

Present Tense

A Journal of Rhetoric in Society

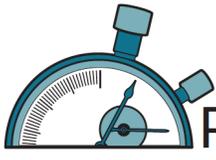
What Counts as Inclusive?: Articulating Writing Program Stances on Divisive Student Writing

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What Counts as Inclusive?: Articulating Writing Program Stances on Divisive Student Writing

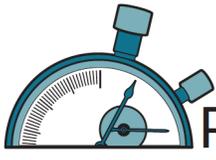
Thomas Sura

A [recent issue of *Present Tense*](#) drew vital attention to the intersections of rhetoric and social justice. These thought-provoking essays grappling with race, education, and technology, along with conversations on activism and justice at recent CCCC and CWPA conferences, have given me cause to reflect on how institutions enable and constrain discourse on issues like these, as well as my own role in that dynamic as an untenured writing program administrator (WPA). My argument is that by not explicitly addressing the ways in which writing teachers in my local context might address divisive student writing, I, and other WPAs like me, unwittingly constrain discourse on things like race, education, and technology. Therefore, by producing explicit statements about responding to divisive student writing through program position statements, WPAs and writing teachers can enable vital discussion about their own roles and responsibilities when it comes to sound argumentation, critical thinking, and conventions of discourse.

At the core of this inquiry is the tension between what some students may write with relative comfort and what their writing teachers or other students may read with relative discomfort. The potential subjects of this divisive writing are many but may include enduring issues related to race, gender, class, and politics. The great source of the tension may not be—at least at

first—between the students and the teachers but within the teachers themselves as they struggle to decide what responding as a reader means when considering their context and strong personal stances on divisive issues. For example, do they pretend the argument is one possibility that is just as valid as other arguments even though they feel duplicitous in doing so, or do they “say how they really feel” and risk alienating the student(s), becoming the subjects of criticism themselves, or worse, exposing themselves to administrative action if and when the administration’s ideologies do not match their own. Furthermore, how best do writing teachers distinguish between free speech and hate speech? How do they determine what constitutes an atmosphere of healthy debate in the classroom and what constitutes an unhealthy or threatening educational environment? These considerations harbor even greater importance and potential ramifications for writing teachers without the relative safety of tenure including graduate students, adjuncts, lecturers, and those who do not have the privilege of “being read as of the majority/a normative subject one’s whole life” (Kopelson 120), that is to say, the vast majority of writing teachers.

This dilemma, then, surfaces questions about how WPAs—as programmatic policy makers, philosophy shapers, and teaching coaches—



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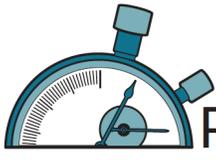
constrain or enable conversations, thinking, and teaching practices. What frames or lenses can help teachers, teacher educators, and WPAs examine their work as well as re-examine how to effectively mentor and support a range of students and faculty? I argue that programmatic position statements are a tool for generating and shaping the discourse of a program or, at the very least, making clear what a program's expectations of writing teachers are so that they have more information about how their responses to student writing might be viewed by those outside the student-teacher interaction. Furthermore, I argue that rhetorical theorist Wayne Booth's framework of stances—different positions taken up by communicators—provides a practical framework for guiding teachers, teacher educators, and WPAs in responding to students' writing, especially difficult and divisive topics. To illustrate this potential and foster more conversation, this essay includes a program position statement on divisive student writing.

In order to present the position statement I'm arguing for, as well as demonstrating Booth's framework in action, I will ground the discussion in a real-world example though I will omit some identifying details to protect the privacy of the student and teacher involved. The example is meant to be illustrative rather than a rigorous case study. In short, a student complained that a writing teacher had reacted unfairly to the student's paper on the confederate flag as a symbol of southern heritage. The writing teacher responded to the student's editorial by invoking the institution's social justice policy, dismissing the paper as unethical, and requiring the student to redo the work on a new topic. When the student came to see me, the student had already redone the paper but felt hurt by the writing teacher's response. The writing

teacher, on the other hand, felt responsible for protecting a positive classroom environment and felt that the best way to do this was to censor arguments that could be interpreted as racist and harmful to the classroom atmosphere.

