The trick to writing history," Sharon Crowley once remarked, "is deciding which story to tell" (Review 245). As the field of composition ages, scholars are indeed deciding on and producing its histories, the best of which critically examine conditions that produce the institutional practices of composition instruction in American universities. Historians of composition have thus interrogated underpinnings of pedagogical practices (Berlin, Kitzhaber), the dire working conditions writing instructors endure (Susan Miller, Connors), and the very economic and political base on which the field rests—the first-year writing requirement (Crowley, Composition).

In this essay I will take up one component of our history that is tightly bound with the political and institutional effects of composition, an ever-present artifact that has indeed informed and shaped prevailing assumptions about writing pedagogy: the composition handbook. Informed by Michel Foucault’s work on the complex ways power shapes and is shaped by institutional conditions, I will argue that composition handbooks serve two important institutional purposes: (1) they function as a site for the articulation of what is deemed important subject matter for composition classrooms—that is, handbooks write the discipline; and (2) they effectively shape teacher and student subjectivities—that is, they discipline the writer. I will demonstrate the ways in which these institutional purposes were secured and perpetuated by providing a critical history of a particular book: the Harbrace College Handbook.

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Robert Connors maintains that the *Harbrace* has served as the paradigm for composition handbooks for over sixty-five years now ("Handbooks" 95), and still stands as the textbook used by more composition instructors and students than any other. First published in 1941 as the *Harbrace Handbook of English*, this grammar manual, written by John C. Hodges, has had an immense impact on 20th century writing instruction. The *Harbrace* is a cornerstone of composition pedagogy known as current-traditional rhetoric, a product oriented approach that seeks to secure a mastery of finite grammar rules and "correct" usage. Since the first edition, the book has had remarkable staying power; the best selling book of its kind, Hodges' *Harbrace* is now in its twelfth edition and has sold over 9 million copies—more than any other college textbook ever. (According to Terry Retchless, national sales representative for Harcourt Brace and Company, the only textbook that comes close to the sales record of the *Harbrace* is McGraw Hill's *Principles of Economics*.)

This genealogy of the *Harbrace* is based on archival research completed at the University of Tennessee Knoxville Special Collections Library, holder of the John C. Hodges book collection and the John C. Hodges Papers, 1935–1967. The Hodges archive contains materials Hodges used to write the handbook in the late 1930's: his personal library (The John C. Hodges book collection); old student themes; Hodges' statistical notes on student enrollment and students' writing habits; several manuscripts of various editions of the *Harbrace*; galleys of the fifth and sixth editions; correspondences between and among Hodges and his editors and later his co-authors; Hodges' own class notes and syllabi. A treasure trove for composition historians, the archive contains details of the *Harbrace*’s inception and subsequent rise to the helm of the composition textbook industry. Such details help identify the critical characteristics of the *Harbrace* and account for its immense success. Perhaps even more remarkable than its success in the textbook industry is the relative fixity of the *Harbrace*’s structure over more than 50 years. Its 35 numbered and coded sections, each of which addresses a specific set of grammar points, provide concise rules and examples that students can easily locate and follow. Materially, the book is compact, yet it is a self-proclaimed "comprehensive guide for writers" (Preface, 10th ed. v). Other than a few minor changes—mostly updating sample sentences—the *Harbrace* has retained the same structure since 1941. The sixth edition (1966) dropped the section on sentence diagramming, while the 11th edition (1990) ushered in a rule for non-sexist language. A special 1984 edition of the *Harbrace* featured the new MLA guidelines to referencing. Aside from these modifications, through over half a century of circulation, the *Harbrace*’s organization and overall strategy remain the same. Indeed, the first and the twelfth editions both have
the same six divisions (grammar, mechanics, punctuation, spelling and diction, effective sentences, and larger elements), and the list of "revision symbols," though more elaborate in the 12th edition, remains remarkably the same, with 32 of the 42 original symbols unchanged. As the preface to the 10th edition puts it, "the character of the HCH is intact" (vi). Given the instability of composition's workforce as demonstrated by Susan Miller (142–73), Crowley (Composition 4–10), and Connors ("Rhetoric" 66–69), the Harbrace thereby remains instantiated as a stable force in an otherwise unstable field.

Composition Pedagogy and the Handbook Genre

For years, composition pedagogy in America has been identified with an "obsession with mechanical correctness" (Connors, "Mechanical" 61). This obsession, according to many historical scholars, can be traced back to 1884 when Harvard instituted English A (Kitzhaber 63). English A marked the birth of the earliest first-year writing course, a course that grew out of a particular historical moment in response to the perceived ineptitude or failure of Harvard applicants to adhere to "standards of correctness." The "need" for such a course can largely be attributed to the veritable flood of bourgeois students to American colleges during this period. According to James Berlin, this "new college was...a middle-class college, committed to material success and progress in this world" (60). The old required classical curriculum slowly diminished and was replaced by a new elective curriculum (Berlin 59–60). Thus, the late 19th century marked the ushering in of a new order of writing instruction; according to Connors, "the age of the rhetoricians was passing...and that of the composition pedagogues was beginning" ("Handbooks" 91). The first freshman composition course was therefore built, as Susan Miller writes, "on basically corrective, remedial ground" (63), ground from which it has arguably never advanced.

