

# Writing in the Disciplines

English Interview: Prof. Henry Hubert

**W.F. Garrett-Petts:** It's an appropriate moment to introduce Dr. Henry Hubert, who is going to be talking to us this afternoon about English, writing in the field of English, and also about the field of English more generally. Maybe I can start you off by asking you to tell us about your own experience as an English student. Did you always think you were going to end up teaching English at a University?

**Henry Hubert:** If I go right back to my first year, I got into English because I thought it was more interesting than the sciences. Strangely enough, in high school I did better in the science--but in English I found more questions that interested me. Actually, when I started my first year I thought I'd go into psychology, but, as I said, English asks such interesting questions that I just decided to go into English.

**Garrett-Petts:** Is there a big difference between high school and university English?

**Hubert:** A big difference. In high school I had no difficulty, everything was easy, very little work. In fact, when I got into the first year of college my marks dropped and I started asking myself, "How can I do better? What's going on here. How can I improve my writing especially?"

**Garrett-Petts:** [to the student panel] Was that a similar kind of experience for many of you as well: a big change between high school and university in terms of expectations when it comes to writing?

**Students:** Yes.

**Garrett-Petts:** Do any particular examples come to mind?

**Student Panelist:** I had the same thing happen to me as Henry. I coasted all the way through high school and I got to university and found that there's a whole different type of expectation regarding what kind of writing I would do.

**Garrett-Petts:** One of the things my own students tell me is that when you first come to a university, when you come to a college, a common first impression is that people talk like books. That there's a different way of communicating one needs to learn. Was that true for you as well?

**Student Panelist:** Yeah. It took a few years to really understand certain words--and not just technical terms. I found that I really didn't know what the teacher was talking about and I ended up getting lost.

**Garrett-Petts:** And also--I don't know if you've had this experience as well Henry-- sometimes after first year, when students leave the college and go home to another community, some of their friends will ask them why they're talking "like that." Their friends will ask them "What kind of language are you using? Who are you trying to fool? Who are you trying to impress?" It's almost as if that "book talk" is catching?

**Student Panelist:** Oh yes, I've had that experience. Very much so. And I'm from Kamloops, but, I mean, when just talking to people you haven't seen for a while you can get a similar reaction to the one you've described.

**Garrett-Petts:** [To Professor Hubert] If we're learning a new dialect here as university students, what's the dialect of English studies? What can you tell us that would help us write a better English paper? If I'm a "C" student coming into your class in English 110 or English 111, what do I need to know that's going to make me sound and write like a better student?

**Hubert:** I don't know if I would use the term "dialect"; it's more a matter of "precision in language." Going back again to my first year, I remember in papers I would write certain words and they would be circled and I would go to the dictionary and find I hadn't been using those words as appropriately as I might have. They weren't the exact words I needed; they weren't precise. I think that reflects a sharpening of thinking as well. But I think a major difference in the language is the precision of language. [To a student panelist] And does that reflect perhaps what you were thinking when meeting old friends-- that the difference now is that you are using language more precisely?

**Student Panelist:** Yeah, I think so.

**Garrett-Petts:** Is it precision, or is it a jargon that one picks up? Is it really precision do you think?

**Hubert:** In specific fields, in particular courses, we learn to use the jargon or the terms of those specific discourses. For instance, if we are talking about literature, we learn to use, more and more precisely, words like "setting" and "character," "theme," and "point of view." Those are specific terms that we use in literature, and we learn to use them accurately.

**Garrett-Petts:** So that the disciplinary terminology, then, gives us categories for organizing our thoughts in perhaps a way that might sound like jargon to somebody else outside the field. But for someone in the field, it's a kind of shorthand?

**Hubert:** Sure it is.

**Student Panelist:** When you were talking about precision did you mean a more careful choice of language.

**Hubert:** That as well. You see, in every field I think we learn specific terms, but, in general, I think we learn to use language more carefully.

**Garrett-Petts:** One of the things we've been talking about in our English course, and I think it's relevant here, is that we never write outside of a context. We always write for a particular audience, and assuming that the audience in English Studies is, say, different from the audience in sociology or psychology or history, what can you tell us about the English professor? What does the English professor looking for?

**Hubert:** I think the English professor is looking for what we started talking about earlier: the English professor is looking for expertise in those categories that the English professor deals with. So the technical terms, the language of the discipline, we have to learn; and we have to learn to work within those parameters. Learning those terms, that language, shows that you belong to that community, in a sense. And if you don't speak with those terms, it suggests that you haven't learned to be part of that community. So it's important to use words like...

