EASE IN COMPOSITION STUDIES

By

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by
C Bradley Dilger
Dedicated to the memory of my grandmothers, Elisa Vanina Dilger (1917–2000) and Mabel Fulton Boutwell (1911–2001).
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, before all else, and for so many reasons, I thank my wife Erin Easterling.

My doctoral committee—Greg Ulmer, Stephanie Smith, Blake Scott, and Joe Wilson—have guided this dissertation, helped me develop the long-term project it represents, supported other research, and allowed me to cultivate an eclectic focus.

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Bruce Leland and the faculty of Western Illinois University recently welcomed me to their campus and asked me to become their colleague.

The players of the WTFL, past and present, have not contributed much which can be cited in this work, but have helped make it possible by cheerfully rumblin’ bumblin’ and stumblin’ through many Saturday mornings.

Ronald L. Corbin helped me through high school and to the university. I aspire to his wisdom and sense of humor, and am proud to have been his student. In many ways, I still am.
Throughout this dissertation, “contemporary” is used to mean “at the time of writing being considered.” “Current” means at the time this dissertation is being written, e.g. 2002 and 2003.

Many texts published during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are quoted in this work. Their distinctive orthography and typography—for example, frequently capitalizing of nouns, or typesetting single words or phrases in italics—is reproduced as faithfully as possible here. In many cases, this typography conveyed didactic emphasis, and it unquestionably has semantic content. Current rhetoric and composition handbooks make much of their use of four-color printing, extensive indexing, and tabbed binding; though Isaac Watts and his contemporaries did not have those means, they did employ the best available printing technologies to make writing easy. Standardizing or normalizing their work to meet current orthographic standards would erase valuable meanings which should be considered carefully.
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EASE IN COMPOSITION STUDIES

By

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Chair: Gregory L. Ulmer
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For many Americans, the idea of “ease” shapes understanding of complexity and difficulty. Though many consider ease of use a twentieth-century phenomenon associated with personal computers, its origins date from the seventeenth century. “Ease in Composition Studies” investigates the role of ease in American culture, especially college-level writing.

I begin by defining ease and tracing its history through four critical periods of development dating from 1700 to the present. I show that ease can be defined using a list of eight qualities opposed to other important concepts: comfort, transparency, effortlessness, simplicity, pragmatism, femininity, expediency, and pictorialism.

Calling on the work of Evan Watkins, I show problems which can occur when ease is uncritically demanded or mobilized—as is frequently the case when consumer models of ease, based on simple transaction, appear in educational contexts.

With ease defined, I demonstrate that current-traditional rhetoric, the simplified approach to writing developed in American nineteenth-century colleges, includes a pedagogy based on ease. Nineteenth-century composition portrays the act of writing,
writing style, and teaching writing as easy, and position writing as the gatekeeper for the “life of ease.” By investigating textbooks, teaching methods, and strategies which writers of supposedly easy rhetorics use, and calling on the work of Lucille Schultz and Sharon Crowley, I identify specific connections between writing and ease, charting the transformation of ease in the classroom from close identification with “easy” pedagogical techniques (atomization, alliteration, and gradation) to a less clearly defined, but no less powerful concept.

The connection of ease and writing established in current-traditional rhetoric was not disrupted by the pedagogical reforms of the 1960s and 1970s. Today ease shapes the development of teaching writing using computers and new media. Can composition instructors continue to mobilize ease to teach electronic “writing” technologies, given the differences in institutional practices and subject formation associated with them—what Greg Ulmer calls “electracy?” My research suggests otherwise. I conclude my dissertation by outlining an electrate supplement to ease: concepts suitable for practicing, learning, and teaching electronic discourse.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance
As those move easiest who have learn’d to dance.
—Alexander Pope, An Essay On Criticism

1.1 Why Ease?

Robert Johnson’s outstanding book User-Centered Technology begins with a sort of apology for its ordinary focus. Johnson makes his case for working with the mundane, the common, and the everyday—common things which are so familiar that they are all but invisible. The concept of ease is often associated with this natural, comfortable character: it conjures up images of elegant simplicity, gracefulness, painless use, pleasant speed, and welcome diversion. But there is nothing simple about the way ease influences American culture and the practice of writing in American colleges and universities.

Much of my research focuses on the role of ease in composition studies, the institution of English, and American culture. However, better understanding of ease is not my principal research concentration. My interest in ease is means, not end. As I see it today, my life’s work will be the development of physical and virtual writing environments, along with pedagogical practices, forms of communication and expression, and institutions which support them. I have spent a terrific amount of time studying ease because, as my first investigations suggested six years ago, ease has a huge role in the institution of composition studies, and a significant influence in the nascent electronic classroom.
Though I approach ease, electronic writing, information technology, new media, and hypermedia\(^1\) from the standpoint of composition studies, not media studies, I share many long-term research goals with Gregory Ulmer, my doctoral committee chair. In *Heuretics* and the recently published *Internet Invention*, Ulmer observes that the apparatus of literacy is in transition, being supplemented by the technology of digital computing. While print literacy remains the primary and most important communicative apparatus, its status is changing as the importance of the emerging apparatus grows. Like Ulmer, I see this ongoing shift as an opportunity for the humanities, especially the language arts. As Ulmer says of his 1994 *Heuretics*:

> My interest is not only in the technology itself but also in the problem of inventing the practices that may institutionalize electronics in terms of schooling. [. . .] It may be that eventually the screen will replace the page (and the database replace the library) as the support of all academic work. [This book] is intended as a means to achieve that transition in the most productive way, including using book strategies to help with the invention process and revising paper practices in the light of the new possibilities of thought manifested in electronic technology. (17)

I follow Ulmer’s desire to invent and discover practices suitable for our transitional moment. As well, I share the long-term ambition, reflected most directly here in Chapter 5, of inventing practices which will be usable beyond the transitional. Ulmer’s neologism “electracy,” used to signify the equivalent of literacy for electronic writing and communication, provides a suitable target. As Ulmer notes, “[e]lectracy does not already exist as such, but names an apparatus that is emerging ‘as we speak,’ rising in many different spheres and areas, and converging in some unforeseen yet

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\(^1\)Throughout this dissertation, “new media” will signify hypermedia, hypertext, digital cinema, and other forms often produced with and displayed on computers. “Hypermedia” will describe a smaller subset of new media made of objects connected by links, often using a branching-tree structure. “New media object” will describe a work of new media. The somewhat undesirable phrase “old media” will signify oral, printed, and telecommunicative forms not numerically represented or modular.
malleable way” (Internet Invention 7). I hope my work with ease will capitalize on that malleability, shaping both current and future pedagogical practices.

My first formal research into ease was provoked by my interest in the Unix operating system, which I used while working with students in the Networked Writing Environment (NWE) at the University of Florida. The unique NWE system combined elements of “easy to use” graphical user interfaces with command-line environments which most people consider difficult and arcane. The NWE’s system architecture and liberal administration philosophy facilitated experimentation, enabling me and other graduate students to push the envelope of the boundary between “easy” and “difficult.”

When I began teaching in the NWE, the ideas of easy computing had been codified for more than ten years (as the Apple Human Interface Guidelines—see page 40 below). Why were my students having so much difficulty using something they grew up with? I could understand the frustration of students who found the NWE interface difficult upon first use—while designed with user-friendliness in mind, the interface was a bit different from that most used on their home computers. But students expressed chagrin with having to use a computer at all, even when I scaled back assignments to involve little more than word processing. Why were interfaces designed with ease in mind, at the cost of millions, failing all but a few students?

Why, also, did ease seem to function in exactly the opposite manner it was supposed to? Instead of enabling productivity, allowing students to become comfortable with computers in a protected virtual space, and gradually maturing into more challenging and creative arenas, ease seemed to cause incapacitation. Few students moved from easy patterns into experiment and deep engagement. Any perceived resistance on the computer’s part became a stopping point. The NWE system’s seeming difficulty enabled sharp attacks on “stupid computers” and some fairly harsh comments on course
evaluations. Some students were able to use *their* computer or *their* software, but not the NWE’s—which I considered analogous to being able to drive a Ford, but not a Chevrolet.

More seriously, student attitudes about the ease of computing spilled into other arenas. Even in the courses I taught without using computers, significant numbers of students resisted challenge, claimed to lack creativity or writing skill, abhorred theoretical or abstract readings or assignments, and sought the easiest path to an A—all but requesting a diagram illustrating the procedure for completing the projects outlined in the syllabus. T. R. Johnson argues that standardized testing, an increasingly programmed curriculum, and a masochistic culture of mastery have encouraged students to expect education to be difficult, banal, and boring (645); I believe that expectation motivates students to seek the easiest, least emotionally and labor intensive, course experience—minimizing their acknowledgment of schooling. (Hence Johnson’s title, “School Sucks.”) Consistent with Johnson’s argument, most of my students avoided showing confusion or difficulty in front of others, and if blame for their difficulties could not be shifted to my unreasonable assignments, the general sucky nature of college, or other agents, became enraged or horrified. Projecting an easy aspect in front of their peers was extremely important for students, even those from very different social and peer groups.

Stephanie A. Smith suggested the phrase “the ideology of ease” to describe the patterns of ease I was seeing in computers, education, and American culture. In the spring of 2000 I connected the classroom desire for ease I had observed in the classroom, and the pedagogical difficulties it caused for me, to cultural pressures in the essay “The Ideology of Ease.” This first publication established some of the conceptual
limits, definition, and history of ease investigated in more detail in chapters 2 and 3 of this work, “The Concept of Ease” and “Evaluating Ease.”

“The Concept of Ease” establishes a specific definition for the current shape of ease using an account from a popular magazine as representative of current attitudes about the roles of ease, complexity, difficulty, and technology. In its oldest sense, ease was defined by comfort, transparency, and effortlessness. I demonstrate how it expanded beyond those original meanings during four historical periods. English educational reforms between 1680 and 1740 extended the definition of ease through simplicity and pragmatism. Near the turn of the twentieth century (1880-1930), budding American consumerism built on the feminine component of ease (the often ham-handed association of women with comfort and nurturing) by establishing women as the central target of advertising and marketing for new gadgets which made life easier. World War Two and the post-war boom in technology (1939–1958) brought expediency, and the era of personal computing (1984–present) pictorialism. During each of these time periods, the functions of ease also grew, with ease shifting from a state of mind to a commodity which could be produced by certain practices. Postwar technological development changed ease to a commodity which could be purchased in certain circumstances; the “information revolution” meant it could be had anywhere, anytime.

In “Evaluating Ease,” I scrutinize the concept of ease developed in Chapter 2, contextualizing it in the Western ideal of technology, and documenting its ideological function. I acknowledge the benefits of ease, then call on Johnson, Evan Watkins, and other critics to show some of the negative effects of ease, offering examples from composition studies when possible. Unfortunately, I find many complications: maintenance of an novice/expert division, self-reinforcement, discouragement of
critique, and a lamentable construction of femininity. Though composition studies has acknowledged these tensions and in many ways is confronting the paradoxical nature of ease, my critique isolates some areas where more attention to ease is needed.

After publishing “The Ideology of Ease” I turned to the role of ease in composition studies. Several presentations at national conferences and considerable work invested in my doctoral exams allowed me to discover several other notable trends. Most importantly, I confirmed my suspicion that ease was introduced into the classroom before the time of computing and new media, with a history in composition dating back to the seventeenth century. I present portions of this extensive history in “Making Writing Easy,” Chapter 4 of this work. Working forward from English philosophical antecedents, I trace the deep connection of ease to current-traditional rhetoric, the writing pedagogy developed in nineteenth-century America. The correlation of ease with Enlightenment epistemology supported two compactly stated assertions: that anyone could easily express their thoughts in unproblematic language, and that such expression was easily taught. My analysis shows the way ease, as the primary pedagogy of literacy, affected writing style, students’ image of writing, and the institutional organization of American colleges and universities. The concepts of literacy and writing still operant in American schools owe a tremendous debt to the qualities of ease.

Continuing my inquiry into the role of ease in the discipline of Computers and Writing convinced me the role of ease in composition was, if anything, becoming larger. At conferences, I was attacked for suggesting the need to think twice about the use of ease as a pedagogical tool. For many, my argument was quite literally counter-intuitive, and despite my pleas for measured consideration, questions about
application of ease often fell back onto old debates about interface design.\footnote{The most lamentable and frequent distraction: audience participants recasting my argument in the terms of the HTML-versus-WYSIWIG debate about Web authoring.} My attempts to connect discussions of ease in American culture with its appearance in computer classrooms had very limited success. From this experience and other research, I conclude that ease is still shaping university information technology in many ways, and that this influence is not fully acknowledged in composition scholarship. I am frustrated by the amount of resources spent on courseware and other expensive software which “makes education easy,” given the limited capacity of these systems and their tendency to sacrifice creativity and pedagogical flexibility in favor of implementing least-common-denominator ease of use.

In Chapter 5 I take up this issue, discussing the future of ease mentioned earlier: my proposed creation of a supplement for ease which serves the same function (a pedagogy for English education) for the nascent apparatus of electracy. After I present the terms of the grammatological analogy which will guide my work, I review the technical principles of new media, as defined by Lev Manovich, and the institutional and social framework of Ulmer’s textbook *Internet Invention*. The juxtaposition of these two works will allow me to project a tentative supplement for ease, through revision of some qualities of ease, as well as establishment of new pedagogical devices based on patterns which emerge when the two books are juxtaposed.

Hopefully, by now it is obvious that I do not want to attack every appearance of ease—or those who seek to find it. I believe that ease, or at least parts of it, can be rehabilitated or reappropriated—and that an electrate supplement to ease which minimizes its negative qualities can be developed. One model might be Jeff Rice’s forthcoming textbook *Writing About Cool*, which I mention because of many
commonalities (the use of new media, a cultural studies approach, positioning in the discipline of composition studies). Rice notes the repeated use of the concept “cool” in a wide variety of advertising and a fair amount of academic writing. He suggests developing critical awareness of the way “cool” is used, and builds on that activity to construct an alternative rhetoric of cool optimized for new media. I hope to develop a similar approach for ease.

I expect that the ongoing research represented by these five chapters will involve quite a few publications. Writing this dissertation has helped me shape future work into three large areas.

First, I want to learn more about the history of ease, especially its connection to literate epistemology. This is important not only because of the ease-writing connection, but because a better understanding of the philosophical basis of current-traditional rhetoric can serve as a model for connecting Computers and Writing (or other disciplines of composition studies) to postmodern epistemology. (One could consider Lester Faigley’s *Fragments of Rationality* a well-meaning but less than successful attempt at this task.) Though I have carefully researched the role of ease in some periods of composition studies history, an extensive amount of work remains, notably grammatological study which places composition in the larger context of the history of writing. In this dissertation, I rely heavily on Sharon Crowley, James Berlin, and Robert Connors, and now see (as I better understand their important scholarship) more divergence between my image of composition studies history and theirs.

Secondly, I want to revise and improve the framework for ease presented in Chapter 2, as noted below. The concepts developed here—the qualities of ease, the functions of ease, the ease equation, ease mobility, and the ideology of ease—have excellent potential. A better framework for defining ease, combined with more
effective tools for discussing its power in education and consumer culture, will help efforts to reform the practice of ease in those areas. I plan to join the voices of those speaking against the adverse effects of ease I hint at above (and discuss more fully in Chapter 3). Work in both cultural studies and composition studies is needed: the cookie-cutter deployment of ease as a pedagogy of literacy is one of the key forces which legitimates its uncritical use, and composition remains an excellent site for effective intervention.

Thirdly, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, I hope to look ahead to the electrate apparatus, extending the work of “Beyond Ease” in both the short term (the production of transitional forms) and the long term (inventing supplements to ease with accompanying institutional practices). Without a doubt, this work will build on the first two objectives listed above. The possibility of application of these devices to the literate apparatus, following Lev Manovich’s notion of transcoding (see page 170 below), creates the opportunity to recontextualize newly developed ideas in revision of current composition pedagogy. As more work like Manovich’s appears, and the shape of the new media apparatus can be more assuredly expressed, I will be able to offer a more definitive shape for the electrate equivalent of ease.

The stakes surrounding ease—and the shape of Computers and Writing—are extremely high. A transactional view of language and education, what Paulo Freire would call the banking model, is creeping further and further into writing programs and the university as a whole. For example, recently announced changes in the University of Florida writing program reduce the number of student contact hours and install a lecture model in writing classes. This will doubtless provide expedient, standardized teaching, and more student credit hours per full-time instructor, but what does it mean for critical thinking? As Ulmer notes in *Internet Invention*, students arrive in English
classes with excellent training in utility, practicality, and other forms of “calculative thinking,” and needing to be taught meditative thinking (74). In much the same way, I see little if any need to spend valuable classroom time encouraging students to conceptualize writing as another task which follows the easy transactional logic of consumer culture. It would be better to encourage a conceptualization of writing which allows for calculative and meditative critical thinking, a variety of writing styles, and an approach to education which acknowledged the usefulness of ease but rejected its universal, unconditional application.

To use local language: it is easy to keep being easy. It is hard to understand that a counter-intuitive approach may be, for this transitional moment, the best thing going. Somewhat paradoxically, the questions I raised about my composition courses, echoed in Johnson’s work, may be answered by moving beyond ease for pedagogy and ways of understanding technology. Surely, it will be challenging for me to suggest revisions or alternatives to ease without being seen as another William Bennett preaching the back-to-basics gospel of Boot Camp English or *Hooked on Phonics*. The history I present in Chapter 4 shows that the debate has to be more complex than that. The pedagogy I outline in Chapter 5 begins movement toward the long and short term goals I sketch out here.

### 1.2 Upon Further Review . . .

Ulmer encourages thinking of the dissertation as a “practice book,” or dress rehearsal for a book. To that end, here is my preliminary review of the rehearsal represented by these five chapters, and a short list of areas of concern to address in my next performance (in addition to the few areas, noted above, where more research is needed).
While writing this dissertation, I had to learn how to juggle the mountain of material related to ease, being extremely selective, and bracketing irrelevant content. My ability to work with a small amount of material, yet keep my entire project in mind, has improved steadily since I began writing intensively ten months ago. But I still need to work harder to foreground the critical perspectives which have provided so many valuable insights for my research, and to keep ideas introduced early in my analysis viable during a prolonged argument. The work of some writers which may seem sorely lacking here—like the definitions of ease presented by Roland Barthes or Giorgio Agamben—are bracketed simply because of sheer volume, and I look forward to considering their impact on my work as a whole. Also, some texts I really wanted to consider here just because I like them so much—like Clear and Simple as the Truth: Writing Classic Prose by Francis-Noël Thomas and Mark Turner—are absent or not very well represented.

To cope with the massive amounts of material relevant to my project, I tried several approaches to historicizing ease—some more successful than others. Several reviewers observed that investigating only the historical periods in which significant change occurred, the cultural studies approach of Chapter 2, works better than the more comprehensive, but much more tedious, approach of Chapter 4. I agree. I like composition history and am fascinated by old textbooks, but given the theoretical ideas mobilized here, I should combine selective inventories of that work with a more inclusive approach. In some ways, the weight of the material I was juggling overpowered the apparatus theory, cultural studies, and grammatological frameworks which have been so valuable for me in many other circumstances.

In several places my historical work missed opportunities to discuss the development of American individualism and the role socioeconomic class played in American
higher education. Both certainly had measurable effect on writing. The specifics of the process by which electronic technologies became a part of everyday life merits further study as well. These tasks do not require original research on my part, but connecting my argument about ease to existing scholarship. As stated earlier, my research will soon be at the point where I must evaluate the composition histories which I rely on here and determine which of several theories about ease and composition history is most accurate.

I remain pleased with the idea of the qualities of ease (explained in Chapter 2 and summarized in table 2.1), especially when it is complemented by a multivalent notion of ease which has several different functions (pedagogy, ideology, technology, etc.). My repeated reference to the chart of the qualities of ease taped to my white-board helped keep the dissertation focused, and its success is also demonstrated by the strength of my argument. However, the framework could use some revisions.

Blake Scott suggested that I might extend the list of qualities of ease. I agree. Two oppositions appear useful and should be added. First, the quality “natural,” as opposed to artificial or synthetic. David Mindell’s *War, Technology, and Experience on the U.S.S. Monitor*, an account of the lives of sailors aboard that pioneering vessel, provides the material necessary for situating this development historically (around the time of the Civil War). Second, “flexible” or “customizable,” as opposed to rigid and universal. Though I am unsure of the historical origin of this quality of ease, or a text which might be relied on for better understanding of it, I see two possibilities: (a) the classification of made to order “custom” goods and services as the highest order of consumerism, as response to the mass standardization of consumer society; (b) the customization of computing and new media, discussed on page 168 below.
At times, my discussion of the qualities of pragmatism and expediency lacks specificity, and I need to define those qualities more carefully. Similarly, my pairing of facility with expediency seems problematic at times: perhaps I should consider the former a component of simplicity. Also, the qualities of femininity and pictorialism have very deep internal contradictions, and I wonder if they should be included in the oppositional structure of the qualities of ease I am working with now. Notably, my opposite of pictorialism is literacy—but how can that be possible if ease is a pedagogy of literacy, as I argue in Chapter 4?

Perhaps I should visualize the matrix of the qualities of ease differently. At any rate, the framework has survived the trials of my practice book, and does connect very nicely to the history of ease and its role in composition studies—as we shall now see.
CHAPTER 2
THE CONCEPT OF EASE

Between 1850 and 2000, the number of technological objects present in American homes increased drastically. Numerous scientific discoveries and new inventions became a part of daily life during this 150-year period. And while the convenient, labor-saving properties of these appliances, tools, and technologies are still celebrated today, at the same time, other voices wax nostalgic for the “olden days,” when apple pie was made from scratch and not a single clock in America endlessly flashed 12:00. Not surprisingly, for many, both stories are compelling: any account of increasing technological sophistication is also a tale of increasing complexity.

A brief query into the history of technology produces many versions of the narrative of increasing technology and complexity, in a wide variety of forms: literature, journalism, history, philosophy, and more. Because the tale itself is complex, and deeply influenced by powerful assumptions about Western culture and American history, perspectives on what Walter Ong might call “the technologization of daily life” abound. Despite often shared historical assumptions, one can find critics and cheerleaders of varying enthusiasm, radicalism, and analytical sophistication, with an astounding variety of motivations, writing about this change in vastly different ways. Both Luddites and wireheads, to use common labels, often embrace a deeply paradoxical stance toward technology, recognizing that it can simplify and streamline daily life, or befuddle or confuse it, simultaneously.
2.1 Overwhelmed? The Answer is Easy!

A recent cover story from *U. S. News and World Report* demonstrates these paradoxes, as well as common assumptions about technology and complexity. The set of articles which make up the cover story confront issues relevant for American culture at both ends of the historical period I consider here. The main article, “Overwhelmed by Tech,” which appears in the Business & Technology section of the magazine, opens with a nostalgic reference to Al Gross, maker of gadgetry which inspired Dick Tracy. Gross’s gizmos possessed a “sense of simple fun [. . .] entirely lacking from the endless numbers of personal organizers, portable phones, and multiple-function whatsits no self-respecting millennialist can afford to be about” (Lardner, LaGesse, and Rae-Dupree 31). By contrast, today’s technologies are not fun gizmos but “fiendish new instruments of mental torture” which are anything but enjoyable, and instead difficult to use (32).

The consequences of this complexity are indicated in several anecdotes. A frustrated minister notes repeated trouble with her laptop, but prefers to put up with crashes and lost files instead of spending two hours on the phone with tech support. Jeff Hawkins, designer of the Palm Pilot personal digital assistant (PDA) and now chairman (*sic*) of Handspring, complains about the problems he has had trying to get a television, videocassette recorder, and camcorder made by the same manufacturer to operate in concert: “What a disaster,” he laments (32). But the articles look beyond tales of lost sermon manuscripts and recalcitrant home entertainment systems, and argue that complexity endangers the entire technology industry. The authors observe that despite potential for sales of new products such as digital cameras and downloadable music, consumers have already stopped buying new products, as they
“[try] to figure out how to work the devices they already have” (31). And the bear market in technology will worsen if sales do not pick up.

The suggested solution, making things easy, has been advanced as the panacea for numerous technological problems. Noting the “runaway success” and “straightforward and intuitive design” of Hawkins’s PDAs and other popular consumer electronics, the writers argue that high-tech devices do not have to be high-stress (32). Good design, rejection of what Donald Norman calls “featuritis,” extensive usability research, and more patient product development offer a path to simplicity and ease. For example, more sophisticated software could update itself silently, “without the consumer even knowing” (34). Ben Shneiderman offers an analogy based on automobiles: “[put] the engine under the hood and [let] everyone but people willing to get their hands dirty operate the car from the driver’s seat” (34). As the article concludes:

one thing has become clear from the blowback high-tech companies have been treated to over the past few months: Consumers may not expect all their new gadgets and gizmos to be fun, but they are demanding that at least they don’t make them feel like idiots. (36)

Consumers want things to be easy. But the first paradox of ease revealed by the article is that “making it easy” will not be, well, easy: “It takes enormous computer power and programming know-how to make something complicated look simple” (33). Hawkins’s PDAs are easy only because his companies defy conventional wisdom and use a recursive—and expensive—development cycle which focuses on ease of use throughout design and production. Unfortunately for consumers, the writers moan, Hawkins’s companies are the exception. The entrenchment of engineer-oriented cultures at companies like Sony and Gateway regulates the influence of consumers, insuring product designs best suited for “cocky developers,” not Joe and
Jane Consumer. Apparently, Norman and Shneiderman’s critiques of these system-centered cultures have had little effect.

Fortunately, a slightly different version of this “easy is hard” paradox offers a solution: “Continuing leaps in processing power and computer storage promise more horsepower to make complex products easier to use” (34). Supposedly, the same technology which threatens to overwhelm us will soon enable the end of complexity. Operation through voice commands and hand signals is just around the corner—it is just a matter of time before advances at MIT “make computing as effortless as breathing” (34). Increases in technological sophistication promise more natural computers which work like we do, and enable us to get our jobs done, unlike today’s artificial tools which work as they do, maintaining unnecessary attention to procedure and systematic concerns. The authors contend that entrepreneurship, in the form of start-up companies free from profit expectations and developer-centered corporate cultures, will play a big role in this march toward ease.

But can every technological gadget be made easy? Somewhat grudgingly, the writers admit that certain devices may not be straightforward and intuitive, and in order to use them, one must read the manual, purchase training, or work with support. Such effort and expense could be quite productive: for example, a few hours spent learning to use filters could save hours of time deleting junk email (36). However, the admission that “making it easy” is not the only way to approach technology takes up less than two paragraphs on the last page of the article.

The conflict of common sense present in “Overwhelmed by Tech” reflects the deeply paradoxical nature of ease and considerable frustration about how to confront that paradox. Again, this is nothing new: the paradoxes of ease are evident in the technologies of writing, kitchen appliances, and warfare. However, the degree to
which these paradoxes are acknowledged varies considerably, and I will discuss that in detail later in this work. For the *U. S. News* article, one could begin such discussion with some questions: what happens if the software download which occurs invisibly contains a bug which causes a program to crash? Who will pay for the cost of the development required to make products easy to use? “So many gadgets and so little time,” a sidebar to the article, offers one answer. Consumers will pay for ease, at least if they follow the strategy suggested there for buying a digital camera: “Start with a low-cost model so there’s less guilt if it gathers dust. As a bonus, cheaper versions *can* be easier to learn. [. . .] If you like digital photography, you can buy a better camera at next year’s plunging prices” (Lardner 36, my emphasis). How purchasing a second camera will reduce the number of gadgets one owns is unclear—as is what will become of the old camera and the pictures taken with it. The tentative correlation between cheaper versions and ease of use contradicts the previously introduced maxim “Easy to use is hard to make” (though that correlation is consistent with the assumption that entrepreneurial start-up companies are able to peddle cheap wares thanks to low expectations of profitability).

A glance at the rest of the magazine in which the article appears establishes that the *U. S. News* writers are correct about consumers’ demands for ease. In editorial content, software is praised as “easy for newbies but flexible for techies” and because it “makes group blogging easy” (Morris 52). Advertising for a hearing aid bubbles, “Your friends will notice how much more easily you can hear and understand” (Hearing Help Express 53). Another advertisement promises to “make your computer as easy to use as your telephone” (Green Tree Press 25). Indeed, this small sample reflects advertising in other media, where a huge variety of technological and non-technological products and services are marketed as “easy” or “easy to use.”
“Overwhelmed by Tech” presents ease as a solution to a technical and economic problem. But it leaves open many important questions, the most significant of which is the nature of ease itself. What indeed is ease? What role does it play in the history of American culture—and in discourses and disciplines such as composition? What problems does ease solve, and what new problems does it create? What is its relationship to technological and non-technological objects, systems, actions, and agents? Why does ease seem to have a paradoxical nature? Do the contradictions introduced by paradoxes of ease have affects on those seeking an easier everyday life? In the first two chapters of this work, I will tackle these and other questions, while providing a general introduction to ease. My description of ease will start with historical consideration which provides a frame for definition and introduces several broad trends in the development of ease. In later chapters, I will investigate the role of ease in composition pedagogies in detail.

2.2 Historicizing and Defining Ease

“Overwhelmed by Tech” is by no means the only text which presents ease as a remedy for the growth of complexity in technological products. Several of the academic and professional experts mentioned in the article have written strong theoretical arguments advocating ease of use. Norman’s *The Psychology of Everyday Things* and Shneiderman’s *Designing the User Interface* offer detailed arguments grounded in cognitive psychology. These two books, other texts published by these authors, and the work of Jakob Nielsen and Edward Tufte, among others, have established very influential theories of design (and psychology) which valorize ease of use and demonstrate that applications for ease extend far beyond the realm of the “high-tech” devices which are the focus of the *U. S. News* article.
Figure 2.1: Kodak Advertisement, 1884.

My research of the historical role of ease underscores this point. Advertising has mobilized ease for years, developing methodologies for selling products and services quite similar to those Norman, Shneiderman, and others advocate for their design. Indeed, the disciplines of usability, human factors engineering, human-computer interaction, and information architecture show considerable debt not only to Norman and Shneiderman but to Madison Avenue. For over a century, ease has been associated with consumer products ranging from paper towels and sanitary napkins to rotisserie cookers and automobiles. Technologically advanced products were marketed as “easy to use” long before America Online’s slogan was “So easy to use, no wonder it’s number one”—Kodak advertisements argued that “Home photography is easy” as early as 1894 (see Figure 2.1).
I will consider the history of ease by describing the oldest meanings of ease which remain relevant today, then turn to four time periods during which supplemental meanings for ease were established or the scope of objects, systems, or practices considered as “easy” expanded. While this method will fall short of a comprehensive history of ease, I will cover critical time periods in its evolution, establishing the grounds for developing a systematic definition of the qualities of ease which are powerful today. The definitions of ease I introduce in this historical review will provide a method for understanding ease in composition studies as well as in American culture at large.

2.2.1 Historical and Popular Definitions

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first sense of the noun “ease” (I.1) has economic connotations: “[o]pportunity, means or ability to do something” (31). This significance remains in current usage as the colloquial “life of ease” or “living on easy street” which represent the pinnacle of economic achievement (33). While not often used in a denotative sense, connotations of wealth and well-being remain associated with ease. By 1700, the second sense of ease, “[c]omfort [or] absence of pain or trouble,” where ease is a state of being, was well established (32). The *OED* offers multiple variations of this sense of ease quite relevant today, with many synonyms and variations reflecting considerable expansion of meaning. Today ease is not only comfort, but convenience. It is a state of being in which annoyances and problems are minimized and the possibility of pleasure is imminent. Ease is freedom from hard work, toilsome physical labor, and excessive strain. A person “at ease” has a calm, collected appearance and no urgency in her aspect. American common-sense prerogatives to minimize labor, for maximizing profit as well as in the pursuit of happiness, offer a powerful endorsement of the system of values implied by ease,
despite the paradoxical condemnation of “taking the easy way out” which can occur if minimizing labor is taken too far.

Easy objects, systems, or practices can be learned quickly, even mastered, with a minimum of effort, and their use appears effortless or natural. They are non-threatening, intuitive, simple, even comforting. Complication, complexity, and difficulty are absent from easy things, or at least not apparent to the casual user. In most cases, the use of easy things serves one of two purposes: simplification or mitigation of a complex or difficult task, or production of a feeling of ease (or feelings congruent with the characteristics of ease) in the agent. Three qualities of ease which appear in current definitions were well established in historical definitions.¹

2.2.1.1 The qualities of ease: comfort, effortlessness, and transparency

As I note above, comfort is the most fundamental quality of ease, and the quality on which many uses of “ease” or “easy” hinge, in both historical and current usage. Though some qualities of ease delineated here are derived from comfort, ease is often little more than a pure state of comfort, enjoyment, or pleasure. Close association with comfort or enjoyment encourages the widespread valorization of ease and easy things. In current usage, “natural” is often used to describe the sense of ease facilitated by comfortable things, as in the third sense in the OED: “[a]bsence of pain or discomfort; freedom from annoyance” (34). “Intuitive” is another important synonym for comfort which has gained widespread usage thanks to the popularity of desktop computing—at times “intuitive” designates a contextualized, familiar, or habitual nature, but its use is often simply clever marketing.

¹The labels I select for these and other qualities of ease outlined here are derived from current usage and may be somewhat anachronistic.
Effortlessness matches the fourth sense in the *OED*: “[a]bsence of painful effort; freedom from the burden of toil; leisure;” (34). Ease is a state nearly free from physical labor and intense activity. Easy things facilitate this effortlessness by reducing or eliminating the manual labor needed to require a task, or by allowing things to be done more quickly, possibly creating leisure time (comfort). Historical nautical uses of ease and easy, as well as the colloquial “take it easy” and “easy-going,” reflect a meaning of calm, undisturbed passage or mental state. The relative position of effortlessness in the definition of ease increased during industrialization, as a life with less back-breaking manual labor became possible for more individuals, raising the bar for the standard of effortlessness required to achieve ease. However, to a large extent, effortlessness is the mere appearance of being at ease in the eyes of others, and one’s actual condition of effort, toil, or leisure is less important.

Ease frequently appears as transparency: freedom from concern with complication or procedure. Transparency (also identified as invisibility or passivity) is opposed to opacity or visibility. This meaning of ease, derived from combination of comfort and effortlessness, is the sense of “easy” which dominates the *U. S. News* article I discuss above. Transparent things appear understandable and enable a person to complete a task without paying unnecessary attention to details or steps in the process which can be automated, removed, or completed in accordance with the intended use and design. But valorization of transparency can make ease quite problematic: it may eliminate or conceal complication and painful effort for the agent as it displaces it to another less fortunate, invisible worker. As Evan Watkins has observed, this is one of the means by which the increasing class stratification in American culture can be ignored: if the labor of the lower classes is invisible, perhaps they can be invisible too. Also, transparency can make ease self-perpetuating, because if one learns a specific way of
functioning without a general understanding of a device or activity, accomplishing a task in a different manner is impossible (or, at the very least, less likely).

Named as “clarity,” transparency frequently appears as one of the goals of writing or argument—indeed, the *OED* notes that as early as 1711, writing “showing no trace of effort; smooth, flowing” was considered easy (33). English and American composition textbooks and writing style guides for other disciplines have valorized clear, easy to read prose for years, while denying the difficulty of achieving such clarity, as well as the philosophical arguments which question its possibility. Ironically, the nature of transparent or clear writing remains quite unclear in many of these influential texts, which I return to at length in Chapter 4 of this work.

