones we know) and by publishers who seem not only to fulfill but also to create the criteria that inform our handbook choices. Bedford/St. Martin’s “Flips

Open . . . Stays Open” campaign, which I alluded to earlier, exemplifies the case of a publisher creating, and then fulfilling, a criterion for selection. We need, therefore, to develop evaluation criteria that challenge the handbook genre, and even attempt to reform it, so that those of us who elect to assign a handbook can find one somewhat consistent with what and how we teach. More important, if we, in selecting handbooks, ignore the theories of writing that inform them, we run the risk of giving our students messages about writing we do not mean to give—messages we only seem, by our assignment of a particular text, to endorse.

When we select handbooks, then, we should approach them not only with the usual local questions about comma coverage and terminological turns, but also with more global questions. We may ask, for example, with respect to each text, (1) what constitutes the act of writing? (2) what constitutes good writing? and (3) who writes—and why? The remainder of my essay considers these questions to suggest a guide to handbook selection.

## **What constitutes the act of writing?**

Most full-length handbooks treat “the writing process,” and some contain fairly lengthy discussions of composing as a complex, recursive, and even social act. Of the fifteen handbooks of various sizes and descriptions I surveyed for this project, twelve begin with a chapter or chapters on the writing process. However, the treatment of process in the designated process chapters of a handbook constitutes only part of its message about process. The rest of the message is formed in the portrayal of the act of writing in the hardcore handbook chapters of the book—the chapters on grammar, punctuation, and mechanics—and in the relationship between what the process chapters claim explicitly and what the rhetoric of the text claims implicitly.

Traditionally, handbooks were internally consistent by virtue of being recognizably prescriptive throughout. They said, essentially, “if you follow these simple steps and obey these simple rules, you will produce a successful piece of writing.” Handbooks were not alone in this kind of

prescription, for “rhetorics” no less than “handbooks” gave advice so coyly simple as to be useless—for example, “When you write, you should sound like yourself. How does a writer do this? The answer is, by not sounding like someone else” (Winkler and McCuen 22). Recently, some handbooks have abandoned the internal consistency of prescribing a simple formula for success, thereby exchanging one kind of fallacy for another: they recommend a messy authorial process full of choice in some chapters and a series of choiceless prescriptions in others. Frank O’Hare and Edward Kline’s *The Modern Writer’s Handbook*, for example, describes writing as a “complex process whose parts are unpredictable because writers tend to develop their own distinct processes as they grow in experience” (6); however, complexity is not an important theme when the process chapters end. Then the authors dispense advice that seems not only to ignore complexity but also to proscribe it. They state, for example, “Whenever you write, the most basic decision you have to make about diction is whether to use formal or informal English” (294).

It is possible, of course, for handbooks to give more consistent messages about composing, with a process focus throughout. For example, if early chapters argue for the importance of revision—and, invariably, they do—then dedicated grammar chapters should speak not of avoiding particular problems (“Avoid semicolon error,” warn DiYanni and Hoy in *The Scribner Handbook for Writers*) but of deploying particular writing strategies. Students might be advised, for example, not to avoid monotony of sentence structure, but to try a range of procedures for varying sentence structure. Preoccupation with writing faults is a traditional feature of handbooks—in fact, Connors refers to a late nineteenth century “proto-handbook” entitled, simply, *Don’t!*—but such a preoccupation is clearly at odds with process messages. Handbooks which focus on error indeed hobble students by portraying the act of writing as a minefield, where every move is potentially disastrous.

Even in matters of grammar and punctuation, a rhetoric of strategy can replace a rhetoric of error. If process chapters focus on authorial choice, then punctuation chapters should treat conventions not as arbitrary rules but as devices of enablement.

For example, students might be advised not to avoid the comma splice, but to choose among several options for joining independent clauses.