Analyzing this scenario begins with Booth's argument that there are four key stances adopted by communicators: the rhetorical stance, the entertainer's stance, the advertiser's stance, and the pedant's stance. The most effective, as one might anticipate Booth arguing, is the "rhetorical stance." It is the ideal because it represents maintaining a "proper balance" between three key elements in a communication situation: the arguments, the audience, and the voice of the speaker (141). He further argues that "we all experience the balance whenever we find an author who succeeds in changing our minds" and that a communicator can achieve this when he or she "engages us in the process of thinking—and feeling—[the subject] through" (144). This last component—emphasizing thinking a subject through—will form the cornerstone of the approach I describe here.

In addition to the rhetorical stance, Booth also describes three less effective stances, but I focus on just two of them here because of their relevance to the scenario. The first one is the advertiser's stance. The advertiser, says Booth, undervalues the subject and overvalues pure effect in the audience (143). The advertiser stance aims to please the audience but does not worry about substance. Booth likens it to advertising focus groups where the message is not based in truth but in what the audience will find most agreeable. Returning to the previously described scenario, I contend that the student's editorial should be classified as adopting the advertiser's stance for two reasons. In



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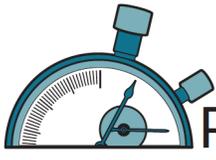
conversation with me, the student explained the topic choice in terms of what the writing teacher found pleasing. The student said that the writing teacher expressed enjoyment for reading about symbols. When I asked the student about the fact that the paper did not draw on significant sources to argue the point, the student explained that the teacher told the students not to use sources but instead to rely on their own ideas and intellect. Therefore, the student believed he was doing exactly what the assignment had called for.

While the student had taken up the advertiser's stance in his communication, the writing teacher's communication presented a different kind of stance that also missed the rhetorical stance Booth advocates. The writing teacher felt compelled to speak out "and speak loudly, to and about a burning exigency" (Abraham 743). His disagreement was so strong that his response privileged the argument over the "personal relationship between the speaker and the audience," what Booth identifies as the pedant's stance (141). Instead of helping the audience to think through the subject, the writing teacher squashed any further thought on the subject. The writing teacher's response, then, becomes a flashpoint between two competing philosophies regarding how to respond to difficult and divisive student writing. One argument suggests that as instructors we should remain or at least sneakily feign neutrality so as not to diminish our credibility in the eyes of students: As one scholar suggests, "loud speaking will tend to fall on deaf ears, not because our students are foolish or misguided, but because it is too easy to dismiss our passion as another kind of orthodoxy to which the institution demands they succumb" (Lynch 745). The counterpoint suggests that "If we must put aside our own strongly held beliefs to advance

academic goals with resistant students as part of a performance and academic neutrality, how do we speak out against clear injustice or problematic cultural hegemonies" (Abraham 741). In situations like this, WPAs are faced with the difficult challenge of responding when both student and instructor ask, "Am I wrong?"

In administering this case, I was ambivalent. On the one hand, I was not persuaded by the student's argument, nor did I think the ideas he articulated should remain unchecked. On the other hand, I was skeptical that censoring the student's idea—as unsavory as that idea may have felt to the writing teacher or even to me—was the best means of challenging it, especially when the student did what the assignment seemed to ask. On top of that, the situation foregrounded the lack of guidance and discussion that the current iteration of the writing program enabled. Responses to situations like this existed in the lore of our program (North), but there was no touchstone or articulation of what might be expected of any writing teachers or why when faced with such a dilemma. This moment made clear that as the WPA and one of the leaders of the writing program's curricular and faculty development, I had both a responsibility to establish a programmatic stance on difficult and divisive writing as well as the ability to implement and frame its use.