Though it is most often seen as positive, both historical and current definitions of ease include pejorative variants and connotations. Comfort, especially in its ultimate sense, can indicate excess or sinful attention to entertainment and frivolity. The Bible famously warns against lax discipline: “Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them” (Proverbs 13:24). Puritan religious teaching—undoubtedly influential in American education—frowned on excessive mirth and frivolity (Bercovitch 4). Similar assumptions about rigor and difficulty of instruction create the implication that facilitating comfort and ease is coddling or pandering—a difficulty anticipated by John Locke in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (see page 84, below).

Ease also indicate economically enabled detachment—a state of mind in which one’s luxurious lifestyle enables an unrealistic disconnection from the laborious rigors of daily life. The *OED* definition reflects this usage with its repeated references to royalty, whose daily lives included little exertion. As economic development and industrialization changed standards of living and reduced the arduous nature of many
of the tasks of daily life—or in the case of production of food, erased them almost completely—this particular negative connotation became less important. Today ease is seldom seen as detachment or aloofness, though it is still identified with economic well-being.

While effortlessness can indicate leisure and relaxation, it can also be evidence (or the cause of) idleness and sloth. Praise for hard work is codified in many forms in influential religious and secular texts (again, consider the Puritans). There is little doubt this praise made the burdens created by everyday life more manageable: if hard work was evidence of virtue, then moral character—or at least its appearance—was accessible to even the poorest laborers. Indeed, this correlation has weakened little since the time when intensive labor was a fact of daily life for all but the very rich—and one could argue that the correlation of hard work and virtue has increased since daily arduous physical exertion is now, for many, optional. To be sure, changing definitions of “hard work” have affected definitions of ease.

Finally, transparency can be a necessity enforced by a lack of mental sophistication. There is a perception that less talented or intelligent individuals require transparent things in order to be productive. The currently popular “For Dummies” series of educational texts embraces this sort of perceived need, partially neutralizing its pejorative character. Regardless, a tinge of guilt or shame often accompanies the desire for transparency, effortlessness, or comfort—feelings which can be exacerbated by criticisms of these three qualities.

2.2.2 Reforming Education in England, 1680–1740

Ambivalence toward ease is well-represented in a text published at the end of the first historical period considered here as part of the evolution of ease. The Art of Rhetoric Made Easy, written by John Holmes and first published in London in
1738, appeared during an intense period of educational reform. Reformers supported more vernacular instruction, challenged teaching methods unchanged for centuries, and sought to supplement traditional curricula with more practical matters such as geography and bookkeeping (Stoker 1). Holmes acknowledged and supported these reforms in the *Rhetoric* and other publications. But his preface shows mixed feelings:

> [I]n this Day [ . . . ] School-Boys are expected to be led, sooth’d, and entic’d to their studies by the Easiness and Pleasure of the Practice, rather than by Force or harsh Discipline drove, as in days of Yore. For while some of them are *too Copious* in Things not so immediately the Concern of Boys at School, most are *too Brief* in Things really necessary for Youth to be inform’d of, and none at all so happy or methodical as to distinguish between One and T’Other. (xiii)

Here Holmes argues that easiness and pleasure lead to a lack of discipline and inability to tell worthy pursuits from trifles. Despite this problematic, ease (named as such, but also implied by the “pleasure” and calls for gentler discipline) retains enough value to appear in the title of his work and to be mobilized pedagogically. This is a new context for ease—before Holmes’s time, pedagogues seldom suggested students should be comfortable or subject matter accessible, or that teachers or texts make learning easy. Quintilian was one of few ancient voices suggesting a gentler way of teaching (Kennedy 42). Though as indicated above Holmes does not unconditionally support demands for ease made by contemporary schoolboys, his production of a textbook which offers an easy method amounts to argument for a pedagogy of ease, and support for reformers like Locke and Isaac Watts.

Brevity and simplification are Holmes’s principal methods for making rhetoric easy to learn. *The Art of Rhetoric Made Easy* offers “a Short, Plain, Comprehensive

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2The dedication, preface, and introduction in John Holmes’s *The Art of Rhetoric Made Easy* are unnumbered. Therefore, I have cited Holmes’s frontmatter as if the first page of the text (the title page) was numbered with the small Roman numeral “i,” the next page with “ii,” and so on, making the final page of the preface “xx.”
and Regular Method.” Its foundation is “the glorious and extensive Plan of the Ancients” abridged “by leaving out the copious Parts of their Works” (xiv). As common in contemporary rhetorical textbooks, long lists of tropes are included, but uncommonly, their definitions are presented as short verses, and Holmes implies study of lesser tropes can be omitted. Holmes’s “easy” would doubtless fall short of twenty-first century standards: Latin and Greek quotations fill the *Rhetoric*, and even though each is brief, and his system not comprehensive, the list of tropes and definitions to memorize is lengthy.\(^3\)

The success of Holmes’s work is evidence of the legitimacy of the “easy” pedagogy of reformers. His *Rhetoric* was reprinted almost immediately, a second edition issued in 1755, and another version appeared in 1786. In England and America, the text “maintained a degree of popularity for well over a hundred years after its publication” (Howell 137), as the first rhetoric to explicitly identify ease in its methodology. Outside of rhetoric, it would inaugurate a long series of “How-to” books which promised arts, crafts, and disciplines “made easy.”

But even today many voices object to the absence of discipline assumed to accompany ease, and demand the preservation of difficulty and discomfort in education in a wide variety of forms. Many educational practices displace comfort, effortlessness, and transparency: corporal punishment for misbehaving schoolchildren, the preservation of classic British and American literature as “the canon,” standardized testing rubrics which mandate retention or remedial education for low scoring students, attempts to shore up “soft” curricula, and the preservation of educational practices which

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\(^3\)Holmes argues that other features of his work help make it easy; see page 103 for more discussion of those techniques, and my review of the “easy” rhetorics and pedagogical practices of Holmes’s reform-minded contemporaries and followers.
resemble intellectual hazing (public recitations, dissertation defenses). (See page 113 below.)

2.2.2.1 The qualities of ease: simplicity and pragmatism

Holmes’s work demonstrates the emergence of simplicity and pragmatism, two new qualities of ease which supplement the three listed above. Both are largely absent from the *OED* definition of ease, even today. However, Holmes’s textbook, “Overwhelmed by Tech,” and many other sources suggest they have been key components of definitions of ease for quite some time.

**Simplicity**, a lack of complexity or difficulty, is not well-represented in *OED* definitions, but readily apparent in “Overwhelmed by Tech,” and a key component of current definitions of ease. Simplicity appears variously as lack of ornament, uncomplicated presentation, brevity, the absence of difficulty, and an unambiguous nature. In Holmes’s work, simplicity takes two forms: the reduction of complexity though the omission of unnecessary details, and the reduction of complex ideas to elemental unities congruent with Cartesian principles. This is congruent with many senses of simplicity which have been connected with ease over the years. In some cases experts make complicated objects, systems, or practices easy through simplification; in others, objects, systems, or practices are developed from the start with simplicity in mind. Notably, definitions of simplicity in writing and other contexts are quite similar.

A pejorative cast of “simplicity” appeared very early in the evolution of the definition of ease, around the same time and with the same meaning as the adjective “simple-minded.” This sense of easy, “[m]oved without difficulty to action or belief” (*OED* 33), was expressed in the colloquial “easy mark” and “easy game.” Today
creating this form of simplicity as ease is often called “dumbing down” or “making idiot-proof”—like the transparency of the For Dummies-style series I mention above.

A class of consumer goods which pretend to “simplicity” appeared contemporary to the rise of the consumer movement, and remain quite popular today. These goods are “simple things” representing the “simple life,” albeit heavily commodified and transformed into expensive designer goods and services out of the reach of many people. This simplicity is highly, but quietly, selective: the crooked artwork and charming handcrafts of the Appalachian farmer are included; abject poverty and the toil of hand-operated tools are not. Such affected simplicity has the outward appearance of the simplicity of poverty and low-tech daily life—relevant because, as noted above, it is the appearance of ease, not its actual presence, which is important.

The reforms which The Art of Rhetoric Made Easy represented included a pragmatic attitude toward education. As Locke and others argued, geography and bookkeeping had value in contemporary culture as the tools of colonial mercantilism. Not surprisingly, pragmatism extends much deeper into the definition of ease. A disengagement from generalization or general understanding is the most powerful pragmatic tendency present in easy objects, systems, or practices. The practice of ease suggests that contextualized, specific, local knowledge is preferable to abstract, theoretical knowledge. Because development of the latter can be difficult and complex, it receives secondary, if any, emphasis. Pragmatic approaches rely heavily on transparency—achieving a goal or accomplishing a task without unnecessary delay or obfuscation—and are closely connected to expediency, a quality of ease introduced after World War Two.

Retail stores like Restoration Hardware and Pottery Barn provide good examples of these products.

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4Retail stores like Restoration Hardware and Pottery Barn provide good examples of these products.
The division between novice and expert common in Western education and attitudes toward technology reinforces the simple, pragmatic character of ease. Experts perform processes of simplification and determine boundaries of pragmatic relevance. Novices, who are not supposed to be able to understand difficult things, and should prefer easy alternatives or representations, must accept the expert interpretation of importance. The pragmatic character of ease discourages developing skills which enable the rise from novice to expert, like understanding Cartesian method, which Sharon Crowley argues underlies much composition pedagogy (42–50 passim). Both simplicity and pragmatism reinforce disciplinary structures, which in turn reinforce the power of expertise.

Cautions against simplicity also play a large part in the formation of the novice/expert binary. Because simplicity is often associated with ease, and is the province of novices, difficulty is reserved for experts, and easy things appear less sophisticated and unsuitable for expert usage—simple imitations of the complex original. For writing, Jacques Derrida charts this process using Plato’s *Phaedrus*: “According to a pattern that will dominate all of Western philosophy, good writing (natural, living, knowledgeable, intelligible, internal, speaking) is opposed to bad writing (a moribund, ignorant, external, mute artifice for the senses). And the good one can be designated only through the metaphor of the bad one” (Derrida 149). Here, again, is the paradox of ease. So simplicity and pragmatism enforce the novice/expert split in both directions: encouraging experts to look down on easy things, portraying them as deficient to the original; and discouraging novices from complexity and difficulty, proffering easy solutions as “good enough” for their less demanding situation.
2.2.3 Bringing Ease Home in America, 1880–1930

The second period of intense change in the nature of ease occurs after industrialization and the development of new technologies affected the daily life of most Americans. Susan Strasser has chronicled the changes in American culture which occurred between 1880 and 1930, focusing on the effects on women. Her scholarship reminds us that accounts of technologization which occurred during this “rise of consumerism” are often radically simplified. Many interrelated agents and forces should be considered in studies of consumer culture, including attention to ease in advertising, publishing, and product development.

Contemporary popular and scholarly works show great faith in technological advancement, presenting an unproblematic account of new wealth and increased standard of living. In 1919 Christine Frederick collated writings from *Ladies’ Home Journal* and other sources into *Household Engineering*, a manual for homemakers which suggests they could radically improve their quality of life by applying principles of scientific management to daily routines. The argument of *Household Engineering* is a clear and simple syllogism: Taylorist methodologies simplify work, saving steps and time; newly available household products and devices ease the intensity of manual labor; therefore, employing both results in a more organized and efficient home, and a happier homemaker.

Ease appears in Frederick’s text in several ways. First, she argues the tools of housework should be more “scientifically” designed for comfort in use. Suggestions include raising or lowering tabletops and sinks to prevent stooping, using a stool instead of standing, and purchasing a stove-top of proper height (12, 18). But “comfort” is narrowly defined—“effectiveness” seems closer to what Frederick had in mind, given her descriptions of “comfortable” tools. Second, Fredrick encourages mitigation of
effort and reduction of toilsome labor or difficulty. Throughout *Household Engineering*, she argues that newly developed technological devices and household products could perform labor done previously by hand, change household processes to eliminate labor, or reduce the intensity of manual labor required for a certain task.

Frederick’s work recognizes historical qualities of ease and the economic pinnacle demonstrated by the contemporary colloquial “easy street” and “life of ease,” (*OED* 33). Her prescriptions for homemakers demonstrate that as America industrialized and developed a consumer culture, a new possibility for ease appeared. Ease itself changed from an abstraction most people could only dream about, or enjoy in infrequent and fleeting moments, to a commodity which could be produced and enjoyed in the home, given the right tools properly used. In one sense, this was a genuine change in the standard of living and working conditions of many people. But in another, it was just relaxation of the standards of the mythical “life of ease” which enabled the development of the consumer economy. To some extent, the reality of change is moot. Because more and more people believed that new products delivered on promises of ease, it began to build inertia and cultural power.

Like Holmes, Frederick shows some reluctance to “make it easy” unconditionally, and her approach is quite complex. Though she asserts household engineering would “enable the homemaker to have leisure time to devote to interests which are more important than the mere mechanics of living,” she insisted that time recovered through her methods be devoted to the “higher ends of personal and family happiness and success” (*Household Engineering* 504, 509). While Frederick argues that household efficiency is more than a method for getting women to do more work, and envisions more power for women and a partnership with husband and family, rather than service to them, her method for achieving that power is “well planned work and equally
planned for minutes of leisure-time” (515–6)—perhaps a bit more structure and regulation than current concepts of an easy, comfortable, effortless approach might intimate.

Contemporary advertisers were not nearly as cautious as Frederick. Numerous new and old products were touted for their labor-saving properties. Some marketing suggested that products themselves were easy to use, such as magazine advertisements from Kodak stating “Home Photography is Easy,” or the use of the “Easy” brand name by the Syracuse Washing Machine Company. However, description of labor-saving properties and the new leisure time possible by efficient vacuum cleaners, detergents, or washing machines was much more common. The products Frederick helped market were just too complicated to be convincingly presented as easy to use—another example of the paradox of ease. Transparency of technology was, in most cases, not yet a reality, despite Frederick’s call for devices which brought “comfort in use.” In this time period, ease in consumer products was primarily represented by effortlessness, comfort, and pragmatism; transparency and simplicity were present, but secondary.

During this time reformers critiqued several forms of ease. Thorsten Veblen introduced “conspicuous consumption” and other concepts such as “trained incapacity” to the language of sociology and progressivism (18, 68). Veblen’s pointed criticisms of upper-class Americans find fault with many things identified here as qualities of ease: the desire to improve social standing, rejection of the functional, valorization of abstention from or reduction of labor, and a life of idleness facilitated by wealth (the “life of ease”). Around the same time, numerous literary critics, artists, and philosophers involved in the avant-garde, modern artistic movements, and Russian Formalism embraced complexity and difficulty, rejecting many of the qualities of ease identified here. Their work questioned many of the assumptions on which the valorization of
ease was constructed. The Formalists praised difficulty in and of itself, identifying characteristics such as “making strange” and “defacilitation” as the fundamental qualities of literariness. In painting, theater, and literature, aesthetic realism and naturalism were rejected in favor of more abstract, less directly representative forms. However, these critiques were exceptions to the rule of gradually increasing strength, importance, and desirability of ease.

2.2.3.1 **The qualities of ease: femininity**

Correspondence between ease and femininity strengthened during this time period. The ancient correlation of women and comfort, through their supportive role as mothers and wives, was supplemented with new meanings which bolstered ease’s gendered nature. The coarsest equation of ease and femininity, “Women cannot handle difficulty, so they need easy things,” reflected the perception that women were delicate, fragile, and unsuited for “man’s work.” Victorian ideals for femininity encouraged women to cultivate this role, reinforcing the assumption of womanly weakness.

A pejorative sense of “easy” connected feminine comfort and the notion that women were inferior workers (and thus *needed* comfort, transparency, simplicity, and effortlessness). Interestingly, if women cultivated this trained incapacity (to use Veblen’s term), they would find themselves in needs of devices which produced ease, such as electric appliances, since hand-operated machinery was too hard for their gentle nature. Frederick encouraged women to embrace ease through consumption: in *Household Engineering* she directly addresses women, advising them to purchase household products which possess qualities of ease, and to follow principles of scientific management in order to produce ease in the home. Her followup, *Selling Mrs. Consumer*, addresses advertisers and marketers hoping to capitalize on the spending power newly vested in women. These extremely influential works solidified
the gendered nature of ease and helped establish the role of women as gatekeepers for household consumer spending.

The ambivalent nature of ease was also reflected in contemporary slang: the sexually promiscuous “easy woman,” who is simultaneously attractive and repulsive, and the use of “easy on the eyes” or “easy to look at” to describe physical beauty—especially in women (OED 34).

2.2.4 Humanizing Technology, 1939–1958

After World War Two ended, technological advancements made during wartime began to filter into civilian use, industries commandeered for wartime production resumed their regular output, and memories of years of depression and rationing were quickly swept away by uninterrupted economic growth. A 1957 U. S. News article labeled the decade following the war “ten amazing years,” noting a general increase in wealth, financial security, and the spread of new products and inventions like television, freezers, vacuum cleaners, and air conditioning—items most would consider technological goods (28). More and more often, advertising for these products noted not only ways their use could improve standard of living by producing qualities of ease such as comfort and effortlessness, but the ways in which the products themselves were easy to use. Electrically controlled, push-button operation replaced “old-fashioned” types of controls. “Automatic” or “computerized” products became more common.

Wartime weapons development introduced new disciplines as well as new technologies: nuclear physics, rocket science, and computer science, to name a few, and provided the bureaucratic structures which ensured their post-war survival. Lesser known fields like human factors engineering also benefited from huge government expenditures and the push to make more effective military forces. During the war, experiments and research efforts were somewhat limited, taking the form of “knob and
analyses of the arrangement of the controls of airplane cockpits and other complex mechanical devices. Though not widespread, these efforts did improve the efficacy of the increasingly sophisticated machines of war and paved the way for organized human factors research. The legitimacy of this new discipline and the dramatic rise in the popularity of technological devices are evidence of another step in the evolution of ease. Producing ease through the use of technology, as was the case during Frederick’s time, would not suffice. Now technology itself had to be easy.

The evaluative power of ease had grown remarkably: devices which lacked ease of use were of questionable worth and could be discarded and replaced with newer, easier ones. As is often the case, advertisers and manufacturers noticed (and encouraged) the new attitude toward technology rapidly, mobilizing ease of use in marketing programs and product design. But academics were not far behind. The growth of human factors engineering and concern for ease of use is demonstrated by the formation of new institutional formations. The Ergonomics Research Society began publishing the journal *Ergonomics* in 1957, and in 1958 the Human Factors Society started distribution of its *Human Factors*. Early issues of these journals reflect the military heritage of the discipline, focusing on nuclear physics, avionics, and spaceflight, with most contributors affiliated with American armed forces.

The opening editorial of *Human Factors* argues that “[t]he ultimate aim of each human factors effort is toward the optimal utilization of human and machine capabilities to achieve the highest degree of effectiveness of the total system” (Morehouse 1). Most of the prose in the first issue has a similar militaristic, bureaucratic tone. But a forward-looking letter to the editor written by a member of the *Human Factors* editorial board insists upon “good coverage from a wide spectrum of civilian industrial human factors problems, all kinds of transportation problems, human factors problems
in communications, and in consumer goods and equipment” (Spragg 46). When an article in issue 1.4 (November 1959) came under attack for “exhortatory phraseology” and a lack of technical detail, the authors defended their approach by arguing such “pedantic ‘scientific’” language contradicted the editorial mission of the magazine. In fact, they pointed out, other reviewers of the article thought it was “unnecessarily technical” and hard to follow (Dreher and Evans 102). Clearly, some researchers wanted to make *Human Factors* easily read, and believed the missions of the journal, the discipline, and ease extended far beyond military-oriented “knob and dial” work.

These struggles should be considered not only as disciplinary growing pains but as a continuation of the ambivalence toward ease demonstrated in Holmes’s introduction and Frederick’s directives for the use of leisure time. Neither “ease” nor “easy” appear in early issues of *Human Factors*, though it is clear (at least in retrospect) that beneath the militaristic jargon many contributors are valorizing qualities similar to the new definitions of ease: especially the virtue of expediency.

### 2.2.4.1 The qualities of ease: expediency

Demand for the first five qualities of ease I identify here (comfort, transparency, effortlessness, simplicity, and pragmatism) increased notably after the war. The connections of ease and femininity remained strong, even as women’s wartime success in the workforce was leveraged into limited gains in gender equity. A new quality of ease, *expediency*, was developed from the synthesis of pragmatism, transparency, and general valorization of speed made possible by mass production, industrialization, and electronic communication. As it appears in ease, expediency is generally congruent with definitions which date back to Aristotle. The expediency of ease embraces speed and suppresses of negative consequences or complications. Expediency enables more
effective transparency: it supplements the filter of relevance provided by pragmatism with a filter of speed.

Many of the easy “convenience products” which appeared during this time period were valued because of expediency. Fast and frozen food, more expensive and less healthy than freshly prepared food, are valuable for ease of preparation and cleanup (cook or buy it, eat it, throw the container away). As was the case with previously discussed qualities of ease, advertising implied that devices which were not obviously convenient and easy were unsuitable. Manufactures often proposed shelving or disposing of last year’s gadgets in favor of new and improved models—as was the case with the digital camera I describe on page 18 above.

Changes in infrastructure also demonstrated demand for expediency: controlled-access highways appeared during this time, and locally controlled and named roads were abandoned in favor of federally regulated systems. This had tremendous impact: as Marshall McLuhan observes, “Great improvements in roads brought the city more and more to the country. [. . .] With superhighways the road became a wall between man and the country” (Media 94). Similar walls grew between economic classes who could afford expediency and those who could not. Educational systems were affected as well: with more subjects to learn at all levels of education, and increasing numbers of machines and technological processes in daily life, there was a considerable need for learning quickly and without complication.

Critiques of consumerism which had been gaining steam since Veblen’s time grew along with the American economy. Indeed, the title of Ralph Nader’s Unsafe at Any Speed takes on new meaning if expediency is considered. Consumer protection and environmentalist discourse called for understanding of the costs of the explosion of consumer society, both in terms of personal, local effects and perhaps unseen or distant
changes wrought by new technologies and consumerist practices. Other criticisms in popular writing lamented the loss of knowledge as specialization spread, and hiring maintenance and repair technicians replaced traditions of owner-operator repair work. Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is not shy about its Platonic heritage, invoking the figure of Phaedrus to speak out against the increased speed and pressure of consumer society and the turn away from general knowledge, especially as manifest in a failure to understand technological devices.

### 2.2.5 Computing Made Easy, 1984–present

The final development in the meanings of ease I examine here is the extension of ease to the personal computer, a device exponentially more complicated than any of the devices Christine Frederick mentioned in her two books, yet more flexible than machines which human factors engineers of the knob and dial era evaluated. The Macintosh personal computer, introduced in 1984, was the first commercially viable computer which used a graphical user interface and was marketed as “easy to use.” Other graphical computers, notably the Xerox Star, existed at the time, as did computers and software being marketed as “easy to use.” However, Apple was the first to combine the two: in sharp contrast to its principal competitor, the IBM Personal Computer (PC), which ran Microsoft’s DOS operating system (MS-DOS) and had extremely limited graphical capability, *everything* about the Macintosh was graphical. The PC was boxy, boring, silent, and ugly; the Macintosh was curvy, flashy, talkative, and cute.

The *Apple Human Interface Guidelines*, published in 1987, codified many of the principles expressed in the early Mac OS, enabling transfer of its foundational principles to other technological and non-technological devices. The Apple design philosophy, as expressed in maxims which introduce the *Guidelines*, foregrounded
comfort, transparency, simplicity, and speed. Ease of use is reinforced through pragmatic novice/expert division (named here as “user/programmer”), and consistent preference for visual display.

The Apple Desktop Interface provides a consistent and familiar computer environment in which people can perform their many tasks. People aren’t trying to use computers—they’re trying to get their jobs done. (2) Most programmers have no trouble working with a command-line interface that requires memorization and Boolean logic. The average user is not a programmer. (4) [The command-line interface . . .] distracts all users from their tasks and focuses attention instead on the computer’s needs. (5) User activities should be simple at any moment, though they may be complex taken together. (7) Users feel comfortable in a computer environment that remains understandable and familiar rather than changing randomly. People use computers because computers are versatile and fast. (8)

The introduction of the Macintosh demonstrated another change in the character of ease: if a system as flexible, powerful, and technologically complicated as a personal computer could be made easy, why couldn’t anything be easy? Norman’s The Psychology of Everyday Things, also published in 1987, would help legitimate that syllogism of ease. This book has become one of the most influential books in the “usability” movement: an outgrowth of the discipline of human factors which encourages design and development practices which result in easy to use objects and systems. Norman analyzes the design of doors, light switches, refrigerators, and other everyday things, critiquing any lack of consistency, user control, feedback, access to conceptual models, or forgiveness of errors—the same principles which, according to Apple, made its Apple Desktop Interface easy. Norman’s prose style matches his argument: unlike the psychologists working in human factors, who clouded calls for ease and usability in dense Armyspeak, Norman frequently uses the first person or

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5Norman intensifies his critique of difficulty in later work such as The Invisible Computer.
“we,” and seldom employs technical language. While well-researched, and not at all anti-academic, *The Psychology of Everyday Things* begins with anecdotes and direct address to the reader, not a literature review filled with footnotes or parenthetical references to other research. For most readers, Norman’s extensive background in cognitive psychology is transparent—in fact, paperback versions of the book are titled *The Design of Everyday Things*.

The long-standing connections between transparency, simplicity, and ease have been strengthened markedly by the Apple Guidelines Norman’s *Everyday Things*, and comparable publications from other writers, reflecting (and helping to better establish) further evolution in the character of ease. Consider “Overwhelmed by Tech,” the article which I used to open this chapter: demands for transparency, simplicity, or ease appear in nearly every paragraph, and the concepts are often used interchangeably. Close correspondence of transparency, simplicity, and ease enables rapid interchange between them. Notably, popular writing and scholarship is less often treating the qualities of ease distinctively, but invoking “ease” and assuming the particular meaning will be apparent.

The current shape of human factors research indicates that most people would name the personal computer or the Web as the current frontier of usability and ease of use. But from its original incarnation to the present day, the Web would be nothing without writing, the technology Holmes wished to make easy—and, to this day, the most important technology involved in the personal computer. Once more, common-sense reasoning is nearly syllogistic: more than anything else, personal computers are machines for making texts and communicating. If the computer itself should be easy, and use of its word processing and typesetting applications should be easy, shouldn’t writing and communicating be easy as well? This expectation is
strengthened immeasurably by the role the qualities of ease has long played in rhetoric and composition. It is easy to assume the parallel movement toward clarity, brevity, and simplicity in the goals, style, and pedagogy of writing, and the design, use, and purpose of other things, is a simple, natural, inevitable evolution.

Critiques of this new role for ease have been limited. A few magazine columnists attacked the Macintosh because it supposedly failed to measure up for business. John C. Dvorak even cast the battle in gender terms, calling the Mac “effeminate” and its principal competitor, the IBM PC, a “man’s computer designed by men for men” (Levy qtd in Brown). Once again, appearance was a problem: the Mac did not look like a business machine. Almost fifteen years later, Dvorak would say of a new Macintosh notebook computer, the iBook, “I can only describe it as a ‘girly’ machine. You expect to see lipstick, rouge, and a tray of eye shadow inside when you open it up” (34). However, Dvorak’s critiques of the Macintosh interface have disappeared now that it is apparent visually rich software like the original Mac OS is here to stay.

Updated versions of earlier critiques against ease have appeared, like Neil Stephenson’s *In the Beginning Was the Command Line*, an argument for the GNU/Linux operating system which echoes many of Pirsig’s concerns about dwindling user know-how. However, the development of computer operating systems such as GNU/Linux and FreeBSD has also demonstrated that in the context of networked computing, flexibility and power can be harnessed to create systems which defy conventional wisdom on ease. Most Linux distributions include command-line and graphical user interfaces and applications, integrating these “hard” and “easy” environments, making much of Stephenson’s critique of graphical systems irrelevant. Projects like Linux and the K Desktop Environment show that highly usable computer systems can be extremely
powerful and versatile—contrary to general definitions of ease and expectations common in mainstream computing. Though it will take time to affect enduring change, non-traditional development models now offer an alternative to the system-centered development model which has preserved the culture of difficulty of computing.

Advertising usually touts the benefits of ease, but some companies have successfully mobilized its negative characteristics of ease. Nike’s long-running “Just Do It” campaign argued both explicitly and implicitly that in order to succeed, athletes must ignore discomfort and inconvenience, embracing hard work and extreme exertion (as well as Nike products). By contrast, General Motors’s “This is not your father’s Oldsmobile,” which admitted that the Oldsmobile brand was associated with easy-driving, somewhat emasculated cars suited for aging men, was unable to shake the negativity of ease and a younger, hipper clientele. Despite considerable effort, the campaign failed, and the brand was phased out. Both accounts show the endurance of the ambivalent character of ease—as well as the importance of the image and appearance of ease in figuring the resolution of that contradiction.

2.2.5.1 The qualities of ease: pictorialism

My list of the qualities of ease concludes with pictorialism. The graphical and visual nature of the Macintosh interface, Norman’s calls for “visibility,” and the changing nature of “transparency” as a quality of ease reflect the drastic shift in the importance of the visual and pictorial which has shaped twentieth-century Western culture. Following Richard Rorty, W. J. T. Mitchell calls this shift “the pictorial turn,” a general recognition that the visual demands cultural attention due to increasing importance and relevance—or suspicion. Images, valorized in fantasy, spectacle, and by the immense popularity of visual media, are opposed to the rational discursivity of the literate apparatus (2–4). In a similar way, ease privileges the pictorial, visual, and
electrate over the graphical, verbal, and literate. It is a reflection of common-sense knowledge of the status of images: watching a movie is easier than reading a book; a picture is worth a thousand words.

Pictures seem to possess, naturally and intrinsically, many of the qualities of ease, notably expediency and simplicity. Without a doubt, the connection of understanding and vision (“I see” meaning “I understand;” “vision” signifying “wisdom”) supports this correlation. The awesome influence of Edward Tufte’s studies of visualization (*Envisioning Information* and *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*) for usability studies has also bolstered the widespread assumption that ease of use and the pictorial are, generally speaking, congruent. But Mitchell reminds us that the pictorial turn is by no means not unconditional. The embrace of the visual and pictorial is deeply ambivalent: images are critiqued as dangerous, debilitating, and dehumanizing—especially by those defending the icons of literate culture (1–4). This ambivalence is paralleled by the ambivalence found in ease: are pictures *really* better than words? Do words and images follow the same patterns, where ease is concerned—for example, are images which are easy to read hard to make, as is the case with words? Derrida’s recognition of the complex nature of the *graphical* as a hybrid of visual and verbal underscores the problem with this oppositional formulation.

In *The Language of New Media* Lev Manovich notes that twentieth-century pictorialism is shaped markedly by traditional realism, particularly the realism of Hollywood cinema which Robert Ray calls the “invisible style” (Manovich *passim*; Ray 32). Through transparency and effortlessness, here is another connection to ease: while as carefully, methodically produced as any other, the “invisible style” appears natural, and its incredible information density is easily assimilated by the viewer. As Manovich points out, perverse versions of that model of information exchange
infect many areas of desktop computing, such as virtual reality, where Jaron Lanier’s resistance to linguistic forms continues “the fantasy of objectifying and augmenting consciousness” and “the desire to see in technology a return to the primitive happy age of pre-language, pre-misunderstanding” (59). I return to Manovich’s extremely important book in the final chapter of this work.

Finally, the idea of “image” is relevant for ease in a slightly different sense. In some cases, especially the image one projects to others, an appearance (or an image) of ease is critical, and one’s actual condition of comfort, effortlessness, or other qualities of ease is not important.

2.3 The Role of Ease Today

Table 2.1 summarizes the qualities of ease I introduced in the preceding historical review, and notes opposites frequently contrasted to them. These qualities still shape American culture, though shifts in relative importance and desirability have occurred as new qualities supplemented historically powerful ones. Also, many of the functions of ease I presented during the historical review remain powerful today. The original meanings of ease, abundant wealth and comfort, live on today as the “American Dream.” Ease can also be a state of mind attainable during rest or leisure, a pedagogical device, a commodity produced by a concert of individuals and technology, or a design philosophy.

My historical definition of ease can be summarized as a list of five trends:

1. Over its long history, the number of discourses, disciplines, and areas in which consideration of ease is relevant has increased consistently.

2. Though it once carried extremely negative connotations, the negativity associated with ease has gradually decreased, though it remains influential today.
Table 2.1: Charting the Qualities of Ease

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>quality</th>
<th>often opposed to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>comfort, enjoyment</td>
<td>discomfort, pain, annoyance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transparency, invisibility, passivity</td>
<td>apparent, visible, active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effortlessness, leisure</td>
<td>intensity, work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>simplicity</td>
<td>complexity, difficulty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pragmatics, specificity, localization</td>
<td>theory, abstraction, generalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>femininity, attraction</td>
<td>masculinity, distancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expediency, facility</td>
<td>deliberation, hard to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pictorialism</td>
<td>literacy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Ease has always had a deeply paradoxical nature, acknowledged to differing degrees over time. The simplest expression of this paradox is, “Achieving ease is not easy.”

4. The number of different qualities by which ease is made manifest, and which define ease, has increased over time. New qualities have supplemented older ones, and are often expressions derived from historical forms.

5. The number of functions which ease serves in society has increased over time, and the relative importance of functions has shifted so that most recently introduced functions are most important.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the growing use of new methods, products, and technological devices have enabled the production of ease in its most fundamental role (comfort and leisure). Post-war booms in consumption and consumerism extended the realm of possibility for this production of ease to many other objects, systems, and practices, and added the criterion that things which produced ease should themselves be easy. Today, this extension continues, as the development of easy-to-use personal computers has all but ended restrictions on the application of ease in technological products or devices, legitimizing demands for ease in nearly any context.
3.1 Is Ease Good or Bad?

In her 1929 follow-up to *Household Engineering*, Christine Frederick argued that the logical conclusion of the progress of American industrial society was a shift in the goals of civilization and culture. Though realization of her vision for America was delayed by the Great Depression, the postwar explosion in consumerism—and the growth of ease—followed her prescription to a large extent:

A civilization like ours—unlike that of the Roman or the Greek—centers its genius upon improving the conditions of life. It secures its thrills from inventing ways to live easier and more fully; means to bring foods from more ends of the earth and add to the variety served on the family table; methods to bring more news and entertainment to the family fireside; ways to reduce the labor and hardships of living; ways to have more beauty and graciousness in the domestic domicile; ways to satisfy more of the instincts of more of the family group. (Frederick, *Selling Mrs. Consumer* 15)

For many people, this quest for easier, fuller living through variety, entertainment, relaxation, and beauty is simply natural and instinctive, as Frederick has identified it here, and the history of American civilization is simply one of betterment, a long increase in economic, educational, and democratic successes. Ingenuity, technological advances, and hard work drive betterment, and the valorization of ease is an unproblematic part of that ongoing process. The roles of ease I describe above—as abstract standard for economic achievement, temporary state of mind, pedagogy, and both means and end of technological consumer products—are nearly totally naturalized.
But I have also noted that ease has never been accepted outright. Though in many ways it seems unquestionably positive (“instinctive,” as Frederick would have it), nearly every quality and function of ease has a negative side ranging in strength from ambivalence which provokes caution to a very strong reservation which prevents valorization of ease completely (or at least limits its contexts). To summarize: comfort and effortlessness still carry the stigma of sloth. Those who demand transparency or simplicity are often labeled as stupid or lazy. Controversy over pragmatism and expediency frequently appears in education, as well as in ethical and environmental rejections of consumerism. And as Mitchell argues, the concept of the pictorial turn is a recognition that the problem of the spectacular image is serious enough to mandate immediate philosophical and popular attention.