Consistency of approach to writing is possible not only in direct handbook advice, but also in indirect advice conveyed through handbook exercises and even handbook organization. If process chapters emphasize the importance of rhetorical context, then handbook exercises should not trade predominantly in decontextualized sentences (This is typical fare: "Rewrite the following sentences to correct errors in modification" [Marius and Weiner 292].) Any process-oriented handbook would, in theory, agree with James Moffett, who says he "would not ask a student to write anything other than an authentic discourse, because the learning process proceeds from intent and content down to the contemplation of technical points, not the other way" (205).

Still, publishers love exercises, because, they say, instructors do, and exercises seem to be an inevitable component of handbooks. Instructors, however, can seek to locate exercises they judge to be pedagogically acceptable. If the text does use single-sentence items, what are the terms of its instructions? Does it ask students to "correct the error in this sentence" or to make positive rhetorical choices—for example, "which term would be most appropriate in this sentence"? Do exercises ever take students beyond the sentence? Are the key terms of the process chapters, perhaps "choosing," "revising," "collaborating," carried through and operationalized in exercises? Do exercises direct students to their own writing and the texts of other writers for examination or revision? Do exercises encourage students to work collaboratively?

In the matter of exercises, auxiliary workbooks can tell instructors a lot about the orientation of a handbook as well. The very existence of a workbook may suggest the publisher thought there were not sufficient sentence exercises in the handbook itself—usually a good sign. That is, a good handbook choice is sometimes a handbook-with-workbook without the workbook.

Handbook organization can provide another opportunity for handbook authors to give contradictory messages to students. Process chapters may suggest a "top-down" approach

to writing, with matters of essay structure, for example, having priority over matters of spelling. However, this message may be contradicted in the text itself, where the arrangement of sections and chapters may be bottom-up, with words treated before sentences, sentences before paragraphs, and everything else before the essay itself. In such texts, explicit messages are overwhelmed by the implicit message that writing is an accumulation of subskills organized to produce an essay as an accumulation of substructures. Chapters in Messenger and De Bruyn's *The Canadian Writer's Handbook*, for example, move from "Sentence Grammar and Punctuation" to "Mechanics" and then to "Style and the Larger Elements of Composition" (bottom up), although its "Omnibus Checklist for Planning and Revising" begins with matters of subject, audience, and purpose, and ends with matters of punctuation, spelling, and mechanics (top down).<sup>5</sup>

In his critique of textbooks, Mike Rose comments on the necessary inadequacy of composition textbooks with their "static pages" to convey knowledge of the complex process of composing. Indeed, it is well-known that Linda Flower's attempt to render recursion in *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing* left her with "nine steps for the composing process." It may be true that a linear model of composing encounters least resistance from the constraints of print. However, in most instances, the bottom-up, cumulative organization of handbooks seems to result more from slippages of theory than from limitations of medium. Now, with on-line and even hypertextual "handbooks" becoming widely available, certain organizational problems are obviated, and, with this, other problems more philosophical may become more apparent.

## **What constitutes good writing?**

All handbooks make claims about what constitutes good writing. For the most part, they do this in two ways—by what they say and by what they display. What they say is most often internally quite consistent. Notwithstanding recent moves by various composition theorists to challenge the hegemony of the expository essay and expand the ground of acceptable school writing,<sup>6</sup> most handbooks are firm in their determination to

have students produce expository and persuasive essays with clear thesis statements and with introductions and conclusions flanking a collection of middle paragraphs, each coherent and each developing an identifiable topic sentence.

The following series of excerpts comes from Jane Aaron's *Little, Brown Compact Handbook*:

Most essays share a basic pattern of introduction (states the subject), body (develops the subject), and conclusion (pulls the essays ideas together) (12). Your readers will expect your essay to be focused on and controlled by a main idea, or THESIS. In your final draft you may express this idea in a thesis sentence (or sentences), often at the end of your introduction (11). Setting off groups of related sentences in paragraphs with beginning indentations helps you and your readers focus on one idea at a time (29). A coherent paragraph organizes information so that readers can easily follow along. These are the most common paragraph schemes: general to specific . . . climactic . . . spatial . . . chronological . . . (32). A formal outline not only lays out main ideas and their support but also shows the relative importance of all the essay's elements. (14)

We find here no hint of a theory of genre, no nod to the role of convention in the production of the academic essay.

