1-1-1987

Review: Writing on Computers in English Comp

Lynn Meeks

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Goran "George" Moberg,
Writing on Computers in English Comp
(New York: The Writing Consultant, 1986)

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For those of us who have been "computer literate" for some time, it's hard to remember how we struggled with learning to use the computer. We have forgotten the fear, the frustration, and the nagging suspicion that we might be not only hopelessly clumsy but also certifiably stupid. Goran "George" Moberg has not forgotten, and his purposefully non-intimidating text reflects his basic sympathy for the first-time computer user.

The text format, itself, is non-threatening and easy to use. Bound like a spiral notebook, the text will *lie flat* next to a computer and the beginner can keep two hands on the keyboard without having to a) break a book binding or b) pile books strategically and risk the embarrassment of having them crash to the floor in the middle of a crowded computer room.

Moberg's style of writing is also non-threatening. He speaks to the computer-novice as "you" and refers to himself as "I" and "me." Moberg writes with a kindly voice that both reassures and cajoles his reader:

> Now let's see how the computer will benefit your writing. You may already be convinced that it will speed your progress, but if you're skeptical or scared of this new technology, let me reassure you: most of the research findings now coming in—as well as the subjective impressions—report good news. And I feel the same way. (14)

However, the best thing about *Writing on Computers in English Comp*, is that it stresses *writing* above word processing. In doing so, Moberg first makes a case for simplicity of equipment: "all you need to use this book in a computer-writing class is computers (with printers) and a program for writing. That's it" (preface). Moberg does not denigrate the various programs for outlining, spell-checking, heuristics, vocabulary or grammar-drill programs on the market; he just makes it clear that they are unnecessary and emphasizes the importance of "*a warm learning environment,*" "*group writing,*" and "*peer response groups*" above complicated programs.

Second, Moberg makes a case for simplicity of equipment use. In just two chapters, "Using the Machinery" and "Your First Writing Session at the Computer," Moberg—in twelve pages (with three-inch margins for notes)—clearly and systematically spells out the essential definitions and commands for using a personal computer. All the while Moberg reassures the computer-novice with comforting advice like, "*OK? Take your time. There's no rush. Some people are faster than others, and that's all right,*" (26) or jokes like, "*Don't curse your cursor but learn to love it!*" (27) Moberg may have written the first "user-friendly" instruction manual.

The rest of *Writing on Computers in English Comp* is devoted to writing assignments and writing strategies for basic writers, and as Moberg, currently at Borough of Manhattan Community College of New York, explains in the preface, *Writing on Computers in English Comp* grew out of his classroom practice. That is both its strength and its weakness.

The audience for this book is clearly basic writers and the book consists of Moberg's personal lesson plans specifically created for his students along with models written by Moberg's students. Therefore, even though the computer instructions could be used by any level writer, the lesson plans and the student models in *Writing on Computers in English Comp* are appropriate only for basic writers.

In addition, the over-all developmental pattern of the writing assignments is difficult for me to follow. The writing assignments begin with a fable, proceed to a character sketch, then on to how to write a one-hour essay test, a visual description, verse, a one-act play, and finally a persuasive argumentation.

However, the major weakness of *Writing on Computers in English Comp* is that some of the writing assignment directions seem incomplete and are therefore difficult to understand without more information or background; also, Moberg asks the students to write verse, a one-act play, an interior monologue and a dramatic dialogue without giving examples.

The verse chapter is probably the least developed section because students are asked to copy a poem, discuss it, and then without further

instruction, write verse of their own. My basic writers would need much more instruction and pre-writing before they could attempt to write verse.

The one act play section is also under-developed. Moberg prints a one-act play, "Prairie Dog," and then gives only two instructions:

1. Write a review of "Prairie Dog." Your teacher will tell you how.

2. Write a one-act play either by yourself or with one of your group mates.

The persuasive argumentation is also given cursory treatment. Moberg does defend his elementary treatment of the argument by saying that

> . . .this is a book about the basics of effective writing and not a course in analytical thinking or advanced English composition. So what follows below will not offer instruction in logic and the rules of evidence but will give you a simple pattern for writing persuasively. (132)

However, Moberg then reprints an excerpt from Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and asks his basic writers "to either favor or oppose Emerson's ideas in 'Self-Reliance' in an essay of your own" (135). For the other persuasive writing assignment, Moberg asks his students to read a letter from a former chief psychologist of New York City schools reprinted from *The New York Times* and to then "follow the same steps as above in writing another essay in which you respond to the letter to the editor. . . Argue as persuasively as you can. . ." (135). Again, there are no appropriate student models except one briefly referred to in the appendix which is not an example of an argument. And I'm not sure how appropriate "Self-Reliance" or a *New York Times* letter to the editor is for basic writers to respond to. Regardless of Moberg's disclaimer, writing an argumentative response to either of the above texts will require analytical thinking, logic and evidence.

However, even though I am somewhat critical of the writing assignments set forth in *Writing on Computers in English Comp*, I admire Moberg's techniques for focusing his students on the act of writing by encouraging them to reflect on their own writing strategies. To this end, Moberg (also the author of *Writing in Groups* and *How to Teach Writing in Groups*) shows students how to use groups to generate ideas and to revise. Moberg's exercises encourage students to be self-reliant and to distance themselves from the act of writing by answering questions that help them think about their thinking as well as their writing.

For example, Moberg requires his students to file Group Reports, journal-type essays in which the reporter documents, summarizes and analyzes the group's activities. The student model that Moberg provides as an example is the best student writing in the text.

Moberg also gives specific directions for the kind of feedback students need to give each other. His "Basic Feedback Sheet" focuses basic writers on three features:

A. *Appreciation*: What I liked most about your writing was. . . .

B. *Sayback*: It seemed to me that your main point was this:

C. *Askback*: But not everything was clear to me. For instance, could you explain:
I'd liked it if you added some details or *examples* about. . .
Perhaps you could shorten or cut the material about. . .

and then includes a student model of the form filled out in response to a sample student paper. Moberg also describes levels of feedback students can give: inferior, ordinary, superior, and deluxe.

He characterizes inferior as "You give your draft to a mate asking, '*Tell* me what you think.'" After a while you get it back with this grunt, "It's OK, I guess." Moberg describes a deluxe response as one in which the peer group takes notes on their feedback form and "then at the end you have some oral discussion as well" (88). Moberg also provides a feedback sheet on focus. The sheet asks students to identify the author's main point from the first paragraph and then describe how each paragraph does or does not support the focus.

Moberg's emphasis on group work and his forms for individual responses to student writing are the strongest features of his text. It is clear that Moberg's classroom is student-centered rather than teacher-centered and his main emphasis is on building confidence and revision skills in each of his writers. The other strength of *Writing on Computers in English Comp* is that Moberg acknowledges the fear and frustration that beginning writers face.

To alleviate their frustration and maximize their support, Moberg requires his students to work in groups at all stages of writing, even during their computer time, pointing out "nothing beats your own getting together with your peers in a close-knit group to create just the kind of warm and friendly environment that you need to develop your writing skills in comfort. . . writing on a computer could be a lonely job, so stay in close touch with your group mates" (15, 17).

However, the major strength of Moberg's text is that it is not about computers. Moberg emphasizes that computers are a "trade tool"—no more or less important than "pens, yellow pads, notebooks for journals, or dictionaries" (preface). *Writing on Computers in English Comp* is about writing, and Moberg's empathetic, peer support approach makes his text an excellent supplement to a basic writing class.

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