3.1.1 Technology and Ease

The consistent presence of these ambiguities and paradoxes is the first reason why it is difficult, if not impossible, to make a final judgment about ease—to determine if it is good or evil. Qualities of ease often appear intertwined, and overlapping meanings exist side by side. Positive and negative aspects are produced in almost any situation in which ease is involved. An easy-to-use thing may indeed deliver tremendous benefit. But what problems does it produce? Are benefits so much the focus that problems are ignored? Should one consider the effect on other individuals or systems while attempting to make a case for or against a particular appearance of ease? In technological thought, the question of good or evil is often answered with deferral: technology is just a tool, and its good or evil character is determined by the human agents who use it. Langdon Winner has pointed out that despite its attractiveness and frequency of invocation, this resolution is problematic. The faults Winner identifies for the question “Is technology good or bad?” are applicable to the question “Is ease
good or bad?” because the connections of ease and technology run very deep, as I demonstrate above.

Evaluation of the good or evil of ease presumes that one can understand fully the impacts of any given situation where it is present. For technology, Winner reminds us there are three reasons this is impossible: first, technologies have unintended consequences which, though they may not be pernicious, are often not visible to the agents involved, and perceived (much less understood) only with removal of time and distance (21). Second, though Western common sense about technology assumes that human beings are the masters of both the natural world and the technology they create, this is simply not the case. Changes in the natural world, failures of technological systems, and other factors prevent mastery of technology (26–7). Thirdly, though Western common sense about technology encourages a conceptualization of technology as a neutral tool, it is all but impossible for any technology to achieve this neutrality (30). Doing so would entail the complete absence of the agency of the designer (problematic for a variety of reasons) as well as achieving freedom from ideological structures of the culture from which the technology originated. Even the simplest tool reflects the design choices and ideological assumptions of its creators. One can argue that foregrounding assumptions made during the design process (through user manuals, directions, or other explanations) makes it possible for the user to understand a given design—but that understanding, even if complete, is certainly not neutrality. And that leaves open the question of unexamined ideological assumptions or predilections not acknowledged for other reasons. To be sure, the extent to which choices of human designers are manifest in technology is influenced by a huge number of agents which affect the production of the device or system and its use. No matter how conscientious the designer, users can ignore directions and use technologies as they see fit, or be
influenced by cultural pressures unbeknownst to the designers—pressures which could shift an object, system, or practice from intended use.

Following the usual path of deferral of “good or bad” to “it depends upon the way it is used” can distract attention from the ambiguity of ease previously discussed. My answer to the question, then, is “Both,” and the course of action implied by Winner’s critique is investigating both the dangers and benefits of ease—not just legislating against “bad” use and shifting blame for it away from ease itself. It would be better to preserve of the ambivalent quality of ease through review of some arguments for and against ease. While it may be quite difficult to predict how ease affects a given situation, the plurality of arenas in which ease appears legitimate makes some effect almost certain. In fact, that ubiquity of effect is the next thing about ease which I will consider.

3.1.2 The Ideology of Ease

Ease has evolved to the point where it has become a powerful ideology with tremendous effect on American culture. This function of ease may have the power to trump those discussed in Chapter 2 above. Because there are numerous ways in which ease is made manifest, and a wide scope of potential application, evaluating an object, system, or practice often, if not always, includes consideration of its ease. The ideology of ease is its power to be mobilized as an evaluative tool, especially for technologies, and the way it functions as a system of representation.

3.1.2.1 Stuart Hall’s concept of ideology

Because many theories of ideology exist, I would like to clarify the specific way I understand the concept. Stuart Hall outlines a theory of ideology which establishes a balance between classical Marxian concepts, rightly criticized for rigidity, and postmodernist theory, which in some forms makes theorizing determination or
ideology impossible. Through a selective reading of Louis Althusser, Hall suggests a complex model of determination and a pluralistic concept of ideology, rejecting simple, mechanical models in which there is a one-to-one correspondence between determining base and determined superstructure, and class position the sole criterion for establishing control of the base.

Hall begins from a complex notion of determination which replaces fixed correspondence between determining base and determined superstructure with a connection more like Raymond Williams’s setting of limits and exerting of pressures (Williams 87). This formulation acknowledges complex structures of authority, like that of the modern state, in which power is articulated from countless positions, and in diverse ways. It also allows the operation of ideological forces outside the strict control of the state, and recognizes that ideology may fail to affect certain institutions. Thankfully, Hall is clear that refusing rigid notions of “determination” does not mean adopting a wantonly post-structuralist attitude, in which difference is “pushed beyond the point where it is capable of theorizing the necessary unevenness of a complex unity, or even the ‘unity in difference’ of a complex structure” (92). A post-structuralist critique of determination should mean there is “no necessary correspondence” between base and superstructure, not “necessarily no correspondence” between the two. Instead of post-structuralist tendency to “becom[e] hostage to the privileging of difference as such,” Hall calls for “thinking unity and difference; difference in complex unity” (93).

Hall’s concept of determination allows for development of theories of ideology which more closely match lived experience: economic benefit for the upper classes is derived from the mobilization of a number of different ideologies which need not appear simultaneously or consistently (97). Recognition of multiple, interconnected ideologies, instead of a “dominant ideology,” and articulation of complexity and
difference, instead of only difference, better enables representation of “the complex interplay of different ideological discourses and formations in any modern developed society” (104). Thus ideologies are articulated recursively, with both structures of determination and practices—discursive or otherwise—connected interdependently. In the middle ground Hall establishes, ideologies have both discursive character (as ideas, thoughts, and other discourses) and material existence (when inscribed in practices). Hall explicitly reestablishes the importance of language and discourse for ideology: “language and behavior are the media, so to speak, of the material registration of ideology, the modality of its functioning” (99). According to the concept of ideology which he advocates, and which I use here, ideologies are “systems of representation,” the “systems of meaning through which we represent the world to ourselves and one another” (103).

3.1.2.2 The ideology of ease today

Ease is one of the many systems of representation which enforce the common sense of American culture and society, setting limits for the roles of technology and other artifacts, exerting pressures on decisions made in everyday life, and reinforcing the assumptions which undergird other ideological formations. For example, as shown by anecdotes from “Overwhelmed by Tech” on page 16 above, objects, systems, and practices which cannot be made easy can be discredited by manufacturers and consumers alike—their use is limited, or completely ignored. In response to the demands of everyday life, consumers are pressured to see ease as the solution for rising complexity and increasing technological sophistication. Common assumptions about technology are shaped by the desire for ease, and the system of representation places the qualities of ease on the strong side of influential binary oppositions.
The close connection of ease with writing and other technologies, established over time, provides several reasons why the ideology of ease is so pervasive. First, if demanding ease is acceptable for the process of learning how to write, which is alternately portrayed as difficult and easy, it should be acceptable for nearly anything. Without a doubt, the connections between ease and writing, strengthened substantially by college composition curricula developed in American colleges during the nineteenth century, facilitated the expansion in the role of ease to certain technological objects, and eventually, with introduction of the personal computer, to all technological things. In the next chapter of this work, I will examine the relationship of ease and writing in much greater detail.

The role transparency has played in ease also boosts the ideological power of ease by encouraging ideological operations themselves. I do not mean that unseen agents are duping the citizenry through the invisibility of ease; in most cases, the invisibility is quite apparent, and willingly accepted. Easy things are valued because they are easy, not because of nefarious advertisers fooling us into believing they are not. A “false consciousness” model of ideology is not the point. Rather, it is the congruence between the operations of transparency, and the function of ideology, which both encourage acceptance of dominant, accepted, common-sense values (or, to put it in marketspeak, off-the-shelf solutions).

Most importantly, when ease functions as an ideology, its act of representation privileges its benefits and deemphasizes its dangers. Obviously, the operation of ease is beneficial in some circumstances. But its ideological function often enables sidestepping or dismissing the critiques of ease which have been introduced over the years, as noted above, and minimizes the pejorative meanings of ease which seemingly contradict its valorization. Most potential problems with ease are overlooked in
context in favor of the “it’s in the way that you use it” ethos which dominates Western thinking about technology. Critical evaluation of ease, which I begin now, is not on the ideological radar screen.

3.2 Critical Evaluation of Ease

My critical evaluation of ease begins with examination of the benefits produced by easy things. I then offer a more extensive discussion of some of the problems created by the growing legitimacy of ease, its careless valorization, and the increasing willingness to ignore the adverse effects which can occur when ease is demanded in situations of high difficulty or complexity. Also, I discuss several problems introduced during the definition of ease presented in Chapter 2 in greater detail.

The function of ease as an ideology does not mean the demise of other functions of ease previously discussed, such as reduction of the work needed to obtain basic human needs, or its considerable role in teaching the use of technologically advanced systems. Nor does it mean ease should be condemned in all of its forms. There are varying levels of dangers and benefits in all the functions of ease, and critical evaluation of ease is intended to acknowledge those benefits, keep them in perspective, and to better understand other effects which may accompany them.

3.2.1 Benefits of Ease

Because I noted many of the benefits of ease while defining the qualities of ease in Chapter 2, I will not afford this section exhaustive detail. The reader can provide more particulars if desired.¹

¹Donald Norman’s work also provides thorough, accessible discussion of the benefits of ease, though his terminology differs somewhat from that used here.
3.2.1.1 Quality of life

The original meaning of ease included connotations of pleasure, beauty, and enjoyment; the pursuit of easy objects, systems, and practices can and should provide opportunities for the same in everyday life, in both leisure and work situations. Small conveniences, such as getting take-out to avoid cooking and washing dishes after a hard day at work or while traveling, and much more complex systems in which ease streamlines a difficult process, present genuine physical and psychological benefit.

3.2.1.2 Safety and security

Easy-to-read traffic signals and signage save lives, as do easy-to-operate emergency medical devices and much simpler things, like irons which shut off automatically. The development of conventions, protective systems built into infrastructure and technological devices, and the standardization and simplicity they offer has increased the safety of daily activities. For example, controlled-access highways separate traffic with medians or concrete barriers, reducing the chance of a catastrophic head-on collision with an oncoming vehicle. On these roads, rest stops are placed at intervals calculated to encourage breaks which reduce fatigue and the chance of accident (Berger 68). Standardized colors, frequency, and styles of signage makes getting lost much less likely, and numbered interchanges and route numbers make it easy to give and follow directions.

Following easy models of system design can also increase safety by reducing the possibility for human error—and by making safe procedures less troublesome to follow. Ease can embed user preferences or provide instructions to save time safely. For example, fill-out forms which include directions are more likely to be completed correctly. Doors which automatically close and lock upon exit reduce the likelihood of
crimes of opportunity; doors which open outward are easier to open for those exiting a building in a hurry—which, as Norman observes, can save lives during a fire (86).

3.2.1.3 Reduced cost

Development of easy-to-use devices allows users to speed up daily activities by focusing less energy on mundane tasks and reducing learning by repeated trial-and-error. Easy devices which store and retrieve user preferences and customizations, and provide automation of mundane repetitive tasks, save time and frustration, permitting humans to focus on more creative, less monotonous work.

Many usability advocates have offered quantitative arguments which show that the impact of saving a typical worker a few seconds here and there can add up very quickly. Norman argues convincingly that paying attention to the design of light switches, doors, and other simple devices can reduce long-term operating cost, despite the increased costs of research and development needed for the production of easy devices. Carol Barnum’s textbook *Usability Testing and Research* includes an assignment which duplicates these analyses, figuring the cost per second of any worker’s time and ascertaining the dollar amount which could be recovered from timed testing (22–3, 28). The time and motion studies Frederick used and advocated for homemakers follow similar patterns.

3.2.1.4 Practicality

Ease enables action by automating or eliminating steps or complication and relying on systemic defaults or controls to make assumptions about expected behaviors and outcomes—or by getting something done despite differences in quality or cost. For example, while developing a customized database-driven web site with accompanying professional quality printed course materials might be the best way to prepare a syllabus, many instructors do not have the necessary programming or pre-press skills.
However, using easier alternatives such as a course management system (CMS) like BlackBoard or WebCT, and photocopies of laser-printed materials prepared with a word processor, will often provide the educational resources needed. The development of easy-to-use technologies has enabled the expansion of technological power far beyond the engineers and technicians who reserved it for themselves little more than a century ago.

3.2.1.5 Legitimation of the pictorial

Mitchell contends that with the pictorial turn, study of the visual arts is on the rise, and more people recognize the negative effects of conflating “culture” and “literate culture.” Of course, Mitchell illustrates the ambivalence of this movement, especially continued resistance from defenders of literate epistemology—but certainly, in the ten years since he penned *Picture Theory*, desktop computing has embraced the pictorial turn vigorously. It may be a tangential benefit, but the preference for pictorial and visual which is a part of ease does increase the legitimacy of pictorial forms. Scholarly programs in film studies, new media, and related disciplines remain secondary to traditional literary pursuits. But in both academia and wider culture, critical attention to pictorial forms is no longer universally dismissed as misguided fascination with “entertainment.”

3.2.1.6 Pedagogy

Pedagogues like Holmes mobilized contemporary philosophy to create systems for learning which endure to this day. Ease has been mobilized as a pedagogy for at least three hundred years, and in some areas successfully challenged its opposition (mental discipline, “back to basics” learning, or curricula based on the assumption that “nothing worth learning is easy”). Making it easy is the model for learning in
educational institutions as well as workplaces and extra-institutional educational settings (“Quilting made easy” or “Accounting for dummies”).

3.2.2 Problems Caused by Ease

Even the most careful and well-intentioned practices which rely on ease for cultural valorization have unintended effects and consequences. More importantly, the ideological nature of ease encourages uncritical application: ignorance, willing suppression, or denial of negative effects. Notably, because ease is often made manifest only as simplicity or transparency, this uncritical application can rapidly become self-reinforcing: critical evaluation which makes the ideological articulation of ease visible is discouraged by ease’s valorization of transparency.

3.2.2.1 Self-reinforcement

Philosophy, literature, and popular writing about technology have noted its self-perpetuating nature. Plato’s objections to writing are well-known, based in part upon the fact that once schoolchildren learned to write, their memories would atrophy and their reasoning skills would suffer from a lack of use. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael observes that precautions taken to protect the harpooneer dangled over the side of the vessel necessitated further measures to protect his protectors—a cycle of doublings which, in an attempt to ease dangers, only created more of them (Melville 349). Finally, texts such as Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, mentioned on page 39 above, argue that the anti-technological mindset common in modern culture is, for most people, an inarguable matter of faith, and criticize the lack of technological know-how caused by this technophobia. Similarly, technological and non-technological applications of ease are self-reinforcing in several different ways.

The definition of ease as transparency or invisibility provides the first and most powerful self-reinforcement mechanism. Transparent objects, systems, and practices
“just work.” To use Norman’s language, “affordances” provide prompts or assistance which reduce the need for fully understanding or memorizing the way something works. But reducing the level of understanding or knowledge can cause problems in the absence of transparent systems, or given a system malfunction. For example, the replacement of gauges with warning lights enables a person operating a device so equipped (such as an automobile) to use the device without understanding how to read the gauge, or knowing very much about the system to which it is connected. If the warning light comes on, the driver takes action (stopping to call a tow truck). However, lacking the ability to read the gauges, the driver cannot safely operate a car which uses them. Thus warning lights, intended as a mechanism for facilitating transparency, become a requirement of use. A person who drives a car with warning lights, not gauges, may not develop knowledge of oil pressure, temperature, and other indicators of engine performance. For that person, it may also be easier to question the severity of a problem indicated by the sudden appearance of a light, as opposed to the continuous feedback from a gauge.

Malfunction of easy things can force to self-reinforcement of ease. As Robert R. Johnson notes for computer interfaces:

[User-friendly interfaces] can mask the complexities of the system to such an extent that if there is a system breakdown, such as when you receive a cryptic error message that explains the problem in virtually encrypted language [. . .] you are left helpless, unable to solve the problem, and continue with your work because you are dependent on external expertise not available to you in any useful form. (28)

This was the case with the preacher mentioned in “Overwhelmed by Tech”: unable to understand error messages and system operation, and unwilling to cope with troublesome external expertise, she suffered data loss (see page 15 above). Computers and Writing scholars were reminded of some of the costs of transparency in winter
2001, when the online CMS provider BlackBoard began charging for what had previously been a free service. Courseware like BlackBoard is popular because it enables an instructor with little knowledge of the technical complexity of hypertext to produce a sophisticated course web site using only a web browser, content prepared in a word processor, and BlackBoard’s online system.

To the instructor adding content to BlackBoard, the complex and technical nature of the hypertext file structure underlying the site is transparent. But when BlackBoard changed its pricing structure, and many instructors were forced to stop using the no-longer-free servers, the cost of this transparency became apparent in more ways than one. Instructors who wanted to download their information from BlackBoard had to move each file separately, one at a time, and were suddenly forced to deal with hundreds of files they did not even know existed. (Without technical understanding of hypertext, BlackBoard users saw only “a web site” not “a collection of files hierarchically organized.”) Additionally, there was no automated method for moving syllabi out of BlackBoard into other CMS systems (Harris). Suddenly, BlackBoard users’ lack of hypertext file management skills was no longer transparent. Unfortunately, as budget cuts loom, similar difficulties continue to plague schools which have committed resources to easy-to-use CMS products. Given the tremendous difficulty of getting information out of the proprietary systems, many educators are paying increased costs rather than abandoning hours of time invested in designing courses for specific platforms.

Johnson’s User-Centered Technology documents the second mode of self-reinforcement of ease: exacerbation of the (already mentioned) division between novices and experts. Western concepts of technology and disciplinary structure provide a strong basis for novice/expert divisions (9–11). In its manifestation as pragmatism,
ease legitimizes the simplification process by which experts render difficulty easy for
the benefit of novices. Easy things maintain this separation by encouraging users to
cultivate their role as novices for whom an inability to understand difficult or complex
systems is perfectly normal, even desirable. Sometimes novices view experts as saviors
whose mastery of complicated systems earns respect and admiration; in other instances,
experts are seen as “elites” obsessed with detail or particulars simply irrelevant for
the general public. Notably, in both cases, expert knowledge and the possibility of
technical mastery are out of the question. In contrast to experts, normal folks just want
the darned thing to work, and assume that the role of expertise is the transformation of
difficult, even frightening technology to an easy, user-friendly manifestation.

Structures of expertise also contribute to the differentiation of novice and expert.
Johnson argues that most technologies are “system-centered,” with all decisions
regarding the technology revolving around the technology itself:

In representations of human life and our attendant technologies through the
system-centered view, however, users are inevitably ancillary, or, in some
cases, they are nonexistent because the system is powerfully hegemonic:
the system is the source and ultimately the determiner of all. System-
centered technology [. . .] locates the technological system or artifact in a
primary position. There is no need for the user to be involved with system
or artifact development, this perspective suggests, because the system is too
complex and therefore should be designed and developed by experts who
know what is most appropriate in the system design. (26)

The system-centered model venerates technical systems and the experts who designed
them. Experts responsible for the design and maintenance of a given technological
system often take a quite proprietary, paternalistic stance toward it, refusing to share
information, reserving decision-making power, and relegating anyone without expertise
to subsidiary advisory roles. (Note the gender implications: powerful, masculine
experts do not need ease; but weak, feminized novices do.) In many cases, the expert
view of novice users is quite hostile, and novice demands for transparent, easy-to-use things are considered evidence of mental weakness or laziness (the negative sense of idleness or sloth mentioned earlier). However, some experts are less derogatory; the Apple Human Interface Guidelines I quote on page 40 above provide a gentler example of novice/expert division. Either way, the power signified by expertise, especially in the West, provides a huge impetus for experts to design easy-to-use devices and encourage novices to avoid anything else—strengthening the valorization of ease.

In Throwaways, Evan Watkins argues that true “gender mobility,” where a person of one gender takes the usual role of another gender, is restricted to men. A man providing comfort or showing emotion (roles usually reserved for women) is “sensitive”—but a woman who crosses to the male side by showing self-confidence or leadership is a “bitch” (155). Adapting that concept to my analysis of novice/expert separation, one might say that “ease mobility” is the province of experts, who can enjoy easy-to-use artifacts and seek ease without risking their power and prestige. But novices who cross the expertise line and made suggestions about the system are seen as uppity, presumptuous, or ungrateful. Additionally, for novices, unlike experts, the use of easy things and the desire for ease demonstrates their deference to expertise, and weakness of character.

The common-sense division of novice and expert is reinforced by novices as well as experts, with some often shrugging off their “idiocy” as inevitable in the light of technological complexity. For novice users, ease consistently encourages wink-and-shrug acceptance of this separation, a phenomenon which Norman calls “learned helplessness,” and Johnson labels “technological idiocy.”

Users reside on the weak side of the idiot/genius binary. We have embedded the notion of technological idiocy so strongly in our culture that we
actually begin to think of ourselves as idiots when we encounter technological breakdowns. Experts are the ones who “know,” so we let them have the power, which of course means we accept whatever is given to us. (45)

Since ease has become more powerful and acceptable, people sometimes blame themselves for poor design, mechanical failure, or other problems which are absolutely beyond control (and perhaps the fault of so-called experts). Sadly, this pathology sometimes becomes an ontology: “I’m not good with computers” or “I’m one of those people who just can’t understand this.” Most depressingly, sometimes novices reverse the syllogism of ease explicated above, reasoning: “If this is easy and I can’t figure it out, I must really be an idiot, and I’m good for nothing.” The ideology of ease plays a huge part in the reinforcement of this corrosive view of complication and difficulty by consistently and unproblematically mobilizing novice/expert separation and downplaying the need to truck with, much less engage critically, anything which is not easy. The selectivity of ease mobility and the ideological status of ease naturalize novices’ seeming inability or refusal to learn, and the cycle continues.

3.2.2.2 Supporting uncritical assumptions about technology

The conceptualization of technology encouraged by the ideology of ease relies on, and therefore endorses and reinforces, common assumptions about technology which are questionable, if not completely inaccurate. A review of the “Overwhelmed by Tech” article which I quoted earlier shows five assumptions about technology which connect it to, or rely on, assumptions about the function of ease:

1. Technology is not difficult in and of itself. Through manifest intent and hard work, talented designers and engineers can overcome complexity and produce easy to use technologies (like Jeff Hawkins’s PDAs and the original Macintosh). Only the most complicated and difficult devices and systems (not a concern for consumers, so merely alluded to in the article) will not be easy.

2. Simple, transparent technology is good technology. Complex, opaque technology is bad. When technology is visible, either a mechanical failure as occurred, or
the technology is deficient. (These sentiments are expressed constantly, in quotes from consumers and experts like Norman, Hawkins, and Alan Cooper.)

3. Because technology is artificial, it is hard to use, uncomfortable, and unfamiliar. Making technology follow natural patterns makes it easier to use, pleasant, and intuitive. (Not a major emphasis in the article, but underlying the frequent use of “intuitive” and similar verbiage.)

4. Technological development and economic growth are correlated on a personal level: one must own and be able to operate technically sophisticated objects in order to be economically successful. Such correlation applies nationally, too: in the modern world, the health of any nation’s economy is dependent on being able to produce technologically sophisticated goods, services, and knowledge. (The authors repeatedly mention the economic downturn, and quote consumers who complain about the need to keep up with the latest technology.)

5. Finally, technological progress is constant, consistent, inevitable, and natural. As technology’s power and sophistication increases, its ability to produce ease and to be easy increases as well. (See page 17 for several quotes which confirm this.)

Scholarly work is also marked by these assumptions. Winner has shown that critiques of technology from philosophers as influential as Martin Heidegger often reproduce and reinforce “inevitability” hypotheses despite attempts to overcome them (14). In Orality and Literacy, Walter Ong argues that histories of communication technology often represent familiar, well-established (e.g. easy) technologies as natural despite their inarguable artificiality (81–2). While much of his Psychology of Everyday Things is carefully developed, Norman’s work often falls back on many, if not all, of these assumptions, and he has a tendency to assume conventions established over years are “natural” (4, 17, 23). Combining assumptions about ease and technology into a single assertion could be accomplished in several different ways. One approach centers on artificiality: “Technology may seem artificial today, but eventually it’ll be natural.”

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2Several pages on Norman’s web site express regret for the terminology in his books. He may have meant “conventional” instead of “natural,” and the forthcoming work Emotional Design (2004) will confirm the presence or absence of problematic assumptions about the “natural” properties of human-made things.
Another rendering (well-represented in “Overwhelmed by Tech”) would match the Western faith in technology with faith in ease: “Sooner or later, everything will be easy.” However, if critics of technological determinism such as Winner are correct, this faith in ease is misplaced and simply unrealistic. The contradictory nature of common-sense assumptions about technology, and the paradoxical nature of ease, also call uncomplicated faith in ease into question. Compare assertions one and three: how can the solution for a lack of natural properties be an increase in artificiality?

3.2.2.3 Reinforcement of stereotypical gender roles

The connection of ease and femininity echoes stereotypical gender roles in a manner which some might consider innocent, not intended to be derogatory, or simply a representation of “the way things are.” It is impossible to ignore the sheer quantity of advertising and popular writing which capitalizes on the connection of ease and the female gender. Casually dismissing these texts legitimizes other contexts in which the easy-female correlation is made unproblematically, especially its crudest expression: the assumption that women cannot handle difficulty, or that they become “hysterical” under emotional stress.

More than anything else, the connection of gender and ease is this perception that women lack the intellect and fortitude needed to handle difficult tasks. Traditionally, “hard labor” is the province of men (never mind the labor of childbirth), and women are better off nurturing the children. It is more “natural” for the physically and emotionally stronger man to take on more physically and emotionally challenging tasks. Supposedly, women’s genetically imposed weakness, when compared with men, places them at a number of disadvantages, and can be blamed for their continued exclusion from certain competitive sports, battlefield roles, and salary equity, among other things. The gendered nature of ease is built on this and the correlation between
the role of women as familiar, comforting, maternal figures and the familiarity and comfort present in the definition of ease.

Apple Computer’s iMac marketing provides several excellent examples of “innocent” connection of ease and the female gender. (Indeed, the history of the Macintosh is marked by frequent correspondence of the feminine gender and the computer’s easy-to-use qualities, and this is one of many possible examples from Apple.) Shortly after its introduction in 1998, the iMac was marketed in a series of television commercials which focused almost exclusively on two things: the external appearance of the iMac and its easy-to-use qualities. None of the technical specifications of the machine were discussed—not even its oft-criticized lack of a disk drive. Thus the commercials are already “feminine”: physical appearance and aspect are the focus, not the hard numbers of performance data.

It is hard not to see the iMac commercials as the performance of a group of scantily clad dancers or synchronized swimmers flirting with the viewer. With the Rolling Stones’ “She’s a Rainbow” providing accompaniment, five of the translucent computers—one in each color available—move around and through the screen, offering glimpses of circuit boards when the camera moves in for a close-up. The Stones make it clear the iMac is a girl, as they sing, “She comes in colors everywhere / She combs her hair / She’s like a rainbow.” There is little doubt Apple intended the viewer to consider the iMac a female that was easy to use and came in whatever color one wanted. The advertisement evidently appeals to traditional models of femininity in which women are attractive, easy, silent servants of their male masters.

The idea of the “easy woman” or “lady of easy virtue” provides another complicated connection of gender and ease. While on the one hand, the easy woman is described for being too willing, too sexual, on the other hand, overabundant sexuality
and promiscuity make her very desirable. Like ease in general, this sense of ease is deeply ambivalent, and the easy woman is simultaneously attractive and repulsive. As above, this particular meaning of ease cannot be dismissed as a historical oddity (recall the *OED* definition mentioned on page 35 above). Instead, it is often assumed that the meanings are interchangeable. This was the case with a 2002 LG Electronics advertisement which bragged their cellular phone offered “Easy to use email. Supermodel easy.” In this advertisement, several connotations of ease which portray women negatively are juxtaposed. First, the phone is easy enough to be used by a supermodel (who, as the highest representation of femininity, must have the lowest technological skill and intelligence). Second, the phone is as easy to master as a supermodel (who, since she bares much of her body in advertising, is likely promiscuous).

### 3.2.2.4 Repression of critique

For most educators, the repression of critique, facilitation of acceptance of the status quo, and discouragement of critical thinking are the worst problems caused
by ease. Simplicity and pragmatism, which John Holmes connected with ease in an educational context, are frequently and rightly criticized for encouragement of a non-critical attitude, which in *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century*, Cynthia Selfe calls “not paying attention.” Though Selfe speaks of composition studies scholars, not students or the general public, the problem applies to all of these groups—certainly, teachers’ attitudes are reflected in, as well as influenced by, curricula. The problem of not paying attention applies to extra-educational situations as well: indeed, willing invisibility is critical for the function of transparency in the service of ease, no matter what the context.

Selfe’s argument begins by discussing technology and the dominant methodology for dealing with it: hoping that it will be invisible. In composition studies (and perhaps all of English), consideration of technological issues limits real composition work: studying “the theory and practice of language” (21–2). The desire for invisible (transparent, to use the terms for ease established above) technology in classroom situations is a reflection of the desire for all technology to “just work,” to be unproblematic, unchallenging, and simple. However, this uncritical acceptance of the technological situation runs counter to encouraging development of critical thinking skills, one of the stated goals of most composition courses (as well as, for many, rhetoric itself). Selfe acknowledges that failure to ask questions about technology will entrench the powerful expert vs. disenfranchised novice opposition described by Johnson above (143).

Building on her technological analysis, Selfe argues that the desire for comfortable, familiar, non-challenging technology is often extended to a lack of paying attention to other situations, in the hopes that a similarly comfortable environment can be discovered there (Selfe 23, 38–9). Educators prefer to ignore the effects of technology which occur outside the immediate educational situation—in fact, they prefer to
dismiss *everything* outside the immediate environment, citing their inability to affect change, irrelevance of “distant” events, or the need to “just get my work done” (a sizable dose of pragmatism is evident here). However, as Selfe’s analysis of the Clinton administration’s desire to increase “technological literacy” shows, a failure to think critically about these seemingly unrelated events has real effects for students and teachers. In rather uncomfortable detail, Selfe shows how Clinton administration mandates resulted in diversion of funds from salaries, construction projects, and other classroom expenditures to new technological infrastructure, networking and technology—often without training or support (43–63). At least in part, educators’ failure to ask hard questions about the effects of these new policies led to the entrenchment of assumptions about technology which facilitated them—and which are very similar to the assumptions about technology and ease which mark “Overwhelmed by Tech”—as well as the development of policies which affected “non-technological” areas of educational systems.

Selfe’s solution for this problem is encouragement of the development of “critical technological literacy” through a cooperative effort undertaken by educators, parents, and government agencies. She sees this as, following Donna Haraway, a situated knowledge, a more skeptical, questioning, discursive approach to understanding what technological literacy might be (147). Language very similar to that which is often used to describe critical thinking marks Selfe’s discussion of this critical technological literacy, which she describes in detail in the third part of *Technology and Literacy*.

Unfortunately, the ideological nature of ease means that common sense runs in exactly the opposite direction. Selfe calls for an end to valorizing invisibility (134)—as ease makes transparency more and more acceptable. She argues that increasing students’ understanding of technology is not merely a matter of installing network
cables and servers (71–5)—but ease backs the simple, instrumental solution. She points out that truly understanding a given situation or practice means connecting local, discursive, and instrumental knowledge with general understanding of its larger context (146–9)—but ease suggests a pragmatic approach, learning only the immediate context needed to accomplish the short-term goal. If the qualities of ease are kept in mind while reading Selfe’s work, it is clear reform-minded educators face an uphill battle.

Stephen Katz has critiqued the push for expediency in technical communication on ethical grounds. The tendency to collapse all deliberative rhetoric into a push for expediency—speed, efficiency, and efficacy, or “technical criteria as a means to an end” (257)—shifts rhetoric away from Aristotle’s focus on means to a more utilitarian focus on ends. Katz reminds us that before and during World War Two, the Nazi government cultivated expediency in nearly all its communications, and gently points out the horrid consequences of that obsession with ends and disregard for means. For Katz, the Nazi’s ethic of expediency helped prevent internal questioning of the “Final Solution,” the repression of dissent, and the bombing of civilians. Expedient language made it easier to deal with the nasty business of day to day life as a Nazi official. But as he points out, problems of expedient rhetoric did not disappear on V-E Day. The expedient technologization of rhetoric could transform its “democratic decision-making process” into “techniques of persuasion and audience adaptation calculated to serve” ends with no attention to means (Katz 271). A highly technologized rhetoric with an ethic of expediency encourages bypassing deliberation, objections, or less popular opinions in favor of easy ends achieved through the use of the latest technologies. In the classroom, this can result in decontextualized learning (the presentation of pure technique), and more seriously, the debasement of ethics through reduction of concern for the reader to minimizing the time necessary for transmission of the information.
being presented (or another item to check off the list of details to address when proofreading). Katz’s connection of ease, expediency, and technique has great potential and needs further study.

The repression of critique by ease also occurs because critique often involves the development or explanation of sophisticated, pluralistic points of view which fail several tests of ease. First, complex positions take time and effort to develop—it is easier to reiterate simple, well-established positions backed by common sense, since they do not require an inventive process for either establishment or protection against rhetorical attack. Sharon Crowley has noted that the rhetoric most common in first-year composition encourages repetition of common sense by moving invention outside of the province of rhetoric—and out of the composition classroom. Secondly, common sense has the advantage of transparency: it is obvious why one would argue that way. Lengthy explanations and investigation of assumptions are not required for the inarguable facts of common sense. As Roland Barthes demonstrates in Mythologies, common sense is natural, depoliticized, comfortable speech: ideas which are “natural and without saying” (143). Finally, complex, abstract ideas based on theory are described as “disconnected,” the work of “elites” who do not understand the real world. Eschewing abstraction in all forms enables highly personalized, contextualized writing—in both content and style—which, as James Berlin notes, mobilizes individual experience consistent with American predilections for positivism. To summarize: ease has the power to neuter critique, reducing it to a trope employed for the sake of form, because being Fair and Balanced is a Good Thing. Ease can transform critical thinking to a ritual speed bump over which one slows as little as possible on the straight and narrow way forward.
3.2.2.5 Increased cost

If one of the benefits of ease is overall reduction in cost despite increased design cost, how can increased cost be one of its problems? The answer lies in the paradoxical nature of ease, and in questioning the accuracy of ease as a system of representation.

