

Teaching Writing In The Bermuda Triangle

Written by Eve Siebert

Wednesday, 03 October 2012 09:00

The following is a contribution to the JREF's ongoing blog series on skepticism and education. If you are an educator and would like to contribute to this series, please contact [Bob Blaskiewicz](#)

First-year composition classes are required at most American colleges and universities. At some schools, including the one at which I currently teach, “freshman comp” is the only class that is required for all students. Instructors of first-year writing classes are expected to accomplish a great deal: we are expected to prepare our students for writing at the college level in all disciplines; we are expected to introduce our students to college-level research (how to find and evaluate sources and how to incorporate those sources into their own writing); we are expected to teach our students how to craft a well-supported, well-reasoned and fair argument. Oh, and there are also the mechanics of writing: grammar, punctuation, diction, syntax, tone, analysis of audience and purpose.

Probably the most important part of our job revolves around argument and research: we strive to teach our students how to be critical thinkers and critical readers, and we try to teach them to be responsible writers. We spend much of our time discussing evidence: evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of potential sources and using evidence to support a strong, logical thesis. To that end, we introduce students to logical reasoning and logical fallacies.

In other words, a bunch of hippie English majors are teaching critical thinking.

One of the best short articles I have found that illustrates the importance of critical thinking, skeptical reading and responsible writing is Larry Kusche's “The Bermuda Triangle,” published in *Science and the Paranormal: Probing the Existence of the Supernatural*, edited by George O. Abell and Barry Singer. Kusche is best known for writing the book *The Bermuda Triangle Mystery: Solved*, which shows that there really is no mystery surrounding the so-called Bermuda Triangle. While the book is comprehensive, the article deals in depth with two cases: the *Suduffco*, a freighter that disappeared in 1926, and a derelict supposedly encountered by the *Ellen Austin* in 1881. I pair the Kusche article with a more credulous Bermuda Triangle piece, George X. Sand's “Sea Mystery at Our Back Door,” published in *Fate* magazine in 1952. The stories discussed in the Sand and Kusche articles do not overlap.

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I begin by discussing the Sand article. Since the students have also read Kusche, they may have a more skeptical perspective on Sand than they would otherwise, but since Kusche doesn't directly refute any of the stories discussed by Sand, the students have to do their own critical thinking. First I ask the class to list positive aspects of the article. Generally, the students mention that Sand refers to specific details: names, dates, locations. They also mention that he is an interesting storyteller, although this is a problematic positive.

I then ask the students to discuss aspects of the Sand article that they find questionable. They notice, first of all, that Sand does not cite any sources, either in a bibliography or within the text, except for one vague reference to the U.S. Weather Bureau. He provides specific details but doesn't back them up with any evidence. Students also notice that some of the details are slightly dubious, causing readers to wonder, "How could he know this?" One particularly egregious example of a suspicious detail comes in Sand's description of the *Sandra*:

The crewmen had been at mess, and now those not on duty drifted aft to smoke and talk and reflect upon the dying day and what the morrow would bring. (12)

How does he know they'd just been at mess? How does he know that they then went aft to smoke and chat? Of course, it's possible that this information was reported somewhere, but, without a source, we have to question it. Sand includes many novelistic flourishes. These not only add to the interest of the story, they also contribute to the sense of mystery: everything is calm and peaceful, and references to St. Augustine lighthouse and the after-mess smoke suggests that Sand knows where the ship was shortly before it disappeared (fairly close to land) and at approximately what time it disappeared. But, again, how does he know? Can we trust the specific details he provides?

After discussing Sand, we turn to the Kusche article. Unlike Sand, Kusche cites sources—primary sources. He describes in detail his attempts to track down information on the disappearances and to validate or refute stories about the Bermuda Triangle. While practicing good research skills, he demonstrates the weaknesses of many other writers who have taken up the Bermuda Triangle as their theme. For one thing, he makes it clear that Bermuda Triangle writers often plagiarize each other and other sources, although he does not use the word "plagiarism." Plagiarism, both intentional and unintentional, is frequently a problem among college writers, so it is a good idea to confront it directly. Kusche shows that many Bermuda Triangle writers plagiarize in two ways: by failing to cite their sources and by using the language of their sources without placing the borrowed words in quotation marks. He notes, for instance, that Vincent Gaddis has been very influential on later writers:

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It was obvious from the similarity of wording and incidents covered that many, if not most, of the later writers lifted their information from Gaddis. The incidents he discussed became the core of the mystery. (Kusche 298)

Kusche is able to trace writers' indebtedness to Gaddis not through their bibliographies, because they did not cite him, but from their appropriation of his language. Further, he notes that John Wallace Spencer's discussion of the *Suduffco* "consisted of reworded, condensed articles from the New York Times. (In one part of Spencer's account . . . a sentence of twenty-two words was exactly the same except for a change of verb tense)" (Kusche 299). Again and again Kusche reveals instances where writers have used sources irresponsibly and dishonestly.