In the next section, I describe the position statement on difficult and divisive writing that I am sharing both within my local writing program and in broader contexts. This sharing is vital to the function of the position statement because of the statement's goal to enable rather than constrain conversation about the subject. The foundation of the position and what all of these assertions come back to is achieving a



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rhetorical stance—one that is appropriately balanced and one that privileges, above all else, engaging “us in the process of thinking—and feeling—[a subject] through” (Booth 144). The statement itself consists of three arguments (not policies) about the writing program’s position, but it is meant to be collaborative. That is to say that in order to claim it is a stance that “we” have adopted it must reflect a polyvocality that includes administrators, writing teachers, the research articulated in professional discourse on writing instruction, and even students participating in the writing courses. Digital spaces like *Present Tense* provide an especially valuable medium for enabling this polyvocality because the digital nature of the journal enables sharing with a feedback loop (i.e. the ability to leave a comment) not as easily achieved through print publication. One challenge with implementing a program position statement locally is that only the writing teachers in the program are able to respond. Because of the imbalance of power between writing teachers and WPAs, writing teachers may be reluctant to voice concerns, ask questions, or take any action that might be implicitly or explicitly counted against them. Circulating the position statement in a digital context like *Present Tense* can help to reduce this concern because writing teachers and even administrators from many different institutions may contribute to discussions with greater impunity since they are outside of the constraints of the local writing program. Likewise, even local instructors may choose to respond and to remain anonymous by using a pseudonym. Therefore, the statement—for all it may get right or get wrong—may potentially receive more rigorous scrutiny than if it were simply written and imposed within an isolated writing program. In other words, the goal in sharing the statement is not simply to present something that is already exemplary but to

share the statement knowing that rigorous public scrutiny through an accessible medium will make it more exemplary. Through this sharing the position statement may become a means of enabling conversations locally and nationally about the responsibilities of writing teachers and WPAs when they encounter student writing, especially writing that they deem difficult and divisive.

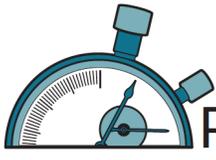
What follows, then, is a sample program position statement on student topic choice written to an audience of writing instructors, and my hope in sharing this document is that it will invite discourse about how and why it might be used.

Position Statement on Student Topic Choices

Position 1. All student thinking is welcome and encouraged (with exceptions).

In conversations about writing, writing scholars and teachers often quote the idea that writing is thinking. It’s true that certain topics like abortion, legalizing marijuana, or paying college athletes are enduring and quite common in introductory writing courses. Even though a lot of students have already thought about these topics, we believe that other students should have the opportunity to think about them, too. Therefore, we discourage banning topics outright and instead encourage writing teachers to be open with students about what makes certain topics especially challenging.

Sometimes students choose topics that are especially provocative or even uncomfortable for instructors or for other students in class. It’s also possible that students will express views that one instructor will find distasteful that another instructor will find unequivocally threatening. In those cases, it is certainly



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appropriate to consult with colleagues and the WPA(s) to identify appropriate courses of action. Encouraging students to grapple with challenging topics does not mean you or your other students must endure a negative or hostile classroom environment.

For the Classroom

Create a conversation with students by using a freewrite or brainstorming activity to generate thinking about the following questions: What topics do you associate with the word *safe*? What topics do you associate with the word *dangerous*? Why do you think you have those associations? Are *safe* topics always good? Are *dangerous* topics always bad? Look for threads that connect the discussion to other concepts like purpose, audience, and context.

Position 2. Think of rhetoric as both the art of persuasion and the art of being persuaded.

As writing teachers, we talk a lot about rhetoric as the art of persuasion, and we teach the skills necessary to persuade an audience (to be a rhetor). We place tremendous emphasis on producing persuasive documents or multimodal texts, and we frame success as persuading an audience. At the same time, if we are not careful, we also inadvertently frame *being persuaded* as failure. It is a weakness because *being persuaded* gets reduced to having been wrong. In a course on composition and rhetoric, it can become easy to overlook teaching the skills needed to be persuaded (to be an audience) as well as framing being persuaded as success as well. Persuasion requires several important skills but being persuaded requires several important skills too:

- Remaining open to new ideas

- Actively listening to the arguments of others
- Remaining skeptical about new claims
- Demanding sufficient evidence in different forms (e.g., scientific demonstration, testimony of others)
- Asking thoughtful questions
- Making decisions

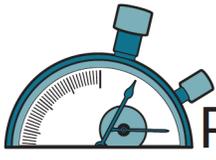
By framing rhetoric as the art of persuasion and the art of being persuaded, we can foreground the pursuit of the most tenable ideas, not just our own ideas, and we can send the message that it's okay to change your mind.