Valorization of certain forms of ease are built on assumptions about the relative value of work. For example, replacing home preparation of meals with frozen or fast food is justified because, as numerous advertisements repeatedly stress, time spent on meal preparation is better spent working or relaxing with the kids. McDonald’s or Healthy Choice is much easier—and the implication is more responsible—than preparing a home-cooked meal. There is no doubt these easy alternatives require less time for purchase, preparation, and cleaning, and higher monetary cost (even the cheapest fast or frozen meal is substantially more expensive than its home-made analogue). But does meal preparation (or any other activity) necessarily prevent one from “relaxing with the kids?” Rapid but perhaps inaccurate movement between qualities of ease facilitates several assumptions: that meal preparation and enjoying time with children are necessarily mutually exclusive; that there can be no pleasure in “menial” tasks like laundry, landscaping, or maintenance of one’s home; that filing a tax return is too complicated for most people, and requires the aid of software or an accountant. For all these things, a more careful analysis would show the incongruity of exchange between the senses of ease equated here. Nevertheless, increased cost is justified by the assumed congruence of qualities of ease: cooking can be a hassle, therefore it cannot be enjoyable or expedient. Landscaping involves hard work: therefore it is neither pragmatic nor enjoyable. Tax law is complicated; therefore it lies beyond the grasp of laypeople.
Once again, Watkins’s *Throwaways* usefully points out several ideological assumptions which empower the valorization of ease. Watkins argues that “time is money” only for those who have enough money to consider converting their money into someone else’s time. For the working class, time is not money, but all they have. That’s why spending an hour or two on meal preparation, automobile repair, laundry, yardwork, or tax preparation (in addition to and despite of the amount of those things one might be doing for others) make sense. It *must* make sense—it is the only option for survival (93). To continue adapting Watkins’s work, this is another case of “ease mobility”: paying for an oil change, doing something the easy way, makes sense if you can afford it—if you enjoy a life of ease. But if you cannot afford the expenditure, there is no extra money-as-time to exchange for ease.

The ideological drive for ease helps justify the increased cost almost always present in “easy” things. In many ways tolerance of increased cost is also made possible by the next negative effect of ease: making cost transparent by shifting it to another agent, time, or place.

### 3.2.2.6 Rendering cause or effect invisible

Robert Johnson offers a powerful example of the displacement of causes and effects typical to the operation of ease:

The most mundane [user-friendly technology] may be the simple light switch. You flip a switch and a light comes on. Simple enough. You have, however, through a simple, user-friendly interface just accessed a complex technological system that uses a vast array of natural, human, and economic resources in order to function. Every time we flip a simple switch then we are using a large, possibly controlling, technology: yet we are virtually unaware of the consequences in any immediate way. Even though we may read daily of the problems of overconsumption of electrical energy, we still are likely to (ab)use the technology because it is so “friendly”—so easy-to-use. (28)
Literal physical displacement of the infrastructure, noise, and pollution of the electrical power system makes it comfortable. The switch is simple and effortless, and electricity literally invisible. The monetary cost of electricity is presented only monthly, if at all; its other effects displaced far from its use. Unless there are massive systemic difficulties, like the power shortages which plagued California in 2000 and 2001 (and which are still having political repercussions), the displacement is complete. For ease, there is no more profound technological change than the switch from human, animal, and mechanical forms of energy to electrically produced and distributed power, though the ongoing shift from analog and mechanical things to digital, electronic systems may displace electricity from this throne—what one might call “the easy chair.”

Electrical power is behind nearly all of the technologies which Frederick advocated for production of ease: even appliances she pushed which did not use electricity, such as kitchen stoves, furnishings, and hand-operated machinery, were only feasible because of manufacturing driven by electrical power. The Depression-era drive for rural electrification provided an important economic stimulus: delivering electricity to the country created a new market for convenience products and electric appliances of all kinds (Hughes 464).

A direct, traceable, quantifiable connection between end users and electrical consumption exists. But the connection between the “distant” effects of that electrical consumption—pollution, political struggles over petroleum-rich areas, and global climate change—is much less clear. Distancing allows consequences to be shrugged off or even totally questioned. A typical result: around the turn of the century, curbside garbage collection began in New York City, and city residents no longer had to burn, dispose of, recycle, or be otherwise confronted with their own garbage. When New Yorkers could simply stack trash by the curb and know that it would be removed
by someone else, the amount of garbage produced per capita grew rapidly, and to some extent the production of copious amounts of garbage became an indicator of affluence (Strasser, *Waste and Want* 124–5, 136). The effects displaced by ease are often forms of increased cost, not only monetary costs incurred in the production of easy-to-consume products and services, but ecological, governmental, or societal costs resulting from unforeseen (or simply unseen) consequences. Spreading, sharing, or concealing these costs may make them easier to stomach—but their disappearance is only figurative, and in many ways displacement of cause and effect makes the web of agency connected to an easy practice quite wide indeed.

Ease can also contribute to obscuring the amount of labor or complication involved in any particular task. This slippage takes at least three forms. First, one can show a lack of concern, respect, or acknowledgment of the labor and agency of other people, as is often the case when considering the labor of those in service industries (Watkins 159–61). Second, the amount of effort and discomfort associated with certain tasks is often underestimated or remembered incorrectly—especially for things naturalized long ago. Mina Shaughnessy contends that some of the problems of basic writers result from teachers’ failure to recall the tremendous difficulty of learning how to manipulate pen and paper, much less the irregularities of English grammar (14, 16). Thirdly, many people underestimate or misunderstand the complexity of things which appear to be easy but in fact are quite elaborate or extensive. The example of the light switch Johnson offers provides one form of this underestimation, but extensive infrastructure deliberately made invisible, like the electrical grid, need not be involved for such underestimation to occur—consider the example of the Blackboard users on page 60 above.
Several forms of forgetting the labor or agency of others involve transferring decisions made by human designers and agents to technologies or other objects, assuming that human agency does not exist at all, or allowing one’s agency to be subjugated to another’s because of ignorance of (or lack of concern with) cause and effect. The design features Norman describes as “affordances” can be considered foregroundings of the intentions of the designer, and as Johnson points out, the “proper” system model associated with a technological artifact (Norman 9, Johnson 29). Johnson’s analysis of system-centered culture recognizes the tendency to blame the system (or even find fault with one’s own actions) when in fact a human agent may be the cause of a problem. But this form of “forgetting” agency also appears when, motivated by pressures for ease, people allow decisions about their privacy, security, or health to be subjugated to other factors. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the resulting establishment of the Transportation Security Administration, discussions of American airline security have frequently opposed travelers’ convenience with their safety and security. In all but a few instances, airline and government agents alike have insisted a system which delivers both is possible. Given the consequences of the lack of security, the power of ease is demonstrated by the insistence upon its possibility and the huge expenditures undertaken to ensure its preservation.

3.2.2.7 Repression of experimentation

Because ease is highly pragmatic, it encourages a method of dealing with problems or completing a task in a manner which eliminates experimentation and transgression. Instead, ease suggests the path of least resistance. Hopefully, following the dictates of transparency, expediency, and simplicity, that path will not only be obvious, but will not take much time and will involve no complication. Experimentation, where the end result might be “failure” to achieve the goal, is not worth the risk if a readily
acceptable, easy method is available, even if ready-mades have obvious limitations, or are clearly an unacceptable fit for the rhetorical or technical situation. Indeed, without the channels of transparency to act as a guide, experimentation is uncomfortable stuff.

Experimentation is further repressed by physical or systemic constraints. In *The Invisible Computer* Norman imagines solving the problem of the complexity of computers by replacing the flexible, general-purpose personal computer with a number of a separate, customized computers—one for each function the computer serves (28–30). In this “information appliance” model, one would have a personal finance computer, a music and entertainment computer, and a recipe computer, among others (253). There are definitely appealing advantages to this type of device, as the popularity of PDAs shows, but highly customized, specialized machines will by their nature make experimentation less possible—since restrictions built into the appliances would likely prevent repurposing a device or modifying its software to facilitate other functions. To return to the notion of increased cost for a moment, adapting an information appliance model of computing would be very difficult for someone who lacked the living space necessary for storing these multiple appliances. Additionally, the extra time required to purchase, maintain, and synchronize information stored on the various appliances would result in cost pressures and further extension of the selective “ease mobility.”

In “Overwhelmed by Tech” Shneiderman suggested that technology should follow the model of automobiles, putting the working parts of a system under the hood, out of the reach of most people (see page 16 above). But as noted by Stephenson, the hood is frequently welded shut, sometimes metaphorically, but sometimes literally. Inability to exercise direct control is often permanent, even if it is marketed as transient. Watkins observes that increasing technological sophistication of automobiles
and the equipment necessary to work on them has literally made tinkering under
the hood impossible for most car owners. Sophisticated, expensive electronics have
replaced the mechanical tools formerly used to control engine operation, shifting
the focus of auto enthusiasts from manipulating engine performance to obsession
with external appearance (89–92). This is consistent with the focus on image and
appearance common to several qualities of ease. The necessary training and investment
transform what may have been a pleasurable (or at least affordable) weekend activity
accessible to thousands of individuals into a specialization performed only at work.
(Johnson notes the same end effect, in a slightly different context, in his critique of
forced novice/expert separation.)

While being forced to hire mechanics for all but the simplest maintenance
may not seem like a large problem, consider the impact of a more metaphorical
sense of “welding the hood shut.” If ease discourages putting an object, system or
practice to work in a method not intended or sanctioned by the its designers, or
even satisfying one’s curiosity about the way something works by opening the hood,
willful transgression of those intended norms will become even less likely, as another
ideological force exerts limiting pressures on such activity. Transfer these attitudes to a
situation such as civil disobedience, where small acts of improper use are mobilized for
political effect. Little wonder then, that in America, where ease is valorized unlike in
any other nation, political protest is less and less common, and speaking out against the
government increasingly viewed as unpatriotic and subversive.

3.3 Conclusion

The complex history of ease, its strong connection to technological progress
and commodification (forces which arguably drive American consumer culture), and
the development of multiple functions for ease (especially ideology) all stand against
sustained critique of ease. But although it has become quite powerful in many different situations, ease is not universally demanded or valorized. And ease does deliver measurable benefits, so unmitigated critique is unwise. I have named several contexts, critical movements, and popular activities in which the power of ease is limited in the historical review which began this chapter. These positions, some of which are powerful indictments of ease, are a small sampling of a larger body of material which I will consider in future work.

If, as I argue here, the scope of situations where ease can be demanded has grown to near universality, shouldn’t learning be easy, as Holmes envisioned in 1738? Perhaps so. However, ease meant something very different when used by Holmes than it does today when advertisers use it to sell nearly every kind of product and service. What are the consequences of applying the principles of ease as it has developed in consumer culture to educational systems and institutions? Given the problems with ease I present above—especially those in composition studies—the development of ease as a pedagogical strategy should proceed with great care, although lapsing into a reactive “get tough” mode is undesirable as well. In order to better understand the pedagogical role of ease today, I will now investigate the development of the bond of ease and writing pedagogy.

3.4 Introduction

So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air. (I Cor. 14:9)

Many works in composition studies tell the story of the development of writing pedagogies in America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The best known of these works, Alfred Kitzhaber’s Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850–1900, Sharon Crowley’s The Methodical Memory, James Berlin’s Writing Instruction in Nineteenth
Century American Colleges, and Robert Connors’s Composition-Rhetoric, provide an overview of the development of the uniquely American pedagogy called “current-traditional rhetoric” or “composition-rhetoric.” Several make specific arguments which move beyond history or historiography. Crowley focuses on the ways current-traditional rhetoric pushed the canon of invention out of the classroom, creating a basic rhetoric for budding writers from a simplified blend of Cartesian method and the canon of style. Similarly, Berlin’s comparative analysis charts the demise of classical and romantic rhetorics from an epistemological standpoint, connecting trends in twentieth-century composition to antebellum rhetoric.

This chapter will follow the path charted by Crowley and Berlin, telling the story of current-traditional rhetoric with a particular focus: its bond with ease. Early American rhetoricians, textbook writers, schoolteachers, and professors drew on classical sources, Scottish and English writers, and their own innovations to fashion a writing pedagogy which, in its attitudes toward writing, teaching, reading, and economy, was deeply marked by ease. As current-traditional rhetoric matured and developed into a powerful force shaping the educational experiences of children and young adults from Harvard Yard to the Inner Quadrangle at Stanford, its connections to ease strengthened. Between 1700 and 1900, the power of ease shaped the discipline of rhetoric and composition—perhaps more than any other single force—and the bond formed between ease and writing would endure well past the waning of current-traditional rhetoric’s domination of composition pedagogy.

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3I am following Berlin and Crowley, not Connors, in using the former term, instead of the latter.
3.4.1 The English Roots of Ease in Writing

The rise of ease in American writing pedagogy, like many of the trends which characterize American composition, has roots in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. In *The Methodical Memory* Crowley shows how the massive changes in “thinking about thinking” which occurred during this time undergird the assumptions about thought, language, and the individual which characterize current-traditional rhetoric.

The development of that rhetoric began with changes in the role of the individual and the relationship of writing to lived experience, human thought and divine inspiration. Philosophers such as René Descartes and John Locke considered knowledge production as an individual phenomenon, unlike in classical frameworks, where knowledge was “enshrined in authoritative books and commentaries or in God’s law made manifest in the nature of things” (5). They believed language was capable of representing, unproblematically, both the knowledge produced in individual minds and things observed in one’s environment. And they had strong faith in the power of reason and the desire for learning to overcome human frailties, ensuring the accuracy of individually produced knowledge, and supporting the assumption that rigorous knowledge production facilitated humanity’s continual moral, social, and technological advancement.

To replace traditional sources of authority (God and history), seventeenth-century thinkers radically changed the status of a writer’s text, and by doing so, imposed new conditions for its production. Validation of one’s argument became a matter of workmanlike presentation—“an orderly completed text, which reproduced the history of the thinker’s investigation, was assumed to constitute sufficient testimony to the authenticity of its findings” (8). In other words, given the facts being considered, and a
clear history of their development, any reader could understand the truth offered by a
text. Writers who made their texts orderly, transparent, and enjoyable to read—easy—
created authority through their manner of presentation. Consequently, directives for
clear, easy-to-read writing begin to appear during this time, and ornate prose structures
began to disappear under pressure from numerous sources.

Cartesian method, in particular, would be immensely influential in composition pedagogy. Its four basic rules—accept no unclear judgments, divide difficulties
into parts, think in order from simple to complex, and be complete, leaving nothing
from consideration—provide a philosophical basis for atomization, gradation, and
simplification: key strategies educators would use to make writing easy. Descartes’s
ideas were also adapted to composition style and content as well: clarity had long
been considered a virtue in writing, but Cartesian philosophy added a huge boost to it,
and provided a partner, “distinction,” with whom clarity would appear in composition
textbooks published from the early eighteenth century.

Questioning the nature of knowledge helped legitimize questions about the
nature of learning. Notably, Thomas More, Francis Bacon, and Petrus Ramus (Pierre
de La Ramée) openly questioned the efficacy of the classical curriculum of the liberal
arts, the nature of the student-teacher relationship, and prohibitions of the use of the
vernacular in education, among other things. Educators began to believe children and
young adult learners could learn without harsh discipline and the confines of rigorous
ancient curricula. While the pace of change was slow by current standards, reforms
proposed by John Amos Comenius (Jan Amos Komensky) and Locke, among others,
were considerable. British and American educators influenced by these men would
suture writing and ease by repeatedly acknowledging the effects of emotional and
physical comfort on their students’ ability and desire to learn.
Locke’s 1693 treatise *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, originally written as a series of letters to Edward Clarke, reflects the trends in contemporary philosophy which Crowley traces. It provided both philosophical arguments and concrete, often incredibly detailed suggestions for parents and educators, and was very influential in both Britain and the American colonies (Cremin v-vi). Locke’s work, which owes some debt to Comenius, undoubtedly paved the way for future reformers like Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, as well as legitimizing writing about education such as Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Emilé*. Lucille Schultz cautions that “[i]t would be a mistake to point to similarities among these four writers—Comenius, Locke, Rousseau, and Pestalozzi—and assume they were alike in every aspect of their thinking about a child’s education.” However, as she demonstrates in considerable detail, these four educators, and many American rhetoricians influenced by them, “shared a concern for tailoring education to coincide with the child’s developmental level” (*Composers* 62, 63). Locke in particular is interesting because of the comprehensiveness of his work—he outlines an educational plan which stretched from cradle to grave. Interestingly, many of his directives suggest students should be made to feel “easy” or “at ease.” For that reason, and because many of his ideas were adopted by American writing teachers and educational theorists, his work will be considered in detail here.

Locke is perhaps best known for his arguments against the widespread use of corporal punishment, or “beating” as he calls it. But these are part of a larger philosophy of child-rearing and education which favors a positive approach—encouragement and the cultivation of good habits—rather than negativity—punishment and the enforcement of rules. *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* asks teachers to make learning enjoyable for children. “None of the Things they are to learn,” Locke argues, “should ever be made a Burthen to them, or impos’d on them as a task” (52). Over and over
again, in language often reminiscent of educational psychology, he suggests methods for presenting education as if it were play. From an early age, children should be encouraged to enjoy what they learn, and learning should gently guide them toward lessons, not enforce a prescribed curriculum. In this way Locke recognizes the power of comfort and enjoyment, as well as effortlessness and leisure, the first and third of the qualities of ease I name in Chapter 2 of this work. But Locke’s philosophy did not encourage “cockering and tenderness” (21): he asked parents to cultivate tough children by methods which, three hundred years later, seem questionable, if not cruel. He suggests a plain and simple diet, with few sweets and not too much meat (10, 14); immersing children’s feet in cold water to build their constitutions (4); and refusing to allow them to cry (91). Instead, children must learn to develop self-denial, which Locke sees as “the Principle of all Virtue and Excellency,” and which should be “made easy and familiar by an early practice” (25).

Locke’s call for a balance of denial and indulgence repeatedly invokes the idea of ease. On the one hand, he maintains that “My Meaning therefore is not, that Children should purposely be made uneasy.” But he argues that children’s “Minds, as well as Bodies, [can] be made vigorous, easy, and strong, by the Custom of having their Inclinations in Subjection, and their Bodies exercis’d with Hardships” (86). Indeed, Locke acknowledges the difficulty of this task for parents:

To avoid the Danger that is on either Hand is the great Art; and he that has found a Way how to keep up a Child’s Spirit, easy, active, and free; and yet, at the same time, to restrain him from many Things he has a Mind to, and to draw him to Things that are uneasy to him; he, I say, that knows how to reconcile these seeming Contradictions has, in my Opinion, got the true Secret of Education. (30)

In these arguments for self-denial, as well as claims for the superiority of a more natural style of learning foreign languages, the benefits of frequent but measured praise,
and proposed reforms of the classical curriculum, Locke may seem to collapse the
difference between children and adults. This would be consistent with the dominant
contemporary conceptualization of childhood as a debased state of being which should
be arrested as rapidly as possible (Schultz, *Composers* 24–5). For example, at times it
is unclear if Locke is speaking of adults or children, as he remarks on the power of his
methodology:

> We would be thought rational Creatures, and have our Freedom; we
> love not to be uneasy under constant Rebukes and Brow-beatings; nor
> can we bear severe Humours, and great Distance, in those we converse
> with. Whoever has such Treatment when he is a Man, will look out other
> Company, other Friends, other Conversation, with whom he can be at Ease.
> (27–8)

However, more often, Locke writes as if there are fundamental differences between
children and adults, balancing calls to challenge children with the connection he
makes between childhood curiosity and the Enlightenment-style desire for knowledge
Crowley discusses. Locke argues for simplicity: “Long Discourses, and Philosophical
Reasonings, at best, amaze and confound, but do not instruct Children” (61). Instead,
teachers should use as few words as possible, and speak plainly. This instruction
extends even to the Bible, which for children, but not adults, is best avoided in favor
of an abridged version (167). His arguments for atomization and gradation—dividing a
complex or difficult subject into smaller chunks, and moving from simple to complex,
so that it can be more easily understood—provide a template for educational practices
which remain in use today. Note that, in the following excerpt, Locke suggests not
only breaking down ideas into smaller units but ensuring each sub-idea is “simple.”

Building on Cartesian philosophy, Locke was one of the first to suggest difficult
materials could be taught successfully in this manner without transformation or, to use
current parlance, “dumbing down.”
But in this, as in all other Parts of Instruction, great Care must be taken with Children, to begin with that which is plain and simple, and to teach them as little as can be at once, and settle that well in their Heads before you proceed to the next, or any thing new in that Science. Give them first one simple Idea, and see that they take it right, and perfectly comprehend it before you go any farther, and then add some other simple Idea which lies next in your Way to what you aim at; and so proceeding by gentle and insensible Steps, Children without Confusion and Amazement will have their Understandings opened and their Thoughts extended farther than could have been expected. (158)

Additionally, Locke’s pragmatic approach to curriculum, suggesting inclusion of skills relevant to contemporary commerce (geography, navigation, and Western European languages), included considerable allowance for children’s intellectual development. Other ways in which Locke valorizes ease—preference for the concrete over the abstract (72, 173), positioning cultivation of an “easy” conversational style as measurement of good breeding (122–4), insisting on an “easy calm temper” (143) for educators, repeatedly echoing the value of an “easy” writing style, and arguing for the use of “easy” picture-books (135)—will be considered in future work.

Notably, shortly after Some Thoughts Concerning Education was published, the word “easy” began to appear in the titles of rhetoric and grammar textbooks. In 1704, Thomas Watt penned Grammar Made Easie, which taught Latin grammar using English, “rendered Plain, and Obvious, to the meanest Capacity” (i). John Holmes’s The Art of Rhetoric Made Easy, introduced in Chapter 1 of this work, put Locke’s ideas into practice, with frequent use of atomization, brevity, and simplicity, an extensive preface for instructors which outlined methods for best using the text, and a detailed table of contents, and other features. These works would be the first in a long line of books continued today in composition by titles such as Andrea Lunsford’s Easy Writer and Michael Keene and Katherine Adams’s Easy Access.
3.4.2 Transforming Philosophy to Pedagogy: Major Figures

While more historical work is needed to track precisely the ways ease was popularized in teaching writing, several very influential writers included considerable mention of ease or advocated methods for teaching writing which mobilized the qualities of ease. Between 1700 and 1850, a wide variety of influential texts would build on the work of philosophers like Descartes and Locke, making possible a solid connection between ease and writing. Four men will be considered here: Isaac Watts (1674–1748), John Holmes (1703–59), John Walker (1732–1807), and John Frost (1800–59). 4

Perhaps more than any other eighteenth-century writer, Isaac Watts would call for both a style of writing and a method of teaching writing with ease at the core. Though best known for his hymns and religious writings, in his time Watts was “a popular and respected author in the fields of education, theology, philosophy, and poetry” (Davis ix). Watts wrote many books which focus on educational theory, some published in multiple editions, and portions of his writing were often reprinted in other works. (Titles such as Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language (1715) and The Knowledge of the Heavens and the Earth Made Easy (1726) offer great promise for future research but will not be the focus here.) His educational theories and practical advice shaped the work of thousands of British and American teachers. In philosophy and writing, Watts’s best known work is Logick: or, the Use of Right Reason in the Inquiry after Truth (1724), which draws heavily on Ramistic thought and Cartesian method to mobilize logic for the broader goals of education and general improvement of the mind (Hoyles 159). Crowley remarks, “The influence of Watts’ (sic) Logick on rhetorical and

4I include birth and death dates here because there are several men with these names living around this time period.
logical pedagogy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cannot be underestimated” (177)—an argument reinforced by the sheer numbers of editions printed on both sides of the Atlantic (Howell 341–2). Thus, Watts was one of the most important figures in terms of synthesizing ease and writing pedagogy, since the content of the *Logick* repeatedly valorizes ease and clarity, and encourages atomization and simplification. Watts’s writings would help popularize Cartesian method and make it applicable to all levels of rhetoric and composition.

The last section of the *Logick* offers seven well-illustrated rules for method which “[amount] to a theory of composition” (Crowley 42). For Watts, method is “the Disposition of a Variety of Thoughts on any Subject in such Order as may best serve to find out unknown Truths, to explain and confirm Truths that are known, or to fix them in the Memory” (340). Watts encourages using method to prevent “Confusion, Darkness, and Mistake” (339) as well as avoiding discomfort or embarrassment in readers and learners—in other words, to ensure their comfort and enjoyment of reading or learning. Watts admits that his concern with method focuses on the “Communication of Knowledge,” rather than on production and verification of it, and his examples and more detailed explanations make his didactic emphasis quite clear.

Of the seven rules of method, the second stands out: “Let your *Method be plain and easy*, so that your Hearers or Readers, as well as your self, may run thro’ it without Embarrassment, and may take a clear and comprehensive View of the whole Scheme” (351). Compositions should begin with obvious things and proceed “by regular and easy steps” to more difficult matters. Teachers and learners should be patient, avoiding hasty movement to new ideas. Sentences and paragraphs should be simple, not crowded with “too many Thoughts and Reasonings” (352), and long
parenthesis or subordination should be avoided. Finally, “a clear and easy way of expressing your conceptions” should be cultivated from an early age.

The other rules Watts pens also valorize ease and its qualities, though not as directly: rule three, “Let your Method be distinct,” provides specific guidelines for atomization (again, following Descartes and Locke, and further establishing the connection between method and ease), and rules four and five address the value of simplicity and brevity. Indeed, Watts develops his seven rules in a manner which makes his writing an example of the principles being explained—his method develops without haste, technical terms are defined in footnotes, and his method of atomization is quite methodical.

Watts’s second large area of influence was popularizing Locke’s educational ideas. Like Locke, Watts believed that children were different and needed to be treated differently than adults:

Watts, of course, is predominantly Lockean in his concept of education. It would be comparatively simple to show that most if not all of his theories come from Locke’s educational works; but this is not so important as to note that through his popularization of Locke, Watts helped to prepare the ground for modern education. The influence of John Locke played a large part in undermining the Ciceronian concept of education still in vogue in eighteenth-century English schools. Although Watts can by no means be placed besides his master as an educational influence, he did a good job in providing suitable texts for a more liberal curriculum. He helped to make Locke practicable. Because of this humble but necessary service, he deserves a small place among the influential secular educators of the century. (Hoyles 101)

In other words, Watts was careful to practice what he preached, making Locke easy to read for educators, and suggesting the best way they in turn could teach was by making education easy. His encouragement and practice of a more “practicable” viewpoint is another example of the growing importance of pragmatism, one of the qualities of ease which, as I argue in Chapter 2 above, was gaining strength during this time.
Consistency of message and presentation extended to Watts’s writing style.

“Such was his devotion to the plain style in prose, that he felt it necessary to apologise for any sally into figurative speech he may inadvertently have made” (Hoyles 225). Indeed, the phrase “plain and easy,” noted from the *Logick* above, appears to have been rather marketable—several printers who produced posthumous editions of Watts’s work created titles of their own including it, and it appears in several other works by Watts. In summary, Isaac Watts was a key player in the construction of ease-writing connections at a variety of levels, and his extensive bibliography demands much further study.

John Holmes, the English schoolmaster whose *Art of Rhetoric Made Easy* is introduced in the first chapter of this work, is not considered a major figure in British rhetoric by most scholars, but still deserves mention here for two reasons. First, while *Rhetoric Made Easy* was not nearly as popular as Watts’s *Logick*, it was the first of several books designed specifically for young learners which were used widely at English schools (Howell 126). Holmes’s immediate influence, through his contacts with other schoolmasters, cannot be discounted, and his influence on American writers, especially Richard Green Parker, is sizable. Second, in his *Rhetoric* and other writings, Holmes employed a wide variety of devices intended to make rhetoric easy, drawing on suggestions from Locke and other writers, but also creating innovations of his own. These devices will be discussed in detail below. While Holmes did not produce the number of books intended for children which Isaac Watts was able to publish during his much longer life, his work had definite impact.

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5Unfortunately, several of these works, published as pamphlets or single broadsheets, are incredibly difficult to find.
Less important than Watts and Holmes, but still notable, is John Walker, whose *Teacher’s Assistant in English Composition* mobilized the notions of “easy rules” and “easy essays.” Though Walker’s books often focus on elocution, like Watts, Walker felt not only students but teachers could benefit from ease. Robert Connors contends that the *Teacher’s Assistant* had a tremendous effect on secondary and college-level writing pedagogy, and was “the seminal book for ‘composition’ as opposed to ‘rhetoric’ [. . .] a set of principles, partly original and partly based in classical rhetoric, that were to become the guiding forces in early composition pedagogy” (218). In some ways, especially regarding the use of rules for writers, Walker’s book fails to break from long-established pedagogical patterns. But Walker did call for “gradual advances in difficulty,” a paced learning style which makes clear his respect for differences between child and adult learners. “The tutor must be constantly on the watch not to overload the pupil’s mind, and to give him rather too little than too much” (10). Walker’s directions for breaking lessons up into smaller components are for the most part consistent with Watts’s.

The most progressive part of Walker’s pedagogy is encouraging children to write as early as possible, and a somewhat expressivist (to use current terminology) orientation toward developing writers. In the following long quote, note how ease in one form is assumed to lead to ease in another—a reflection of contemporary assumptions of transparent movement between thought and language. Walker calls on teachers to limit their expectations of students in a manner which allows for differences between adult and child learners but does not display childhood as a debased state. Instead, Walker believes that, given easy training, children naturally begin to think in advanced fashion:
The moment young people can read fluently, and talk upon common subjects, they may be enabled to write upon them; and nothing but the habit is wanting. It is true the path must be smoothed for them; we must not expect them to invent matter: what they write must be infused into them, and what we infuse must be of the easiest kind, and so connected that one part will naturally suggest another: when a subject is thus prepared, it will be easy, even for a child, to set it down from memory on paper; and when once a habit of doing this is acquired, the greatest difficulty is over. By degrees they will naturally supply with their own words those they do not remember, and soon begin to think upon a subject for themselves. (4)

The faith in ease Walker demonstrates here is echoed in other places. In fact, he argues that “Ease is the completion (sic) of every operation of art” (50). A similar equation provides support for Walker’s call for students to write narratives: “Nothing so easy to comprehend and retain as a story, and therefore nothing so easy to write down from memory” (152). Perhaps Walker’s faith in ease was greater than his trust of children—his pedagogy stopped short of complete trust in their abilities (Schultz 43–5). Regardless, his use of “ease” and other features of his pedagogical approach represented breaks from the norm.

Finally, we turn to the Philadelphia schoolmaster John Frost, whose contribution to American education remains largely unexamined, despite his considerable influence and the huge number of textbooks and educational writings he produced (Schultz, “Re: John Frost”). Many of those books, which covered subjects as diverse as the United States Navy, the Mexican War, and pictorial histories of American revolutionaries, offer evidence of strong belief in the didactic power of ease. Of particular interest here is Easy Exercises in Composition, which Schultz discusses at some length.

Schultz outlines a “Pestalozzi-Mayo-Frost connection” (Composers 65–74) which offers a path for tracing the influence of British and Continental reforms in America different than that presented here. In some ways, Frost is the pedagogue Walker
could have been. He put the Lockean framework popularized by Watts into practice, eschewing a rule-based pedagogy and frequently using illustrations and simple models to encourage student writing. Frost desired ease for his students in several ways: first, he wanted them to write with ease and grace (vi); second, like Locke and Walker, he wanted their early experiences with education, especially writing, to be positive, even comfortable and enjoyable (10, 118); third, he called for the use of models and visuals, due to their ability to present ideas and content interestingly and transparently, with little need for explanation or traditional rhetorical invention (66).

In addition to atomization, brevity, and other methods for making easy proposed by Locke, Watts, and Holmes, Frost believed that writing in itself was, to a large extent, easy. He extended Locke’s desire for a form of instruction currently called “whole language” to writing, arguing that “Written expression is so entirely similar to oral expression that the natural mode of instruction in each is essentially the same” (79). In other words, one could learn writing by doing it, by participating in written conversations with parents and adults, because it was easy. Indeed, Frost’s pedagogy often relied on letter-writing, which he considered “an easy form of composition” (76). Many of the engravings used in Easy Exercises in Composition show students writing letters, and exercises throughout the text suggest composing letters to friends and family near and far.

But Frost’s books were a mixed bag. Despite the liberal use of pictures and other changes which move his work away from the difficult, arcane rhetorics of the time, Frost repeated many contemporary practices. While the first part of Easy Exercises is filled with pictures, addresses the student reader directly, and encourages an orientation toward writing which could be called “proto-process,” the second part is a formal presentation of rhetorical principles clearly borrowed from George Campbell with little
adaptation or editing. There is little effort to bridge the “easy” pedagogy of the first half of the text with the more formalized rhetoric of the second half. Similarly, another text, the *Easy Reader*, presents a number of very short pieces which, while they might be less difficult to read than classical or Elizabethan works, and not “stiff monotonous reading” (i), often include fairly complicated narratives or present long, demanding quotations from the Bible or other sources.

### 3.4.3 Caveat Facilitator

Existing scholarship questions the position of ease in writing pedagogy. Glenn Carlson Hess argues that for rhetoric and composition textbooks published between 1784 and 1870, “[making] the study easy and interesting” was “of minor importance” (31). Schultz muses, “I can’t imagine, for example, that mid-nineteenth-century university professors would have turned to a book called *Easy Exercises in Composition* for help with writing instruction” (*Composers* 154). She reminds us that although university professors such as Richard Green Parker and influential writers like John Frost were producing books with “easy” in the title, and separating themselves from Hugh Blair, Campbell, Lindley Murray, and other popular writers of the time, many of their textbooks were designed for high-school, not college-level work.

Certainly, there are numerous instances where directions for developing “easy style” or “ease of composition” appears in writing textbooks, and the appearance of the term does not always indicate congruence with the meanings outlined in the first and second chapter of this work. For example, ease is one of the five static abstractions Adams Sherman Hill names as goals of writing in *The Foundations of Rhetoric*. Hill’s “ease” signifies a certain manner of word choice and style one might call “graceful” or “harmonious,” and which Hill most often characterizes as “framed as to be agreeable to the ear” (201).
Ambivalence toward ease played a part in making it a repressed goal of composition books. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, negative meanings of ease were more powerful than today: ease retained a touch of the immoral, with its connotations of indolence, sloth, and idleness. While writers may have had little problems making the case for “easy” pedagogy in grammar schools, writers working with more advanced students may have had to use other terminology, though ideas in texts labeled “easy” and those without the label are often quite similar. Differences in consideration of intellectual property also make influences harder to trace—copying without attribution was standard practice. A professor “borrowing” from Walker or Frost could conceivably do so without mentioning their names, perhaps breaking the connection to foregrounded easy method. The framework for definition established in the first chapter of this work can reduce the impact of these problems: the presence of “ease” will be established not only by name, but by searching for the five qualities of comfort, transparency, effortlessness, simplicity, and pragmatism. As works closer to the turn of the twentieth century are considered, femininity, expediency, and pictorialism will also be noted, as well as strategies commonly used to affect ease, such as atomization or alliteration.

3.4.4 Four Assumptions About Ease and Writing

Four assumptions about ease shape eighteenth- and nineteenth-century textbooks and writing pedagogies: first, students should find writing easy, and teachers should make it so. Second, students should write prose which is easy to read. Third, teaching writing is easy. Fourth, writing is the gatekeeper to the “life of ease.” These assumptions became more widespread in loosely chronological order, and to some extent built upon each other. For example, it made sense to claim teaching writing would be easy if student writing was easy to read (minimizing time necessary for grading themes
and essays), and if it was assumed teachers could make writing easy. This cumulative nature is reflected in the structure of this chapter: the first section, which covers the first assumption presented here, is longer than the second, and so on.

Technology is often mobilized to reinforce assumptions about ease. For Connors, technological progress shapes current-traditional rhetoric: “Composition-rhetoric is a modern rhetoric, quickly changing and adapting, driven by potent social and pedagogical needs, and running on the rails of an ever cheaper, ever quicker, and ever more competitive printing technology” (7). New technologies extend beyond the metaphor of steam-powered iron horses invoked by Connors—one must consider the advancements in printing machinery and technique, especially stereotyping and engraving, which enabled the production of cheaper textbooks which included more pictures and illustrations. The development of steel pen nibs, pencils, and better inks reduced the skill required to produce a page free of ink-blots. Paper and book costs fell, modern transportation enabled different methods of distribution of printed books, and electronic forms of communication sped the transmission of information.

