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The Truth about Primary Sources

Why do students often produce a collective groan of despair when they are assigned a historical primary source to read? Though they may have the same reaction to any form of an academic assignment, there seems to be a special corner of Reference Hell reserved for historical writings. Many students have called historical primary sources tedious, difficult to read, boring, confusing, etc. However, these same descriptions are also used to describe textbooks. The questions that arise then are: Is academic rhetoric truly easier to comprehend than a historical primary source about the same topic? Why is one form considered easier than the other? We could simply assume that this feeling of dislike towards historical sources is in fact just a socially constructed feeling based on other students' overtly negative opinions, though that theory is getting dangerously close to the realm of conspiracy theories. Instead, this conundrum of so called readability can be resolved using a variety of quantitative methods widely used to evaluate the accessibility of writings and other rhetorical concepts.

“The Confederate Reader: How the South Saw the War,” edited by Richard B. Harwell will be the medium used for this analysis. This nonfiction book is a compilation of historical primary sources written during the American Civil War mostly by citizens of the Confederate States of America. The format of the book provides the opportunity to compare the rhetorical strategies of the Civil War period to the current scholarly styles. For each primary source there is a brief historical introduction of the writing by Harwell which provides the academic background

information for the readers' understanding of the piece. This juxtaposition encourages comparison and analysis of the two distinct rhetorical styles, and their overall accessibility. Since the primary sources were produced by a multitude of different authors, this essay will focus on the examination of only one specific section entitled, "The Tune of Dixie."

The Mobile Cadets were a Confederate regiment of young men that left their Alabama homes in the April of 1861. The proud young men were sent off North to Virginia with the expectations of a three-month war, and a gallant return home. To them, the South was fighting for a noble cause: independence from their oppressors. They believed wholeheartedly in the close relationship between elegance and military capabilities. Though it may seem ignorant to us in the current day, they believed that the Southern gentlemen could lick the Yankees quickly and gracefully. Sadly, the reality of the war did not end up matching their expectations. The American Civil War lasted 5 years and by the end, the Mobile Cadets would have one of the bloodiest regimental records recorded for either side. However, their lesser known achievement is the creation of the patriotic "Tune of Dixie" which quickly became the anthem of Southern nationalism.

In this section of the book, Harwell provides the reader with an excerpt from one of the Mobile Cadet's account of the war. Henry Hotze was a member of the regiment when he wrote this part of his larger compilation of wartime writings in Norfolk, Virginia on May 5, 1861. He was later sent to London as a commercial agent, where he established a successful Confederate propaganda paper called *The Index* and published his accounts of the war including this one which was printed in the spring of 1862. In this excerpt, he is describing the boxcar journey to their army post in Virginia, on which the Tune of Dixie was created. The boys composed it on their ride and sang it "on every appropriate occasion, with marked effect upon the hearts of the

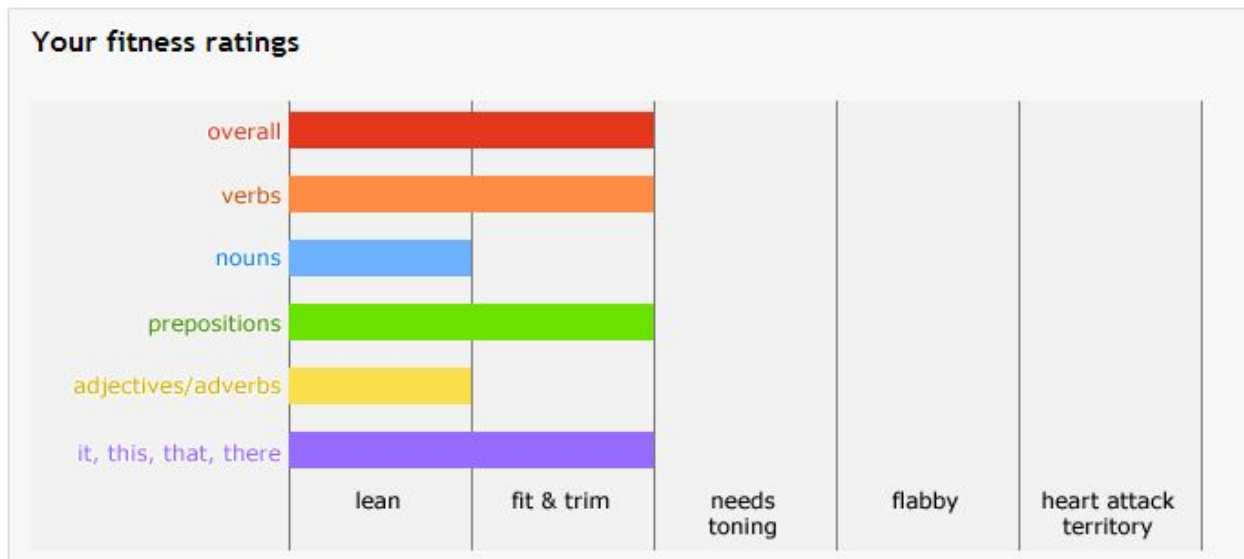
Virginian beauties.” (26.) The song became so loved that eventually some “considerate persons” (26.) printed the lyrics and distributed them around the train route the Mobile Cadets were travelling on. Soon “The Tune of Dixie,” in today’s terms, went viral. It was, and still could be considered the greatest song of the Southern pride.