This "new age" of composition, with its flocks of "broken" students and their stacks of essays instructors had to "mark," produced two important concomitant and—I will argue—connected effects: a new class of teachers, and a new teaching tool, the composition handbook. As the number of students rose (along with administrators' apparent nervousness about the students' qualifications), the working conditions for composition instructors declined sharply. Composition instruction became a service to the rest of the university, the place where "underqualified" students were groomed and prepared for the academy. An attendant effect of this new "underclass" of students was the creation of an underclass of teachers as well (Connors, "Rhetoric" 55). Senior professors scurried away, securing positions which afforded them the luxury of teaching only literature, thus freeing them
from the dreadful ordeal of marking daily themes. The work was then taken up by teaching assistants, part-timers, and adjuncts, and the vast majority of those who remained in these jobs were women. Susan Miller points out that the menial nature of this work, and its attendant responsibilities, brought to English—and particularly composition—a gendered identity. Teachers of composition—both men and women—took on several symbolic roles in service to the institution, and these roles were distinctly feminized. According to Miller, the writing instructor, regardless of gender, takes on the role of nurse, mother, or maid; she is disciplinarian, enforcer of institutional standards, initiator into the academy, housekeeper of “messy” writing (“Feminization” 47-48).

As the face (and gender) of composition transformed, it also saw the proliferation of a relatively new teaching tool: the composition handbook, a doctrine of mechanical correctness. Connors’ history of the handbook traces the development of the genre, a development that culminated in 1941 when Hodges’ Harbrace arrived on the scene. Connors contends that after 1930, the handbooks “assumed a larger and larger place in the pedagogical scene and eventually became the single most important element of stability in the composition course” (“Mechanical Correctness” 69). Certainly this stability was deemed necessary since the workforce—and the field itself—was so unstable at the time (and remains so now). Indeed, if the composition teacher assumed the role of nurturing mother, then the handbook took on the role of the strict, steady father, serving as a supplement to those who were deemed only tentatively entitled employees of the academy—TAs, part-timers, and adjuncts (Miller “Feminization” 45-46). If the handbook served as the father text, then the Harbrace was perhaps the grandfather of handbooks, for as Connors contends, the Harbrace, with its unique layout and “well-planned minimalism,” established the precedent for handbooks to come (“Handbooks” 95). This genealogy will explore the ways in which, as the father of father texts in composition, the Harbrace both depends upon and helps perpetuate the feminized, “underclass” roles Miller and Connors elaborate; further, it secured—and continues to secure—its own place in the curriculum by creating student subjectivities through a discourse of lack and need, much like the discourses circulating at the inception of English A.

Hodges in Retrospect

I begin this genealogy in media res, in 1966, a moment in composition history when the birth of English A seemed long forgotten, when the required first-year writing course had become a “given,” naturalized as the training ground for higher education. My reason for beginning with documents from this period is twofold: First, they show Hodges at a retrospective/prospective crossroads from which he articulated his own purposes for
writing the *Harbrace*, describing what elements of the book he thought accounted for its success. Moreover, Hodges’ own evaluation of the book provides a starting point from which to trace—backward and forward—key assumptions about writing instruction, its students, and teachers, assumptions that appear to have had their beginnings in Hodges’ graduate education at Harvard, as well as in his indoctrination to the prevailing educational and pedagogical trends at the time, as represented in his own collection of textbooks. These assumptions, which I will analyze here, gave rise to Hodges’ distinctive research methodology upon which he erected the *Harbrace* dynasty.

The *Harbrace*, having led the handbook industry for 25 years, was coming under scrutiny by its users, and consequently its publishers. By the mid-1960s, most other academic presses had a handbook on the market modeled after the *Harbrace*. Prentice-Hall’s *Handbook for Writers* (4th ed.), Scott-Foresman’s *Handbook of Current English* (2nd ed.), and Macmillan’s *Handbook of English*, along with McCrimmon’s extremely successful *Writing With a Purpose*, then in its third edition, were all, by Hodges’ own account, saturating the textbook market, putting pressure—for the first time—on the *Harbrace*.

The *Harbrace* was in a crisis of sorts. Consequently, the publishers at Harcourt Brace and World contemplated changing the sixth edition to keep up with the competition. Further, surveys of instructors reported a decrease in satisfaction with the fifth edition for its “stiff,” conservative approach, its lack of “liveliness,” and its occlusion of rhetoric. Critics from schools as varied as Stanford University and Marin Jr. College in California to Kansas University, and Methodist College in Fayetteville, North Carolina, had “switched away” from the *Harbrace*, citing the “fuddy-duddy” sentences diagrams, its “poor” handling of research papers, and its scanty treatment of rhetoric (“Critic Evaluations,” Hodges Collection, MS 401).