The changes affected by shifts in technology are substantial and must be considered carefully. This work is guided by the assumption that technological change is never simply instrumental, but is a complex, recursively articulated process involving institutional practices, ideological formations, with tremendous consequences for subject formation. Changes in technology shift the shape of educational institutions, the relation of individuals to those institutions, and the ideological articulation of technological pressures. Some historians have acknowledged the impact of the nineteenth century changes in colleges and universities: as oratory’s role in American culture was supplemented with written communication, many colleges changed from schools which produced only lawyers, ministers, and physicians, to become much more
comprehensive. For example, in new Midwestern state schools, writing was much more important than in traditional eastern colleges, and a university education was envisioned as preparation for a much wider variety of occupations (Veysey *passim*).

Crowley’s *The Methodical Memory* shows that the connection of ease and writing was facilitated by assumptions typical of Enlightenment philosophy. Throughout this chapter, similar analyses will connect contemporary views of technology, writing, and ease. In some ways, ease was used as an interface for writing: it bridged the gap between the philosophical and ideological “reality” of writing, as practiced in churches, schools, and other educational systems, and the physical and technical skills needed to write.

The remainder of this chapter will demonstrate the four assumptions demonstrated above, with frequent reference to the connections of technology and ease one could consider a fifth assumption. Optimally, while in some ways this work shall be “yet another history of the nineteenth century,” it will also provide an example of the benefits of considering technological development through its articulation in institutions and ideologies as well as individuals. A historical account of the connections between ease and writing will better enable understanding of the relationships of current-traditional rhetoric and the rhetorical frameworks which preceded it (Scottish and English “new rhetorics,” common-sense realism, and the work of the Port-Royal grammarians), as well as twentieth-century rhetorical and pedagogical theories, some of which are consciously oppositional.

### 3.5 Students Should Find Writing Easy

Books about rhetoric, rhetorical textbooks, and grammars published in the early nineteenth century reflect the changing philosophies of education discussed above. More and more often, writers recognized that belletristic rhetorics like George
Campbell’s *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* were not ideal for children (and were difficult even for many teachers). New books which sought to make writing easy became popular, and curricular changes which underscored the assumption that writing was easy soon followed.

Many of the textbooks examined here begin with a preface which laments the current status of textbooks, trumpet the uniqueness of the present work, and brag of the care taken to adopt it to younger, less capable minds. Thomas Watt blasted contemporary rhetorics as “a rapsody (*sic*) of confusion, and scarce intelligible to mortals” (i). Holmes argued that existing textbooks contained numerous deficiencies his work remedied. Frost begins *Easy Exercises in Composition* in a typical fashion:

> Having recently resigned the general superintendence of a seminary [. . .] I felt more sensibly than I had ever done before, the want of an elementary book of instruction in Composition, suitable for beginners. I could lay my hand on none exactly suited to my purpose. Those which presented themselves seemed liable to a variety of objections. Some were unintelligible to young pupils; others contained methods of procedure which I considered useless and even pernicious. (v)

Textbook introductions contained this style of introduction well into the 1860s (Kitzhaber 206), in part because many of the first “easy” textbooks were easy in name only. Many attempts were abridgments of classical and contemporary works. An 1808 edition of Hugh Blair’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* included an advertisement for an abridged version: “THE (*sic*) want of a system of Rhetoric upon a concise plan, and at an easy price, will, it is presumed, render this little volume acceptable to the public” (qtd in Hess 137). Hess lists eleven abridged editions of Blair’s work (though it is not clear if these editions reprinted the same text or were unique impressions). Walker’s *Teacher’s Assistant* and Frost’s *Easy Exercises*, as discussed earlier, differed from the British rhetorics they replaced, but retained much of
the contemporary ways of thinking about students and teaching. Walker displayed little faith in students’ ability for invention. Frost’s books contain many pictures and direct address to the student, but often include arcane rhetorical principles. These books should be viewed as transitional works which began the long process of making writing easy.

Schultz summarizes some of the ways these transitional books failed in their reform efforts, and ended up being little more than slightly different presentations of existing material. While “these books were small in size and thus suited to a child’s holding them, they used a very small type font, had long paragraphs and little white space, and few if any illustrations” (Composers 26). Language was also a huge problem. For example, in the introduction to Rules for English Composition, and Particularly for Themes, John Rippingham promised that “Great care has been taken to render this treatise suitable to the capacity of youthful intellect” (qtd in Schultz, Composers 8). But his first sentence is weighted with jargon:

A theme is only the miniature of a declamation, essay, oration, or sermon. In each of these species of declamation a subject is proposed, an inference drawn; and arguments adduced to support and authorise that conclusion. (qtd in Schultz, Composers 25)

There is little doubt young children, high-school and college-age students, and even those who taught them would have trouble understanding the differences between these forms of composition. The use of phrases like “an inference drawn,” the fifty-cent words “species” and “adduced,” and the complexity of this sentence also seem less than easy. Finally, the number of abstract concepts introduced here (and in the hundreds of other juicy sentences like it) call to mind the difficulties of “static abstractions” proposed by Kitzhaber.
Textbooks in general also remained difficult and even abstruse because of their extensive debt to classical curricula. Though Ramistic and Cartesian philosophy offered excellent philosophical grounds for moving away from the classical curriculum, and a method for developing rhetorical authority without quoting Cicero, Aristotle, and their contemporaries, classical content and method survived in many works (Crowley 10, 19). Richard Whately’s *Elements of Rhetoric* tried to simplify classical systems, with varying degrees of success. John Ward’s *A System of Oratory* was a “detailed and elaborate restatement of classical theory for the adult” not a “distillation of classical theory for the child” (Moran 2).

Pedagogies based on learning, reciting, and to some degree applying systems of rules also appeared in “easy” books. Rules were often combined with continued belief in the power of imitation (which itself was a remainder of classical approaches). George Russell’s approach was representative of many nineteenth-century writers who used rule-based pedagogies and organized textbooks around rules. Russell sought to use ease to get students to move from copying material and reading to writing one’s own compositions. Rules were to be memorized, applied to literature or other texts, then used to guide composition. But as with many writers, little justification is offered for assertions of the power of rules such as these:

> The learner should be permitted first to trace the application of the rules of rhetoric in the writings of others. This stage of practice he finds easy and interesting. It also serves to prepare him for transferring to his own composition the rules which he has been applying to those of other writers. (Russell qtd in Schultz, *Composers* 45)

Schultz calls textbooks which were able to avoid most of these pitfalls and offer new models for an introduction to composition “First Books” (*Composers* 37).

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6The connection between imitation, *mimesis*, and ease is out of the scope of this work but definitely merits further investigation.
These books, which appeared between 1838 and 1855, were designed for grammar and elementary schools and consequently are not considered in depth by Connors, Berlin, Kitzhaber, and Crowley. There are many parallels between these books and college-level texts analyzed here for their mobilization of ease.

### 3.5.1 Early Exemplars

Two books by Isaac Watts and John Holmes, *Logick* and *Rhetoric Made Easy*, have already been introduced. These works helped popularize Cartesian method and Locke’s educational philosophies, and nearly one hundred years before Schultz’s First Books, introduced specific techniques for making writing easy which remain popular to the present day. Many of the techniques used by Watts and Holmes were made possible by typography, consistent with Marshall McLuhan’s assertion that Elizabethan writers were highly conscious of choices made in that regard.

#### 3.5.1.1 The influence of Watts’s *Logick*

The differences of Watts’s work from that of his contemporaries, and his notable influence in composition pedagogy, have already been considered. Because he took great care to put his theories of composition and method into practice in his own work, Watts’s *Logick* demonstrates several important techniques of ease, in addition to repeatedly valorizing a “plain and easy” style of writing and teaching writing.

Watts argues for the atomization of ideas being taught into small, teachable units. In the *Logick* Watts himself divides his theory of method into seven rules, each subdivided into sections which offer careful explanation. This makes his work hierarchical, predictable, and teachable— one need not determine the number of subunits needed to teach his method, but can simply repeat his careful outline. The process of atomization is often supported by signposting which provides the number of atoms in each section. Notably, the relations between atoms are often spelled out
in detail—as is the case with the explanations of the fourth and fifth rules of method (359–60). This is consistent with Crowley’s description of the methodical memory: writers could enrich their texts by relating the process by which they established their frameworks of ideas.

Typography is also used to make the Logick easy. While Watts uses italics much more often than modern writers, as was common in contemporary printing, and his use is sometimes erratic, there are often definite patterns. For example, when defining several types of method, Watts structures his prose so terminology appears as the first few words in each of a sequence of paragraphs, highlighted by italics. This emphasizes the definitions in a manner quite understandable by today’s readers. Watts also uses leading italics to make the briefest possible expression of an idea—a sentence or phrase—stand out from the text surrounding it.

Indeed, calls for brevity mark the Logic deeply. Italicized rules positioned as topic sentences are supplemented with summaries—at the beginnings of chapters or even for sections within chapters. Italic type often offers the reader short versions of rules. Watts’s idea of brevity is tied directly to several virtues in writing which correspond to qualities of ease: the complexity or difficulty of an argument (simplicity), a sense of the work it requires of the reader (effortlessness), and the reader’s interest in the text (comfort and enjoyment):

This Fulness of Method does not require that every thing should be said which can be said upon any Subject; for this would make each single Science endless [. . .]. As your Method must be full without Deficiency, so it must be short, or without Superfluity. The Fulness of a Discourse enlarges our Knowledge, and the well-concerted Brevity saves our Time. [. . .] [It should] not waste the Time, tire the Learner, or fill the Mind with Trifles and Impertinences. (359)
Finally, in a few instances Watts employs footnotes to explain words which may not be understood by the reader, such as “homogeneous” (353), and words with specific rhetorical connotations, like “analysis” (341). These footnotes bolster simplicity and ensure reader comfort with a high level of expediency and a very low risk of embarrassing the reader. The use of smaller typefaces for the less important footnote text—a convention then not wholly established—is another way printing techniques ensure consistency between the form and content of Watts’s work.

3.5.1.2 Holmes’s *Rhetoric Made Easy*

Holmes’s approach to his innovations is quite obviously more forward than Watts. Perhaps seizing on the repeated use of “easy” in Locke’s work, and bolstered by the growing number of “easy” titles appearing in rhetoric and other disciplines, Holmes prioritized ease not only in the title of his work but in its preface, though the term “easy” does not appear in his work as often as it does in Watts’s.7

Like many of his contemporaries, Holmes retains faith in the didactic power of imitation, and includes many examples in *Rhetoric Made Easy* with the hope that students will learn from them “The Height and Excellency of Good Writings” (ix). To this end, the second half of the work is an annotated commentary on Longinus’s *On The Sublime*, printed in both Latin and English. In fact, the book contains quite a bit of Latin and Greek—reflecting the transitional status of Holmes’s work, and the variations between contemporary and current definitions of ease.

Holmes uses his preface to foreground many of the innovations which mark the *Rhetoric* and allegedly make it easy. As noted in Chapter 2 above, Holmes is ambivalent toward students who “are expected to be led, sooth’d, and entic’d to their

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7Ease may figure in the dedication of *Rhetoric Made Easy* as well; however, since Holmes wrote that portion of his work in Latin, comment on that material is not possible at this time.
studies by the Easiness and Pleasure of the Practice, rather than by Force or harsh Discipline drove” (iii). However, he hastens to note the advantages created by his simplification of classical works and the strategy of adapting ancient texts by focusing on terms in contemporary use. English language examples are substituted for Latin and Greek, making the classical work more encouraging and alluring.

Cartesian method marks Holmes’s easy approach. He argues that his work is a comprehensive treatment of rhetorical theory, thus saving the student “abundance more Trouble” (iiv) in compiling tropes and figures from other sources. These figures are illustrated by “more Examples [. . .] than perhaps you’ll find in all the Rhetoricians put together” (iv). But the Rhetoric is saved from bloat by shorthand, since Holmes uses only chapter and verse for Bible quotations instead of printing them in full (iii). And by brevity: Holmes maintains that “The Chief Tropes, Figures, and Repetitions, for the more easy attaining and longer retaining them in Memory, are briefly defined and comprized each in one Verse, in this large Character” (vi) (e. g. printed in a large typeface).

Holmes collects these chief figures and principles into a group, distinguishing them from the rest of his work by marking important passages with capital letters. Not surprisingly, he uses the Cartesian term “distinction” and Locke’s categorization of “ordinary” and “rare and extraordinary” content. This alphabetic system is also collated on a single page placed before the index. As Watts before him, Holmes makes use of typography and new printing techniques, differentiating less important material from items which must “be got by Heart” by using smaller, tightly leaded type. Interestingly, the dedication and preface to the Rhetoric appear in the largest typeface, suggesting that their content—the foregrounding of Holmes’s easy method—is the most important part of the book. (Holmes mentions his communications with his printer in his
preface.) The *Rhetoric* also includes an index Holmes argues can be used to find tropes of lesser importance (which are not emphasized in his work). Holmes points readers to the index three times in the preface, encouraging its frequent use. Finally, a list of questions for the student begin each chapter. The book concludes with a collation of the questions asked throughout it, including names of all tropes covered.

Throughout his preface, Holmes’s method correlates with the qualities of ease: the student’s comfort is a constant concern; the workload of students (and teachers) is mitigated; several methods for reducing complexity and encouraging simplicity are employed; and Holmes is pragmatic about the use of classical languages and the comprehensiveness of his rhetorical theory. Interestingly, Holmes leverages the best available technology—typography and printing—to make rhetoric easy. Like the evangelists of computer-assisted education who would follow him years later, Holmes believed technology had this power. Holmes’s decision to foreground his easy method should also be noted: for teachers without extensive training, being encouraged to think that writing was easy, and the textbook before them designed to make it so, this could be quite comforting.

### 3.5.2 Strategies for Making Writing Easy

This review of the work of Watts and Holmes enables me to construct a list of the methods by which writing would be made easy in the nineteenth century. While the sophistication of easy techniques would increase, and techniques would be applied to a wider variety of material, many of the strategies used remain popular today. Their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century development is part of the rise of simplicity and pragmatism as qualities of ease, but certainly connections to older qualities—especially transparency—apparent. I will offer some details about each device before discussing other ways writing was made easy.
3.5.2.1 Brevity

As noted earlier, Locke suggested brevity was a good strategy for education, and that brief lessons were easier than long ones. Watts and Holmes follow Locke, maintaining a critical part of Locke’s theory: that brevity should not be attained at the expense of comprehensiveness. Brevity corresponds to a wide number of qualities of ease, especially simplicity and effortlessness, but also pragmatism and expediency (though as outlined in Chapter 1, these qualities were not widely connected to ease until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century).

Methods for introducing brevity into teaching writing have already been discussed—Watts’s condensation of chapters into summaries; Holmes’s conversion of rhetorical theory into short, aphoristic sentences, and his summary of each chapter in catechetical (question-and-answer) format. Other methods include abridgments, popular in the nineteenth century as today (though now called “concise editions”); the use of sets of rules for writing, rather than explanation in narrative form; expression of the qualities of good writing as single words, or static abstractions; and the use of short passages from literary works as a substitute for complete anthologizing. John Genung’s desire for his Outlines of Rhetoric was typical: “Worded with the utmost brevity and crispness that can be consistent with adequacy” (iii).

3.5.2.2 Simplification

Simplification involves judgment about relevance and necessity of details—though contemporary philosophy minimized need for discussion of the particulars. The demand for simplification increased throughout the nineteenth century, as the popular strategy of adding to the rhetorical systems of the late eighteenth century began to collapse under its own weight, and as the number of subjects taught in all levels of education expanded. Kitzhaber considers Barrett Wendell’s massively popular English
Composition a sort of watershed: it marked the transition of composition books from massive, highly formal rhetorics to simple, direct texts. It was an easy-to-read book which matched the easy-to-read writing style growing more and more popular as well:

The most prominent feature of the book is its comparative simplicity and informality. Nearly all the ideas in it are drawn from older rhetorical doctrine, but Wendell’s power of synthesis reduces complicated theory to a few broad and simple generalizations expressed in an easy conversational tone that makes them seem much less formidable than, say, Genung’s or [Adams Sherman] Hill’s statements of the same principles. (68)

To put it another way, it was much easier for teachers to argue that writing was easy, and students were much more likely to believe them, if the composition book they used presented writing in easy fashion. To that end, more and more often, textbook authors began to leave out details or subordinate ideas, ignore exceptions to rules, and focus on specific directions for writing, instead of general theories.

3.5.2.3 Atomization and gradation

Atomization, the process of breaking complicated or complex things into smaller units for didactic purposes, and gradation, presenting those ideas following the general pattern of simple to difficult, are closely related to simplification. (Indeed, atomization and gradation sometimes involve the process of simplification.) Cartesian method provided much of the theory of atomization mobilized in writing pedagogy, and Crowley’s Methodical Memory demonstrates the connections made between atomization in philosophical investigation and teaching. It was necessary for teaching since both analytic and synthetic method entailed movement between general and specific, or simple and complex (Crowley 42–50 passim): teachers had to simplify complex unities to help students move from simple to complex when writing analytically, or in order to evaluate the accuracy of students’ synthetic work.
As I note on page 85 above, Locke advocated gradation in teaching, and restatement of his ideas was common. Frost argued that teachers should err on the side of presenting too little information, or too simple a lesson, rather than overwhelm the student with abundant quantity or difficult quality of instruction (Easy Exercises 118). A slower pace would ensure that students would master each lesson before going onto the next, and allow difficult subjects to be tackled eventually.

Many writers utilized atomization and gradation which began with words and moved through sentences to paragraphs and larger units of writing. Technique varied; some writers chose to begin with larger units and move “downward,” though most thought beginning with words and moving “up” worked better. The hierarchical, increasingly visual type of atomization which became very common after 1870 was sometimes called the “pedagogy of levels” (Connors 242). In fact, Walker had connected atomization and gradation to up and down movement much earlier. Summarizing his technique’s effectiveness, he declared, “Thus we have descended to slowness of parts as low as we can go. No descent can be too low if it raises the pupil from indolence to exertion, from backwardness to facility” (Teacher’s Assistant 180). Walker’s introduction, which echoes the technological language of economic progress then becoming familiar, suggests the advantage of gradation several times, and argues that its low frequency of use is the “principal reason” why composition is so neglected.

Hess argues that despite support in Locke and Cartesian philosophy, Walker’s contemporaries did not see it that way. “Gradation of subject matter was carefully discussed by only two authors of early textbooks. It apparently was assumed that all students were interested in the same activities and possessed uniform abilities” (Hess 35–6). However, one of these two authors, Richard Green Parker, penned two graded
popular books: *Progressive Exercises in Composition* and the massively influential college-level text *Aids to English Composition*.

More study is needed to determine when gradation gained a foothold in the writing classroom. Regardless of the date, most agree that once it caught on, it seemed unthinkable to teach in any other way, and from a current perspective, using graded curricula seems natural or obvious (Connors 242). However, atomizing the teaching of writing and ranking the difficulty of the chosen units assumes that language can be used to subdivide without alteration. Handbooks today still suffer from atomizations which, while no doubt carefully planned and meaningful to their authors, fail to be understood by the reader.

### 3.5.2.4 Alphabetization and alliteration

The use of alphabetical systems of organization also made writing easy, as demonstrated in Holmes’s *Rhetoric Made Easy*. As is still the case today, arguments for the use of alphabetical lists cite its “natural” or “transparent” quality. Parker noted the utility of his alphabetized lists of common errors. Alphabetization really blossomed late in the nineteenth century, as hierarchical systems creaked under the weight of lists rhetorical terms and rules for writing. Organizing rhetorical theory in lexical fashion seemed congruent with a shift toward a more rational, concrete, natural system: “And besides all these indications of a complete reaction against the abstract rhetoric of former years, there were the alphabetical lists of disputed or faulty diction that were designed for quick and easy reference by the student as he wrote or revised” (Kitzhaber 215). For example, Genung ended *Outlines of Rhetoric* with an alphabetical “glossary” of commonly misused words.

Alliteration also made writing books easy. Connors points out that the pioneering Holmes defined elegance as “Purity, Perspicuity and Politeness”—a memorable list
borrowed by Joseph Campbell in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Blair adapted Holmes’s technique with a bit of rearrangement, defining perspicuity as purity, propriety, and precision. From there, this repeated P ascended to a position of power: “Here in Blair were the terms that were to become important stylistic dogmas for the Early American composition-rhetoric of the first half of the nineteenth century” (Connors 258–9).

### 3.5.2.5 Inclusion of “teaching aids”

Hess uses the term “teaching aids” for explanatory prefaces, tables of contents, indexes, question and answer sheets, and other content added to textbooks to help teachers understand how a book could be used, and to make a book easier to use for students (154). Once again, from a current perspective, these elements may seem trivial, since they are present in textbooks used at all levels and in all subjects. In fact, their absence would make a textbook seem amateurish. But as anyone who has collated an index or a table of contents by hand knows, production of these aids is by no means easy. Writers who included these items must have considered the extra work involved quite carefully. (Since they were doubtless used by students as well as teachers, in the long run, a different name for these aids might be useful.)

Hess’s analysis shows a gradual increase, over time, in the number of teaching aids which appear in composition textbooks, especially if new books, rather than reprints of older titles, are considered (154–80 *passim*). This increase, and the increase in the use of other devices mentioned above, correlates to the general increase of the power of ease in composition. However, as will soon be discussed, as momentum for “teaching writing is easy” grew in the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, some teaching aids would begin to disappear, and composition instructors were forced to create their own—or do without.
Through these specific strategies and changes in content, textbooks and curricula generated from them increasingly reflected the demand for ease. More comprehensive analytical work is needed: perhaps an extension of Hess’s inventory of composition textbooks for atomization, teaching aids and the like needs to be completed, tabulating the use of strategies for making easy and better connecting them to philosophical antecedents.

3.5.3 Emotional Needs: Comfort and Familiarity

Organizational devices and techniques acknowledged differences in the intellectual abilities of adults and children. The desire to update rhetorical textbooks to create works interesting and not foreboding to young children was supported by an increased awareness of their emotional state. Much of this was a reflection of a more liberal approach to education and shifting ideas about childhood, which was less often envisioned as a debased condition or disease, with children merely small adults in need of a cure (Schultz, Composers 25). Locke’s educational model, which generally favored encouraging the learner, cultivating the desire to learn, and consideration of the student’s emotions, has already been discussed. Many writers applied these ideas to composition, suggesting alternatives to old models of learning by heart with enforcement by rod: a “benevolent classroom environment and a pedagogy that moved from the simple and concrete to the complex and abstract” (Schultz, Composers 75).

In Teacher’s Assistant Walker attacked customary practices of teaching composition and suggested a proto-process method which considered the emotional state of the student would make more effective composition pedagogy—and better writing. For Walker, teachers should recognize the frustration writing would cause in students who had probably never written before, and “not aim at too great correctness [or] perfection” (7). Rather, they should use an incremental approach in grading (evaluation)
and assignment design, with students preparing draft versions of assignments for later recopying and correction. Teachers should take care not to frighten students with high expectations—at least not at first.

Years earlier, Stirling had argued that Greek grammar should be “plain, easy, and delightful. For it is certainly a great Mistake in Education, to vex and torture the Minds of Youth with dry, insipid, grave, and perplexing Trifles” (qtd in Moran 119). Frost was similarly concerned with relevance and the way students felt while composing, and connected an easy, natural feeling in the student to an easy, natural, successful writing style. This long quote shows repeated directives to pay attention to the emotional state of a young learner and shape the curriculum accordingly:

Above all it is necessary in these initiatory exercises that he should write freely and boldly, using such expressions as suit his own feelings, and his own understanding of the subject. Hereafter we shall endeavor to give him some instruction in the art of correcting his own composition. But the first and most important thing is to be able to originate observations on the subjects presented and to express them in such language as his feelings prompt. If he feel a constant solicitude lest he should make a trifling mistake, this will chill his feelings and give his writing an unpleasant air of stiffness and constraint. When he commences writing it is better that he should say whatever comes into his head in a natural though inaccurate manner, than that he should puzzle himself by hunting after words that do not come readily, or by torturing the common place expressions of other people into new and artificial forms. The most common words are the most forcible; and if the idea to be expressed is a good omen it will tell better in short every day words than in holyday terms and words of “learned length, and thundering sound.” (Easy Exercises 66)

This movement would be echoed by more and more rhetoricians. J. Scott Clark spoke out against “dreary platitudes” of expository writing (Kitzhaber 105). Gertrude Buck called for topics which engaged student emotion and interest (Berlin 83–4). Henry Day rejected the “drudgery” of writing according to the directions of his contemporaries, though his attempts to remedy it involved complicated systems of
rhetoric which frustrated students and teachers alike, leaving him overshadowed and outsold by his competitors (Kitzhaber 97, Connors 221).

Veysey tracks another important reason for the increasing legitimacy of considering student emotions in pedagogy. In composition, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century rhetorics of Blair, Campbell, and Whately were supported by faculty psychology and its model of the mind as a group of separate faculties, similar to muscles which, like arms and legs, required exercise for development (20–5 passim). This was a component of the highly influential approach of “mental discipline,” the curricular effects of which Kitzhaber describes in excellent detail:

Educators, therefore, saw their function as twofold: to discipline and strengthen these separate faculties through drill and exercises [. . .]. The best sort of education was that which offered the best opportunities for rigorous drill, and that which stressed generalizations thought to be universally useful. [. . .] Instruction was by recitation, a method calculated to strengthen the faculty of memory: the student often memorized the pages of his textbook and repeated them to his teacher verbatim. Questions from the student were not encouraged, since the teacher did not consider it a part of his responsibility to add anything of his own to the lesson. (2)

Mental discipline functioned as discipline in several ways: it provided support for a strictly governed classroom and demanding curriculum. It also served as a guarantee: consistent with American economic ideology, students who put in enough hard work would be rewarded with an expanded mind (Veysey 142). As this model fell out of favor, the pressure for discipline and drill decreased as well, since there was less of an imperative to make education tough or rigorous. Concomitantly, it became less difficult to justify approaches which acknowledged students’ feelings, from gradation to more blatant appeals to student fancy. There were certainly some holdovers, such as the inclusion of Anglo-Saxon in the curriculum, which was often studied because of
its difficulty (Kitzhaber 37). And some other subjects, such as science, were delayed curricular inclusion because they were “too easy and undemanding” (Veysey 41).

Mental discipline did not disappear quickly, but remained powerful in many schools and universities, especially conservative colleges like Princeton and Yale. In those schools, the elective system was shunned because it was believed students would select courses based solely on difficulty, and there are some indicators this is exactly what happened (Veysey 39, 224–7). But mental discipline left little room for student individuality and no room for feelings, thoughts, or input from student—an incompatibility with the increasingly popular ideas of Locke and reformers like Comenius and Pestalozzi. Additionally, the monolithic view of students it projected was less tenable as, during the second half of the nineteenth century, a wide range of students formerly excluded from most education began to enter classrooms. As the twentieth century neared, approaches which created discomfort in students were less and less viable, and signs of increased attention to students’ comfort and enjoyment proliferated.

Connors’s *Composition-Rhetoric* includes a much more controversial argument about the role of emotion and student comfort in the nineteenth-century classroom. Building on Walter Ong’s analysis of orality and literacy, he contends that as more women entered colleges and secondary schools, and classical oratorical rhetorics of Aristotle and Cicero were supplemented with belletristic rhetorics of Campbell and Blair, composition-rhetoric became a decidedly Irenic rhetoric. In comparison to the more agonistic rhetoric of eighteenth-century education or nineteenth-century political discourse, composition-rhetoric was more cognizant of the emotional state of the listener, more polite, and more feminine:
College was a man’s world, and it was a world red in tooth and claw. [. . .] [But] when women entered the educational equation in college, the whole edifice built on ritual contest between teacher and student, and between student and student, came crashing down. [. . .] From having been arenas of contest, the lecture halls and recitation rooms became forums of irenic discussion. The atmosphere changed from one of boredom punctuated by anxiety and hostility to one much more decorous. [. . .] The tone of public college life both in and outside classrooms changed completely. (48, 49)

Even if Connors overstates the rhetorical effects of coeducation—in fact, there has been debate about the causal chain implied by his argument (Mountford 493)—it is difficult to refute his evidence of a reduction in the competitive, agonistic character of classroom practices and an increase in discussion, lecture, and other learning techniques less likely to result in the public humiliation of a student. In other words, at least one form of student discomfort was generally less frequent, as there was “gradual change of student-teacher relationships in rhetoric/composition courses from challenging and adversarial to developmental and personalized” (Connors 44) during the nineteenth century.

Connors asserts that the presence of women in classrooms introduced other aspects commonly associated with contemporary ideas of femininity: a less demanding, more nurturing environment, and more focus on the personal and private, rather than the public and political sphere. The second of these effects seems to have been underway independent of gender influences, as will be discussed below. The first is consistent with the equation of femininity and ease described on page 35 above. Given the low opinion of the female intellect and constitution common in the nineteenth century (Ferreia-Buckley and Horner 204), the appearance of women in classrooms—as both teacher and student—could be used as justification for an easier curriculum and

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8See also Sharon Crowley’s review of Composition-Rhetoric in Rhetoric Review 16 (1998), 340–3.
classroom atmosphere which could prove beneficial to all students. Accounts of student reactions to coeducation in Veysey’s research support this argument.

### 3.5.3.1 Write what you know

Writing was also made easy by a shift to writing about more familiar subject matter. This occurred in three ways, which I describe below. Movement toward the familiar was, as Crowley argues in *Methodical Memory*, bolstered by questions about student ability—even the most progressive writers doubted student’s capacity for original thought, and suggested methods of easing the burden. (Current-traditional rhetoric ensured the canon of invention was not available for assistance.) This familiarity was often connected to comfort: Frost, who combined all three approaches, argued that shortly after starting to write by his method, a student would “feel somewhat at home in the use of his pen” (Frost *Easy Exercises* 79–80).

First, as Schultz demonstrates, educational techniques proposed by Johann Pestalozzi gained popularity. Pestalozzian learning relied on a vision of the child as a seed which, given the proper substance and upbringing, would reach its innate potential. The natural desires of children—curiosity, creativity, and power of observation—could be harnessed for educational purposes. For Pestalozzi, “the path of learning was the path of nature; that is, learning proceeded from the near to the far, from the known to the unknown, from the simple to the complex, and from the concrete to the abstract” (Schultz, *Composers* 65). Pestalozzi believed, like Locke, that children learned best when they enjoyed learning, and to that end he spoke against classical techniques (memorization and recitation) and encouraged direct experience such as field trips and “object teaching,” for which he is best known.

Object teaching involved the use of concrete objects as prompts for student interest and creativity. With the object method, a student would be shown something like
a piece of glass, allowed to handle it, and be taught words associated with glass, such as “bright,” “brittle,” and “transparent,” through observation and discussion (Schultz, *Composers* 69). Generally speaking, the focus of instruction shifted away from abstractions learned from books and traditional canons of knowledge defined by the teacher to common objects a student would know from everyday experience. Composition teachers who adopted Pestalozzian ideas mobilized the idea of object learning in a variety of ways, and often included “object” in book titles (Schultz, *Composers* 74–6). Schultz’s “Pestalozzi-Mayo-Frost” connection, mentioned above on page 92, charts Pestalozzian influence to John Frost through Massachusetts kindergarten teacher and writer Elizabeth Mayo. In concert with Pestalozzi, Mayo sought to “bring education more into contact with the child’s own experience and observation, and to find in him the first link in the chain of his instruction” (Mayo qtd in Schultz, *Composers* 68). Things a child already knew would be used as starting points for learning.

Frost was one of the first to adopt Mayo’s work to composition. For him, objects led to better writing: “It occurred to me that by making a course of exercises on pictures and real objects the starting point, something might be done towards (sic) inculcating a natural and correct, as well as an easy and graceful style of composition” (Frost *Easy Exercises* vi). Notably, Richard Green Parker, and possibly Simon Kerl and Alexander Bain, were also influenced by Pestalozzi through Mayo’s work (Schultz, *Composers* 80)

Increasingly, so students could write and think with ease, composition moved away from abstract subjects toward more concrete and personal matters. Here is the second form of “write what you know”: focusing on immediate experience, one’s surroundings, perhaps readily available memories—often without the direct experience and decidedly humanitarian influence of Pestalozzi. “Abstract topics
were increasingly supplanted by subjects based in personal observation” as well as “by assignments more concrete and overtly personal in nature” (Connors 64). In its extreme, this resulted in a positivist approach, encouraged by the growing scientism of education and American culture in general, and which directed the student to objectively report, never interpret or editorialize (Berlin 9, 62).

Preference for the concrete was often expressed through personalization of venerable abstract assignments. For example, “The Value of Diversions” would become “My Summer Vacation.” A historical essay could include a student’s experience (even at times her feelings) and reference to recent historical events, instead of focusing on doctrinal readings of history (Schultz, Composers 123). Frost expressed this as “subjects which will readily suggest such ideas as may easily be expressed in a natural and unaffected manner” (Easy Exercises 9).

The motivations for shifting away from abstract topics varied, but were frequently connected to qualities of ease. Simon Kerl emphatically connects abstraction to misunderstanding, boredom, and difficulty for the reader: “Unusually abstruse or abstract subjects should also be generally avoided; because most people cannot easily understand what is said on such subjects, or they care but little for what can be said” (363). Ernest W. Huffcutt valorizes brevity and simplicity, important qualities of ease in write-what-you-know concreteness, saying of the subject for writing, “Let it be a subject about which [the student] knows something. Let it be specific, concrete, not too broad in its scope, and capable of simple and direct treatment” (qtd’in Kitzhaber 105).

Finally, writers wrote what they know by adopting new forms. As rhetoric became multimodal, letter-writing, personal narrative, experiential writing, and description were more often considered part of composition, augmenting the old standby, argumentation (Connors 207–20 passim). In many cases, this shift was at least in part
because of the relative ease of these nontraditional forms. Again, we turn to Frost for an argument supporting letters as easy writing assignments, and see the reassertion of the power of the familiar:

[Letters are] generally considered an easy form of composition, and it is that in which most persons make their first attempt at expressing their thoughts and feelings in writing. The chief source of difficulty in this, as in every other branch of the art, is too much solicitude about the language and style, and too little attention to the subject. When a person has some particular business to be done—some real object to be effected by the writing of a letter, it is generally expressed in perspicuous language, and in an easy, natural style. But if the writer intends merely to compose what is called a “beautiful letter,” he is apt to run into some of the worst faults of style. (Easy Exercises 76)

The length of this quotation shows an interesting hybrid variation of write-what-you-know pedagogy: Frost assumes the young writer does not know “language and style” well enough to make a “beautiful letter.” However, if she would stick to her “particular business,” the use of the “easy form” of the letter and the “real object” in her mind (and not the high abstractions of belletristic theory), an “easy, natural style” would be the happy result. Here is another example of easy pedagogy motivated at least in part by mistrust of student ability. Similarly, Parker warned against teaching epistolary writing, arguing that it was one of, if not the, most difficult form of composition, due to the pressing need to make letters “elegant” (123).