Many textbooks, furthermore, posit the research essay as a special kind of essay, implying first, that the project of research is separate from the project of persuasion, and second, that research is only appropriate in designated research assignments. Kirszner and Mandell (*The Holt Handbook*) write, for example, "Research is the systematic study and investigation of a topic outside your own experience and knowledge. When you write a research paper, you may do **primary research** . . . in addition to **secondary research**—reading other researcher's [sic] studies of your topic" (546).

These values of genre are themselves problematic, since some composition instructors support neither the notion that compositions come in a number of modes, of which exposition and persuasion are the most worthwhile, nor the notion that the research paper is somehow *sui generis*. Instructors might



prefer to look for handbooks that are more descriptive than prescriptive, ones which describe traditional academic essays, including research essays, as conventional forms for use within particular discourse situations. Such handbooks invite students to consider the conventions of various kinds of writing and to enter the conversation about what does constitute good writing.

What handbooks display raises other concerns. In general, handbook authors seem to value expository and persuasive essays. Some display samples from their own cache of student essays written in response to their instructions to produce essentially the kind of essay that the book prescribes.

The display of student writing can be pedagogically both sound and satisfying. Welch has argued that the focus of composition textbooks in general should shift from excerpted canonical material to student writing. She says, "If writing courses have been frequently oriented to stasis, it has been so because of the course's frozen texts and the dullness they unconsciously embrace" (272).<sup>7</sup> Yet, student texts can pose problems of their own, since essays are frequently selected not for freshness or brilliance but for their opposites. They are selected, that is, because they satisfy certain formal or generic criteria, and sadly, they may exemplify the kind of vapid prose Jasper Neel satirizes in his mock student essay, "Three Reasons for Stopping X," in which the student writer dutifully slots received content into a prescribed form. Because some instructors and some students may find such essays—to quote Wayne Booth—"boring from within," it makes sense to search handbooks for student essays which, while exploiting academic conventions, seem to represent some probing, perhaps some learning, on the part of the writer.

An essay appearing in Peter Dow Adams' *The Harper Collins Concise Handbook for Writers* exemplifies the problem with many student writing samples. I quote from its opening paragraph:

I think the media have a lot to do with why people are sometimes afraid of their fellow human beings because all they like to talk about on the news anymore is all the bad things people are doing, which is bound to make people leery of their fellow human beings. But what really left an

indelible impression on me was seeing such an act of violence in person with my own two eyes. (paper by Steven Shaver 68)

The topic is interesting enough, but the essay has been somehow touched with the wand of bland, with the homogenizing force of the universe of the textbook. If there was any struggle here, in the student's experience of violence or his experience of writing, it has been painted over in the essay itself. "Writing," the handbook author says on the page following the student essay, "is a process of constructing meaning" (71), but the author's message is belied by the very essay he holds up as exemplary.<sup>8</sup>

Many handbooks display writing by published authors. These selections can pose other problems with respect to claims about what constitutes good writing. For example, some handbooks focus instruction on the expository essay but take most of their excerpts from short stories, novels, and literary nonfiction. I offer, for example, this partial list of authors collected from a survey of the "Paragraph" sections of DiYanni and Hoy's *The Scribner Handbook for Writers* and Marius and Wiener's *The McGraw-Hill College Handbook*: Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Loren Eiseley, Bertrand Russell, Joan Didion, E.B. White, LeRoi Jones, Jane E. Brody, N. Scott Momaday, Maxine Hong Kingston . . . . Similarly, some handbooks claim to be suitable for courses in writing across the curriculum, but take most of their excerpts especially from English Studies, the usual home discipline of handbook authors. Some claim to be interested in business and technical writing, but contain no examples of business or technical prose. That is, some handbooks hold up as good writing what they have never instructed students to produce, and provide few samples of good writing in the genres in which they have encouraged students to write. This fundamental contradiction—that is, the contradiction between what handbooks say and what they display—confounds students *most of all*.