So why does Hotze’s fascinating account still hold the stigma of being a historical primary source? It is, at least in my opinion in no way any more dull or beyond understanding than any textbook. However, a personal judgment is not enough for a sound argument. Several different quantitative methods of rhetorical breakdown will be used to assess the general readability of the two selections. For the purpose of this analysis Harwell’s introduction is used to analyze the “current-day academic rhetoric,” while Hotze’s writing is used to analyze the “historical primary source rhetoric.” The results of various tests were completely opposite to what the widely held assumptions are. According to the WritersDiet Test, SMOG, the Gunning Fog index, the Flesch Kincaid Grade level, and the Automated Readability Index, Hotze’s historical primary source is more easily comprehended than Harwell’s academic writing.

The first method used was Helen Sword’s “WritersDiet Test.” Her test “assesses whether your sentences are flabby or fit” by evaluating the writer’s use of repetition, their sentence structure, and their grammar. The technique of this test distinguishes these results from the others which all use an approach very distinct from Sword when analyzing writing. The test uses a metaphor in which writing is compared to the human body to label 5 levels of “fitness”: lean, fit & trim, needs toning, flabby, and heart attack territory. As is shown in Figure 1, Hoetze’s primary source article received the rating: Fit & Trim, while Harwell’s academic introduction as shown in Figure 2 was rated two levels down: Flabby. While Sword makes it clear that her test is in no way attempting to identify skilled prose but is instead a tool to help writers compose “more

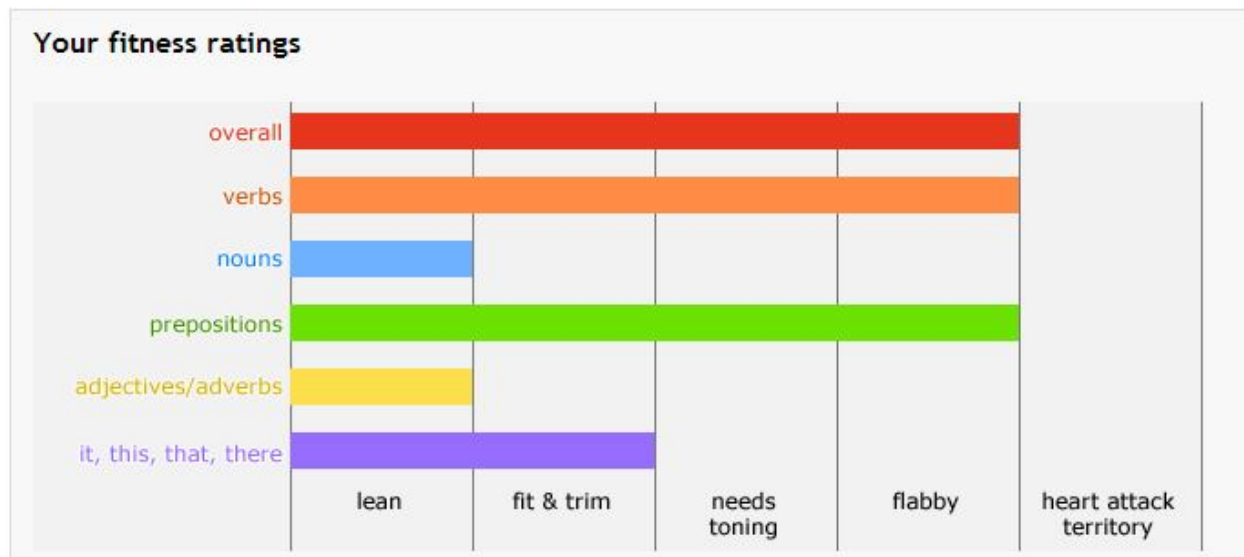
clearly,” it still contributes to the case in favor of historical primary sources. Based on the results of Sword’s test it is logical to state that according to the WritersDiet Test that the historical piece was more plainly written than the academic section.

Figure 1



"Writer's Diet." The WritersDiet Test. Helen Sword, n.d. Web. 14 Feb. 2013.