Notably, John Walker shows a considerable amount of indecision regarding the comparative ease of the various forms which he advocates in his Teachers’ Assistant. At first, he argues in favor of the theme, which, “from the regularity of its form, seems to be the easiest species of composition” (16). However, soon afterward, he suggests his own formula-based “easy essay” as an alternative (though the difference between themes and easy essays is somewhat unclear). At another time, he advocates narrative: “Nothing so easy to comprehend and retain as a story, and therefore nothing so easy to
write down from memory” (152). Regardless of this inconsistency, the trend is clear: Walker’s advice regarding form, now nearly two centuries old, was heavily influenced by ease. As Hess summarizes, “The evidence shows that the present-day idea of having a child evaluate his experiences and express his opinions simply and naturally had its beginning in textbooks more than a hundred years ago” (184).

3.5.4 It’s Just That Easy

While the idea that writing should be easy was supported by new styles of textbooks and new teaching methodologies, there was also a much simpler line of thinking: writing should be easy because it is just not that hard. Not all writers argued so—for example, consider Walker’s frankness about the “difficult and irksome” character of writing (10). The differences of opinion reflect the deeply paradoxical and contradictory treatment of ease in writing—consistent with the paradoxes which surround ease in general.

Crowley illuminates part of the philosophical basis for assuming that writing is easy: the modern view of language and the world inherited from Francis Bacon, who equated language with reasoning. Language, thought, and the world worked in the same way and thus were practically equivalent (Crowley 9). Similarly, faculty psychology and associationism presented a unproblematic view of the mind, and the task of philosophical investigation and related writing. This equation enabled the popular belief, still popular today, that clear thinking and clear writing are connected.

Some argued that English, as a non-inflected language, would not present the difficulty common in more advanced languages like Latin. In the extreme, those who argued this position contended that English did not have a grammar and that such instruction was superfluous (Connors 117). Many who followed the mental discipline model thought students’ English would benefit from learning Latin, Greek, or even
Anglo-Saxon because those languages were more difficult than English, and students with language muscles enlarged from classical tongues would have no problem with easy English (Veysey 39). In a similar vein, with implicit support from Locke’s use of spoken language acquisition as a model for learning, and clear connection to the purpose of writing as dictated by philosophical investigation, John Genung was one of many who collapsed spoken and written English, arguing that anyone who could speak could write:

To write an essay or any formal kind of composition seems to most people, and doubtless is, a much more difficult thing than to converse. But why should it be so? At bottom it is virtually the same thing, except that it is done with a pen instead of with the voice. The purpose too is the same, namely, to make others see a subject as the author sees it; and it ought to be just as natural, just as spontaneous, just as characteristic of the man, to write his thoughts as to speak them. If we could always bear this obvious truth in mind, and feel perfectly at ease with a pen in our hand, composition would cease to be the bugbear that it now too often is. (1)

The presence of new technological instruments for writing also bolstered assumptions that writing is easy by reducing much of the tedium of writing. Steel fountain pen nibs expedited writing by eliminating the frequent cleaning and mending necessary with quill pens. Automation of book and newspaper production lowered the cost of paper and made books more available, so their availability was less of an event (Wright and Halloran 226–7). Elizabeth Larson, among others, has considered the impacts of these technologies for writing. In a slightly different vein, Ong reminds us that the printing press was the first assembly line (118), and though some argue that ideas from assembly-line style thinking and scientific management had little effect on nineteenth-century education (Callahan 10), it is possible they affected the numerous printers who wrote introductions, created abridgments, and even penned whole books.
At any rate, the outcome of consistently assuming that writing is just easy—especially when combined with other portions of the matrix of ease and writing presented above—was that students who had trouble writing, expressed frustration, or otherwise rejected the assumption that writing was easy (or that their alphabetized, alliterative textbooks made it so) could be dismissed as deficient, unteachable, lazy, or all of the above.

3.5.5 A Mixed Bag of Ease

Of course, the largest problem with assuming that writing is easy is that for even the most talented, experienced writers, it can be quite difficult. There was definitely heated discussion about some of the curricular and pedagogical changes which reinforced the idea that writing is easy. Those who recognized the difficulty of writing often reflected it by ambivalence or hedging of bets: they would argue that certain kinds of writing were easy, or certain subjects. Or they would contend that writing could be easy with proper training.

Genung provides an interesting example of this inconsistency. Just a few pages after arguing composition should be easy (see page 121 above), he writes:

What Composition requires.—There is a good reason [. . .] why composition must [. . .] be more difficult than conversation. It is because in composing we have to be more careful and painstaking. We cannot, for one thing, be so off-hand about the words we use and the manner in which we put them together; we must take thought for choice and arrangement, because what we write is intended for a permanent expression of our thought, and we have no opportunity afterward to explain or correct our blunders. [. . .] Further, as our subject may be hard, or our reader slow to grasp it, we must often study how to express ourselves with such emphasis or animation, such copiousness or pointedness, as most surely to engage his attention and give our thought a lodgment in his mind. Many such necessary things belong to the art of putting our ideas on paper, and of course make composition a more studious and calculated work, and in this sense more difficult, though in its real nature it remains the same as speaking. (2)
What were students and teachers supposed to make of this paradox? Is composition just another species of speaking, and therefore easy, or is it fundamentally different and more difficult? Genung strays from the hard and fast rules typical of his *Outlines of Rhetoric* in this passage. In fact, he shifts the goals of composition considerably: from enabling others to “see a subject as the author sees it” (consistent with philosophies on which current-traditional rhetoric is based) to engaging the attention and provoking the memory of the reader (more consistent with classical rhetoric). Ambiguities like this one mark quite a few of the works which represent writing as easy—and in most cases, as with Genung, the paradox itself is unacknowledged.

Part of the reluctance to accept the notion of easy writing was based on the assumption that easy writing was a different sort of writing than non-easy writing (presumably literature or *belles lettres*). For example, Lilienthal and Allyn separated the two styles of writing with a considerable gap in knowledge: “Without a proper knowledge of things, the pupil lacks the material out of which to build up the edifice of ideas; without the systematic training which will prepare him to proceed, in writing, from easy to more difficult themes, he will be unable to master his subject; and composition will always remain a most irksome and difficult task” (Lilienthal and Allyn 3 qtd in Hess 139).

The techniques I present here, which allegedly made writing easy, were by no means universally accepted. Nathaniel Greene was not reluctant to argue for the catechetical plan of instruction (learning based on question and answer), which was “of great utility” because it “renders the attainment of this useful branch of learning extremely easy.” But he also recognized that many would consider this method “too easy,” and took considerable pains to justify its use (Greene iii qtd in Hess 159, 161). The extensive prefaces and teaching aids Holmes, Walker, and Frost provided, and
from which many quotations are included above, also indicate their understanding of the ambivalence toward ease, and perhaps even admission of its paradoxical status. More work is needed to investigate the extent to which mainstream writers accepted the assertion that writing is easy, and to develop a more specific chronology of the strength of ease through the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

3.5.6 The Results

While imperatives to make writing easy strengthened, and writing pedagogy changed to support the claim that writing is easy, composition curricula changed in notable ways. Those changes should be cast in terms of qualities of ease I describe above on page 46: movement from education centered around the presumably abstract, theoretical classical curriculum to a simpler, more pragmatic, utilitarian curriculum better suited for creating an upwardly mobile middle class, not only doctors, ministers, and lawyers; the rise of the pragmatic elective system, enabling courses to be selected with a student’s enjoyment and effortlessness in mind—in some ways a “study what you know” paradigm; the development of composition techniques and styles, such as expository writing, which follow simple, expedient formula; and shifts in rhetoric which encouraged understanding the act of writing (and language itself) as a transparent, passive process.

These and other changes occurred for many reasons—not only because of the rise of ease. The relationships between composition, ease, and American and British culture need to be articulated more precisely than is possible in the limited space available here. The drive to make writing easy had tremendous effects on classroom practice, rhetoric, and nineteenth-century views of technology—and in turn, on the style of writing which students were to produce in composition courses and extracurricular discourse.
3.6 Students Should Write Easy-To-Read Prose

As current-traditional rhetoric became more powerful in American high school and college classrooms, it began to shape writing style as it shaped the public image of writing. Current-traditional rhetoric argues that writing, especially student writing, should be easy to read—clear and transparent, brief, simple, concrete, and graceful. Not surprisingly, many of the devices which were used to make writing textbooks, curricula, and the image of writing easy were also mobilized to shape writing style.

Once again, Crowley provides a link between contemporary rhetorical theory and the practice of making writing style easy. Among other things, she points out that classical systems of invention dealt extensively with audience interaction and shaping one’s rhetoric to meet audience needs. During the nineteenth century, this complication was for the most part eliminated, and any customization necessary compressed into the figure of “that ubiquitous military persona who stalks the pages of later composition textbooks—General Reader” (69). Gen. Reader is characterized by interest, and a desire for writing which is conventional, natural, and easy to read. To please the General, “[w]riters needed only to arrange their discourse [. . .] in a fashion that would ease the reading process—that would, in fact, reflect the way any reasonable person might have written it, according to the natural dictates of the rational mind” (122).

Unfortunately, the directives to make writing easy to read were often either general orders supplemented by positive models (to be emulated) or negative models (to be avoided). This was consistent with much of current-traditional rhetoric: it was assumed that the subject matter being taught was based on simple, universal truth which needed little or no explanation. After all, writing was easy!

Leveraging ease as a model for writing style considerably simplified the institution of composition as a whole—the same system could be used for thinking about
the act of writing and the style of writing being produced. (Soon we’ll see triple and quadruple duty for the easy system of writing, as rules introduced above are applied to teaching and the institution of composition, too.) As was the case with the public image of writing, there were several critical concepts which organized thinking on making writing style easy.

3.6.1 Clarity

Thomas Sprat, historian for the Royal Society, penned a guide to writing still cited by writers today, especially in scientific and technical writing. In a well-known passage, he praised “a native easiness” as one of the highest virtues in writing:

> They have therefore been most rigorous in putting in execution, the only Remedy, that can be found for this extravagance: and that has been, a constant Resolution, to reject all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style: to return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver’d so many things, almost in an equal number of words. They have exacted from all their members, a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness: bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness, as they can: and preferring the language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that, of Wits, or Scholars. (111)

The basic message expressed here was echoed in a large number of the rhetoric and composition texts of the nineteenth century. This was nothing new; clarity and transparency have long considered a virtue in speech and writing, and many examples of the valorization of clarity or transparency are doubtless available to the reader. Thus, in order to support the argument that the best writing style is easy, current-traditional rhetoricians could rely on not only Sprat but Aristotle, the Bible, Samuel Johnson, Benjamin Franklin, and many more writers in between.

Campbell, Blair, and Holmes, the rhetorical heavyweights who would provide the foundation for most nineteenth-century rhetoric, all identified “perspicuity” as part of the definition of elegance in writing. Connors points out that this term and others
used by these men were at the time a well-known synonyms for clarity (258). As they moved away from the weighty inventories of tropes and figures which dominated sixteenth- and seventeenth-century rhetoric, and from the more florid, descriptive style which characterized the writing of the time, Campbell, Blair, and Holmes answered Sprat’s call to define a new style with clarity as one of its most important principles.

Numerous writers who followed echoed the call for clarity or transparency—especially as the power of belletristic rhetoric declined and the rise of more “practical” textbooks became more popular. Hugh Blair, William Russell, Richard Green Parker, Amos R. Phippen, Adams Sherman Hill, George Quackenbos, and Barrett Wendell all identified clarity or clearness as a virtue of writing, though specific definitions varied. By 1870, most defined excellence in expository writing by perspicuity, clarity, and unity (Connors 234). Most of these writers follow Sprat’s lead, and review of his definition of “clarity” touches most of theirs.

Sprat’s model for clarity is closely connected to brevity. Not surprisingly, this alliance is found throughout current-traditional rhetoric. It was generally assumed that brevity led to clarity. Hill provides an excellent example of this oft-expressed commandment: one must “use as many words as are needed to convey his meaning easily and fully but not one word more” (213). Edwin Abbott’s very popular How to Write Clearly, one of the single-subject composition textbooks common after 1870, is divided in two sections: clearness and force, and brevity.

The argument for clarity also calls for rejecting style, which was (and still is) considered an undesirable addition to writing—a film which obscures pure and natural thinking. Frost’s argument for the ease of letter-writing, detailed above on 119, shows similar associations: the “worst faults of style” occur when one tries to transform “easy, natural” prose into a “beautiful letter” (Frost, Easy Exercises 76). As noted
above, Cartesian method provided philosophical support for staying on the lower level of “mathematical plainness” and “clarity and distinction” so that one could move toward truth without distraction. A conscious shift away from style and toward plainer, supposedly clearer language began with Blair and picked up speed as writers such as those mentioned above fell in line (Connors 257–95 passim).

Clarity as defined by Sprat also refuses writing which privileges expertise, both in his rejection of the language of wits and scholars, and his desire for “clear senses” and “primitive purity.” There is a slight echo of class distinction here perhaps not operant in Sprat’s situation but definitely part of the eighteenth-century American urge for clarity (Connors 120–1). Unfortunately, the desire to keep language closer to the language of the working class rather than the aristocracy was often complicated by the assertion that colloquialisms and pronunciations typical of the working class were unclear (Scott and Denney 2, 12).

Abbott felt that clearness (his term) was the easiest of the virtues of writing, a “mere matter of adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, and auxiliary verbs, placed and repeated according to definite rules” (6). His vision of writing admitted that forcible and elegant writing were desirable, but secondary in importance and out of the reach of most students. Perhaps because of this, Abbott was content to devote more than half of his 78 page book to exercises, leaving a scant 26 pages to explain his version of clarity.

3.6.2 Brevity and Conciseness

In the previous section of this dissertation, I explained some of the techniques of brevity used in textbooks to enforce the idea that writing is easy. Much of the strength of these techniques relied on the common-sense, unspoken notion that shorter utterances are understood more easily than long ones. As noted for Hill above, authors of rhetorical texts from Watts forward encouraged students to be as brief as possible,
and brevity was named one of the guiding principles for good writing time and time again.

Many writers encouraged students to achieve brevity through careful word choice. Four of Abbott’s thirteen rules for brevity follow suit: encouraging general terms instead of more specific lists, using participles, and omitting conjunctions (37–40). Parker’s seminal *Progressive Exercises* returned to brevity quite frequently. Franklin Scott’s 1928 revision of the Woolley Handbook named brevity as a feature of the word, scarcely mentioning it in later discussions of sentence, paragraph, and composition (though he did address sentence and paragraph length using different terms).

The connection between overall length and brevity is weaker when sentences and paragraphs, not only phrases and clauses, are discussed (or while general guidelines for good writing are presented in introductions and prefaces). For example, Abbott suggested that student writers could achieve brevity by combining simple sentences into compound or compound-complex sentences (39). This would result in longer sentences, but would decrease the length of paragraphs. The assignments and exercises included in textbooks called for fairly short compositions—sometimes just a few paragraphs, sometimes even less. Recall Walker and Frost’s position that student writing as short as one sentence was acceptable, as long as it was original and truly the work of the student. Parker picked up Walker’s “easy essay” and presented that form as a simpler, shorter composition which bridged first attempts at writing and full-blown themes (*Progressive Exercises* 112–3). Later in the century, texts which focused on the paragraph as the ideal assignment would become more popular. To be sure, these stipulations of length did not refer specifically to techniques for achieving brevity in writing, but reinforced the valorization of brevity through invective against novels,
suggestions for the length of compositions and speeches, and guidelines for writing letters.

3.6.2.1 Brevity and the paradox of ease

The paradox of ease is acknowledged in considerable popular writing on brevity. The sentiment in Thoreau’s famous line, “Not that the story need be long, but it will take a long while to make it short,” (320) is echoed by numerous writers who came before and after him. Unfortunately, few of the textbook writers considered here qualified their encouragement of brevity similarly. It was assumed, or at least implied, that students could be brief as easily as they could learn punctuation or paragraphing. Walker was one of few considered here who suggested that teachers should indulge the “luxuriance” of student writing and encourage a more process-oriented pedagogy, with brevity achieved after revision (7).

Comparisons between spoken and written language frequently encouraged students and teachers to believe both that writing was easy and that an easy style of writing could be achieved naturally. Few writers followed the example of Scott and Denney, who recognized that differences between spoken and written grammar were natural, and that the appearance of conversational grammar in writing could be accidental, not indicative of laziness or stupidity. Scott and Denney recognized the extra effort needed to move from the more verbose, phatic, repetitive speech of conversation to concise, highly structured speech of written composition.

Before moving past clarity and brevity, one point merits consideration: some writers’ list of the virtues of writing concludes here. Clarity and brevity, when combined with adherence to conventions of usage, provided a complete rhetoric for Hill’s Foundations (Crowley 142). (How’s that for practicing what you preach?)
However, most writers suggested other ways writing style could be made easy, explicitly or by example.

3.6.3 Simplicity

Sprat’s directives included simplicity, another virtue of easy writing desirable for many rhetoricians. Definitions of simplicity often took the form of “plain language” or made a similar reference to an undressed form of writing similar to the writing without style commonly associated with clarity. The goodness of simplicity was often bolstered by the assumption that novice writers (including students, but also most readers) could not handle difficult or complex thought and language, and were better informed by simple ideas simply expressed. Divisions between novice and expert were increased by the demand to make writing simple enough to be understood by a wide readership.

Even Fred Newton Scott echoed this sentiment:

> the stuff out of which a great national language is created is the simple, homely expression of sincere feeling and sturdy thinking. [...] If it is the voice of high wisdom, of moderation, of human nature at its best, the words will take on that power and charm which is the test of a great national speech (Scott 9).

Directions for simplicity most often focused on avoidance of jargon and technical language, using common words as often as possible, even the odd requirement that words of English origin, rather than Latin or Greek, were preferable. (How students without access to etymological knowledge could distinguish between these classes of words remains to be seen.) Hill extended this directive to a preference for general, rather than specific words, arguing that the former were of more use, and responsible for the classification and storage of knowledge (187). However, he also remarked that general words could be used for sophistry, and hedged his praise for them with warnings about “second-rate sermons and school compositions” (188). J. Scott Clark
followed the reverse path, suggesting that particular words were more desirable than general, but like Hill, instructed students to avoid technical terms.

But simplicity was more than word choice: it also involved making complex subjects simple using method handed down from Descartes. Complexity and difficulty were undesirable in and of themselves, but could be presented if accompanied by explanations which showed a methodical movement toward simplicity which could be followed by the reader. Obviously, Crowley’s description of the development of the methodical memory is quite relevant in this regard.

Hill admitted achievement of simplicity might cost a writer accuracy and precision, but instructed writers to accept “the risk of being inaccurate.” “A writer has to content himself with giving an approximate idea of his meaning” (187). Similarly, Phelps suggested details and “minute and exact accuracy” would have to be sacrificed, in preference for concrete over abstract subjects. Students were encouraged to cultivate simplicity by choosing subjects which did not require technical language or lengthy explanations—both of which might confused the presumably general readership.

The directives for simplicity would also bolster the shift to more concrete subjects, as noted earlier. Lists of suggested topics for student writers, like those at the end of Parker’s *Progressive Exercises*, demonstrate that simplicity and other facts of easy writing style affected not only how students wrote but what they wrote as well.

### 3.7 Teaching Writing is Easy

The notion that teaching writing is easy is a corollary to the first two alliances of writing and ease: if writing is easy, and the best writing style possible is easy, shouldn’t teaching writing be easy as well? In this section, I will turn to nineteenth century teachers of writing and focus on the ease—or lack thereof—of their task, as
reflected in textbooks, institutional practices, and shape of the institutions of composition and English departments. In the nineteenth century, rhetoric and composition ignored the trouble with simultaneously claiming that writing was easy, and that the best writing used an easy style. Thoreau’s warning of the difficulty of writing was echoed by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Mark Twain. Hawthorne’s aphorism is especially memorable: “Easy reading is damned hard writing.” Not surprisingly, the paradox of ease could not be completely ignored by those charged with teaching writing, though in many ways the institution of composition encouraged exactly that.

There are several excellent reasons for the institution of composition to want to believe that teaching writing was easy. First, the workload of those teaching subjects in English—speech, grammar, writing, literature—increased radically as written work became more important in schools and colleges. Teaching by declamation, recitation, and oral examination declined; assigning numerical grades became more common, and enrollments skyrocketed (Connors 140–1). If teachers could believe teaching writing was easy, they might be more likely to take on the amount of work required. Second, teacher training was sorely lacking. Until after 1850, pedagogical journals were virtually nonexistent, there were few normal schools, and post-secondary training for teachers was very limited (Hess 1–3). Schultz points out that many teachers had trouble reading and writing on their own, much less teaching writing (Composers 24). In many cases, textbooks were the only guide to writing teachers had. A severe teacher shortage exacerbated these difficulties. To be sure, administrators and others responsible for hiring writing teachers (for example, parents seeking private tutors) were able to ease their frustration and embarrassment if they could justify poor teacher preparation or the hiring of obviously underqualified individuals by arguing that teaching writing is easy.
James Berlin offers a third reason: with little or no disciplinary structure or identity, composition teachers had no pedagogical mandate (60). Consequently, they often chose the path of least resistance, actively seeking easy pedagogical techniques. Teachers often utilized a single model for several different areas of composition (or in some cases, instruction in all subjects). For example, the unity-mass-coherence triad was motivated for sentence, paragraph, and entire compositions, in what Crowley calls a “nest of Chinese boxes” (132). Of course, I argue that “ease” was an ideal single model because its framework could be used recursively as rhetoric, pedagogy, and to define the institution.

Finally, as American universities changed in response to booming population, a desire to emulate the German research university, and other factors, they mirrored the increasingly stratified, hierarchical shape of American society (Veysey passim). A sort of class system in English departments was established, with composition’s easy writing craft serving literature’s difficult artistry. Composition was seen by many, as is still the case today, as an apprenticeship program requiring little skill and tolerated in universities only because of the deficiency of American schools.

The common thread in these four movements is a food chain of difficulty which descends from institution and textbook, to professors and administrators, to instructors and teaching assistants, and finally to students. This pecking order was often called on to move blame for failures in writing downward onto students when it was more accurate to blame institutional pressures for the sad conditions common in composition. Thus Harvard administrators could simultaneously blame high schools for the “illiteracy of American boys,” yet staff composition courses with teaching assistants at the rate of one per hundred students (Kitzhaber 44). For students, this created a Catch-22: elementary and high schools refused to teach certain subjects, styles of
writing, or forms because they were not easy enough. On the other hand, colleges and universities rejected teaching spelling, grammar, and usage, among other things, because they were too easy. There is little doubt students felt uneasy trapped by this chorus of “That’s not our job.”

The trouble for students is apparent in textbooks with a surprisingly foregrounded “Student, teach thyself” orientation. *The Century Collegiate Handbook* bragged:

> “The book throws upon the student the responsibility of teaching himself. [. . .]
> Thus friendly counsel is backed by discipline, and the instructor has the means of compelling the student to make rapid progress toward good English” (Century iii qtd in Connors 93). But Crowley reminds us that blaming composition teachers for this state of affairs is unfair and unwise: with no disciplinary infrastructure, it was difficult, if not impossible, for women and men in such a low station to effectively question institutional practices which pathologized students. In fact, teachers often reached out for ease only in self-defense, as they struggled to cope with a lack of training, salary, and institutional support. Criticism of easy educational practices is not criticism of teachers, but of the institution that makes alternatives to easy pedagogy appear untenable.

### 3.7.1 Textbooks and Other Tools

Many textbook authors recognized the plight of teachers—and thus the paradox of ease. Their books claimed to ease the teacher’s task, but at the same time maintained at least in part that it was easy, begging the question: if teaching writing is easy, why are textbooks needed to make it so? Edwin Woolley’s influential *Handbook of Composition* provides a typical mixed message. On the one hand, it acknowledges the difficulty of teaching: “the task—by no means easy—of telling the student just what to do is transferred from the teacher to the book.” But on the other hand, its preface
concludes with the (assumedly encouraging?) sendoff, “I hope that [teachers] will find it not only possible but easy to help students in this way by means of the present book” (Woolley v, ix qtd in Connors 93, 98). Abbott’s How to Write Clearly demonstrated similar ambivalence about the ease of teaching writing (note that the student’s job, simplified to learning clarity by rules, remains easy):

Almost every English boy can be taught to write clearly, so far at least as clearness depends on the arrangement of words. Force, elegance, and variety of style are more difficult to teach, and far more difficult to learn; but clear writing can be reduced to rules. To teach the art of writing clearly is the main object of these Rules and Exercises. (5)

Notably, textbooks which were not easy often failed. Gertrude Buck’s pioneering research, which mobilized psychology to develop a rhetoric based on the creative use of metaphors, had little use for the devices of easy pedagogy. Her work was largely ignored (Kitzhaber 183–6). Henry Day’s first textbooks, printed in the 1850s, included classifications intended to ease memorization of the weighty systems of rhetoric popular at the time. It was not until Day simplified his work—and was further simplified by others—that his influence was felt (Berlin 59–60). Connors’s Composition-Rhetoric includes several more examples of very important textbooks designed and marketed with the ease of the teacher in mind. Of Lindley Murray, Connors writes, “[he] was tremendously popular as a grammarian because he was simple and clear, and because his book included many easily taught exercises” (262). Richard Green Parker also considered the ease of teachers’ task in both his Progressive Exercises and Aids to English Composition. Overall, given the considerable pedagogical role of textbooks—in some cases the sole authority for composition style, correctness, and pedagogy (Hess 2)—it is not surprising that Connors concludes:

Thus were the first American rhetoric textbooks born: out of the derivative nature of most rhetorical material, out of the weaknesses of undertrained
teachers, and out of the increasing power of a newly technologized publishing industry that was quickly gaining the ability to control the content of textbooks by the exertion of market pressure. (78)

The bonds between the classroom and the technologized textbook marketplace were forged in the second half of the nineteenth century, as new technologies such as stereotyping lowered the cost of printing. Improved railroads and other infrastructure enabled centralized distribution of books—or plates ready to be locally printed—from large northeastern publishing houses. In contrast to the first half of the nineteenth century, when printing was almost solely the work of small businesses using hand-operated machinery, post-war textbook production was increasingly industrialized (Schultz 50, Crowley 146). Not surprisingly, publishers sought books with wide appeal, and the mobilization of ease as a selling point was logical, since it was already familiar to students and teachers thanks to its role in defining students’ image of writing and the ideal writing style.

3.7.2 The Curriculum

Berlin’s synopsis of the development of current-traditional rhetoric shows considerable influence of ease. For Berlin, George Campbell offered a “managerial” style of invention which virtually ignored its traditional role of discovery (20). Whately filled this gap with an early version of “write what you know;” suggesting that the student supply the subject for composition, with few qualifications (30). Campbell and Whately were, through Hill, Wendell and their contemporaries, simplified into a pedagogy of ease still familiar to composition today (21).

Kitzhaber’s summary of the most important trends in current-traditional rhetoric exhibits the imprint of ease repeatedly: expediency and simplification by deletion; pragmatism and rejection of the theoretical and abstract; simplifying the craft of writing to a single unit; and simplifying the grading of writing to obsession with mechanics:
The first solution proposed was simple surgery: cut away the catalogs of emotions, the long lists of figures of speech, the disquisitions on the Sublime and the pathetic—features that now seemed anachronistic—and thus reduce rhetorical theory to its essentials without disturbing its basic character. [. . .] Another solution was to make rhetoric “practical,” to insist that rhetorical principles were valuable only as far as they led to actual skill in writing. In its ultimate form, this attitude resulted in the “daily theme,” constant practice and little or no theory. [. . .] Scott and Denney proposed the paragraph as the central prose unit, mastery of which would lead to mastery of most other details of composition. [. . .] Running beneath all these theories, however, and stronger than any of them, was the doctrine of mechanical correctness. (222)

As noted above, the desire to make teaching writing easy for both teachers and students led to an oversimplified curriculum. Material difficult to teach was discarded or not included in lessons (though students were sometimes held responsible for it anyway). This pattern is visible in Abbott’s How to Write Clearly, which simply skips coverage of the tougher parts of writing (force and elegance). On the other hand, neatly teachable material was repeated in book after book, year after year. Comparing composition texts from 1830 with those from 1890 shows variations in structure and method of presentation, but many of the lessons are the same.

Kitzhaber claims that the push for mechanical correctness was by far the most important part of the development of current-traditional rhetoric, and it is hard to disagree with him, given its importance in composition today. Though it was one of the last developments, chronologically speaking, of nineteenth-century rhetoric, veneration of mechanical correctness above all else had tremendous implications. For teachers, it made teaching much easier by shifting the focus of instruction and grading to issues which could be satisfied with swift strokes in red ink and occasional reference to a rulebook. However, for students, it made composition more difficult: not only were they expected to memorize the rules of English grammar and their
many exceptions, but if differences arose in the interpretations of conflicting rules and
exceptions, they had to defer to the teacher’s authority. Because the role of mechanical
correctness in current-traditional rhetoric is covered in depth by Connors and other
writers, I will discuss it in detail here. Suffice it to say that enshrining mechanical
correctness as the most important criterion for measuring success eased the burden
of instruction in many ways—streamlining grading, reducing the amount of training
needed for teachers, and minimizing the need to supplement handbooks with other
materials.

The use of rules was critical for mechanical correctness, but made teaching
easy in other ways. In the same way rules transformed grammar, usage, punctuation,
and form into lists of simply articulated maxims, they also provided “ex cathedra
legislation” (Kitzhaber 190) which shaped writing style, conventionalized diction and
word choice, narrowed the field of suitable subjects, dictated acceptable paragraph
structure, and defined the hosts of static abstractions which filled turn of the century
textbooks. The number of choices governed by rules is astounding. Kitzhaber argues
that composition was ready for Woolley’s *Handbook* years before it was first published
in 1907, and welcomed its unapologetic stance toward rule-based pedagogy:

\[
\text{The aim of the book is not scientific, but practical. The purpose is to make clear the rules in regard to which many people make mistakes. [..] Some of the rules in this book, making no mention of exceptions, modifications, or allowable alternatives, may perhaps be charged with being dogmatic. They are dogmatic—purposely so. [..] the erring composer of anarchic discourse can best be set right by concise and simple directions. (Woolley iii-iv) }
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9See also Connors (especially 112–70), Kitzhaber (especially 199–204), Edward Finegan’s *Attitudes Towards English Usage*, and Dennis Baron’s *Grammar and Good Taste*. 
Teaching was made easier by rules, but through less dogmatically stated means as well, such as preferences for concrete subjects, personal narrative, and expository writing. Again, we turn to Connors:

[P]ersonal-experience writing is the easiest writing a teacher sees. Abstract topics produce writing that is cognitively more demanding and therefore slower to read and grade. Criteria for judging narratives and simple descriptions are easy to set; paper content often suggests itself; and the essay’s organization is usually simple chronology or spatial reference. [. . .] Adding to the attractiveness of exposition was the fact that in the methods of exposition teachers found a neatly packaged and easily taught pedagogical tool, of a sort no other mode offered. (141, 238)

Simplicity, in either the model of Hill’s unity-coherence-emphasis for sentence, paragraph, and theme, or as Scott and Denney’s model, where organizing all forms of writing followed the logic of the expository paragraph, definitely reduced the number of things students and teachers had to memorize, facilitating teaching (Crowley 143, 103). Recall Kitzhaber’s argument about Wendell’s *English Composition* (page 107, above): simplicity made it work, even though it was little more than old wine in new bottles.

Few spoke out against the consequences of simplifying textbooks and the developments of an easy curriculum—perhaps because they were far greater for students than for teachers, for whom they were all but survival tactics. Aside from occasional attacks on composition as a whole, and some criticism of rule-based grammars in the mid 1890s (Kitzhaber 196), it was not until 1930, three decades beyond the time frame of this chapter, that easy pedagogy came under fire. Porter Perrin (who directed Kitzhaber’s doctoral research) attacked exercises and drill books: “Why do we adopt them? Well, they’re easy to handle: like every popular ‘advance’ in pedagogical method, they are ultimately easier for the teacher. . . . We find a
comforting certainty in the most elementary conventions of the language” (Perrin 384 qtd in Connors 149).

3.7.3 Composition and the Institution

As with the rise of mechanical correctness, other scholars have pointed out the dismal institutional position of composition in relation to other disciplines of English. To put it bluntly, rhetoric and composition has been the red-headed stepchild of the English department for quite some time—the province of new professors, untenured instructors, and graduate teaching assistants. The lack of change in that position could be interpreted as justification for repeating the powerful arguments of Berlin, Connors, Crowley, Patricia Bizzell, John Brereton, Susan Miller, and Edward M. White, among others. However, in the interest of brevity, mention of that work must do here.

When relative positions of composition and other disciplines of English are considered in terms of ease, the paradox of ease is apparent. On the one hand, the simpler, shorter, entry-level forms of composition seem “easy” in comparison to the complex, lengthy, advanced works of literature, literary theory, and cultural studies. But on the other hand, the difficulty (or at least the tedium) of teaching first-year composition is acknowledged by an institutional pecking order which distances tenured professors from such duties. The disciplinary structure of English has long ignored the contradictions of simultaneously deriding composition as an easy, debased form of writing, saddling those teaching it with overwork, a lack of institutional support, frustrated and bored students, and a dismal future. One turn of the century teaching assistant offered this explanation:

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10 For a comprehensive list of sources in composition history, see Rebecca Moore Howard’s online bibliography (http://wrt-howard.syr.edu/Bibs/history.bib.html).
It is my personal opinion that the comparative ease of the task of teaching literature, of arousing enthusiasm in regard to works that have a perennial charm, accounts as much as anything for the great attraction this field has for all young men entering upon the teaching of college English. There is on the contrary no field which so quickly searches out a man’s weakness [. . .] as English composition. (Thomas qtd in Connors 340–1)

Composition’s relative ease when compared to other curricular areas also served as a “mud fence” insulating the better areas of English from the “unsupervised and uncontained sprawl” of first-year composition (Crowley 53). Students required to pass allegedly easy first-year courses were discouraged from further progress by its difficulty and dullness. English majors and devotees who knew things got better in the upper division were allowed to pass through to the “glorious liberty of literature.”

3.7.3.1 The feminization of composition

Thomas’s choice of the phrase “a man’s weakness” is ironic, considering that many of those who taught composition were women. But weakness is prescient, because many female composition instructors were doomed to “theme-work” because, as women, they were thought unfit for anything else. Both Susan Miller and J. Elspeth Stuckey have penned essays titled “The Feminization of Composition.” Miller’s essay argues that this feminization has had both positive and negative effects on the discipline, though she focuses on the latter. Her analysis shows repeatedly that correlations between femininity and ease are powerful in composition, as in wider culture (and as I outline in the second and third chapters of this work).

Miller’s essay confirms two other points made here. First, she argues that the feminization of composition is largely due to the nature of composition as it developed in the nineteenth century—the time it became allied with ease. (It was also the first time women were present in college classrooms in large numbers.) This tripartite correlation (ease in composition, women in the university, women teaching
composition) cannot be ignored. Second, the feminine character of composition was strengthened considerably in the last half of the nineteenth century. English as a whole had a reputation for femininity, in comparison to the rest of the university curriculum. By establishing composition as the girly, weakened partner of literature, the English professoriat was able to establish a more masculine position in the university, increasing its power through, among other things, “manly associations with religious and nationalistic ideals” (Miller 42–4). This ensured not only that composition would not threaten literature, but would continue to provide economic support in the form of student credit hours.

