

Fifteen Years and Still Counting (on Ignorance and Confidence)

An Editor's Note

The 1998 volume of Written Communication represents a milestone in the journal's history. Fifteen years of continuous publication may not seem much of an accomplishment for a journal supported by memberships in a professional organization; but for an independent and unaffiliated journal like *Written Communication*, 15 years represents a significant achievement. It is an achievement that speaks to the quality of the articles that *Written Communication* has been privileged to publish over the years since John A. Daly and I put out the first issue in January 1984. To celebrate this 15-year milestone, Deborah Brandt, Martin Nystrand, and I have decided to reprint seven essays that originally appeared in *Written Communication* between 1985 and 1988, each of which deals in its own distinctive way with an important component of rhetoric, rhetorical theory, or rhetorical history.

We hope that reprinting these essays will serve three functions. First, we hope that the current readers of *Written Communication* will discover or rediscover the individual merits of seven good essays that, in some cases, have not received the recognition they deserve. Second, we hope that the seven essays will disabuse some people in our field of the view that *Written Communication* has no interest in rhetoric, rhetorical theory, or rhetorical history—a view that I have heard expressed at virtually every professional meeting that I have attended over at least the past 5 years. Rhetorical study is, indeed, an interest of *Written Communication*, and a vital one at that. It has been so from the journal's first issue onward. If essays dealing directly with rhetoric, rhetorical theory, and rhetorical history have appeared only infrequently during recent years, that is due less to journal policy than to

the simple fact that *Written Communication* cannot publish what it does not receive. Third, we hope that the seven essays will serve as reminders to both readers and prospective writers of the centrality of rhetoric in the study of written communication, and that they will suggest how both "old" and "new" rhetorics can provide the writing researcher with useful tools not only for the analysis of written texts but also for the study of situational or social dimensions of written communication.

On the pages that follow, the seven essays are reprinted in the order in which they originally appeared in *Written Communication*. With the exception of the essay written by the late Eric A. Havelock, each essay is reprinted with a current statement from the respective author(s), a commentary on the history of the piece or on the contemporary status or application of the piece. (To preserve the integrity of the original manuscripts, they are presented exactly as they appeared in the original publications, including inconsistencies in style; misspellings have been noted.) Readers will note that as a group, the seven essays take as their objects of study rhetoric-related issues and events that span the centuries between ancient Greece and contemporary workplaces. In this, they collectively illustrate the centrality of rhetoric to understanding the history of writing and written communication, even as most also demonstrate the relevance of rhetorical principles to developing important understandings of contemporary issues in the production and use of written discourse, all of which have been and continue to be important interests of *Written Communication*. The essays also illustrate some important components of the history of *Written Communication*: Over the years, the journal has published the work of well-established scholars such as Havelock and of young scholars such as Elisabeth M. Alford, whose essay on Thucydides was written, if memory serves me well, when she was still a doctoral student; and over the years, *Written Communication* has published essays, such as Roger D. Cherry's, that grew directly out of dissertation work.

However much Deb, Marty, and I hope that reprinting the seven essays will elicit subsequent submissions of high quality on related topics, reprinting the essays does not signal a change in editorial policy. *Written Communication* will continue, as John Daly and I wrote in our "Editors' Note" for the inaugural issue in 1984, as "a cross-disciplinary journal devoted exclusively to the study of written communication," a journal that provides "a regular outlet for original work and thought on writing in any of its many dimensions." *Written Communication's* editorial policy has always been one of inclusion and

never one of exclusion. It is a policy that all of the journal's coeditors, past (Daly, Cherry, and Keith Walters) and present, have honored. It is a policy always honored by the journal's truly cross-disciplinary reviewers and Editorial Board—whose collective work over the years has contributed mightily to the success *Written Communication* has achieved and to the respect it has earned. And it is a policy that authors themselves have honored through their submissions, which have in many ways defined the current landscape of written communication. Authors' submissions are the principal reason why the journal has not only survived but has also become recognized in a variety of academic disciplines as a (and in some cases *the*) leading journal in the field of written communication.

In the 15 years following the inaugural issue, I have rarely used the journal's front pages as a vehicle for communicating with readers and authors. And on the occasion of this rare occasion, I want to refer readers to one of the epigraphs I included at the head of the "Editor's Note" in the January issue of Volume 6 (an issue that happened to include important essays by the current coeditors): "All you need in life is ignorance and confidence, and then success is sure" (Mark Twain). Like the present issue, that issue marked for me another milestone in the history of *Written Communication*. The journal had survived its first 5 troubled years, and the initial goals John and I set for the journal had been achieved. The epigraph, it seemed to me, captured quite nicely something of the spirit with which John and I had approached our tasks as founding editors: From the outset, John and I believed that the journal's "success" would depend on maintaining our "ignorance" of whatever boundaries might be implied by the name we decided on for the journal, and, at the same time, the journal's "success" would depend on maintaining our "confidence" that authors and articles would ultimately define the landscape to which the name *Written Communication* pointed.

As it turned out, the abundance of "ignorance and confidence" that John and I brought to the *Written Communication* enterprise was quite enough to guarantee the journal's "success" in its formative years. And John and I could hardly have been disappointed with how much of our "ignorance and confidence" contributed to the "success" of even the first issue. Featuring pieces that are in many ways as relevant to the study of written communication today as they were in 1984, the first issue illustrated, without defining, something of the breadth that John and I had envisioned for the "written communication" concept: Anne Dyson's "Emerging Alphabetic Literacy in School Contexts,"

Richard Pollay's "Twentieth-Century Magazine Advertising," Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede's "Classical Rhetoric, Modern Rhetoric, and Contemporary Discourse Studies," Hunter Breland and Bob Jones's "Perception of Writing Skills," and Linda Flower and Dick Hayes's "Images, Plans, and Prose." For John and me, tampering with Twain's formula for "success" was strictly prohibited thereafter.

Now, 59 issues into the journal's history, the formula appears not only to have worked well for a good long while but also seems appropriate for at least the next 15 years. As I think about the future of the journal, I cannot help thinking about its past and how that past has shaped the present landscape of written communication. For those of us who have reason to track (however informally) such things, the frequency with which writers of essays published (both in the United States and overseas) in other journals and in books cite work that appeared in *Written Communication* is, indeed, impressive. Perhaps equally impressive is the fact that a number of *Written Communication* authors (Chuck Bazerman, Steve Doheny-Farina, Anne Dyson, Linda Flower, Chris Haas, Dave Kaufer, Judith Langer, Greg Myers, and Bill Vande Kopple, to name a few) have used work and topics that were introduced in their *Written Communication* articles as "springboards" or "touchstones" for portions of longer, book-length treatments. As one of the two founding editors of the journal, I take considerable delight in both the frequency with which *Written Communication* authors are cited elsewhere and in the frequency with which those authors subsequently build on work they allowed *Written Communication* to publish. The "ignorance and confidence" of editors clearly assures "success."

Deb, Marty, and I will continue in our own considerable "ignorance and confidence." And each time we open a submission envelop, we will be reminded that the continued "success" of *Written Communication* depends on both.

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