**Garrett-Petts:** [Interrupting] That community is not a seamless community though is it?

**Hubert:** By no means.

**Garrett-Petts:** There are different factions within all of these disciplines that we're talking about? When I say "sociology," there is no one voice of the sociologist, or one voice of English studies. Can you give us an idea of the tensions, perhaps, in the field of English. The rival factions or the different philosophical viewpoints within the field?

**Hubert:** Well an obvious tension within the field: I would say there might be three areas within the wider field of English. The most traditional area, of course, is literature. Another area that is more traditional, but hasn't been as traditional in the twentieth century, is rhetoric. That is, the area that teaches us how to write persuasively. Rhetorical studies go way back to the middle ages and earlier, while in the twentieth century--in the late nineteenth century and twentieth century-- English has been related very closely with the study of literature itself. In the field of English, very recently however, the field of technical writing is becoming more and more significant. So those are three areas.

**Garrett-Petts:** How does rhetoric differ from technical writing then?

**Hubert:** They're both writing oriented, and the study of rhetoric is the study of putting your ideas across well in whatever field. So rhetoric, in a sense, would span every discipline. Technical writing would involve writing for engineering reports, for instance. Writing in the professions would be classed as technical writing; rhetoric would be "communicating persuasively across the disciplines"; and literature, of course, is the study of novels, poetry, and other creative works--these days expanding from what was traditionally English literature to world literature.

**Garrett-Petts:** So you write differently do you in these various classes or these various sub-disciplines of English.

**Hubert:** Distinctly differently. If you look at a technical report, for instance, the field of writing, the vocabulary, even the format of the paper, are distinctly different. A report is not an essay.

**Garrett-Petts:** We're beginning to talk about questions of format now, questions of language, language choice and difference. You brought with you an example of what you consider to be good writing.

**Hubert:** Yes. For a first-year paper this would be very good writing.

**Garrett-Petts:** This is an example from a literature class.

**Hubert:** That's right. Earlier you were comparing literature and other disciplines, say, sociology. In a good sociology paper or a geography paper, for instance, I would look for tables, I would look for statistics and other such forms of evidence. But if you look at a paper like this [Dr. Hubert holds up the student essay], you'll find that it's a straight essay, that there's only text. There are no diagrams, there are no tables, there are no charts: it's only text.

**Garrett-Petts:** That's your first clue, then, that you're reading a literature paper?

**Hubert:** You can have text-only essays in other areas. But the fact that I don't have charts and things like that--yes, it suggests to me that I might be looking at a literature essay. A history essay might look quite similar, of course. Both areas are within the humanities.

**Garrett-Petts:** So it's more text oriented, less visually oriented.

**Hubert:** Very much more text oriented. Now the interesting thing is, if you look at the first paragraph, at the visual dynamics (if we can use that term) is introduced in the author's interest in images. The images give us the visual aspect--but in words. [Reading from the essay] "James Joyce's 'Boarding House' is the study of mirrors." So the author asks you to see a mirror. We are introduced to "mirror like characters" and to "the self-revelations inherent in viewing one's own self image." Even the word "image" is used directly. So, in English, the word "image", for instance, would suggest to us very strongly that we're in the field of literary study-- or in the arts in some way. Although the word "image" can be used in any discipline, in English Studies it remains an area of special interest.

**Garrett-Petts:** You're putting this essay forward as an example of fine writing, a piece of first class writing at the first year level?

**Hubert:** No question.

**Garrett-Petts:** What does this essay do that, say, a "C" essay in first year wouldn't be doing?

**Hubert:** Well, I'd like to look at the structure of this paper as an "A" structure, in a sense (Click here to read the 'A' paper) . It begins with a proposition: looking at James Joyce's "Boarding House" as a study of mirrors, mirror-like characters and the self-revelation inherent in viewing one's own image. Then the rest of the paragraph introduces some ideas that follow this proposition, ideas that support. Mrs. Mooney, the woman who runs the boarding house, is discussed and so is her prey, Bob Doran. If we look at the rest of the paper, now, we find that the second paragraph ties back to the first. It's, in a sense, introduced in the first. This second paragraph looks back to what we call the thesis: what the essay is about. The second paragraph also ties back to the whole question of imagery. And if you look at the final paragraph, where we are told that water clarifies "Polly's sight" while it obscures Bob Doran's, we once again sense the essay's coherence. Bob Doran is mentioned in the first paragraph and the last, so the structure of this essay all hangs together very nicely--and that's the mark of a good paper. A "C" paper very often presents a number of individual ideas, but they don't hang together and develop the thesis as well as this one does.