Discussion of the economic impact of ease for students will conclude this chapter.

3.8 Writing as Gatekeeper to a “Life of Ease”

The considerable time this work has spent discussing matters of transparency, simplicity, and similar valences of ease may have pushed the connection of ease and economics into the background. But ease often meant “inexpensive,” as was indicated in an 1808 abridgment of Blair, described as “rhetoric at an easy price” (Blair qtd in Hess 33). The notion of the easy woman also connoted ready availability and low cost. The colloquial “easy street” and “the life of ease” would strengthen this economic correlation as they became more widespread in the last part of the nineteenth century.

As noted above, the gatekeeping role of ease, the last of the four discussed here, was also the last to develop. It can be subdivided into three types. First, the equation of writing with the highest form of economic and moral achievement was as old as the equation of clear writing and clear thinking. The infamous establishment of the writing entrance exam and mandatory first-year writing course at Harvard (in 1874 and 1890, respectively) changed the general correlation of writing and economy to a
hard requirement with a gatekeeping role. Students now had to demonstrate writing ability in order to be admitted to Harvard (and other colleges) and earn the upper-class credentials it offered (Kitzhaber 31–6, 43–7). But at certain institutions, especially Midwestern state universities, a second form emerged: writing became the path on which the middle class could join the world of business and bolster their fledgling upward mobility. This more egalitarian, open view of writing-as-gatekeeper was championed by Scott and other progressive rhetoricians and educators—but it still leveraged writing to exclude the lowest classes. Finally, there was a third way that writing served as gatekeeper: new professors in English departments often had to “serve time” in composition before being admitted to the “literature” section of the department. Since the last of these gatekeeping roles was mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, my focus here will be on the first two.

The gatekeeper role of writing, in both its upper and middle class forms, was a way of understanding one’s relationship to new technologies: would an individual be better suited for the “mechanical arts,” the new technologies of iron and steam, or the mechanical correctness of current-traditional rhetoric, and the new technologies of high-speed printing and electronic communication? Interestingly, the novice/expert split proposed by Sprat and echoed by Scott (see 126 and 131 above) placed easy writing, as the goal of composition, on the novice side of this binary opposition. But when composition was used to keep “illiterates” out of elite colleges, easy writing lands on the expert side of the equation. This is another example of the contradictory definition of ease.

These two different forms of new technology have considerable differences, and the methods of dealing with them are very different, thanks to advancements in writing technology. Scribes and early printers who used hand-operated letterpress
machinery and lead type expended considerable physical exertion in the course of a workday (McNeil 456). Benjamin Franklin’s discussions of the long hours he labored over his press, and the failure of his competitors to keep up, served as some of the ideological glue for an American ideal: the inevitability of success given hard work. In the mechanical arts, workers maintained this high level of sweat and physical toil, even after industrialization. But for those who toiled in mechanical correctness, life was much easier. Working with the technologies of paper, pen, and ink became less labor-intensive as the twentieth century neared, and was far less demanding than operating heavy machinery. Even the methods of communication required less and less human labor: typewriters sped the process of writing, made reading much easier as well, and enabled inexpensive duplication of prepared documents (McNeil 465–8). Instead of letters hand-carried over long distances, telegraph and telephone service offered quicker, less labor-intensive transfer of writing. All in all, it may have been more difficult to be mechanically correct—but those who could do so replaced physical toil and intensity with the ease of effortlessness and leisure.

Both upper and middle class visions of writing and ease could be used to detect the ability of a student to work (and thus participate in the capitalist economy). Because learning to write was easy, as demonstrated above, and required only grasping conventions and cultivating one’s innate ability through hard work, anyone could challenge the work ethic, and thus the fitness for upward mobility, of any student who had trouble writing. And since teaching writing was easy, students were powerless to argue that deficient teachers had caused the their downfall. Failure to write suitably indicated not only a failure to think suitably, but a failure to work suitably as well.
3.8.1 Ease, Vulgarity, and Gentility

Before 1850 American colleges were little more than finishing schools for the children of the American elite, not places where education led to betterment. The atmosphere was forwardly elitist. Anti-intellectualism was powerful—it was assumed that men could make names for themselves without the need for schooling (Berlin 32). The life of ease to which these institutions served as gatekeeper was decidedly upper-class. Schultz points out reflections of this lifestyle gap in Frost’s illustrated composition books: the children and adults portrayed in engravings students were to write about appear in opulent settings, dressed very well. In one case, the students Frost addressed were asked to reflect on “your latest adventures, in hoop-driving, and ball-playing.” By contrast, an assignment about “the country boy” spoke of the “life he leads” and “his fondness for school” (Frost qtd in Composers 103, emphases added). This clearly indicated the difference between socioeconomic classes and the anticipated audience of Frost’s composition books.

The economic station required to own books contributed to the association of reading and writing with the upper class: royalty, respected statesmen, the gentry. The highly moral content of composition books and readers reinforced this pattern, though to be sure the presence of moral instruction in education was also related to the very sectarian nature of education. Schultz provides another example: opposite an engraving of a very modest home which showed a woman washing out front while tending to two barefoot children, a poem denouncing the evils of rum was printed (Metcalf and Bright 119 qtd in Composers 106). Generally speaking, low moral character, lower class, and low diction and usage were lumped together as the villain to be erased by composition, though education had little or no interest in helping the lowest classes become active participants in American political life. Berlin offers this synopsis of the way language
remained a gatekeeper to the life of ease, and antebellum colleges served only the highest socioeconomic classes:

Until after the Civil War, colleges were conservative institutions, run by Protestant clergymen [. . .]. In short, these schools were not democratic in spirit, despite the lip service they paid to democracy in order to survive. [. . .] The language used was to be the language of the educated, meaning the often stultifying diction and syntax of the educated clergy and the classes they served. As [Frederick] Rudolph explains, “The choice . . . was between adopting a course of study that appealed to all classes or adhering to a course that appealed to one class.” Most colleges selected the second alternative. (56)

Even after the Civil War ended, elite Northeastern colleges retained this linguistic and social elitism, perhaps unintentionally. James Murphy writes of Harvard’s institution of entrance exams and first-year composition graded largely on mechanical correctness:

And by attempting to impose a “hyper-correct” dialect on the generally privileged students at Harvard and the other established liberal arts colleges, [Adams Sherman] Hill and others may actually have strengthened the linguistic obstacles to upward mobility, ensuring that those students formally studying the dialect would overcome the obstacles while those informally studying it would not. (Murphy 231)

Indeed, while it is convenient to envision the war as a separator between an extremely elitist view of gatekeeping the life of ease and a more egalitarian view, Connors reminds us that the line is not so clear. Tracing the fortunes of grammar instruction, he demonstrates that as the United States became increasingly divided by class, it became increasingly divided linguistically as well (114–5, 120–1). Grammar instruction, a critical tool in this division, itself waxed and waned, and methods varied considerably. Before the war, Murray had applied the notion of correct and incorrect grammar to English—a simplification with huge ramifications which need further study. After the war, corrosively elitist linguistic bases for class distinctions continued to appear in the
Alford/Moon/Gould debates, popular opinion about “vulgar” or “barbarous” language, and nonacademic guides to proper English (123–4).

3.8.2 Writing and Upward Mobility

Between 1850 and 1880, large state universities (Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois), and well-endowed private universities (Cornell, Johns Hopkins, Clark) grew rapidly, competing with traditional northeastern colleges (Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, and Penn). With mandates from state legislators and philanthropic benefactors often openly stating goals of egalitarianism and betterment, these schools defined the “life of ease” much more broadly, and their faculty often saw writing classes as critical tools in empowering citizens to participate in democracy—and to benefit from the growing economy. Again, Berlin:

The new college was to serve the middle class, was to become an agent of upward social mobility. It was based on an educational psychology that abandoned mental discipline and the training of the faculties in favor of a view emphasizing individual differences and the importance of the student’s pursuing his own natural talents. [. . .] The new college was nonetheless a middle-class college, committed to material success and progress in this world. [. . .] Most schools, both private and public, began to view themselves as serving the needs of business and industry. [. . .] The ability to write effectively—then as well as now—was one of the skills that all agreed was essential to success. (60)

For the middle class, the path to the life of ease ran through business, built on educational opportunities provided by the new colleges. It was not surprising, then, that colleges set aside mental discipline and strictly enforced classical curricula, embracing a more comfortable classroom environment and the elective system. This enabled students to select courses in areas they already had expertise—study what you know—and to avoid classes with a reputation for difficulty—as happened even at Harvard (Veysey 225, 240).
At Johns Hopkins, the first American university modeled on the German research institution, betterment played a different, although still sizable, role. The goal of that institution was discovering scientific truth and delivering it for national use in the pursuit of “human betterment and material progress” (Rudolph qtd in Berlin 59). Following a pattern which should now be familiar, American researchers simplified the German model, minimizing its contemplative, philosophical dimensions, and emphasizing specialization in the name of positive science. The university envisioned by Humboldt and his contemporaries was made easy: abstractions set aside in favor of concretion, and a deliberative approach eschewed in favor of expediency of research. The German model was widely influential and definitely shaped Midwestern universities and even northeastern colleges who felt pressure to compete with Hopkins. At land-grant colleges and state universities, German ideals extended the university’s mission, complementing upward mobility for undergraduates with service to the community and general economic return.

3.9 Conclusion

During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, strong bonds between ease and writing formed as the technology of writing, its economic importance, and its position in curricula began a period of intense change that quickened in the twentieth century. Ease played numerous roles in the institution of college-level writing. The philosophical approach which enabled equation of clear thought and clear writing, or the application of concepts like “unity, coherence, and emphasis” to sentences, paragraphs, and essays, bolstered the position of ease relative to writing style, writing pedagogy, the teaching profession, and the relation of writing and society. This typical multiplicity magnified the self-reinforcing nature of ease, enabling its incredibly rapid spread throughout the curriculum.
The development of new media, electronic communication, new technologies, and advancements in writing and printing tools were critical for the spread of ease and its bond to writing. Because writing is a technology, is impossible to separate “technological” concerns from the history of writing, though for many composition studies researchers this is standard practice. The more integrated approach used here demonstrates the strength and frequency of ease-writing connections. However, questions remain about the evolution of the relationship of ease and technology.

Questions also surround the dynamics of contradiction often associated with ease. The four large areas in which ease and writing are connected demonstrate different level of acknowledging this contradiction. There is also a tremendous amount of variation between individual authors—differences not nearly as pronounced in patterns of relationships to technology. Writers were more likely to admit the difficulty of writing prose which is easy to read than the difficulty of learning to write or teaching writing. Questioning the economic value of writing was less common as the turn of the century neared (though it was by no means a bygone conclusion). Contradictions of ease, like technologies of ease, need further study.

Finally, the claims of success for easy writing pedagogies must be challenged. If, as Kitzhaber argues, the writing pedagogies of 1900 were “almost as unrelated to the realities of communication as the instruction had been fifty years before” (220), and critiques mounted in the late 1890s are relevant more than a hundred years later, what has easy pedagogy and rhetoric done besides increase the possibility that consumption-oriented, transactional models of ease will be used for writing pedagogy—and for culture as a whole? The familiarity of Perrin and Scott’s critiques is disturbing enough, but even more so when considered in light of the consequences of current institutional
trends (like the rise in high-stakes testing) and the increasing power of ease (as I demonstrate in Chapter 1).

In the 1950s, when composition studies began to take shape as a viable discipline, new pedagogical approaches, often described as movements, recognized that current-traditional thought was lackluster, if not deeply troubling. Many of these approaches were grounded in twentieth century rhetoric and consciously oriented toward reforming disciplinary structure and pedagogy. But ease and writing would not be separated by these new ideas. In fact, when computers were introduced into writing classrooms, first in the 1980s, then in quantity in the late 1990s, in many ways the role of ease was expanded. Educators used easy methods like those I discuss here, supplemented with ideas from computer science and popular culture, to solve problems which arose when these new media were used. I now turn to those areas of composition studies.
CHAPTER 4
BEYOND EASE

4.1 The Endurance of Ease

The bond of ease and writing pedagogy forged during the nineteenth century survived the upheaval in composition studies which began in the 1950s, when the limits of current-traditional pedagogy became apparent, and the voices of critics like Porter Perrin and his protégé Albert Kitzhaber were finally heard. Indeed, important scholars date the disciplinary birth of composition studies from the early 1960s. Since that time, several schools of pedagogical thought have offered tangible reforms of undesirable current-traditional practices. Though some of these pedagogies acknowledge the paradoxical nature of ease, it has remained very powerful, and direct rejection of ease like Perrin’s (see page 140) has seldom occurred. I will summarize some of these trends to show the lasting power of ease in composition:

First, the expressivist theories of Peter Elbow, Ken McCrorie, Ann Berthoff, and other writers, and closely related process-oriented pedagogy, acknowledge that writing is not easy. Elbow observes that the overt attention to grammar in schools is likely because it is easy to teach and grade (138), and suggests mixing a “write what you know” approach with conscious defamiliarization and establishment of distance from one’s own writing (14). But qualities of ease like transparency remain very important. Writing of peer review groups, Elbow suggests that student writers make “movies of the mind” which enable others to access thoughts as if through a window were installed in the side of one’s head (92). Like many other expressivists, Elbow resists
overt theory, separating the theoretical essay “The Doubting Game and the Believing Game” from the more pragmatic content of *Writing Without Teachers*. Finally, his work privileges economy and brevity: he contends that introductions and transitions are evidence of poor structure, a wordy “wrong order” (41).

Second, technical communication is often derided for a pragmatic approach which beats the excitement out of writing, focusing instead production of conventionally formatted texts in “plain language.” Notably, as with nineteenth-century composition, this obsession with form can make grading easy. While there are definitely technical communication programs and textbooks which take a broader approach, transparency, pragmatism, and expediency—qualities of ease—dominate the field. (Recall my discussion of the last of these on page 70 above.) Indeed, many technical communication textbooks follow current-traditional rhetoric by using a single concept, such as usability, as a complete rhetoric, relegating other concerns—ethics, technology, even grammar and usage—to sidebars or out of the main textual flow (Dobrin).

Recently, the concept of usability and Jakob Nielsen’s ideas about writing for the Web have become massively influential in technical communication. “How Users Read on the Web” and “Concise, Scannable, and Objective” (with John Morkes), based on a small number of studies of web readers, are frequently deployed as justification for “web” oriented writing: a style which combines the inverted pyramid of journalism with formatting-intensive technical writing. Many Web writing guides cite Nielsen and Morkes in arguments which imply that this style is simply the latest in a chain of natural evolutions toward a state of pure information (see Henry or Petersen). Some usability advocates see a strong correlation between the development of computers and the Internet: both are optimized for high-speed, high-technology environments, in
which any content but necessary facts is a distraction that slows the reader’s processing of the data at hand.

Thirdly, handbooks which might be called “updated current-traditional” still eagerly embrace ease, and though printers now use four-color process, many of the typographic techniques Holmes used in *The Art of Rhetoric Made Easy* appear today. Titles such as *Easy Writer* and *Easy Access* are selling well. At CCC 2003, Prentice Hall marketed their *Reference Guide to Grammar and Usage* as “The easiest textbook for students to use”—a slogan printed on banners, bottled water, and promotional literature. McGraw-Hill’s *Writing From A to Z* is subtitled “The Easy-To-Use Reference Handbook” because its revolutionary use of alphabetization “eliminat[es] students’ need to crack the code of a conventional writer’s handbook.” Generally speaking, composition handbooks conform to the first two standards of ease established in Chapter 4 above (writing is easy, the ideal writing style is easy), though there is considerable variation in the field, and some handbooks are less depressingly current-traditional than others.

Finally, the discipline of Computers and Writing is, to be blunt, obsessed with ease. Early books suggested that teachers could work with programmers to design writing software or even create their own, and pedagogical theory was frequently complemented with highly technical discussions of programming.\(^1\) However, the field has gradually shifted to the other extreme, and involvement in software development is reserved for “techies” and “geeks,” not everyday folks—or as Selfe notes, is dismissed as ancillary to the real business of teaching writing (22). At the annual Computers and Writing conference, theoretical scholarship is less well received than

\(^1\)For example, see Cynthia Selfe, *Computer-Assisted Instruction in Composition,* or Hugh Burns, “The Challenge for Computer-Assisted Rhetoric.”
empirical accounts of classroom practice based on anecdote or lore (Salvo), and how-to workshops focusing on commodity software are common. For many instructors (and as required by many institutions), easy-to-use course management systems like BlackBoard or WebCT have replaced homegrown hypermedia “syllaweb.” Student work centers around the production of essays and printed forms—with the justification that it is too difficult to teach (or learn) new media such as hypertext and digital cinema.\(^2\) To summarize, the discipline’s use of computers follows established norms: word processing, Web browsing, online research, and ready-made course web sites which resemble CNN and Yahoo—with occasional chat or email discussion, added as supplements to the real business of producing essays. The field has settled into a comfortable literacy-oriented computer usage pattern not conducive to innovative classroom use of emerging new media technologies.

What will it take to address these problems?

The first three areas of composition studies I covered here—expressivism, technical communication, and “updated current-traditional” pedagogy—predate the widespread appearance of computer technology in composition classrooms, though they have certainly been influenced by it. The problems ease can generate in these fields can be addressed through the work of some of the composition studies scholars I outlined in Chapter 3. Additionally, novice/expert divisions exacerbated by classrooms structured around teachers have been addressed by student-centered practices such as collaborative learning. Pedagogy which suggests that writing is an individualized process has acknowledged importance differences between student writers consistently smoothed over by old and new forms of current-traditional rhetoric. Some technical

\(^2\)See footnote 1 on page 2 regarding the specific use of this terminology.
communication books, such as Melody Bowdon and Blake Scott’s *Service Learning in Technical and Professional Communication*, break from an easy, instrumental view of writing to foreground a rhetorical approach. Generally speaking, for these and most areas of composition studies, acknowledging the paradoxes of ease and problems which can occur when it is mobilized is a very positive step. Composition can motivate existing scholarship to reduce the negative impacts of ease noted in Chapter 3 of this work.

But the problems with ease in Computers and Writing are a little different. Consider the bond of writing and ease I analyze in Chapter 4. Ease was designed for and shaped by writing, and optimized for its ultimate form: the essay, especially the five-paragraph essay which Sharon Crowley identifies as the Holy Grail of current-traditional rhetoric (134–5). The essay and its pedagogy, ease, are connected not only to the technology of writing, but to its cultural situation as well. Crowley repeatedly demonstrates her awareness of this connection:

> During the late Renaissance, method was a process of inquiry; thinkers who were rebelling against scholasticism turned to it as a non-Aristotelian means of finding new knowledge and of organizing received knowledge. [. . .] The five paragraph theme was the most thoroughgoing scheme for spatializing discourse that had appeared in rhetorical theory since Peter Ramus’ method of dichotomizing division rendered all the world divisible by halves. [. . .] [M]odern attitudes toward knowledge, which are encapsulated in the expository theme, are currently under fire. Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974) is a readable attack on what Pirsig calls the “Church of Reason.” Another sort of attack has come from persons influenced by “postmodern” epistemological assumptions. (34, 135, 186ff)

Crowley recognizes that methodical thought signified a shift in worldview, not just a change in technique: method was appealing because it enabled rejection of all of the trappings of scholastic logic. The five paragraph essay, the ultimate “easy” form of current-traditional rhetoric, is built on Enlightenment assumptions of correspondence
between language, thought, and the rationality of the individual—for which Ramus
provided critical codifications. His simplification of rhetoric was just the beginning
(and would, as Crowley notes, suffice until worldview was altered again with the
development of postmodern epistemology). The ease-writing connection worked
because it was erected upon, correlated with, and shaped not only the technology
of writing (in the form of the book and the essay), but the institutions where the
technology was mobilized (the nascent university, founded on scientific principles), and
Enlightenment subjectivity (rationalism and positivism).

Similarly, the development of electronic forms of writing—the new essay—and
electronic pedagogies—the new ease—will work best by following an approach
which respects the social dimensions of technology. Apparatus theory provides
such a framework. Gregory Ulmer describes the notion of the apparatus succinctly:
“an interactive matrix of technology, institutional practices, and ideological subject
formation” (Heuretics 17). The literate apparatus has been outlined; what makes up the
apparatus of electracy? While it is impossible to answer definitively, Ulmer offers a
persuasive picture: the technology of new media (electracy) shaped by the institution of
entertainment, through a post-modern subjectivity.

How will the electrate apparatus emerge? As I note on page 49, Langdon Winner
observes that the popular understanding of this incredibly complex process follows
the Western ideal of technological progress: (1) a new technology comes along; (2)
due to its excellence, that technology immediately gains acceptance, replacing existing

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3Crowley’s critique of the five-paragraph form demonstrates that is a debased form of the academic
argumentative essay—the culmination of the lamentable tendencies of ease. I have argued that this
strategic undermining of student composition leveraged the position of professional essay writers—who,
like students, called on the pedagogical nature of ease. My mobilization of ease as a model
rejects this novice/expert separation and fallacious “ease mobility;” and attempts to establish learning
techniques available for all electronic “writers.”
forms; (3) the obsolete technology is relegated to use by Luddites and other holdouts. Out with the old and in with the new. Marshall McLuhan offers a different model: the content of new media (technologies) are the forms of old media (*Media* 9–12). The apparatus of literacy will not be rejected, but folded into the new apparatus, perhaps even reinvigorated by it: a supplementary phenomenon which Walter Ong called “secondary orality” (135). This explains the presence of ease in *Computers and Writing*, and reveals an opportunity: during this transition period, ease can be reshaped to meet the needs of the new apparatus. It need not retain its present form—and perhaps some of the problems it causes could be addressed during this reformulation. (The quote from Crowley above reminds us that Ramus *willfully created* the writing practice which led to the development of ease as a pedagogy—a sentiment mobilized as a generational rhetoric by Ulmer in *Heuretics.*)

I have already showed that Selfe and Robert Johnson both offer valuable critiques of transparency and expediency. But though both forward emerging computer technologies as one of their principal objects of study (Selfe 3–5, Johnson xi), regarding their work from the perspective of apparatus theory reveals closer concern with institutional practices of literacy. Selfe’s book culminates in the development of a “critical technological literacy” designed to extend attention paid to technology to the cultural and political forces which are involved in it (148). Johnson’s “user-centered rhetorical complex of technology” is an attempt to redefine the terms by which technological systems and their users relate, using rhetorical principles. But both approaches mobilize the literate apparatus. There are limitations to such an approach:

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4Evan Watkins persuasively demonstrates the adaptation of this model to the exploitation of the working class in the current service economy.
Our first question in this essay: *what are we likely to carry with us when we ask that our relationships with all technologies should be like that we have the technology of printed words?* Our second question: *what other possibilities might we use for expressing our relationship with and within technologies?* (Johnson-Eilola and Wysocki 349)

Like Selfe and Johnson, Johnson-Eilola and Wysocki recognize technological decisions are not valueless with respect to the extra-technological: but they also insist that one can recall those values while looking ahead to different epistemological systems. I hope to answer their challenge, complementing Selfe and Johnson in two ways: by focusing on the change in technologies—the nascent forms which will be the electrate supplement of the essay—and by extending consideration into the apparatus of electry. Of course, my proposal must be incomplete: this discourse is situated in composition studies, and appeals to others in the discipline. Thus, the literate institutional framework of the university must be retained, at least in part.

To return to ease in the classroom: following apparatus theory, one can predict that the use of ease as *it was developed for literacy* with computers would reproduce essay writing adapted to electronic form. The trends in Computers and Writing which I have discussed throughout this dissertation bear out this assumption. While ease is certainly not the only force encouraging the use of computers following the methods invented for paper-oriented communication, the lack of innovation in the pedagogical use of computers is hard to ignore. Also, one could predict a second possibility: that the deployment of ease as a strategy for learning computers would be ineffective, and would fail to function as it did for the technology of writing (producing comfort, simplifying the complex, and enabling learning). I believe the problems surrounding technological devices described in “Overwhelmed by Tech” support this conclusion (see pages 15–19 above).
My long-term goal, as stated in Chapter 1, is development of writing environments and suitable pedagogies for their use in college-level composition and rhetoric courses. I will outline the resources needed to accomplish that goal, taking the current transitional moment into account, and assuming that development of electrate forms will require a recursive process of articulation, revision, and experimentation. To that end, this chapter will be a starting point for future pedagogy—a “first run.” Analyzing the situation from the perspective of apparatus theory indicates that in order to produce an electrate supplement to ease which will function pedagogically, a transitional apparatus should be assembled.

First, technology. What will the electrate “essay” be, and what will be its “alphabet”—its technical characteristics? My primary source will be Lev Manovich’s groundbreaking work *The Language of New Media*. This well-received text is intended to be a historical record of the current state of new media which enables more work in the field: “It is my hope that the theory of new media developed here can act not only as an aid to understanding the present, but as a grid for practical experimentation” (Manovich 10). That seems ideal. Manovich describes five principles of new media—there is the “alphabet”—and his work repeatedly considers the established genre of hypermedia. I will consider this the new “essay.”

Second, institutional practices. Because of the context of my work in composition studies, I will retain some of the framework of university education. But a work which seeks models which supplement schooling is necessary. Ulmer’s latest book, *Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy*, provides an institutional model which synthesizes school and “entertainment.” A strong parallel to Manovich’s work emerges here: both he and Ulmer consider the impact of the practices of cinema (and
Hollywood-style studio cinema, especially) as one of the key elements shaping transitional hypermedia (following McLuhan’s model of old-within-the-new). Ulmer also proposes the development of new institutions such as the “EmerAgency” to support the practice of electronic “writing.”

Third, subjectivity. Through the presentation of poststructural theory, Ulmer’s *Internet Invention* argues that the electrate apparatus will reflect the hybrid subjectivity of postmodernism. Ulmer demonstrates its congruence with the associative logic of hypermedia, focusing on the way the logic of the image—what he calls conduction—is representative of larger trends in postmodern thought. Manovich’s work also reflects this belief, though in a much less foregrounded manner than Ulmer.

In the rest of this chapter, I will present the transitional apparatus based on important components of these works, drawing important connections between them and noting some trends with implication for my future work. Tabulating this material will also provide me with a “how-to” guide for applying the transitional apparatus—the ways Manovich and Ulmer synthesize literate and electrate can serve as models for this synthetic work. I will then call on the resultant apparatus to redefine several qualities of ease into concepts which form the beginning of the electrate supplement to ease. With this work, I will begin the process of applying well-developed theories of new media to composition studies—where, regrettably, they have been seldom used.

### 4.2 The Transitional Apparatus

*The Language of New Media* presents a thorough look at the state of new media at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The examples Manovich presents throughout his book show that hypermedia is his dominant concern. Manovich calls upon an open-ended definition of hypermedia established by Halasz and Schwartz: objects that “provide their users with the ability to create, manipulate, and/or examine
an network of information-containing nodes interconnected by relational links” (qtd. in Manovich 40–1). The corpus of hypermedia Manovich considers ranges from works designed for Apple’s HyperCard program, which brought scriptable hypertext with integrated images to its Macintosh computers in 1987, to interactive computer games like Myst (1993), to Web-based installations using a variety of new programming languages and standards. Notably, media which are not necessarily digital but which could be considered hypermedia, such as installation art, are also considered. This broad approach is well-suited to the speculative work undertaken here.

Manovich’s work offers far more to the reader than I present here, but today remains the only work which endeavors to present the “alphabet” of new media needed for my analysis.

4.2.1 The Principles of New Media

In the first chapter of *The Language of New Media* Manovich offers five characteristics of new media objects which differentiate them from old media. The first two principles, numerical representation and modularity, are fundamental: the remaining three, automation, variability, and transcoding, are derived from the first pair. While Manovich suggests that the principles “should be considered not as absolute laws but rather as general tendencies of a culture undergoing computerization,” (27), it seems unlikely that any new media forms would manifest fewer than three of the characteristics mentioned here, and most evidence all of them.

Social and cultural effects shape Manovich’s characteristics of new media, but the emphasis is technological. While he recognizes the congruence of twentieth-century economic developments and the principles of new media, Manovich is not very specific
about what “cultural” forces affect new media. Also, though they are not included here, Manovich follows his principles with a brief explanation of “What New Media Is Not,” which contends that digitizing, multimedia, and random access do not define new media or differentiate it from print, television, or other forms. This section debunks some common myths about new media as well—the revolutionary nature of “interactivity,” and the notion that all digital media can be copied an infinite number of times without loss of information, among others.

The five subsequent chapters of Manovich’s book explore many of the particular forms appearing in new media, such as interfaces, databases, image-instruments and filters. His work also inventories and describes as particular concepts and entities (many functional in the literate apparatus as well as in old electronic media) which will likely take on new importance as the new media develop: the screen, navigable space, and a series of oppositions involving representation.

4.2.1.1 Numerical representation

Manovich points out loose usage of “digital” is confusing because a digital nature can include three components: analog to digital conversion, standardized encoding and quantitative systems, and numerical representation (52). The last of these is the greatest change. New media objects created on computers are represented using the numerical systems of digital formatting. There are two critical consequences of this development, which “changes the identity of both media and the computer itself” (25). Media can now be described mathematically and manipulated with algorithms—over and over again, and reversibly. “In short, media becomes programmable” (27).

5Samples of Manovich’s latest work Info-Aesthetics, in press at the time of this writing, have been posted on his Web site, and indicate that Manovich may now be addressing institutional and ideological formations more directly.
The numerically represented character of new media is often portrayed in terms of discreteness and continuity. But many forms, new and old alike, are both: “each frame [of motion picture film] is a continuous photograph, but time is broken into a number of [discrete] samples (frames)” (28). Similarly, the halftone screens involved in offset printing are discrete dots, but the size and therefore the apparent intensity of the dots vary continuously (28). Manovich contends that the development of standardized and discrete properties for media such as film and typesetting machines mirrors contemporary economy (the industrial logic of the factory). New media “runs ahead of” both that economy and the “quite different logic of post-industrial society—that of individual customization, rather than mass standardization” (30).

Numerical representation presents a fundamental difference from photography, writing, and other media. Though writing, like new media, is made of a restrictive code (the alphabet), and units of writing of different sizes, meanings, and forms can be produced using that code, the code used for writing differs from that used for musical notation. For new media, the underlying code of both a novel and a symphony—not to mention a photograph, a film, or a design for a building—shares a common structure, whether one is speaking of the text itself or an individual iteration of that text. Identical filters, operations, and methods for storage and retrieval function for new media objects which appear quite different.

But binary, hexidecimal, and even more outwardly alphabetic forms of numerical representation are barely human-readable. Here is a portion of the hexidecimal code of an icon associated with the University of Florida’s web page: 5089 474e 0a0d 0a1a 0000 0d00 4849 5244 0000 1000 0000 1000 0608 0000 1f00 fff3. Many other...
new media objects are represented in exactly the same fashion. The arcane nature
of numerical representation is one of the forces behind the creation of interfaces for
computers and new media objects as well. Thus the interface is almost as fundamental
to new media as numerical representation, and the two are closely linked.

4.2.1.2 Modularity

New media have a fractal structure: they are collections of samples, algorithms,
or other data which can be organized as samples, algorithms, or other data (30).
New media are often composed using an object-oriented model: units of new media,
considered objectively, can be integrated into other new media objects without losing
autonomy. For example, digital representations of photographs can be embedded
in a slide show presentation, and later extracted without modification. The logic of
computer programming and the makeup of new media objects reflect this modularity;
both are often made from independent units collected as needed, and reassembled each
time they are used. To continue the use of the slide show example, changes made to an
individual photographic unit would be reflected in the slide show as well.

This objective nature makes the hierarchical structure common in old media less
important, at least on a technical level: since objects can replace other objects, and
any new media object can be “swallowed” into another, it is difficult to assume that
any one object is most important. This “cut-and-paste” logic was embedded from the
start in early versions of the Mac OS. (Some new media objects retain hierarchical
organization, and resist objective structure, since they are produced following the
linear, atomistic logic of print.) Modular structure affords the production of highly
dynamic, customizable new media objects, since both the application programs used
to produce new media and the objects follow the objective logic of modularity.
The implementation of layers of images in applications like Adobe Photoshop, or
the functional objects and applets of programming languages such as C++ or Java, facilitate a modular approach by the user or programmer. Time and spatial (or semantic) organization are both impacted by modularity: the actions of a computer or its users can be treated as if they were objects and played back, reversed, or reorganized in a different manner. (Again, Photoshop’s “Actions” function demonstrates this principle.)

However, there is a considerable effort to remove or disable the modularity of new media. The Windows operating system prevents capturing data being presented with the Windows Media Player through screenshots. Recording and film industry corporations are pushing legislation requiring Digital Rights Management (DRM) systems which would prevent altering the objective structure of a new media object without proper authorization—or payment of a licensing fee. This neuters cut-and-paste functions in an effort to stop “piracy”—often with blatant disregard for the Fair Use provisions of the copyright code.

4.2.1.3 Automation

The combination of numerical representation and modularity structure enables some removal of the presence of human agency from the production, manipulation, and evaluation of new media objects. Some of the most common examples of automated new media content are Web sites which customize their appearance for individual users. These sites “automatically generate Web pages on the fly when the user reaches the site. They assemble the information from databases and format it using generic templates and scripts” (32). But automation extends far deeper into new media: “artificial intelligence” is the result of automation, the combination of logical systems programmed by humans repeatedly implemented through recursive evaluation. Almost all the functions of computers can be automated.
When automation is combined with the common representational code of new media and the computational capacity of digital computing, new possibilities for sorting, filtering, and searching arise where only hand scanning was present. Automation of this process in real-time can produce new media objects in its own right, or find patterns. Both collections of new media objects and new media representations of old media can be processed in this manner. Automation of recording, processing, and evaluation systems is also possible—raising the possibility that automated exchange of new media objects will be used for surveillance.

Automated systems which search, filter, or create new media objects are sometimes called software “agents,” and there has been considerable debate over their development. In some ways the development of automated media processing systems is a response to automation of media gathering: with data being produced all the time, there is no way human beings could inspect all of it (35). (Modularity and variability contribute as well, since all media can be processed, and dynamic character of media creates a need for continual re-evaluation.) Not surprisingly, a loss of human agency can result from the use of these systems, as Steven Johnson discusses at length in *Interface Culture*—if machines are collecting and processing the data, human agency is represented only in the design of the system—which, as I note on page 61 above, is often mystified by system-centered design philosophy. Manovich is right to position these concerns as a crucial part of the character of new media, not an easily dismissible side effect.

### 4.2.1.4 Variability

“A new media artifact is not something fixed once and for all,” Manovich states, “but something that can exist in different, potentially infinite versions.” (36). This variability “is a basic condition of all new media” (42). I have already outlined some
of the implications of this property—the ability for embedded objects to change without affecting the “parent” object, and the need for repeated evaluation, over time, of the same new media object, to ensure it has not changed. Manovich points out numerous additional consequences of this variability, which will be consolidated here into a few properties.

Once more, the logic of new media “corresponds to the postindustrial logic of ‘production on demand’ and ‘just in time’ delivery logics that were themselves made possible by the use of computers and computer networks at all stages of manufacturing and distribution” (36). Old media were mass media, circulating in identical copies. By contrast, new media are often customized to for individual viewers:

Every hypertext reader gets her own version of the complete text by selecting a particular path through it. Similarly, every user of an interactive installation gets her own version of the work. And so on. In this way new media technology acts as the most perfect realization of the utopia of an ideal society composed of unique individuals. New media objects assure users that their choices—and therefore, their underlying thoughts and desires—are unique, rather than preprogrammed and shared with others. (42)

Manovich has few illusions about this alleged utopia. He recognizes that the customization offered by new media is extremely limited—the much overstated “freedom” of customization amounts to ideological multiple choice. Shifting decisions to the reader or user also shifts the work and responsibility of authorship. Watkins, too, observes the strict limits and workload created by these newfound “freedoms”—the work of consumption as “field constitution” (137).

