

Bad Ideas about Writing, edited by Cheryl E. Ball and Drew M. Loewe.
Open Access Textbooks, 2017. 370pp.

Reviewed by Jenn Fishman with Alli Bernard, Jessica Brown, Grace Chambers, Lorena Dulce, Ryan Higgins, Brian Huback, Saúl López, Aishah Mahmood, Shane Martin, Beth Michalewski, Madi Moster, Carly Ogletree, Alyssa Paulus, Lily Regan, Anna Story, and Haley Wasserman

Marquette University

Bad Ideas about Writing is a really good idea. This open-access digital book edited by Cheryl E. Ball and Drew M. Loewe contains a series of informed, readable rebuttals to familiar fallacies about writing. Fittingly for a publication meant for both academic and nonacademic readers, several chapters of *Bad Ideas* appeared in *Inside Higher Education* between January and November of 2017. The collection itself was published that same year by West Virginia University's Open Access Textbooks (OAT). Among additional OAT offerings—Derek Mueller's award-winning *Network Sense: Methods for Visualizing a Discipline* (co-published with the WAC Clearinghouse/Colorado State University Press), the *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning 2017 Directory*, and *West Virginia History: An Open Access Reader* (Barksdale and Fones-Wolf)—*Bad Ideas* stands out as an intervention. Born of frustration with popular discourse about writing and the limited circulation of writing scholarship, *Bad Ideas* is “an attempt by a varied and diverse group of writing scholar-teachers to translate . . . specialized knowledge and experiences about writing for a truly wide set of audiences” (2). Addressing “teachers, students, parents, administrators, lawmakers, [and] news media” (1), it is an activist work meant to provide readers with a combination of leverage and hope in the form of “more productive, inclusive, and useful ways” of conceptualizing writing (2).

As an intellectual project, *Bad Ideas* is inspired by John Brockman's annual queries to the scientific community, including his 2014 provocation: “What scientific idea is ready for retirement?” Since the late 90s, Brockman's questions have been asked and answered in his online scientific salon, *The Edge*, but they began as face-to-face deliberations, and Ball and Loewe's volume preserves that spirit, enacting a lively, Burkean parlor that I extended into the classroom by making *Bad Ideas* required reading for my advanced undergraduate composition class. In a graduate seminar, I might have assigned *Bad Ideas* with *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies* (Adler-Kassner and Wardle), inviting students to loop recursively through discussions about what writing is and who writers are while gathering a sense of disciplinary positioning and

praxes. In my advanced comp class, we read and discussed *Bad Ideas*, and then students pursued individual projects inspired by the book. Although we numbered only seventeen (including myself), our range reflected in microcosm the contributors to Ball and Loewe's collection. My students, sophomores to seniors, were mainly English majors with second majors or minors in everything from biomedical sciences and communication to education and political science. Likewise, *Bad Ideas* authors include graduate students, emerita scholars with expertise in rhetoric and composition/writing studies, and those with high school teaching, editing, publishing, and educational consulting experience.

Organizationally, *Bad Ideas* includes eight sections, which mirror "eight major categories of bad ideas . . . tied to the production, circulation, cultural use of, evaluation, and teaching of writing in multiple ways" (3). In my course syllabus, I listed a common chapter from each section, and students also read at least one chapter per section of their own choosing. Moving through the book in order, we started with "Bad Ideas about What Good Writing Is" and "Bad Ideas about Who Good Writers Are." The former section opens with a chapter by Patricia Roberts-Miller that counters the idea that rhetoric is a synonym for empty speech. Just as rhetoric plays a framing role in college composition, the argument Roberts-Miller makes about rhetoric frames confutations of bad ideas about literacy (Babb), first-year writing (Branson; Cook), knowledge transfer (Wardle; Carillo), and reading (Carillo; Barger).

The second section demystifies writers in relation to not only writing but also language itself. To begin, Teri Holbrook and Melanie Hundley call attention to an all-too-familiar contradiction: Writers represented as both "magical beings" and people so "incapable of dealing with . . . daily life" that "they drink, do drugs, need help, and occasionally slip into murderous madness" (53). In turn, Ronald Clark Brooks takes up the pervasive belief "that one has to be credentialed in order to call oneself a writer" (61), while Dustin Edwards and Enrique Paz write in collaborative defiance against the idea of the writer as an autonomous genius, and Jill Parrott soundly rejects the notion that "writing is a talent set in stone" (71). In complementary fashion, the next four chapters confront false standards to which writers are regularly held: namely, they must always succeed (Carr), and they must always speak and write Standard Written English (Pattanayak), a notion that reflects biases against African American Language (Cunningham) and home languages other than English (Alvarez). In conclusion, this section addresses bad ideas about what writers do: Confront writer's block (Carter), revise (Giovannelli), and, most fundamentally, produce writing (Butts).