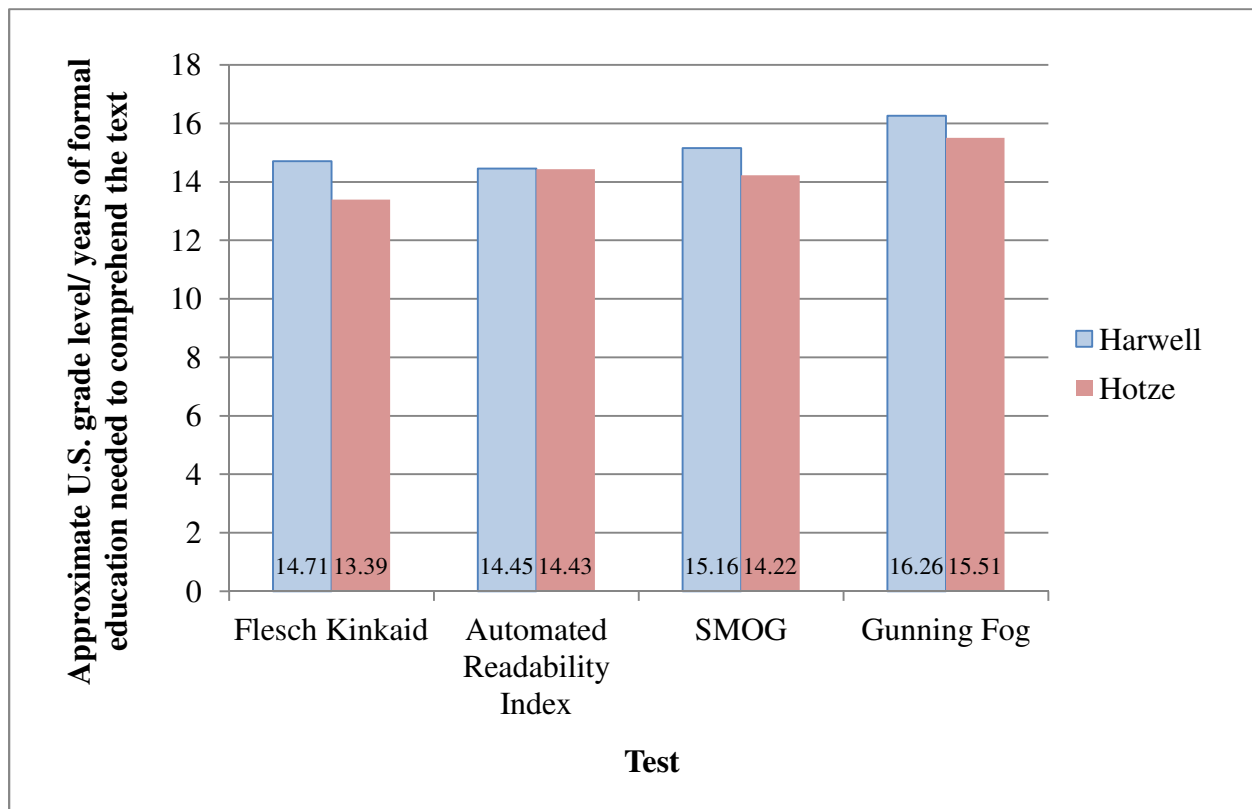
Figure 2



"Writer's Diet." The WritersDiet Test. Helen Sword, n.d. Web. 14 Feb. 2013.

The next tests were done simultaneously because the formulas all judge the writings using techniques which are similar to one another. The SMOG, the Gunning Fog index, the Flesch Kincaid Grade level, and the Automated Readability Index all evaluate the writing based on the syllables in each word and the length of sentences in order to assign a grade level based on the American system of education. These are designed to evaluate the “number of years of education that a person needs to be able to understand the text easily on the first reading.” As shown in Figure 3, Harwell’s introduction required more years of academic knowledge than Hotze’s account according to every test. If the accepted assumption is that the less education needed, the more accessible a piece of writing is, the connection can be made that since Harwell’s writing is more academically advanced, that Hotze’s style of writing is indeed more easily accessible.

Figure 3



"Tests Document Readability." Tests Document Readability. N.p., n.d. Web. 14 Feb. 2013.

Therefore, based on these quantitative methods it can be said that a primary Civil War period source is in fact more readable than its current day academic counterpart. Then why do students still consider current academic writings more accessible? The answer is essentially that there are several rhetorical issues that arise when a student is attempting to absorb a primary source and if the student is not prepared for these issues, it is simple to say that it is “too difficult,” giving rise to the readability issue, which is not the inherent problem. At the heart of this confusion is a lack of rhetorical education about how to manage a historical writing. Students must learn how to account for differences in the rhetorical domain and the speakers’ purpose, and recognize the opportunities for rhetorical analysis and discovery.