*Harbrace* users had very distinctive ideas about the proper purpose and scope of a handbook. “Critic C,” for example wrote: “I think that more space should be devoted to rhetoric, especially sentence structure. I do not believe that the handbook needs a discussion of logic. Any discussion of formal logic would of necessity have to be so short as to be almost worthless. Furthermore, most English instructors are not qualified to teach the subject; it should be left to philosophy departments.” Likewise, “Critic E,” wrote that “more emphasis upon rhetoric would be helpful to both students and teachers.” Hodges’ own summary of critic comments includes some biting remarks, such as the following from a critic from the University of Arizona: “A good handbook must be written by someone with genuine interest and writing skill. But if this book must be evidence, Hodges possesses neither of these qualities.”
Conversely, faithful Harbrace users worried that too many changes to the sixth edition would somehow radically alter their teaching practices. One critic, for example advised, “It is probably unwise, without much study, to change a format which, like that of the Volkswagen, has its own endearing qualities.” Another critic, expressing concern about the possibility of including rhetoric and thus risking “diffusion,” wrote: “I believe in the need for a sharper definition of the use of a handbook.” The criticism, combined with increasing competition, forced Hodges to articulate his book’s value to a discipline with ever-shifting boundaries.

On November 15, 1966, John Hodges wrote in a letter to William Jovanovich, then a rising leader at Harcourt Brace and World, defending his stand against making “radical change” to the Harbrace. Hodges’ reasoning: “No successful handbook has gone through six editions—not even four—with so little basic change or reorganization as ours. The fundamental sameness of all editions, not the minor changes to which we have been limited, explains the success of the book.” Accompanying Hodges’ letter is what appears to be a prospectus. Here, Hodges identifies the “purpose” and “distinctive features” of the book, typed and titled in Hodges’ handwriting: “Purpose (or Object) of Sixth Edition, HCH—Distinctive Features.” According to Hodges, the Harbrace had two main objectives:

1. To make correction of written work as clear and easy as possible for the student.
2. To make marking of student papers as easy as possible for the instructor.

(Hodges Collection)

On the surface, these concise purpose statements tell a story of liberation. The words “as easy as possible” suggest the book promises a freedom from the arduous task of theme correcting, but at what cost? Certainly if a student can correct her paper on her own with the use of a handbook, then the instructor has more time. It was this goal—to make paper marking an easier task for composition’s instructors—that impelled Hodges, back in the 1930s, to determine, once and for all, what errors students made most often.

**Ordering the Data: Hodges’ Research Methodology**

In the eighteenth century, the table was both a technique of power and a procedure of knowledge. It was a question of organizing the multiple, of providing oneself with an instrument to cover it and to master it; it was a question of imposing upon it an ‘order’...It is
the first condition for the control and use of an ensemble of distinct elements; the base for a micro-physics of what might be called a ‘cellular’ power.
—Foucault, Discipline and Punish (148–49).

Hodges considered his “exhaustive” research and the insight it offers instructors to be one of the most distinguishing features of the Harbrace:

All editions of the Harbrace College Handbook give the instructor a choice of two simple systems for marking papers: either 35 numbers to refer to the 35 sections or symbols (most of them selected because they have long been in common use) to refer to the 35 sections. And the instructor can without any confusion of the student make use partly of symbols and partly of numbers. (Letter: Distinctive Features, Hodges Collection)

35 was Hodges’ magic number. Hodges’ extensive research led him to believe these 35 rules accurately reflected the 35 most common grammatical errors students make. During the late 1920s and early 30s, Hodges and 16 other Tennessee freshman English instructors used a coded system to mark errors on student themes. When the students received the marked-up themes, they were to systematically record all the errors, as directed by the Manual of Instructions for Freshman English, a syllabus-style manual written by Hodges and required for all first-year writers at the University of Tennessee. The Manual of Instructions varied in length and expanded with each edition. The first edition, published in 1922, was eleven pages long and listed the required texts, the first- and second-term schedules, the reading list (i.e., the literary texts for second term), a description of each unit of study, as well as grading and correction policies. By 1937, the last edition, the manual expanded to twenty-nine pages and included such items as a schematic of the main library on campus, three pages of directions for preparing a long exposition, and an extensive (eight page) reading list to be consulted for report-writing, preceded by the statement “Good reading is one of the surest means of acquiring a mastery of the language” (15).

The Manual presented two pages of sample error entries, along with precise instructions for theme correcting: “All corrections must be made with the use of the Century Handbook of Writing, and the corrections must be registered on the ten or more sheets of theme paper kept for the purpose at the back of the folder and numbered 1–9, 10–19, 20–29, 40–49, 50–59, 70–79, 80–89, 90–99” (1st ed. 6). The Manual directed the students to first classify and then correct the errors on the appropriate sheets, thus producing, at the end of the term, a summary of errors made on all the themes.

The first three steps of Hodges’ data collection were completed in this manner: the students made errors, the instructors found and marked them, and the students collated and recorded them. The instructors then
collected the folders at the end of the term and placed them in “The Theme Vault,” an institution developed by Hodges. This vault—it was an actual vault sealed in the interior of the English Department—provided a safe holding-place for Hodges’ associates to tabulate the errors made by the students. The carefully coded essays provided Hodges with the “scientific” data he needed to write the Harbrace. After the analysis of 20,000 essays—written, marked, and vaulted in the late 20s and 30s—was completed, Hodges determined the 35 sections and corresponding rules that he claimed represented “all matters needed by freshmen.”

