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### Tiles, Pens, and Laptops: Midterm Reflections on Word Building

Although I have read Matt Richtel's article "Blogs vs. Term Papers" many times, this semester marked the first time I had studied it as an exercise in analysis. Ordinarily, I include Richtel's article on the syllabus as a prologue to my students' own blogging. The article served that purpose in August as well. But as I found myself teaching a different composition curriculum that features an analysis as the first major paper assignment, Richtel's article served a dual purpose: It not only oriented my students to the role that blogs would play in the class, it also provided them with the opportunity to study the way a writer—in this case, Matt Richtel—presents the ideas of the experts he interviews. By reading Richtel's article, the students learned about changes in writing practices in college classrooms; by *rereading* Richtel, they began to see how his writing takes shape. The same was true for me.

The process of crafting a study of "Blogs vs. Term Papers" prompted me to meditate on the similarities between analysis and Scrabble, another feature of the course. The more I examined Richtel's words, the more details I noticed. Similarly, the more closely I study the words on a Scrabble board and the tiles on a rack, the more opportunities for word building become apparent to me. This semester, the processes of writing an analysis of "Blogs vs. Term Papers" and playing Scrabble have deepened my understanding of how those two activities cultivate the focus that leads to the discoveries intrinsic to learning.

One of those moments of discovery occurred for me as I was rereading the paragraph in Richtel's article where he addresses an argument put forth by experts who frown on replacing the term paper with the blog. Richtel reports their claim that if teachers want to reduce term papers to blog posts, why not bypass blogs altogether and ask nothing more of their students than tweets? In my previous readings of the paragraph, I was drawn primarily to the clever mimicry at the end. There Richtel omits letters from the words "Sherman's March," spelling it as "Shermn's Mrch" to imitate the word-shortening technique characteristic of the Twitter platform.

As I studied the paragraph more closely, I saw beyond the intentional misspellings at the conclusion. Subsequently, what preceded the imitation of Twitterese became far more revealing. I noticed that the paragraph consisted of only one sentence—one of only two one-sentence paragraphs in the article—and that Richtel's presentation of the claim demonstrates a flaw in the experts' logic: "Their *reductio ad absurdum*: why not just bypass the blog, too, and move on to 140 characters about Shermn's Mrch?" Realizing that Richtel presented one of their assertions as a logical fallacy, led me to this point:

To assert that defenders of traditional academic writing carry their opponents' argument to an absurd conclusion presents those advocates of old-school writing as purveyors of the same flawed logic that their own traditional rhetoric supposedly teaches students to avoid.

Additionally, I considered the effect of choosing to present the fallacy as a one-sentence paragraph, noting that "[b]y introducing an apparent contradiction in the argument of the advocates of old-school writing, Richtel subverts their claim; and by presenting that incongruity as a one-sentence paragraph, he highlights the issue."

Reflecting on the effect of the one-sentence paragraph, with its emphasis on a single idea, led me to reexamine the other one-sentence paragraph in the article. That paragraph, a sentence spoken by Professor Cathy Davidson of the City University of New York, underscores the prominence of her words and ideas in Richtel's article, an observation of mine that led me to the thesis, that "[a]lthough Richtel's article appears to present an objective account of the disagreements among experts, a close examination of the diction and structure of 'Blogs vs. Term Papers' reveals a preference for the innovations advocated by Davidson and Lundsford."

Rereading Richtel's article through a writer's lens showed me details I had scarcely noticed before, ones that now in plain view lead me to ask repeatedly, *How could I have missed that?* It's a question I have also found myself asking when a word emerges from a seemingly hopeless combination of Scrabble tiles. Sometimes my students chide themselves for what they didn't see on the board or the rack, but those realizations are almost always part of the composing process, whether we're building words with tiles, or pens, or laptops. The closer we look, the more we discover, which is learning in its purest form.

#### Works Cited

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