The first problem for students when trying to read a primary source is the difference in rhetorical domain. In a chapter of his book, Wayne Booth explains that for each rhetorical situation, there is a “rhetorical domain” which consists of a set of standards or “warrants” that are accepted in a certain group or circle. For effective communication, this concept must be taken into account by not only the speaker or writer, but also by the audience or reader. A failure to address these inevitable clashes with our current norms could, at its best lead to a lowered opinion of the piece of writing, and at its worst cause the reader end up with a completely misunderstood comprehension of the entire writing.

For example, reading that the Tune of Dixie “expressed the negroes preference for his more genial and sunny native clime, the land which is the negro’s true home, and the only land where he is happy and contented,” (29). or seeing the term “bethought,” (26). or the spellings “We’ill” (27). or “marvellous” (27). may be a bit disturbing for a student who is not taught the idea of rhetorical domain. Booth’s warrants include not only spelling and grammar, but also societal differences. Without addressing the differences between Hotze’s world and the current

day, a reader would immediately assume that because the writer uses the word negro, that he is ignorant and racist. Without consideration of standards, a reader could also take Hotze's spelling as a sign that he is uneducated. However, in Hotze's society, "negro" was not an insult or considered disrespectful in any way, it was simply what African Americans were called and those were the commonly accepted spellings for "we'll" and "marvelous." If all students were prepared for these variances, perhaps they would more be able to more fully understand the content of the source, consequently making the material more readable.

The second problem that students may encounter are the differences in the speakers' purpose. Purpose is the main factor in what could be called the rhetorical triangle #2 in which the speaker, audience, and subject are at the points and purpose is in the center. David Ryan and Fredel Wiant explain that the consideration of purpose is "essential for any rhetorical analysis" (261). because in order to evaluate a text, one must first examine "what the author's purpose is." (261). Students are accustomed to academic readings in which they are able to almost immediately discern what is of importance and what is not. However, in primary accounts, that is not often the case. An academic reading or a textbook is written with the express purpose of explaining certain concepts to the student, whereas a historical primary source could be written for a variety of different reasons in many different forms such as persuasive articles, letters, or personal accounts like Hotze's. In this situation, students often miss the significant ideas which contributes to the misconception that primary sources are simply "too complicated." Being able to adapt to various purposes of writing is a matter of studying the practices of rhetoric such as evidence, style, and descriptions.

For example, instead of Harwell's explicit description of how "the future of bloody battles and years of hardship did not worry them so long as the dangers were unforeseen, and the

best of young Southern manhood marched defiantly, almost gaily, to Virginia,” (24). when reading Hotze’s account of how “Bevies of girls to greet us wherever the train stopped for wood and water, and gifts of flowers, cakes, and early fruit by the enthusiastic fair” (26). the reader must extrapolate that the war was not yet considered to be an unfortunate or sober event without being overtly told. Gaining familiarity with and being able to identify the techniques of rhetoric provides students with the ability to successfully draw out relevant points from historical primary sources which also improves the accessibility of this type of writing.

Finally, if students recognized the rhetorical opportunities that primary sources hold, one would hope that the ability to make remarkable discoveries about history would make students view historical writings as more accessible. In Rebecca Fleming’s article, she describes textbooks as “boring, predigested, and avoiding all controversy.” Though it could be debated whether or not primary sources are also boring, it is undeniable that primary sources are raw and can often be extremely contentious as a sharp contrast to Fleming’s description of academic writings. Historical writings hold an enormous amount of possible personal interpretation. Primary sources can spark debate allowing for students to learn skills to defend their position, can cause us to question our preconceived notions of history and how it has shaped society, and can provide us with a rare window into our world’s past. Historical primary sources contain a never ending potential for new insight and knowledge, however students simply cannot recognize their value without the right education.

“The Confederate Reader” and the story of the Mobile Cadets provided a unique insight into both worlds of rhetoric: the current day academic sphere and the primary historical realm of the Civil War. However, primary sources are worth more than just as a part of a rhetorical analysis. Primary sources contain so many possibilities for innovative learning, yet they are not

appreciated. Though the quantitative tests have resulted in their favor, and the reasons behind their dislike have explored, students still seem to prefer to read academic textbooks as opposed to a historical primary account. There is no easily explainable reason why they would prefer one over the other, and according to the methods of rhetorical analysis it should be the opposite inclination, if anything. Students are lacking the right tools that would allow them to fully embrace historical rhetoric, but with the proper insight, would be able to unlock these rich sources of knowledge. Fleming states that historical primary sources “let us see that history is not about learning the past; it's about constructing understandings of the past and gaining skills useful in the present.” The problem now is only getting students in the present the right rhetorical skills to begin this construction.

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