**Garrett-Petts:** You're looking for what used to be called "unity of effect."

**Hubert:** That's right. And the unity of effect, of course, if we looked at that, would also be present within every individual paragraph. That is, you have the topic sentence that relates to the thesis. In a sense, every paragraph is, in itself, a mini essay, right? Each topic sentence, then, could be seen as a thesis of its paragraph.

**Garrett-Petts:** Now everything in this short paper that you brought with you refers to mirrors.

**Hubert:** That's right.

**Garrett-Petts:** So the focus is extremely narrow.

**Hubert:** That's right.

**Garrett-Petts:** Is that a good thing to do--to focus so narrowly?

**Hubert:** Very often it's a good thing to do, depending on the topic of the paper of course. What is central, of course, is that it's going to be dealing with...the paper's going to deal necessarily with the topic stated. Now a good topic in literature, an analytical topic, very often "goes deep"-- and the narrower the topic that we have, necessarily, the deeper and more analytically it cuts into the topic that we're analyzing. And so, from that perspective, you see that in this essay the imagery of mirrors takes us right from beginning to end. We discuss mirrors as they are present in the middle of the story--in the beginning, the middle, and the end. We discuss how all the characters relate to that one image. In a sense, it takes us "into" the story, right into the centre of the story.

**Garrett-Petts:** Now the focus of the essay is relatively narrow, if I'm understanding correctly...

**Hubert:** That's right.

**Garrett-Petts:** ...everything relates. If the author is going to talk about mirrors in James Joyce's "The Boarding House", then the entire essay is about every reference to mirrors he or she can find in that story? Now if that's a first class paper at the first-year level, what do you need to do to that topic, or to that paper, at say, the third- or fourth-year level to make it a first class term paper?

**Hubert:** I suppose the difference between the first class term paper and the first class paper on a short story like this, first of all, is simply the length. A term paper is going to be longer than this necessarily.

**Garrett-Petts:** Normally ten to fifteen pages.

**Hubert:** Normally ten to fifteen pages. But many of the same principles hold. That is, a good term paper has that unity of structure that we find here. But very often in a term paper we start asking ourselves different questions--that is, in expanding a little bit, because we're dealing with much, much more material. When we're discussing a novel, for example, then we're discussing the criticism of that novel as well. So we're discussing the novel...

**Garrett-Petts:** If I can stop you there. There's no reference to criticism in this paper.

**Hubert:** That's right.

**Garrett-Petts:** This is a personal reaction, a very informed personal reaction to the story.

**Hubert:** A very close reading of the story itself, yes.

**Garrett-Petts:** But now, for a term paper, you're asking for criticism...

**Hubert:** That's right.

**Garrett-Petts:** ...in the third year. So what kind of criticism? What are we looking for?

**Hubert:** When we're looking at a work of literature in the third and fourth year, we're asking "what have other people said about this story?" And the interesting thing about the study of literature, of course, is that good literature has ambiguity: it suggests different things to different people. In a sense, every reader brings his or her own background, and knowledge, to any reading of the story. And very briefly, that's why people often say a book is better than a film-- because when you read a book you bring yourself to the story and the images are your stories. You personalize the story, whereas a film does everything for you.

**Garrett-Petts:** So if everybody has a different view of the story, is it a recipe for chaos that we're looking at here? A recipe for debate anyway.

**Hubert:** It's a recipe for debate. But the interesting thing is as a community we have a commonality of interests. And because we're talking about the community interest rather than very personal interests, we can talk about the story and see it as "the same story." We have certain shared understandings, shared approaches as critics, even though we have individual points of view. And so...

**Hubert:** Would personal opinion become part of the third- and fourth-year essay as well? Here I'm not necessarily asking about using the first person pronoun; I'm wondering whether it's fair to bring own personal backgrounds to the analysis of the story?

**Hubert:** It's necessary, because you're going to be reading the story, you're going to be bringing yourself to the story--and so, as you compare critic "A", "B", "C" and "D", you're going to resonate more with critic "B", for instance. Right? Your reading will resonate with that critic's world view, and so that you will find that interpretation closer to yours. That said, your interpretation might be distinctly different from "A", "B", "C" or "D".