The next sections challenge received ideas about style, usage, and grammar on one hand and writing techniques on the other. Section three opens with chapters critical of the authority vested in Strunk and White (Lisabeth) and

more general received rules for writing (Dufour and Ahern-Dodson). The following four chapters address usage through a colloquy on voice, focusing on first-person pronouns and passive voice (Thomas; Rodríguez; Parker; Brooke). Finally, three chapters tackle bad ideas about grammar: “Teaching Grammar Improves Writing” (Dunn), “Good Writers Must Know Grammatical Terminology” (Rule), and “Grammar Should be Taught Separately as Rules to Learn” (Harris). In the section dedicated to bad ideas about writing techniques, contributors bring attention to three distinct topics. Kristin Milligan challenges the assumption that “Formal Outlines are Always Useful”; Daniel V. Bommarito disputes the claim that “Students Should Learn About the Logical Fallacies”; and Nancy Fox rebuffs an idea that teachers and students alike seem to take away from writing textbooks: namely, that “Logos is Synonymous with Logic.”

The section dedicated to “Bad Ideas about Genres” is the longest with a dozen chapters that address not only particular genres and types of discourse but also related activities. This section opens with bad ideas about academic writing (Theune), creative writing (Alexis), and popular culture (Williams; Pepper). Three chapters address bad ideas about a genre that itself might be classified as a bad idea, the five-paragraph essay (FPE). Rebuking educators in particular, these chapters reject readymade claims that the FPE is rhetorically or pedagogically sound (Vieregge; Bernstein and Lowry; Bowles, Jr.). The remainder of the section examines bad ideas about research-based writing and the only school genre that may be as reviled as the FPE, at least by writing scholars—the research paper. Respectively, Alison C. Witte and Emily A. Wierszewski critique the shibboleths that research starts with answers and thesis statements, and Alexandria Lockett takes issue with the persistent notion that “The Traditional Research Paper is Best.” To conclude, Susanmarie Harrington and Jennifer A. Mott-Smith address the common assumptions that “Citing Sources is a Basic Skill Learned Early On” and “Plagiarism Deserves to be Punished.”

The last three sections call attention in turn to bad ideas about writing assessment, digital technology, and writing teachers. The section on assessment begins by questioning our fixation on grading (James) and grading rubrics (Leahy; Sands). Subsequent chapters bemoan “the over-graded paper” (Harris) and the overrated idea that only teachers should evaluate student writing (Friend). While peers’ evaluations may have merit, Chris M. Anson and Les Perelman reject the notion that “machines can evaluate writing well” (278); Stephanie Vie rejects the perception that “plagiarism detection services are money well spent” (287); and Kristen di Gennaro nixes SAT scores as “useful for placing students in writing courses” (294). The following section singles out mostly old chestnuts about writing and digital technology. As Scott Warnock states: “We need to put to rest the idea that digital forms of writing pose a threat to

overall writing ability” (301). Likewise, as Christopher Justice argues, we need to embrace the “many positive benefits” of texting (309). On balance, we need to stop trying to gamify writing (Daniel-Wariya), and we need to reconsider our unfettered embrace of digital technology along with our metaphors for people who do and do not use it (Carter and Matzke; Alexander).

The final section, “Bad Ideas about Writing Teachers,” might have been titled “Bad Ideas about College Writing.” It begins with a claim that almost always signals bad ideas will follow: “You’re Going to Need this in College” (Hollinger). The next three chapters also concern dubious absolutes: “Dual-Enrollment Writing Classes Should Always be Pursued” (Wilkinson), “Secondary-School English Teachers Should Only be Taught Literature” (Wright), and “Face-to-Face Courses are Superior to Online Courses” (Bouelle and Bouelle). To conclude, two chapters interrogate what may be the worst idea of all: anyone can teach writing, whether online (Hewett) or off (Kahn). Within the scientific community, ideas that need to die are judged obstacles to progress. In public discourse about higher education, the notion that anyone and everyone can teach writing does more than thwart good writing instruction. It negates the combined pedagogical, scholarly, and institutional praxes on which effective and ethical formal literacy education is built and sustained. Hewett connects some of these dots when she explains: “Unfortunately, a top-down, administratively driven requirement for online writing-intensive instruction reveals an implicit, pervasive belief that to teach writing online is intuitive and therefore simple to do” (357). Kahn alludes to others when he writes: “How we got to the point where so many faculty doing such important work can be treated so poorly is a long story” (364). Offering a useful gloss on the rise of English composition, he goes on to state a widely shared desire: “I wish it were obvious that people better trained to do something would do it better than people who aren’t trained as well. That feels like such a truism it’s hard to know what evidence to offer to support it” (365).

The volume is full of richly informed, personally framed strong statements, which are part of the book’s appeal and a source of its rhetorical oomph. In the words of my students, such moves help make the book relatable. Although “relatable” is a term I usually associate with uncritical and dangerously relativistic thinking, that is not how my students used it in their reading journals and class discussions. Under the auspices of relatability, they found *Bad Ideas* engaging because it surprised, amused, and occasionally angered them. *Bad Ideas* also introduced them to literacy practices and experiences different from their own, and it encouraged them to scrutinize their assumptions about writing along with themselves as writers. On balance, the colloquial style of *Bad Ideas* contributed to some of our most significant difficulties. For disciplinary novices, the undergirding research and scholarship may have been too camouflaged,

making it too easy to read *Bad Ideas* and its authors' activism as one more opinion war. Reflecting on our overall experience as readers for this review, we talked about how next time I might assign fewer sections of the book and more of the research and scholarship behind the chapters. An opportunity to peer behind the curtain, we agreed, might help everyone better understand where contributors are coming from along with some of the challenges involved in crafting public intellectual rhetorics.