## Who Writes and Why?

In her 1972 *College English* essay, "Women Writers in Freshman Textbooks," Jean Mullen, looking at anthologies of essays for students, reports that in 112 textbooks published between 1960 and 1971, 5,795 essays were by men and 472 (or 7.53 percent of the total) were by women. While we trust Mullen would find the situation improved almost twenty-five years later (at least we no longer have the *Playboy College Reader*), Mullen's concerns are still worth noting.

Handbooks are populated by a large number of people, real and invented. They are the real authors of student essays and published works; they are the partially invented student writers whose identities frequently dominate process chapters, and whose interests, fears, and goals determine how and what they write; they are the characters in the sample sentences and exercises in the grammar and sentence structure chapters of the books; they are the people whose titles are abbreviated in the chapters on abbreviations.

Who are these people?

A glance at the list of characters will reveal something of the culture of a text. Of the published authors, how many are women, how many give voice to cultural diversity? What do we know of the student writers? What are their names? What are their concerns? Why do they write? Of course, handbook authors may fall into tokenism; the point is not simply whether anyone is called Louisa or Satwinder or Pak, but what these characters think about and, when they write, what they use writing for. (In fact, in pages with proper names—two pages each, chosen at random from Heffernan and Lincoln's *Writing: A College Handbook* and Rosen and Behrens' *The Allyn & Bacon Handbook*—Western/Anglophone names predominated: Peggy, Marvin [Heffernan and Lincoln 367], Zeus, Moses, Jesus, Joneses, Ann and James, Tim and Susan, Paul and Marysa, Kitty and James [Heffernan and Lincoln 489], Dwight Eisenhower, Lawrence Swift, Joan Warren, Mindy Lubber, Jane Thompson, Marie Lew, and John Kraft [Rosen and Behrens 523], and Bill, Susan, Ellis, and Orson Wells [Rosen and Behrens 476].)

Who in these handbooks inhabits the world of sample sentences? For these thousands of sentences compose a discontinuous text of their own. Even the matter of the population for title abbreviation is not entirely frivolous. Some texts lean to men with titles from the clergy and the military. In Moore, Corder, and Ruszkiewicz's *A Writer's Handbook of Current English*, for example, seven titles are abbreviated, and, of these, five belong to men, and of these five, two are Reverends and one is General. Other texts entitle women as, for example, physicians, senators, and ministers. All these characters create a textual environment in which students must find a place for themselves.

Making a related point about textual culture, Lester Faigley notes that through its several editions the influential textbook *Writing with a Purpose* has been "addressed to the young men of the bourgeoisie, with women included almost as an afterthought":

Writing topics directed toward women students in the 1950 edition include: 'Being a good hostess'; 'How to give a party'; 'Be your own interior decorator'; 'The importance of the right neighbourhood'; 'Keeping up with the movie stars'; 'Marriage or career?'; 'How important are social graces?'; and 'What do people find to talk about on a date?' (148)

Some authors of handbooks (in general under less scrutiny than authors of "rhetorics") continue to construct what is at best a vastly oversimplified version of campus life and life in general, populating their texts with students who write tidily in response to assignments from their teachers. Essay topics in *The Modern Writer's Handbook* (O'Hare and Kline), for example, include "Recycling household wastes," "Exercising," "The joys of giving," "Rock groups," "Keeping a pet," "Saving money," "Women in politics," and "Your favorite hobby." One imagines a world in which the people are all young and are all called Jeff and Susie. Jeff and Susie live in the coed dorm, spend evenings at the local hangout, and wash the Chevy on the weekends.