So the Theme Vault was much more than a large filing cabinet. Indeed, the vault provided a site for observation and surveillance, a way to isolate and examine specific “cases,” much like the hospital client files Foucault discusses. Such a system of surveillance objectifies student themes, transforms them into individual “specimens” that, as a group, in Foucault’s words, “made possible the measurement of overall phenomena, the description of groups, the characterization of collective facts, the calculation of the gaps between individuals, [and] their distribution in a given ‘population’” (190). Such a scientific practice, as Foucault demonstrates, holds implications for disciplining per se. It combines “hierarchical surveillance and normalizing judgment, assures the great disciplinary functions of distribution and classification” (192). Surveillance and judgment, then, turn individuals into case studies, objects to be examined; for as Foucault points out, “the individual...may be described, judged, measured, compared with others...and it is also the individual who has to be trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc” (191). Before Hodges designed his training manual, he set out to determine in precisely what areas students needed correction. Thus, the theme vault provided a functional site that made possible “the measurement of economies and the analysis of movements” (149). Ideally, as a result of Hodges’ (and his staff’s) systematic supervision and intervention, students would become well-trained in the placement of commas, regulated spellers, efficient machines, docile writers.

Susan Miller addresses such scientific inspection of error in terms of its “distancing” effects. Miller contends that “Writing makes an object of a student’s language, and usually without at all objectifying a composition teacher’s judgment of its writer. Consequently, the practice of attending to mechanical errors allowed written texts to become instruments for examining the ‘body’ of a student, not just the student body” (57). Hodges effectively did both. The individual errors, taken together, became a collective. Hodges universalized the particulars: by examining the “bodies” of Tennes-see students’ writing, he grafted their most common “flaws” onto the national student body. Herein lies one of the major shortcomings of Hodges’ research. That is, Hodges viewed the student writing he examined as representative of all student writing, not just in the 1930s, but throughout most
of the century. Indeed, Hodges wrote in that same letter to Jovanovich that if any major changes were going to be made to the sixth edition of the *Harbrace*, they would need to be justified by a study similar in scope. He never seemed to question the validity of the study, which Connors and Andrea Lunsford call “problematic at best” from the vantage point of the 1980s (397). Hodges never entertained the notion, for example, that different teachers and students might cultivate divergent writing habits. There was, however, one major distinguishing characteristic of Hodges’ data pool, a limitation that Hodges did not appear to consider: geography.

**Fixing the Hicks**

Hodges’ sampling produced an obvious Appalachian slant in the earlier editions of the *Harbrace*. The *Harbrace* divides levels of usage into four categories: formal, colloquial, dialectical, and illiterate. Students are directed to avoid dialectical usages “as a rule” (186), and to avoid illiterate constructions entirely (2nd ed, 186). Rule 19f addresses such “illiteracies”: “Illiteracies (also called vulgarisms) are the crude expressions of uneducated people, usually not listed in the dictionary” (192). This rule contains the overall sentiment that such usages are offensive or socially unacceptable; indeed, the error is a class marker, exposing one’s educational level. These “incorrect” usages, Joseph Williams maintains, are treated as violations akin to “defective social behavior” (152–53). Williams offers an insightful evaluation of these attitudes toward language use. According to Williams, errors of grammar and usage “excite feelings commensurate with judgments like ‘horrible,’ ‘atrocious,’ ‘oaf(ish),’ and ‘detestable,’ …We break wind at a dinner party and then vomit on the person next to us. We spill coffee in their lap, then step on a toe when we get up to apologize” (153). For Williams, Hodges’ description of the “crude” nature of illiterate usage “defines the seriousness of the error and its expected amendment” (153). The treatment of grammatical and diction “errors” as faulty social behavior works with etiquette rules and social propriety to demarcate classes of people, be they racial, socioeconomic, or geographical.

As Williams points out, the response to the error, rather than focusing on the error on the page, focuses on the error in the student (155). Moreover, the usage guide indicates a strong desire to eradicate specifically the Appalachian dialect. Listed as “questionable idioms” in the 1946 second edition are such constructions as “cannot help but” (202) while constructions such as “could of” (for could have), “where at,” “would of” and “you was” are listed as “illiterate corruptions” (204). Also listed as “illiterate” is the word “done”; the example given is “He has done sold the dog.” The corrected version reads, “He has already sold the dog,” or “He has sold the
The usage guide also lists as colloquial or dialectical such words as “fix,” “folks,” “reckon,” “take” (as in “take sick”), “take and” (as in “He took and knocked the ball over the base line”), and the Southern plural-you construction, “you all.” All of these proscribed usages are indigenous to the South, or mountain dialect, and Hodges clearly wants to rid these Tennessee students of such “corruption.” The Tennessee students, many of whom were probably first generation college students, were taken as those who needed—in the worst way—a simple book to help “fix” their language practices.

Indeed, composition lore has it that Hodges wanted to create a book small enough to fit into a man’s coat pocket, so he and the students could carry it at all times. The *Harbrace*, therefore, became a supplement to the student body, and the student body at the University of Tennessee provided the model for which the new appendage was sized.

**Born From Details**

A meticulous observation of detail, and at the same time a political awareness of these small things, for the control and use of men, emerge through the classical age bearing with them a whole set of techniques, a whole corpus of methods and knowledge, descriptions, plans and data. And from such trifles, no doubt, the man of modern humanism was born.

—Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (141)

For the book to be small enough to fit into a man’s coat pocket, Hodges had to keep things brief. At once the *Harbrace* is “minimalistic” in its choice of sections yet comprehensive in its detail. The second major selling point for the *Harbrace* is what Connors’ calls its “well-planned minimalism” ("Handbooks" 95). Hodges wrote in 1966:

> The *Harbrace College Handbook* has, I believe, fewer section numbers than any other popular handbook. And yet, all matters needed by freshmen are adequately covered, with less important matters properly and logically subordinated to the 35 numbers. The Index (the most detailed of any handbook) makes it easy for instructor and student to locate any detail sought for. (“Letter: Distinctive Features,” Hodges Collection)

The inside front cover of every *Harbrace* displays an elaborate table of the book’s elements. The table systematically classifies all 35 sections under six heads: grammar, mechanics, punctuation, spelling and diction, effective sentences, and larger elements. Such tables, according to Foucault, “create complex spaces that are at once architectural, functional and hierarchical” (148). For Foucault, a table is “both a technique of power and a procedure of
knowledge" (148). As such, a table is an instrument for mastery; it imposes an order. The taxonomy of the Harbrace, then, represents "all matters needed by freshmen;" the table focuses their gaze on individual, consumable "chunks," thus securing a circulation of value through the assumed mastery of detail. The 35 sections are divided into further sections which are also divided into sections—the book is actually divided into over 100 discrete sections. Each sub-section treats a specific aspect of a larger heading; section 17, for example, "the period and other marks" contains a smaller section (17e) on "the dash." This smaller section offers three numbered reasons to use a dash. An emphasis on detail is critical for any form of discipline, as Foucault writes, "for the disciplined man...no detail is unimportant, but not so much for the meaning that it conceals within it as for the hold it provides for the power that wishes to seize it" (140). The Harbrace's power lies in its detail; taken together, its details—its tables, charts, and their microscopic division of grammar's minute points—reveal its hierarchy and effectively close the system, thus securing its place in the composition classroom.

The Instructor Set Free

In 1941, James McCrimmon articulated this liberating function of the composition handbook in his essay, "The Importance of the Right Handbook." For McCrimmon the handbook existed for the teacher. As he wrote, "The significance of an English handbook lies less in the possibility that students may read it than the fact that instructors do...instructors not only consult the handbook they are using, they are likely to con it, get it by heart, and, not infrequently, pledge indiscriminate devotion to it" (70). McCrimmon casts the handbook as the teachers' one salvation, offering a patronizing description of a teacher lost "in such a sea of confusion he clings to his handbook as a shipwrecked sailor clings to his raft" (71). This salvation/liberation myth pointed out early on by McCrimmon persisted in handbooks, and as I argued earlier, the need for such stability became more urgent with the emergence of a new class of students and instructors. When Hodges composed the Harbrace, the rhetoric of instructor liberation dominated other composition texts, texts that Hodges owned and read, texts that apparently shaped Hodges' own philosophy of composition pedagogy. Take, for instance, C. H. Ward's preface to Better Sentences, a grammar handbook/workbook in Hodges' collection:

Every instructor of freshman composition feels that if the entire class could use decent sentences, so that he could be lifted out of the mire of this elementary ignorance, he would be free to develop a better artistry with sentences. His task would then become a proper academic occupation. Such an emancipation is what Better Sentences promises. (v)
Better Sentences thus overtly claimed to liberate the instructor, and Hodges, owner and user of this very book, was certainly aware of the emancipatory promise of handbooks. Hodges' copy of Better Sentences is well-worn, its margins riddled with notes about which rules he would include in the Harbrace. According to the preface, Better Sentences sought to “show students... that they must exert their own power, must feel responsible for overcoming deficiencies that they have the ability to overcome” (v). The handbook thus relieves the teacher of the task of explaining each rule’s intricacy, providing what Robert Connors calls a “mechanical support system” (“Mechanical Correctness” 67), a pedagogical strategy for coping with mounds of student essays. It’s no wonder that Hodges wanted to create a book to make teachers’ lives easier, just as it’s not surprising that the overworked underclass jumped aboard. And once they were on, there was no getting off. Hodges’ system, by his own formulation, had a distinct advantage over its competitors in that

The section numbers remain the same from year to year, because these sections were determined by the most exhaustive study ever made of the specific numbers needed by freshmen. As a result, the instructor is not required to learn new numbers with each revision. (“Letter: Distinctive Features,” Hodges Collection)

This was the ultimate “payoff” of Hodges’ taxonomy of errors: The Harbrace remained unchanged from edition to edition so that the instructor need only learn the system once. The book’s static section numbers, for Hodges, represented the number one selling point of the book, the reason instructors returned to it year after year. Here we see the first evidence of the Harbrace’s disciplining function: the instructors themselves have been trained—to use the Harbrace.

McCrimmon, well aware of the “power of the handbook” for the teacher, elaborated the role handbooks play in teacher-training. His telling description is worth quoting:

For the English handbook is often the teacher’s teacher, so that when a man writes and publishes a handbook he becomes a power behind the throne of every department that adopts his work. Such a condition may exist in other departments also, but there are factors peculiar to the teaching of English composition that allow the author of an English handbook to exert an unusual authority (70).