We further questioned the strategic simplicity of the book with some of our earliest class discussions in mind. For example, in the second week of the semester, we read "Formal Outlines Are Always Useful," where Milligan argues that "mandatory outlines should be given their proper burial" (164). Student-led discussion echoed this statement but, as on previous days, did not initially go much further. Listening to the group take sides based on their own habits and related failures or successes, a light bulb went off for me. Our trouble as interlocutors with *Bad Ideas* stemmed not from what authors claimed—about outlining, rules for writing, first-year composition, etc.—but from how they made their claims: in bold terms that invited us to make similar, all-or-nothing first-person arguments. Missing were explicit prompts within chapters to read critically both with and against them. When we took a step back to consider whether outlines were really the problem, discussion shifted. We focused on the word "mandatory" and the situations that might lead teachers to require outlines as well as the beliefs those teachers might hold (i.e., about writing, about learning about writing). When I asked how else students had been taught to generate ideas and organize information, the discussion deepened. We considered the purposes such assignments serve and what makes the ways they shape thinking and writing "good" or "bad."

Students also responded to *Bad Ideas* via class projects. In the second half of the semester they selected a bad idea from or inspired by the book, interrogated it via one or more modes of inquiry, delivered a presentation or lead an equivalent in-class activity, and produced a final text. A student-produced essay, "Easy to Teach, Easy to Grade," satirized the appeal of the FPE in five paragraphs written from a teacher's point of view (Chambers). Another, "Are Outlines Useful Only for Math-Minded Students," presented findings from survey-based research in a *Bad Ideas*-style chapter composed in outline form (Moster), while "Creative Writing Doesn't Belong in Science Classrooms" used interview data to reconsider assumptions about good undergraduate science writing assignments (Wasserman). "Using A Thesaurus Makes Your Writing Worse" triangulated the always changing nature of language, students' perceptions of vocabulary, and both good and bad thesaurus pedagogies (Michalewski). A chapter on workplace ghostwriting underscored the limited opportunities students have to practice writing both with and for others dur-

ing college (Dulce), and “All High School Students are Literate” addressed the all-too-real literacy crisis in K-12 education (Regan). In an imagined volume, *Bad Ideas about African American English*, Alyssa Paulus conceived a study dedicated to “debunking misconceptions about AAE.”

Not everyone chose *Bad Ideas* modes (i.e., chapter, book). One future teacher produced a set of lessons designed to help sixth graders explore different genres, including the FPE (Huback); another wrote a NCTE-style “Statement on Increasing Linguistic Diversity in the Classroom” (Bernard). In addition, the podcast “Cheering Them On: Student Athletes and Writing Confidence” reported on whether and how cheerleading informs high school writers’ confidence (Ogletree). Two creative writers chose creative writing projects: one researched and composed a short story, “Ranch House” (Story), and one conducted a mixed methods self-study of his own NaNoWriMo efforts and compiled a set of his own rules for the annual November writing challenge (Higgins). Another pair responded to chapters on first-year writers with their own research questions. Following the format of a CWPA grant proposal, “The Writing Practices and Processes of First Year Students” outlined an ambitious project almost ready for IRB review (Mahmood), while the documentary-style video “Not All Students Need First-Year English” let students speak for themselves about the value of FYE (Brown). Two additional videos brought more student voices to the fore: “together” featured international students talking about their experiences as bi- and multilingual college writers (Martin), while “Snapshots: Creative Writers at Marquette” featured four first-generation students of color who write short stories, poetry, and rap (López).

The digital projects noted above and students’ positive reception echoed the class’s critique of the section on digital technology. The attention paid to texting felt dated to them, and as a group they raised important questions about the chapter on digital natives and immigrants, concepts that have been widely criticized by both digital and decolonial scholars. The digital projects also reflect students’ interest in using available means to contribute to and amplify the overall project of *Bad Ideas* and bring informed arguments about writing to non-specialist audiences. This is, indeed, a good idea. We benefitted from it, and we expect others will, too.

Milwaukee, WI

Works Cited

- Adler-Kassner, Linda, and Elizabeth Wardle, editors. *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*. UP of Colorado and Utah State UP, 2015.
- Barksdale, Kevin, and Ken Fones-Wolf, editors. *West Virginia History: An Open Access Reader*. Open Access Textbooks, no date. <https://textbooks.lib.wvu.edu/wvhistory/index.html>.

- Brockman, John. *This Idea Must Die: Scientific Theories that are Blocking Progress*. Harper Perennial, 2015.
- Mueller, Derek N. *Network Sense: Methods for Visualizing a Discipline*. The WAC Clearinghouse and UP of Colorado, 2017.
- Scholarship of Teaching and Learning 2017 Directory*. Open Access Textbooks, 2017. <https://textbooks.lib.wvu.edu/sotl/index.html>.