The dishonesty is compounded by the fact that Spencer, having plagiarized the *New York Times*, leaves out the most crucial sentence: "The *Suduffco* was proceeding down the coast at a time when the coast was swept by storms" (qtd. in Kusche 299). By leaving out that bit of evidence, Spencer has turned a non-mystery into a mystery.

Kusche's discussion of the *Ellen Austin* and its encounter with a derelict ship is also instructive. Kusche researched primary sources very thoroughly and found that, although the *Ellen Austin* certainly existed, there was no evidence that it had ever encountered a mysteriously abandoned ship. He also established that the event couldn't have occurred the way it is described in various Bermuda Triangle works.

While Kusche's research is exemplary, he again demonstrates the problems that occur when researchers are sloppy or dishonest. He tracks the story through several sources, starting with an account written in 1914 by Rupert Gould. Gaddis used Gould as his source for a 1964 magazine article and a book he wrote a year later. Most other writers have used Gould and Gaddis as sources. Kusche is meticulous in describing the various accounts. He even provides word counts for each story. I ask my students what the significance of the word counts may be. If they look at me blankly, I say, "Well, Gould's account is 86 words; Gaddis's first version is 115 words; his second is 188 words; the next account is 429 words. What's happening?" The answer, of course, is that each account becomes longer because the authors are adding details, details that are not in their sources. The later writers embellish the story prodigiously; one even mentions that the *Ellen Austin's* captain thought about the [Mary Celeste](#) as he boarded the derelict. These details have no basis in fact and are not accounted for in the acknowledged (and unacknowledged) sources, but they have become part of the mythos of the Bermuda Triangle. The writers repeat each other's mistakes and elaborations and add their

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own, and yet their books appear in the non-fiction section.

After discussion Kusche, we return to Sand. I ask my students to do some Internet research on the stories in the Sand article. The assignment is twofold: I want them to discover the truth behind the stories, if possible, and to assess the quality of information available. As far as the second part of the assignment is concerned, the students find that the problems that Kusche notes are magnified on the Internet: plagiarism is so much easier when you just have to copy and paste. The stories also continue to grow on the Internet and are accompanied by outlandish explanations for the “mystery” disappearances.

Fortunately, among the plagiarized and fictionalized accounts, it is also possible to ferret out likely explanations: the weather was bad; there were mechanical problems; a pilot got lost. In the case of the *Sandra*, the first disappearance Sand discusses, students are likely to find another Kusche article, published in [Skeptical Inquirer](#). In this article, Kusche asks many of the same questions my students had asked when we first discussed Sand. It’s rewarding for them to realize that Kusche shares their doubts. Kusche also has the answer: Sand says the weather was calm when the *Sandra* sailed in June. Indeed, it was calm in June, but the *Sandra* actually sailed in March and faced nearly hurricane-strength winds.

Very careful readers will notice something else about this Kusche article. He quotes Sand’s account of the *Sandra*:

The *Sandra* was a square-cut tramp steamer, decorated here and there with rust spots along her 350-foot length. Radio equipped and loaded with 300 tons of insecticide, she leisurely thumped her way south in the heavily traveled coastal shipping lanes of Florida in June 1950. (qtd. in Kusche, “Critical Reading”)

All of this information is indeed included in the Sand article and the general wording comes from Sand as well, but the quotation is not quite accurate, and sentences are rearranged. The same is true of the second paragraph Kusche quotes. I don’t have an explanation for this inconsistency. It is possible that Sand’s article was published in more than one form; it is also possible that Kusche made a mistake when he quoted. Inaccurate quotation is another problem that frequently occurs in student writing. The differences between Sand’s original and Kusche’s quotation of him are significant enough that it seems like sloppy work on Kusche’s part. This is disheartening, but it is also a teachable moment: no source, however good, is perfect, and no source should be trusted implicitly. Critical readers should approach writings with an open mind,

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but they should also be skeptical and seek to verify and confirm any information they find.

References:

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