The pedagogical burden thus effectively shifts from teacher to reference manual, leaving composition instructors to survey, nurture, perform light housekeeping. The “liberation” promised by the handbook effectively locks the teacher into a secondary role, a caretaker and enforcer of the “father’s”
Bodies that Lack: The Construction of Student Subjectivity

As Foucault maintains, an effective disciplinary system depends on a particular construction of the subject. Handbooks that seek to correct errors rely on a construction of student subject as “lacking” or “deviating,” a child who needs correcting or disciplining. The first edition of the Harbrace offers two different introductions, one “to the instructor” and one “to the student.” The section addressing the teacher is written in positive language and seeks to familiarize the instructor with the different elements of the book, its numbers, its symbols, its drills. According to the author, “It presents well-known subject matter in a more usable form, and thus eases the instructor’s task of grading papers” (iii). Interestingly, most of the “To the Instructor” section is written in objective, passive voice. The paragraph on “Drill Material,” for example, reads:

Exercises are provided both for the major sections and for many subsections. This drill material bulks much larger than in most handbooks. The appropriateness of the sentences is insured by the fact that they are drawn from student writing and show errors actually made by students. (iv)

Likewise, the description of diagramming is written entirely in passive voice, hence focusing attention on the material in the book, promising its utility for the students: “diagrams are used here and there throughout the handbook...these diagrams are made as simple as possible to prevent the student from becoming more interested in complicated lines than in grammatical relationships” (iv). The instructor section, then, establishes a reassuring tone, yet the passive voice distances the handbook author from the instructor reader, effectively implying the book’s separation from the instructor.

The section entitled “To the Student,” by contrast, directs rather than describes. Here, Hodges uses the second person imperative, pelting student-readers with a barrage of military-like instructions:

A number (or a symbol) written in the margin of your theme calls for a correction. If a number is used, turn directly to the boldface number at the top of the page. If a symbol is used, first consult the alphabetical list of symbols on the inside cover to find the number to which you should turn (v).

These symbols range from “cs=Comma Splice” to “t=tense” to my favorite, “x= Obvious Error. Correct It.” The military language in the student’s introduction effectively begins the training process. The Harbrace becomes a
machine for learning, set into motion, in Foucault’s terms, by precise commands: “All activity of the disciplined individual must be punctuated and sustained by injunctions whose efficacy rests on brevity and clarity; the order does not need to be explained or formulated; it must trigger off the required behavior and that is enough” (166). The student body, or student bodies are thus placed “in a little world of signals to each of which is attached a single obligatory response” (166). Once students learn the Harbrace codes and the required action, they have been effectively trained, and they respond automatically, obeying the sharp orders found in the beginning of the handbook.

After explaining how a student should use the Harbrace to correct sentence fragments, punctuation, spelling, and other “obvious errors,” the “To the Student” section moves to a discussion of “supplementary help” (vi). Curiously enough, all the “supplementary help” is located right there in the book. Hodges never once indicates that the instructor might provide “supplementary help” (vi), but offers only more direction on how to use the book: “If you fail to understand any term of grammar used in the handbook, consult the alphabetical list in section 1” (vi). This introduction directed “to the student” presents rules about rules, cast in terse, directive language that seeks to regulate the use of the Harbrace. The Harbrace thus secures what Foucault calls the “coercive link with the apparatus of production” (153). The desired subjectivity? Grammatically correct automatons.

Instead of a mastery of writing, the Harbrace seeks to instantiate a mastery of the Harbrace, a self-perpetuating move.

The very language Hodges uses to address students supports Susan Miller’s contention that institutional practices don’t treat students as “responsible ‘authors’” (196). Students are instead perceived as meek and needy, incapable of processing much more than terse commands. Indeed, some texts refuse to recognize students as authors at all. This sentiment can be seen in Raymond Woodbury Pence’s College Composition (1929), a book in Hodges’ collection written expressly for freshmen. In the Preface, Pence contends that “a book for college freshmen should aim at respectable English for the ordinary purpose of life—not at authorship” (vii). Instead of being viewed as potential authors, students and their writing are conceived as nothing other than the ‘problem’ composition was “established...to correct” (Susan Miller 201). The focus shifts from instruction to discipline, as we see in Pence’s second aim:

During the freshman year the forming of correct language habits is by far the most important thing. Discipline rather than ‘inspiration’ or ‘self-expression’ should be the keynote of the course—especially for the first semester; for such language habits come only through drill. Expertness for the average
person is a matter of long and persistent practice. It is not enough for a student to know what is the right thing; he must acquire the habit of doing the right thing on all occasions. (vii)

This type of system constructs the student subject in terms of lack or deficiency, and the “lack” is directly linked to the student’s youth. Foucault writes that “In a system of discipline, the child is more individualized than the adult, the patient more than the healthy man, the madman and the delinquent more than the normal and the non-delinquent” (193). In other words, children, madmen, and delinquents are cast in terms of lack or deviation from a norm; they are individualized in that they stand apart from an otherwise homogeneous group. As Pence makes strikingly clear, the concern for the young writer’s deficiency represents a desire to normalize, train, in short, to discipline. Student writers are made “docile,” for docile bodies, by Foucault’s formulation, “may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (136). As Susan Miller puts it, “students in those freshman courses taken to be at the center of composition studies are socially and politically imagined as children whose Victorian innocence retains a tainted need for ‘civilizing’” (Miller 196). The titles of many of Hodges’ books and papers present images of young, immature and inexperienced writers—namely freshmen. They include: Freshman Composition (1929), Military English (1918), Freshman Rhetoric (1913 and 1922), Exercises for Senior High Schools (1940), and Notes For Young Writers (1918). Even more telling are the infantile representations of student-writers in these and other texts owned by Hodges.