**Garrett-Petts:** Is there no right interpretation of these stories then?

**Hubert:** There is no single interpretation. And here I think it comes down to your original question: "What makes a good term paper at the third and fourth year level?" And I would say that when I'm reading a paper I'm looking for a thesis and then I'm asking, "is this thesis significant, does it resonate with the critical community as such?" "Is this student asking the right questions?" Then I would ask, "Is this thesis relevant to the text?" And finally, after I've read the paper, I ask myself, "Am I as a reader convinced that this thesis is valid, is true for this text--am I convinced?" When you present a topic sentence for instance, does the paragraph convince me that that position that you've taken is valid. So I'm not asking, "Is your research, in a sense, complete," because it can't be. There are always other viewpoints. But I'm asking the central question: "Are you writing convincingly--am I convinced your thesis is valid, significant and true."

**Garrett-Petts:** Well, so far what I'm hearing is that the successful senior-level term paper shares a number of characteristics with the paper that was written in the first year--one showing unity of effect, a clear thesis, strong organization. But now, for a term paper, or a senior-level paper, you're looking for that personal response to the text, an informed personal response to the text, in a kind of a dialogue with other critics. And you would find that critical dialogue by consulting other readings of the story?

**Hubert:** That's right. Sure.

**Garrett-Petts:** So is that it, then? Is that all you do to write an "A" paper?

**Hubert:** To write an "A" paper, I start with that question, "Is the argument or reading relevant to the critical community?" and "Am I convinced by the argument?" But from an "A" paper I also demand evidence of strong technical writing ability. A paper that is full of errors, even one that convinces me, also leaves me irritated. And if I'm irritated that paper is not going to get an "A".

**Garrett-Petts:** What irritates you? [Laughter]

**Hubert:** What irritates me? Weak sentence structure, run-on sentences, spelling errors, things like this. That is, I'll compare a paper to, if I might, to a car. That car might run very well, but if it's rusty, not even washed, if the interior's dirty, if there are holes in the dashboard--the car might run very well, may take me from here to Vancouver and back on a single tank of gas, but that car isn't going to get top price on the market.

**Garrett-Petts:** You're describing your own car aren't you? [Laughter] We've only got a couple of minutes left and maybe this is a good point to turn it back over to you [addressing the students] and ask for any clarification about some of the matters that have been brought up thus far. Maybe I could start things off by asking, does this "resonate," to use the word we've been using, with your own experience? Have you been asked to use the library more in third and fourth year, for example, than in first year? I'm thinking especially of English papers-- but this tendency may relate to other subjects? And if so, what are the challenges involved in using the library to contextualize your views?

**Hubert:** Have any of you have difficulty using quotations really smoothly in a paper? And how does that relate to this.

**Student Panelist:** I found that sometimes I feel like I'm using too many quotes to say what I want to say instead of me saying it myself, or I don't use enough to clarify what I mean.

**Student Panelist:** Or else you use the quotation and then you don't expand enough on it, and the teacher is like, "Whoa, what are you doing with this quote?" Like you're not saying what you want to say.

**Garrett-Petts:** That strikes me as a really important aspect of this discussion. As you're moving from first year to third and fourth year, you need to contextualize your own ideas; but to do so you must learn to quote someone else's words, and then you comment on those words. You must add to the conversation. So you contextualize the quotations within your own essay. And by doing that you're showing that it's not a disembodied voice but you're using the information and working it in in some way? How do you know when you've got a good issue to work with? Henry's been using the term "thesis." How do you know when you've got a good thesis?

**Student Panelist:** When you can make your essay as many pages as you need. [Laughter]

**Garrett-Petts:** So when it generates a big enough essay?



**Student Panelist:** That's right. [Laughter]

**Garrett-Petts:** Let's give you that last word, Henry. How do you know you've got a good thesis, a good topic to work with? How do you recognize one in a student paper?

**Hubert:** Again, it depends. There's a difference between the first year and the fourth year. The first year thesis: I'm expecting the thesis to take me into the centre of the story, in a sense, the way this paper [holds up essay on "The Boarding House"] does. At the fourth year level, I'm looking for a thesis that in some way touches the various points that I might expect to find from other critics--in other words, I'm looking for evidence that the essay draws on the primary and secondary research. A good thesis doesn't isolate the rest of the sources that I'm looking at; it draws it in and draws it in in a way that deals with the text that I'm dealing with. So it's simply an inclusion of the discourse community, in this case, of literary criticism, with the literary text. And when it does that I know I've got a significant thesis.

**Garrett-Petts:** Thank you Henry Hubert from the English Department. Thank you all, and good afternoon. [Applause]