For the Classroom

Ask your students to read "The Best Leaders Allow Themselves to Be Persuaded" by Al Pittampalli and discuss what persuades us and how it feels to be persuaded. Ask students to describe a time that they changed their minds about something. What convinced them and why?

Position 3. Create and share Quick Complexity Lists (or QCLs) with other instructors.

As writing teachers, we often receive underdeveloped or one-sided student essays, and it is easy enough to urge the student to do more research. To aid that research, we advocate creating and sharing Quick Complexity Lists (or QCLs) with other instructors. These lists amount to quick links to or citations for articles and ideas readily accessible in either the local context or on the web. With these lists, writing teachers can offer students one shareable resource as a means of adding specific, focused material to challenge and advance the students' thinking on an issue. The student and the teacher then understand that even if the



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students' arguments do not change that the students must integrate and account for the additional information. Furthermore, this does not mean that a writing teacher must always fill a perfunctory devil's advocate role. The goal is not simply to argue the opposite of the student but to advance students' thinking by focusing students on one specific source that will add complexity to their essay—through new information, alternative hypotheses, or different perspectives.

For the Classroom

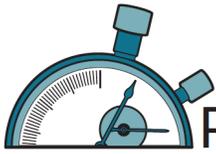
- As a peer review activity, ask students to read each other's papers and then help you build a classroom QCL by identifying one source that challenges and advances an essay through new information, alternative hypotheses, or different perspectives.

Putting these arguments together into a response to divisive student writing can help writing teachers respond honestly and openly while reducing the danger of compromising their credibility in their courses or their relationships with their students. To carry through the example from earlier, here is a model of what a writing teacher pursuing a rhetorical stance to a student's paper about the confederate flag might look like:

This is an important and timely topic. In fact, with all of the recent news coverage I've been thinking about it a lot myself in recent weeks. I appreciated reading your perspective, although I can still imagine audiences that are skeptical (and maybe even angry) about your argument. I wonder how you would respond to and integrate Ta-Nehisi Coates's essay entitled "Take Down the Confederate Flag—Now" because his

argument is quite different from your own. Remember that even if you don't ultimately find him persuasive you can strengthen your own argument by accounting for and providing evidence that refutes alternative arguments. If you can't find evidence that helps you refute an alternative argument, then you might need to keep thinking about it, keep looking for even more sources, and keep asking yourself if there's anything to the other argument.

This experience described here has pushed me to think and feel through how WPAs and teacher educators talk about difficult and divisive writing within programs. I have two concluding thoughts. First, this discussion is crucial in my own local context because it addresses a gap in our teacher development that I had too easily ignored. On top of that, my institution is 90% white, and our Campus Read during the last academic year was a book called *Just Mercy*, a memoir depicting the brutality and unfairness wrought upon ethnic minorities by the US criminal justice system. Teachers and students across campus were having difficult conversations. On top of that, the current political climate has stoked difficult and divisive conversation. A recent *New York Times* article described how "Defying modern conventions of political civility and language, [Donald] Trump has breached the boundaries that have long constrained Americans' public discussion of race" (Confessore). At the same time, Colin Kaepernick, a quarterback for the National Football League's San Francisco 49ers, had begun kneeling during performances of the US national anthem as a means of protesting racial injustice in the country. His goal, he said, was to enable conversations about racial inequalities. In sum, we are already having difficult conversations about divisive issues and more of them. They



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stretch from campuses, to capitals, and even to sports arenas.

The second thought is that without clearly articulated positions, writing programs may constrain important discussions about important topics. Yes, writing teachers have many position statements through NCTE, CCCC, and even CWPA, but there is nowhere that programs share their position statements. What is missing are actual articulations of how writing programs enact the theories, the research, and the conversations on a practical level. Using digital spaces like *Present Tense* or even *Medium* to share program position statements will enable ongoing discussion as well as provide valuable nodes that link public audiences back to our institutions and professional organizations like NCTE, CCCC, and the Council of Writing Program Administrators. In doing so, writing teachers and WPAs can support their programs and each other while also becoming more vocal about how and why the work writing programs do matters.

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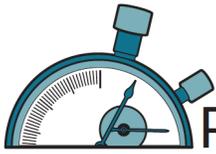
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