Manovich proposes the production of “media databases,” a form which “offers a particular model of the world and of the human experience” which affects its reception by the reader, viewer, or user, as a result of variability (37). The database is a “structured collection of data,” and that structure is imposed on the items it contains,
establishing relationships between them (218). Because “[i]n general, creating a work in new media can be understood as the construction of an interface to a database,” and both the contents of the database, the structure of the database, and the interface itself are highly variable, the resultant meaning of a single database can also vary considerably—perhaps without alteration of its content. Therefore, “[a] number of different interfaces can be created from the same data” (37). While true for print media technology as well—an experience can lead to a ballad, book, or brochure—with new media changes to the experience can be propagated into all subsequent forms. The creation of versions of interfaces can be automated. This is quite visible in emerging rhetorics of hypermedia: the interactive structures of branching or hyperlinked interactivity harnesses variability to create a new type of media.

The most obvious form of variability is dynamism: the form of new media is much less static and permanent than old media. Because it is produced using numerically representable actions and operations, a new media object can be designed to appear in a slightly different fashion each time it is produced or viewed. New media can be revised repeatedly without a trace—while the idea of the “digital palimpsest” is common, strictly speaking, it is fallacious. Also, new media objects can be revised even after they are published, in much the same way early nineteenth century writers like William Blake repeatedly revised their work. But variability “can also be seen as a consequence of the computer’s way of representing data—and modeling the world itself—as variables rather than constants” (43). This slightly different meaning is well-represented in computer programming practice, which separates algorithms (usually static) from data (usually dynamic) (41). Programming is not only variable, but forged from variables.
4.2.1.5 Transcoding

The final property Manovich outlines “is the most substantial consequence of the computerization of media” (45). Transcoding has been defined in computer science in several different ways: as adapting content for a certain display or output format, or converting the numerical representation of digital information from one standard of encoding to another. Manovich strives to maintain this meaning, noting that the numerical representation in new media gives objects which appear radically different a common structure. With this last principle of new media, Manovich acknowledges the influence of culture more intensely than in the previous four, extending and adapting the computer-science understanding of transcoding by discussing the exchange of human-recognizable forms and computer-oriented structures. Manovich describes this separation as division into a “cultural” and “computer” layers.

I previously observed that because of numerical representation, many forms of media formerly distinct can be treated identically. The surface structures familiar to humans (words, objects, surfaces, shots, frames, etc) are irrelevant instrumentally speaking, where they are rendered as packets, functions, variables, streams, files, or folders. Consequently, exchange between these forms is now more possible than with old media—a new media object can be transcoded from one form to another much more readily than old media. In some cases, this process can be automated, with a single parent new media object producing several child objects manifest in different forms. More importantly, however, transcoding means that human-oriented concepts can be applied to new media in previously impossible ways. For example, the playback interface common to compact discs has been applied for texts by Adobe Acrobat (16). And vice versa: “database” is used to organize texts or documents which might have previously been called an anthology or collection.
Assuming feedback between the cultural and computer layers of new media is not a huge leap for the humanities, but for certain perspectives from computer science (and commercial computing), that model is a radical departure. The “black box” model of computing, in which human-computer interaction is minimized, and cultural influences on computing willfully excluded, remains powerful today (and threatens to reappear thanks to DRM). Robert Johnson notes this phenomenon is one of the trends keeping computing system-centered (25, 28).

Manovich recognizes the differences of new and old media have tremendous significance for the discipline of media studies, which provides an important, but insufficient, perspective for understanding new media. However, media studies “cannot address the most fundamental quality of new media that has no precedent—programmability. Comparing new media to print, photography, or television will never tell us the whole story.” (47) Concepts from computer science need to be integrated into a new field:

New media calls for a new stage in media theory whose beginnings can be traced back to the revolutionary works of Harold Innis in the 1950s and Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s. To understand the logic of new media, we need to turn to computer science. It is there that we may expect to find the new terms, categories, and operations that characterize media that became programmable. From media studies, we move to something that can be called “software studies”—from media theory to software theory. (47–8)

“Software studies” should provide concepts which supplement the five summarized here and enable further development of corresponding concepts designed to teach the production and understanding of new media forms based upon them.

4.2.2 Supplementing the essay

I now turn to Ulmer’s Internet Invention, taking inventory of the material it presents which will be usable to my pedagogical experiment. In this book, marketed
as a “next generation textbook,” Ulmer outlines a comprehensive program for an
Internet-based writing practice. Not surprisingly, his scholarship shares many of the
goals of my research. However, he does not focus on the specifics of technological
implementation, instead, calling on the student and instructor to work out the specifics
of the “widesite” which makes up the bulk of the “workbook” portion of the text.
The examples of student work on the companion web site for the text make clear that
Ulmer’s conceptualization of that form is congruent with Manovich’s broad definition
of hypermedia.7 (One of the ancillary functions of my development of this transitional
apparatus is verifying Ulmer’s assumptions about technology, using Manovich’s
compact principles as a baseline for new media behavior.)

The semester-long assignment Ulmer outlines for students using Internet
Invention is a five-part form called the “widesite” envisioned as a version of the
medieval practice of the memory palace (109). This assignment is designed to
culminate in the production of the “image of wide scope,” an emblematic form based
on Gerald Holton’s idea of “themata,” a set of concretions formed in childhood which,
retrospectively, shape one’s relation to lifework. Several examples are provided;
for example, a compass, which fascinated Albert Einstein as a youth. What was
hidden behind the needle’s magic movement toward north? Repeated consideration of
emblematics (the icon, the star) enrich this concept. Ulmer surmises that grasping a
version of this “wide image” early in life would have incredible potential—an electrate
version of the “Eureka.”

The widesite is generated in five parts. The first four parts begin with the general
instruction “Make a website documenting something.” This calls to mind the notion

7At the current time that site is at <http://web.nwe.ufl.edu/~gulmer/longman/>. 
of documentation, explained as “a curated display of details related to a discovery, invention, and a figure responsible for it” (21–2)—but not necessarily an explanatory discourse (as in the typical use, computer documentation). The logic of the widesite (and electracy as a whole) is aesthetic: conduction (see below). Like Manovich, Ulmer argues that new media will not necessarily follow narrative structures, and he advises against imposing structure on the wide image before all the parts were assembled (92). The material for the four preliminary parts of the widesite, corresponds to the parts of Ulmer’s “popcycle” (career, family, entertainment, and community), and is drawn from the “database” of the Internet.

Work with the “popcycle” is not only generative but intended to encourage students to consider the institutional situation and the way that affects them. “The premise of the wide image is that nothing is created or invented in general, but only within the parameters and paradigms of the disciplines and professions that set the problems and determine the criteria for evaluating proposed solutions” (24). This repeated articulation of institutional context helps students understand the larger shift (from literacy to electracy) that is the focus of the book. It also helps students understand the counter-intuitive nature of the widesite: it appears to challenge the “truth” of literacy. Showing the way such truth is mediated through an institution reconfigures the practice as no longer necessarily oppositional.

The development of the widesite and eventual production of the image of wide scope is guided by the “pedagogical genre” of the mystery, which recognizes Manovich’s variability principle and the concomitant customization of new media. The mystery lends form to introspective communication with oneself which supplements literate models, designed for communication with others (57, 155). This necessitates rethinking metaphors used to describe the “writing”—not text, from textile’s ordered
warp and woof (signifier and signified, sender and receiver), but felt, from that tangle of interconnected fibers. The pun of felt and “feeling” helps establish the increased relevance of mood in the practice of electracy.

The mechanism for this assignment is congruent with Manovich’s principles in several ways. First, the guide for producing the widesite follows the logic of modularity: the widesite components are not arrayed in a hierarchical structure. Indeed, the overall shape of the widesite is not specified, and Ulmer hints that Georges Bataille’s concept of informe (formless) will be usable as “a new dimension of value associated with electracy [. . .] literacy did not have enough computing power to think formless” (40, 323). This assertion is verified by the fact that in an initial iteration of this experiment which involved only the work of Manovich, I projected “informality” as a tentative part of the electrate supplement to ease.

Second, remarking on the skepticism of some students facing the apparent impracticality of the wide image (which makes sense because electrate pedagogical practice does not necessarily require pragmatism, a quality of ease), Ulmer points out the mystery is designed to simulate the wide image (21). Manovich’s theory illuminates this comment: in the transitional period of new media, simulation is opposed to both representation and visual illusionism. For Manovich, simulation “aim[s] to immerse the viewer completely within a virtual universe” and “[model] other aspects of reality beyond visual appearance” (16, 17). The practice of simulation moves imaging beyond the simply representative function of language (writing, which is unproblematic as defined by ease) as well as the illusionistic function of images (their realistic motivation, the invisible style of Hollywood cinema).

Thirdly, the centrality of the image and image schema in the assignment reflects the increased role of the visual in new media and the blending of meanings of “image”
from poetry and the visual arts. On the technical side, this blending is supported by
Manovich’s principles of numerical representation: any component of new media can
take on “imagistic” properties because there are no boundaries between images, text,
and other forms. To say a certain new media object has “image-like” properties or is
“poetic” is redundant; all new media have these properties.

Finally, Ulmer recognizes in several ways that new media involves the fore-
grounding of “interface” much more than old media, as he describes the widesite.
Interfaces are a part of all media, but literacy (through the operation of transparency)
minimizes their impact on the reader. First, Ulmer proposes that students use inter-
faces as pedagogical devices, suggesting the model of narrative to describe movement
through Internet Invention to wide image. Second, Ulmer extends the operation of
“interface” in a manner generally congruent with Manovich’s principles of variability
and modularity, encouraging the creation of multiple interfaces for the same “data,”
and recognizing that such interfaces affect what the appearance and meaning (mood)
of that data. Overall, Ulmer’s construction of the hypermedia widesite correlates with
Manovich’s placement of the fundamental quality of interface with new media, and its
increased visibility (despite the myth of transparency discussed earlier).

4.2.2.1 Institutions

The institutional setting Ulmer proposes is a hybrid form. In fact, much of
Internet Invention is dedicated to understanding the process of institutional articulation
through the mechanism of the popcycle. For the purposes of my experiment, this
activity is analogous to Ulmer’s foregrounding of interface: it is necessary because the
operations of literacy minimize the actions of institutions (truth is truth, not disciplinary
consensus).
The textbook-oriented focus of the work (the textbook interface) remains, and Ulmer explains the particulars of this approach (general language, specific specialized knowledge, sanctioned by nationality, which teaches acceptable history and ideological practices). Ulmer’s book begins very tightly oriented around the institution of school and textbook, and gradually moves away from it toward the institution of entertainment its forms—the *ficelle* (string, link), image, mood (voice, funk). But removal from school is never completed, as mentioned above, nor shall it be for my development of transitional “ease”—at least not at the present time.

Ulmer’s work with entertainment, especially film, is mirrored by Manovich’s debt to cinema, though Ulmer calls on popular music as well. Ulmer assumes that entertainment already follows the logic of image and mood, the logic of electracy (127). Entertainment is the institution which “primarily hails one into commodity capitalism as a consumer” (25), discouraging the individual production of image-texts in favor of passive mass interpretation in the manner of spectatorship. This does not click with hypermedia, even on the most basic level, where user action is regularly needed (though Manovich rightly points out the limitations of considering “interactivity” a liminal characteristic of hypermedia), and Ulmer spends considerable time extracting concepts from entertainment which can function rhetorically. Particularly interesting is his idea of impersonation, tied to embodiment, which Ulmer deploys as an interface for learning the “icon of the [movie or rock] star”—the signs which convey her mood or image (133).

From entertainment Ulmer also borrows several versions of the remake, or performance of a standard with improvisational character (as in jazz). In this making and remaking one can see considerable echoes of Manovich’s description of the principle of the programmable nature of new media: harnessing variability to generate
a number of versions of a new media object using a ruleset, program, or algorithm, or other method. Ulmer deploys remaking in several different ways: to dictate form, to generate new content, and to find patterns through juxtaposition. Again, this practice is supported by Manovich’s description of transcoding in new media, in which a process can be reconfigured as a form or filter, or applied to seemingly heterogeneous new media objects. The notion of “performance” is important, too; its analog in programmable new media would be an individual program execution.

The EmerAgency, which Ulmer describes as a hypothetical “consultancy without portfolio” and “a hybrid selected from oral, literate, and electrate elements” (1, 156) is offered as an institutional framework which will supplement school and entertainment, supporting the work of “egents” in the electrate apparatus. The EmerAgency “places the text-image forms of screen compositions within the global institutional setting of the Internet” (xiii). The task of the EmerAgency is problem solving, specifically public policy problems, for several reasons. First, this provides a way for humanities education to re-establish its importance in the community (1). Secondly, there is a connection between narrative (one of the principal forms of the humanities) and problems: every narrative has a conflict. Thirdly, the form of the wide image indicates that the method of establishing solutions for personal problems can be amplified to address much larger ones. (21).

This seems fairly outlandish, and Ulmer acknowledges that some folks may simply dismiss the idea of the EmerAgency (28). But as Manovich shows repeatedly, practices very much like the EmerAgency already exist on the Internet: the communities of Open Source or Free Software programmers. A brief examination of this

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8The trAce writing community, similar online writing collectives, and the very loosely knit community of weblog (blog) users who have christened themselves the “Blogosphere” also provide examples
community shows that Ulmer’s proposal is less fiction than virtual reality. The model of intellectual property embraced by these programmers would not be possible without the modularity of new media (and computing in general)—the object-oriented approach to writing code which facilitates decentralized sharing. Notably, leveraging the programmable character of media, these communities have developed tools which facilitate a distributed, non-hierarchical structure. (Unlike the EmerAgency, free software projects do maintain portfolios of code libraries.) The slogan Ulmer proposes for the EmerAgency, “Problems B Us,” matches the motivation of free software development described by Eric S. Raymond: selecting a project based on “scratching an itch” or “addressing a problem.” Notably, many free software developers see the entire concept of free software as civically motivated, a response to irresponsible commercialization of the software industry. The free software programmer fills a void, like the egents of the EmerAgency.

One of the functions of the EmerAgency which could be considered secondary is quite consistent with Manovich’s notion of “transcoding,” which is built on the principle of modularity. Ulmer notes that pidgin has served as a transitional form for the development of creoles, which are full-featured languages (157). Where pidgin establishes an ordinate (colonizing) and subordinate (colonized) language, and favors the former, creole preserves the complexity of the linguistic and cultural forces involved (158). Perhaps the pidgin-to-creole movement is unnecessary, and creole itself could serve as a model for the electrate exchange of icons and moods on a global scale (similarly, Ulmer calls for prospective, not retrospective, location of the wide image). Here is the match with Manovich: transcoding and the syncretism Ulmer envisions of virtual entities developing institutional and subjective forms based on the technology of networked new media, including some forms of consultation.
(and explains in much greater detail than is presented here) function in very similar fashion: both are agents for cultural exchange and movement between technological registers.

4.2.3 The Logic of Conduction

One of the central assumptions of *Internet Invention* is the centrality of the visual and the image in electracy. This seems quite intuitive, given the ability of new media to create, display, and manipulate multiple kinds of images—raster and vector data, still and moving pictures, hybrids, and new forms. As Manovich demonstrates, the numerical representation of media means that as far as the computer is concerned, all kinds of text and image are handled in the same way. Ulmer’s notion of “image” includes this valence: “Electracy is an image apparatus, keeping in mind that ‘images’ are made with words as well as pictures” (2). So “image” is not just a matter of increased pictorial or visual content, though that is certainly one part of electracy, but supplementing the logical system of literacy with new modes of inference. Following Manovich’s terminology, one can consider this electrate image-text a transcoded version of the poetic image or metaphor.

Conduction supplements the established literate forms of logic (synthesis or analysis, or more specifically, abduction, induction, and deduction) with an associative, accretive mode of meaning-making. The Ramistic principle of ordered, hierarchical atomization (and the pedagogies of ease based upon it) are unnecessary for conduction. Emphasizing the concept’s critical importance, Ulmer explains it in several ways: using Roland Barthes’s idea of the third or obtuse meaning, and his illustration of it with haiku (43–9); through a powerful example of conductive reasoning derived from a previous publication (114–21); and other examples which call on the notion of string (*ficelle*) as link. To echo Ulmer’s explanation, mystery tunes the strings
of this conductive process, which relies on the mobilization of personal memories. Conduction does not introduce a new mode of meaning, but merely establishes an electrate framework for acknowledging meaning “that has been at work all along” but with application greatly restricted by literacy (45).

The technological allowances for conductive reasoning in electracy are extensive. The cut-and-paste capability of the contemporary GUI epitomizes the qualities of variability (new media objects of all kinds can be cut-and-pasted), and modularity (the cut-and-paste process is iterable, and does not alter the character of child objects involved). Manovich notes that programming applications designed for new media extend this conductive behavior to the relationships between new media objects: selecting and manipulating computer programs, too, can follow a graphical logic of cut-and-paste or its updated cousin, drag-and-drop (80, 135).

Mood, voice, and atmosphere are the basic units of conduction (Ulmer 59). All are part of normal experience, exemplified in institution of entertainment, which has generated numerous forms to produce them, admittedly in sometimes overdetermined fashion. By contrast—and Crowley’s critique of the five paragraph essay is relevant here—argumentative writing excludes mood and atmosphere. That mood is appropriate for writing, but for certain kinds of writing, especially the writing in composition, the meanings it carries, which fall outside the province of the rational, are irrelevant (some would say threatening). All meanings, not just those semantically consistent with each other, are relevant to conductive inference (Ulmer 157). Instead of reducing something to its essence (the literate ideal of the concept) through the process of atomization, in preparation for conductive work, a comprehensive list of meanings should be recorded. (This is the reason for the “documentation” directive which begins the four parts of the widesite assignment.) Because conductive logic, like new media, is modular, an act of
juxtaposition could produce contact between many groups of meanings, not just those analytically or synthetically justifiable.

The creole syncretism Ulmer envisions mirrors the “database logic” Manovich outlines. As far as the computer is concerned, all media objects in a database are represented in the same manner and equally subject to access or manipulation. On the other hand, for the human user of the database, the relationships between forms arrayed by it are critical; changing the relationships between objects (which is not at all difficult thanks to the principle of variability) does not necessarily affect the objects themselves. If Manovich’s projection of the behavior of new media databases is correct, the syncretic forms Ulmer envisions are quite possible.

Conduction permits the registration of sensory perception all kinds, including touch (another valence of “feeling” indicated in the “felt” metaphor related earlier). Computers already have limited capabilities to acknowledge the sense of touch, though such technology is still limited to horseless-carriage status (digital drawing tablets or electronic pens). Manovich (5) and Ulmer (170) both relate amusing anecdotes about the Nintendo DataGlove input device; one can only assume that its use will someday seem less whimsical. That’s certainly Ulmer’s opinion; in the future, he sees increased “capacity of the technology to read formulaic or clearly defined gestures or body movements” (171), and anticipates electracy will acknowledge embodiment. Interface may suffice now, but interbody might be a more useful formulation (146–7).

This syncretic logic corresponds to the syncretic subjectivity of postmodernism: “Mystery is composed in the middle voice. Electracy in general shifts emphasis from the nearly exclusive attention to communication within the ‘I-s/he’ system, to attend more to the ‘I-I’ system” (57). The specific operations of that I-I system are still emerging, but undoubtedly have a collective dimension: hence the development of the
wide image (the emblem of one’s “self”) through understanding the articulation of social institutions.

4.2.3.1 Two notes

Of Manovich’s five principles of new media, automation is the least well-represented in *Internet Invention*. One consequence of this might be that concern over the displacement of human agency from computing practices, which Manovich connects very closely to automation, is lacking in Ulmer’s work. There are a few mentions of “agents” which follow Steven Johnson’s description of automated programmed new media objects presented in *Interface Culture*. Given the considerable effort Ulmer dedicates to the “egent” (the supplement to agent) and the notion of “voice” as a characteristic of conduction, it seems not a matter of absent agency but its manifestation with different terminology (and forms). To be sure, for most computer users, the current level of programmability of new media has not yet reached the position from which Manovich established his principles of new media. The relative absence of automation from Ulmer’s work reflects the high level of user involvement currently required in most new media production.

At the present time, “documentation” has connotations in computing which clash with Ulmer’s usage. Ulmer envisions documentation as a practice which is not consciously explanatory, but a form of recording. (Giselle Beiguelman’s notion of descriptive rather than inscriptive writing is useful here.) However, the most common functions of “documentation” on computer are explanatory. Help, manuals, and how-to guides are often called “documentation.” The comments included in programming which are designed for self or others to read, but not included in compiled code, could be considered *solely* explanatory since they are seldom if ever incorporated in a finished product.
4.3 Supplementing Ease

I will develop the first prototypes of a pedagogy for this material by extending the qualities of ease in the direction of patterns which emerge in the comparison of the work of Manovich and Ulmer. The ideas I establish here will function in the same manner as ease, but with the transitional electrate apparatus in mind, and (hopefully) taking into account some of the difficulties with ease I reflect on in Chapter 3.

Teachers could use my ideas in one or more ways: (1) by applying them to modify the material being taught, in the same way atomization and alphabetization functioned for ease; (2) encouraging students to cultivate these properties in the material being learned, as ease shaped writing and students’ relation to it; (3) seeking them in their own practices. This last assertion could be off the mark; my questions about the monolithic character of writing pedagogy (ease for everything) are relevant here. However, for a pedagogical experiment—especially one guided by heuretic principles, which encourage embracing the method being invented along the way—extending this strategy from the previous apparatus seems acceptable.

4.3.1 Translucence

Transparency is an important component of ease because it matches the unproblematic model of technology, communication and sense of self which dominate literacy. Good prose, and good technology, are clear and easily understood. There is no need to highlight the operation of technology (or, for that matter, other components of the apparatus). But transparency is not as unproblematic as it seems (recall the arguments of Selfe and Robert Johnson I summarize on pages 68 and 73 above). Manovich’s

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9I could also simply appropriate the pedagogical devices Ulmer utilizes—foregrounding the idea of interface metaphor, using and recommending concepts like the remake and impersonation, and propagating his heuretic method into the transitional apparatus of new media.
principles of new media add several strong reasons for questioning the desirability of transparency in the electrate apparatus.

The modular property of new media would best be harnessed if it were in some way detectable, especially given the goal of encouraging students to produce, not only consume, new media. Students working with found new media objects as well as their own creations would not be able to exploit modularity (and its cousin, variability) if the boundaries between assembled new media objects were transparent. Would the discouragement of critical thinking demonstrated in literacy be repeated in an apparatus which followed the logic of conduction? Consider Ulmer’s suggestion to look for patterns in all parts of available meaning: the literate process of focusing on one meaning to the exclusion of all others follows the logic of transparency (allowing one “point” or “concept” to stand out, and others to be invisible). If transparency was able to function in this way for attempts to think conductively, it would reduce the possible number of connections between meanings begin considered. We can project that transparency would be detrimental to conductive logic as well—perhaps even more so than it is to inductive, deductive, or abductive reasoning.

Transparency is sometimes explained using the metaphor of signal-to-noise ratio: any part of an utterance which calls attention to itself is considered “noise,” and is not part of “the message.” That noise can take different forms, and naturally, what is and is not noise depends on who is listening. The new media principle of numerical representation echoes the logic of conduction, putting pressure on this definition: there is little difference between signal and noise as far as computers are concerned; really, there are merely signals of different kinds.

\[10\] My explanation is a bit metaphorical; students do not necessarily have to find the boundaries of data in a filesystem or computer code, but should be able to understand how they might disassemble and reassemble compound new media objects.
The outline of an electrate “writing” proposed by Ulmer connects the practice of language to images, echoing the visual metaphors with which transparency is often discussed, and suggesting an electrate version of it should, similarly, conduct the image. The notion of translucence provides this connotation, and I consider it a workable supplement to transparency for several other reasons. Translucence retains some of the invisibility and passivity of transparency, but calls to mind syncretism and hybridity. Translucence would allow the character of new media objects to be modified through interaction with other objects—yet, thanks to the principle of modularity, to bear no lingering effects. Like Ulmer’s vision of creole, the properties of individual cultures and languages (objects) would remain intact. For pedagogical purposes, alterations in the structure of the hybrid could highlight the characteristics of individual components—analogous to comparative analysis, but without the reduction of simplification.

However, the operation of transparency need not be strictly imagistic. Because new media are represented numerically, many kinds of “filters” could be used to create varying levels of transparency or opacity—the effect need not only be that of blurring a photograph by looking at it through a sheet of tissue paper. Another way to define translucence would be quite familiar: the degree of a new media object’s presentation of its technological status, its status as media. Designers of new media already work with this property when they decide where to place the buttons, dialog boxes, and other controls commonly used for interacting with new media objects. The artistic work highlighted by Manovich provides numerous examples of systems which call attention to their boundaries by manipulating them.

Translucence would also have the benefit of degree: an object could be nearly transparent—present or visible in a small amount—or nearly opaque. Different kinds
of translucence could be superimposed additively. Variation of the level of translucence could occur in real-time (consider the pedagogical value of being able to manipulate the technological forwardness of one component of an image-text in relation to others)—perhaps an update for the literate model of “gradation.” Unlike transparency, which is all-or-nothing game, association of new media objects with varying levels of translucence would still be translucent; a single opaque component object or filter would not result in an opaque result.

Translucence, then, could support the second-nature character of transparent interfaces and clear language, but need not be restricted by it, as is currently the case with the powerful imperative to make technology disappear. Privileging translucence in the model of technology and language, and in the production of technology and language, is congruent with the increased contact presence of technology in Ulmer’s work—the shift from interface to interbody.

4.3.2 The Complex

The preference of ease for simplicity and difficulty, rather than complexity, is manifest in many different ways. Outright rejection of complex and difficult objects, systems, or practices is the most commonly discussed consequence, but the desire for pragmatism and expediency also reflects valorization of simplicity. Writing, when well-crafted, has only one possible meaning, and can express any idea, even something complicated or multifaceted, in a simple manner. Crowley points out the connection between Ramistic dichotomization and simplification as it was manifest in the nineteenth century.

Following Ulmer’s principle of considering all of the meanings of a work points to the idea of “the complex,” a group or association of objects or constructions. The appearance of this formation in two of the critiques mentioned here backs this
assertion. First, precedent appears in Ulmer’s work: the emblematic image of wide scope which is the goal of the widesite takes the form of a complex: “every person possesses a wide or guiding image (actually an interrelated set of four or five primary images)” (18). Secondly, Robert Johnson proposes the “user-centered rhetorical complex” to rehabilitate the model of technology borrowed from literacy and applied to computing, by recognizing the situation of technology users in relation to disciplines, institutions, and communities (38). The notion of “the complex” I forward here would merge these two definitions, forming a collection of conductively related new media objects.

Johnson provides Venn-diagram–like visualizations for his user-centered rhetorical complex, building on James Kinneavey’s rhetorical triangle (30, 39). Would the complex proposed here follow the model of translucence in taking an imagistic character? Perhaps, with a word of caution: mapping the complex according to the hierarchical visual paradigms of organizing information which support literacy (e.g. Edward Tufte’s theories of quantifying and visualizing information) would restrict its usefulness. The architectural, spatial, or visual component of the complex would have to follow the rules of new media, especially that of variability.

Using the complex as a model for composition—as both final product and works intended only as exercises—would enable the response to difficulty or complexity to follow the conductive model Ulmer proposes as the logic of hypermedia, not the analytic model which is the default of print literacy. In fact, this is the process Ulmer proposes for the mysterical articulation of the image of wide scope—instead of investigating the institutions which have an impact on an individual, divining the sum of that effect (simplification), and then selecting the most important or logical relation between epitomized qualities, Ulmer asks students to build a complex of
meanings with the widesite. The complex also includes ample possibilities for the
syncretism reflected in Ulmer’s view of electracy and implied by Manovich’s principles
of modularity, variability, and transcoding. As noted earlier, his “media database”
(one way of thinking Ulmer’s widesite and the complex) exhibits strong syncretic
properties. Modeling the complex after the syncreticism of creole culture would
also provide strong support for the component of cultural exchange expressed in
Manovich’s transcoding, emphasizing the possibility of forming complexes from human
and machine components, and embedding an arguably progressive model of power
relations.

Ulmer reminds us that one of the original goals of the outline was generative.
It was used to pair concepts, mapping oppositions in an manner which facilitated the
completion of an argument. This usage was set aside by current-traditional fetishization
of the graphical character of the outline and its value for arranging prose (Crowley 82).
Learning from this lesson, the notion of the complex would not favor organizational
over inventive character. As Johnson ends the discussion of his idea of the complex:

In conclusion, the complex serves a number of purposes. It can be a
heuristic for analyzing technological artifacts or processes. It also can
be a mode for exploring the people who use, make, and/or even destroy
technology. It can help tell the tales of people as they struggle with,
become enamored of, or just get plain bored by technology. (40)

While the complex would offer a pedagogically useful organizational concept to
students learning the apparatus of electracy, it would have to be presented keeping the
variable, programmable nature of new media in mind.

4.3.3 Repetition and Iteration

The last practice for the electrate supplement to ease I propose continues the
confrontation with pragmatism and expediency expressed in the complex, and focuses
it toward developing a new method for considering the act of creation, what is often called “writing process.” My assumption is that if Manovich is right and the fundamental difference between new and old media is that “Media becomes programmable,” then in order to best realize its potential, those who wish to produce new media should consider the methods of programming Manovich alludes to frequently in his work.

Manovich considers the loop extensively, considering its effect as a narrative device and connecting the use of loops in the moving pictures which preceded cinema (314–22). That discussion is anticipated in his discussion of the automation and variability principles. The device of the loop is less important here than the practices it represents: repetition and iteration.

Ulmer’s method for constructing the wide image can be considered an iterative loop: students perform the same function (documentation) on a set of variables (Career, Family, Entertainment, Community) in order to produce data (the widesite) designed for evaluation by a future program (which will produce the image of wide scope).\footnote{That action could easily be expressed in Perl pseudocode, though writing a subroutine which performs the “documentation” function will be left for another researcher.} If the method which Ulmer has selected is not particular to the production of the wide image, but a reasonable method of \textit{inventio} tailored for conductive logic, a pedagogy that helped students understand how to iterate would be as usable for electracy as the pedagogy of ease, which inculcated the act of atomization and alphabetization.

My goal is not creating programmers, but as Johnson argued, disrupting the assumption—perhaps ingrained in literate subjectivity?—that there are those who can write (or program), and those who cannot. In fact, the redefinition of writing will likely change the status of what is considered “programming” and what is not. To continue thinking analogically, this has already occurred as it pertains to the visual
component of document production. Writers using desktop publishing software—or even a common word processor—can make decisions previously restricted to “designers.” Similarly, as the programmable nature of new media becomes more part of expression, and more tools for programming are invented, methodologies which support programming will become available for transcoding, and will affect the formation of other practices of writing.

Composition studies scholars who have theorized the writing process offer a relay for bringing iteration into the classroom. However, the concept of iteration envisioned here differs considerably from the work of research, prewriting, drafting, and revising essays: it does not necessarily shape the final artifact, but produces material and methodologies which support it. Whereas from the “drafting” stage forward, students work on their final utterance in some form, iterative development can focus on building a procedure for a computer to generate the final product. Iteration is one way to leverage the processing power of computing and the characteristics of new media to construct different interfaces for the same data, one possibility Manovich offers. One might consider this the difference between thinking of “writing processes” and “processing writing.” Iterative development would take process pedagogy’s attempt to reduce the focus on final product (to the exclusion of development of methodology or creative exploration) one step further.

Automation also takes on a new character if repetition is considered. Sampling based on repetitive frequency is the basis for analog and digital recording of auditory and visual signals. The form of the loop and sample, already being used extensively in popular music, points to Ulmer’s reliance on some musical forms, particularly the notion of the jazz standard as a framework for experimentation (analogous to the function of rhetorical topics). Programming, too, relies on the standard: in the
form of the Request For Comments (RFC), documents used to establish standards for
network protocols and other technologies which have guided the development of the
Internet. These documents serve as guidelines for programmers, yet they are not
static; usage of the RFCs indicates ways in which they should be revised, and indicates
where development of new standards might be beneficial. The standard, as practiced
by both Internet programmers and jamming musicians, is performed repeatedly. In
fact, it is used precisely as Manovich hoped The Language of New Media would
function: “not only as an aid to understanding the present, but also as a grid for future
experimentation” (10).

\footnote{For more information about this form, used by the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) and
other international organizations, see \url{http://www.faqs.org/rfcs/}.}


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Bradley Dilger has lived in Florida all his life and, with the successful defense of this dissertation, possesses three degrees in English from its flagship university. He grew up in Palm City, frequenting the St. Lucie River and the citrus trees which grew throughout his neighborhood. During his senior year of high school, Bradley served as an elementary school aide in lieu of attending morning classes.

As an undergraduate at the University of Florida, Bradley finished most of a pre-medicine sequence before realizing how much happier he had been teaching kindergartners. A quick change in focus led to studying nineteenth-century American literature, especially Melville, and a Bachelor of Arts in English. Following several years in the advertising and publishing business, during which time he married the lovely, talented, and patient Erin Easterling, Bradley returned to graduate school to study English once again, focusing on composition studies, especially teaching in electronic environments.

From 1996 through the time of this writing (August 2003), Bradley was a graduate student in the Department of English. He held a diverse assortment of University positions—teaching first-year composition and media studies, serving as a research assistant for the Department of English, working as a technical writer for the Department of Agricultural and Biological Engineering, and serving as Information Technology Specialist in the Networked Writing Environment. Since January 2002, he has suspended these diversions to focus on the present work.
Bradley has accepted the position of Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Journalism at Western Illinois University. Upon commencement of his professorship, he will be the seventh teacher in his family, joining his brother, sister-in-law, mother, mother-in-law, grandmother, and great-grandmother. Bradley and Erin have recently sold their little yellow house (which they will miss very much), boxed up Lumper and The Big Kitty, and relocated to Macomb.
I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Gregory L. Ulmer, Chair
Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Stephanie A. Smith
Associate Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Joseph V. Wilson
Associate Professor of Computer Science and Engineering

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

J. Blake Scott
Assistant Professor of English

This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English in the Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

August 2003

Dean, Graduate School
For many Americans, “ease” shapes understanding of complexity and difficulty. Though most consider ‘ease of use’ a twentieth-century phenomenon associated with personal computers, its origins date from the seventeenth century. “Ease in Composition Studies” investigates the history of ease, especially its role in American college-level writing.

Chapter One introduces the dissertation and long-term research goals. Chapter Two provides an introduction to ease, including definition, historical review, and synonyms for ease: comfort, transparency, effortlessness, simplicity, pragmatism, femininity, expediency, and pictorialism. Chapter Three investigates the dangers and benefits of ease and its influence on American culture as “the ideology of ease.”

Chapter Four documents the role ease played in the development of nineteenth-century college-level writing. Chapter Five proposes a supplement to ease which functions similarly but is tailored to the character of electronic communication (electracy), unlike ease, which was developed in and for use with print literacy.