Such infantilization often happens quite overtly. Thomas Ernest Ran kin, Clarence DeWitt Thorpe, and Melvin Theodor Solve, authors of College Composition (1929), for example, begin their chapter on the paragraph with the following description: “Everyone is familiar with the incoherent youngster who, bursting with big news, rushes in to tell his story. In his excitement and hurry he tries to tell it all at once, and the result, of course is chaos” (109). After constructing student subjects as babbling youths the authors go on to argue for the importance for thinking “in units of the paragraph.” Hodges placed an asterisk beside this section along with marginal note: “thinking out by units of paragraphs.”

It seems clear that these books in Hodges’ library and their constructions of student subjectivities influenced his conception of the Harbrace; not only do his markings appear in discussions of young writers, he apparently made decisions regarding the rules in the Harbrace based on this conception of the student subject. In this same copy of College Composition, Hodges underlines the following sentence, offering traces of his reasoning: “But we can say this, that the effective use of the sentence fragment requires a skill which
few amateur writers possess.” Here the word amateur implies the operative
distinction between student-writer and author. The authors continue: “To
the young student of composition let us give this counsel: [which Hodges
underlined] First, master the English sentence; learn the regular gram-
matical forms; when you can write these successfully, then, if you wish, ex-
periment” (163).

The Harbrace, however, leaves no room for experimentation. The second
major rule listed in the early Harbrace: “Do not write a sentence fragment.”
Hodges apparently wanted concrete rules with no room for exception or
experimentation. On page 361 in Hodges’ copy of Howard Grose’s 1926
text, College Composition, Grose draws a distinction between “violations of
unity” and “those allowable suppressions of subject or predicate which are
used for emphasis or rapidity.” Hodges’ note in the margin here reads
“Dangerous for young writer.” Hodges was evidently not concerned with
the finer distinctions and exceptions that Grose attempts to clarify. He is in-
stead looking for hard and fast rules for the “young writer.” Too many fine
distinctions and exceptions might confuse youthful writers; thus Hodges
privileged “hard and fast,” “do and don’t,” “not x, but y” rules. Such rules
guarantee the ease and simplicity the book promises, while simultaneously
disciplining the writer by constructing a normative subject and occluding
the possibility of “authorship.”

Hodges’ text markings point to a concern with the limits of student writ-
ing, and this concern finds its way—ever so subtly—into the pages of the
Harbrace. One striking example of this concern’s manifestation can be seen
in Hodges’ markings in his copy of Chester Noyes Greenough and Frank
Wilson Cheney Hersey’s 1917 text, English Composition. Hodges focused in
particular on their treatment of paragraph unity. He underlines a sentence
directing students to always be sure a paragraph can be “summarized in a
single sentence” (211). Later the authors address an implicit topic sentence;
here Hodges writes in the margin, “Topic sentence not always expressed”
(212). In this passage, the authors delineate three signs of a unified para-
graph. One contains a topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph; in
another, the topic sentence is implied, and finally, the authors describe a
method by which the writer introduces and concludes a paragraph with a
topic sentence. According to Greenough and Hersey, “For the beginner
the...method of opening and closing paragraphs—of surrounding them, so
to speak, by a frame—is perhaps safest” (212). Hodges underlined the open-
ing qualifier “For the beginner” with dark pencil twice. A look at section 31
of the Harbrace reveals the impact of Greenough and Hersey’s distinctions.
Here, we see rule 31a, “Give unity to the paragraph by making each sen-
tence contribute to a central thought” (302). Hodges explains as follows:
“The central thought is usually expressed in a topic sentence. This is often the
first sentence in the paragraph, but may come anywhere within the para-
graph. Sometimes it is not expressed at all but merely implied" (303). No
longer is there mention that this is merely a recommended “framing” tactic
appropriate “for beginners.” Here, the Harbrace’s examples of unified para-
graphs become significant. The first example, a paragraph drawn from
Main-Traveled Roads by Hamlin Garland, a popular writer in the 40s, con-
tains a topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph. The third example
shows a paragraph with an implied topic, drawn from Main Street by Sin-
clar Lewis, a well-established author. But strategically placed in the center
of the page, the second example is a paragraph with the “frame,” which
states the topic at the beginning and repeats it at the end. The source? A
mysterious “Student Paragraph.” The examples imply that there are a few
options for insuring unity of a paragraph, two of which are successfully ex-
cuted by “real” authors, and the other option is observed by a student
writer. The tacit message: student writers should observe the method suc-
cessfully represented in the student paragraph.