DiYanni and Hoy's *Scribner Handbook for Writers* makes much use of student writing, but some of the students they

quote, like the student I quoted earlier on the topic of violence, seem to write not out of any real sense of exigence or dissonance, but *only* out of the need to fulfill the requirement that they write. For example, DiYanni and Hoy offer this from Tim Burns, student: "Colonel Robert Gould Shaw knew what it meant to be noble and brave. Few white men in history have shown more courage and dedication in trying to give the black man his rightful place in America . . ." (208). Certainly, I know nothing of Tim Burns's motive. My point is only that the writing feels to me, and will perhaps feel to students, like writing divorced from any purpose but the purpose of fulfilling an assignment. What is writing used for? The culture of handbooks sometimes suggests the culture of situation comedies, where affluent, white, heterosexual, fully-able young people can take on any topic and move it swiftly to closure.

The question of who writes and why is important, especially if composition instructors perceive inducting students into an academic discourse community as one goal of their work as instructors. How much more difficult is this process of induction when the prescribed handbook is both the voice of authority and the voice of exclusion?

## Conclusion

The questions *What constitutes the act of writing?*, *What constitutes good writing?* and *Who writes, and why?* are finally interrelated, for the culture of handbooks is created not only by their populations and subject matters, but also by the composing processes and composed products they set up as exemplary.

Examined critically, all handbooks may be found somewhat wanting, to be sure. Yet a handbook is adequate, even desirable, as a resource and a reference for student writing as long as it does not confuse, mislead, or exclude students, and as long as it seems to help them in their work. A method of handbook selection that poses global rather than local questions directs our attention not only to what a handbook says, but also to what it does. This is the rhetorical question for handbook selection: "What does the book do?" If a particular handbook,

subjected to such evaluation, promises to support rather than suppress student writing, then it may be worth having.

### ***Checklist***

Following is a summary list of questions to serve as a guide for instructors in handbook selection.

#### **1. What constitutes the act of writing?**

a. Does the handbook give consistent messages about composing? Does process language permeate grammar chapters? Are students offered choices and strategies rather than warnings and proscriptions?

b. Does the handbook prefer whole discourse exercises to sentence-level ones? Where sentence-level exercises do occur, do they emphasize positive rhetorical choice over error correction?

c. Is a top-down approach to writing evident in handbook organization?

#### **2. What constitutes good writing?**

a. Are academic essays described as conventional forms rather than prescribed in a set of formal rules? Is research treated as a part of writing rather than apart from writing?

b. Are student writing samples used? If so, do they seem to suggest some probing and some learning on the part of the writers?

c. Do writing samples in general support the stated goals of the book? Does the book's commitment to writing across the curriculum extend to writing samples?

#### **3. Who writes, and for what purposes?**

a. Who populates the handbook? What is the culture of the text? Is the culture inviting to student writers?

b. What is known of the students constructed by the handbook? Are their concerns and reasons for writing close to those of the students who will use the book?

c. Is writing shown in the handbook to be realistically complex – and useful?

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Although I will provide examples of problems wherever possible, I will stop short of supplying sample solutions. My purpose is not to endorse any particular handbook.
- <sup>2</sup> Lester Faigley examines writing textbooks (though not specifically handbooks) as instruments of social and political discipline, as they support and even prescribe a rational subjectivity.
- <sup>3</sup> Connors ("History") explains that publishing houses frequently commissioned handbooks, "often christening them with the house's name" (94). At the 1992 meeting of the Canadian Association for the Study of Language and Learning, Jim Bell reported that his survey of composition teachers revealed none who could name the author(s) of their textbooks; most referred to the books by their covers.
- <sup>4</sup> Meyers ("Handbooks") offers this list:
1. How sound is the reference grammar?
  2. Can the book's guidance in usage be trusted?
  3. How strong is the book on punctuation?
  4. What does the particular handbook emphasize?
- <sup>5</sup> Welch discusses "mixed messages" in composition textbooks on p. 275.
- <sup>6</sup> I refer to feminist composition theory (see, for example, Flynn's review essay), to discussions of the personal essay (see, for example, Zawacki), and to critiques of argument (see, for example, Lamb).
- <sup>7</sup> While student authors are increasingly named in composition texts, their names are not likely to appear in Author Indexes.
- <sup>8</sup> Faigley's critique of the coherence principle in writing textbooks supports and expands this point.

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