When student learners are constructed as lacking or inept, a classifica-
tion of learners emerges: those who possess what Hodges’ sources might
call “genius,” and those who don’t. This problematic distinction can be
seen in C. H. Ward’s Better Sentences. The section on Style, marked up by
Hodges, classifies students as “dull” or “average.” Ward writes:

A dull student might contrive to write passable sentences if he did no more
than follow the instructions that have been given thus far in the book—
namely:

I. Do not make sentence-errors—that is, half sentence faults or comma
blunders.

II. Do not make too frequent use of the three types of sentences that have
just been described...The mere following of those negative instructions
might save an ill-prepared student from humiliating failure. (102)

This conception of the bumbling “dull” student, straightened out by con-
crete “don’t” rules, contrasts with the student who possesses “average in-
telligence,” who might, according to Ward, “learn to make a series of
varied sentences that resemble the work of an author.” In both these pas-
sages, Hodges marked the words “dull,” “passable sentences,” and “aver-
age intelligence.” He then underlines two successive sentences: “It is true,
in general, that the higher reaches of style cannot be taught. But on a low-
er plane, where we deal only with the forms of expression, style can be
taught” (102). Hodges apparently shared this sentiment. The “lower
plane” becomes the province of his book, as a notion of “right” style in-
habits the Harbrace.
Hodges created the term “Sentence Sense” for the “dull” students Ward and many other handbook authors construct. Since the second edition, “Sentence Sense” has been the subject matter of the *Harbrace’s* first section. “Sentence Sense,” which functions a lot like “common sense,” the basic knowledge Americans supposedly need to “get by,” is a knowledge of the basic components of a sentence. According to the *Harbrace,* “The student who has no well-developed sentence sense will find it difficult to recognize sentence fragments and will continue to make this most serious error” (1–2). The first rule of the book commands students to “master the essentials of the sentence as an aid to effective writing and intelligent reading” (1). But there is one other reason for obtaining this “sense”: “Indeed,” the student section reads, “sentence sense is prerequisite to the intelligent use of many sections of this handbook” (1). Thus, in order to be able to use the *Harbrace* effectively, a student must develop this sense, condition her mind, and fill this presumed gap. This initial section of the *Harbrace* presents what Hodges believed to be the important first stage of training, providing further evidence of the hierarchical structure of the *Harbrace,* a key technique in the normalization of student subjectivity.

The *Harbrace College Handbook* demonstrates the way in which current-traditional rhetoric is a discipline in both senses of the word. It is a discipline in the sense that it has a subject, a “body of knowledge,” a body of precepts for students to learn and follow. At the same time, current-traditional rhetoric is a form of discipline; it disciplines students by first constructing them as aberrant individuals, children who need correction. Like many current-traditional texts, Hodges’ handbook offers deployable tactics, “coded activities and trained aptitudes…the highest form of disciplinary practice” (Foucault 167). As much as it was bound up in the current-traditional story, the *Harbrace* also writes a portion of the story of humanism, which as characterized by John B. Emperor, a colleague of Hodges’ in the 1930s and 40s, is “first of all concerned…with training minds to work right, feel right, be right” (22). This critical first step of “training” or discipline, creates a subject who may go on to develop humanist qualities such as good taste, and goodness in general. But the humanist project impinges on the details, and as Foucault proclaims, “from such trifles, no doubt, a man of modern humanism was born” (141).

To this day, the *Harbrace* rules are still based on Hodges’ study of Tennessee students conducted in the 1930s; the divisions and rule numbers remain intact; the *Harbrace* still fits into a man’s coat pocket, and Hodges’ name is still emblazoned on the spine. The *Harbrace College Handbook,* with its tables, charts and finite system of rules presents a very limited conception of writing, but one that is still widely accepted as the logic of current-traditional rhetoric continues to persist. Current-traditional pedagogy is
still current, though it has taken on the force of an under-current. It is precisely because of the current-traditional paradigm and its haunting presence in the microphysics of the writing classroom that the first-year writing course remains where it began—on “remedial” ground; that composition teachers are not able to break out of their working class status; and finally, that student-writers may never see themselves as authors.

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Notes

1. To be sure, the concern with grammar and correctness did not just materialize from nothing, for as Sharon Crowley and Thomas Miller argue, trends in the American composition classroom, particularly those practices now dubbed “current-traditional,” are firmly rooted in 18th century British rhetoric and education. See Crowley (1990), and Thomas Miller, (1997).

2. For compelling treatments of the dire working conditions, see Robert Connors (1991), Crowley (1998), as well as Susan Miller’s Textual Carnivals.

3. Since the practice of theme vaulting lasted until 1992 when it was stopped by composition director Linda Bensel-Meyers, Hodges and others always had access to fresh batches of student themes. Unsurprisingly, in 1965, it appears from some of his statistical notes that Hodges conducted yet another study of student errors, though the number of themes examined is not evident. The results: the top two most frequent errors swapped places. In the 1965 study, the frequency of comma errors superseded spelling errors, which were the most frequently marked mistakes in the 1940 survey. Apparently operating on the same logic, Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors conducted a similar study in 1988, citing Hodges’ half-century-old data as the last known “error-frequency research” (397). Though Lunsford and Connors set out to match the number of themes Hodges examined in his first study, they quickly realized that they had neither the time nor the wherewithal to pore over that many essays.

4. I would simply point out here (as a Southerner) that in the South, or at least in Tennessee’s Appalachia, “He has done sold the dog” has a slightly different force than “He has sold the dog.” While the latter simply conveys the “factual” information, the former carries a more exclamatory force, as if the selling of the dog were either a surprise or somehow prevented another valued activity, like hunting, for example.

Works Cited


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