This panel is based on the idea that there are strong similarities in the approaches of Style, They Say/I Say, and Rewriting. I agree that there are, but I’d like to focus my remarks here on what strikes me as a key difference among our books. Both Style and They Say/I Say do indeed offer students direct and explicit advice about the craft of intellectual writing. I’m not sure that Rewriting does the same thing. It seems to me that my book works on more of a meta-level—that it offers students a language for thinking about what they want to do as writers. My goal here today is to explain what I mean by teaching such a metalanguage for writing.

But before I do, let me offer a few remarks about what I most admire about Style and They Say/I Say. I remember that when I first came upon Style, now almost 30 years ago, it was the first book on writing I’d ever read that offered not unsupported and unconnected dicta about correct usage, but a set of working principles that a writer could actually use in crafting prose. I felt grateful then, and now. If you want to learn how to write a clear sentence in a coherent paragraph—and who doesn’t?—then Style is your book.

Similarly, if you want to learn how to make your way into one of the ongoing conversations of the academy—to put in your oar, as Kenneth Burke would have it—then They Say/I Say is your book. The advice in Style is offered to writers who already know what they have to say, but need to say it more clearly. But the goal of They Say/I Say is to show students how to develop something to say—to stake out positions of their own, to speak back to the texts they are reading. They Say/I Say is extraordinarily frank in laying out what Cathy and Jerry call the moves—the punches and counter-punches—of academic argument. The key word here is demystify—a verb that used to strike me as arcane, but is used in the first three blurbs on the back cover of the book. Style clarifies; They Say/I Say demystifies.
I’ve used both books in my own teaching—sometimes assigning them to students, sometimes simply stealing their ideas and presenting them as my own. They both offer good advice. But whenever I’ve assigned either *Style* or *They Say/I Say*, I’ve asked students to read them not simply as handbooks—that is, as compendia of hints and rules and examples—but as books about writing, that tell us something about what writing is and what it is good for. I thus ask students much the same questions about *Style* and *They Say/I Say* that I’d ask them as readers of any other book: How would you describe the voice you hear speaking in this text? For *Style*, the answer is (almost always) *professional, businesslike, organized*. For *They Say/I Say*, it’s *academic or professorial*—although I think they mean it kindly. What do these books value in writing? For *Style*, it’s *clarity* and *agency*. (There are many other lessons that *Style* teaches, but these are overwhelmingly what stand out for students.) For *They Say/I Say*, the key values are *clever* or *smart* or *persuasive*.

I hasten to say that I endorse all these values. It is better to be smart and professional than not. I admire the practical virtues of *Style* and *They Say/I Say*. Both books offer direct and sensible instruction in how to do the actual work of academic writing. However, when I look at my own book, *Rewriting*, I see a shift in emphasis. Despite the promise of my subtitle, *How to Do Things with Texts*, it seems to me that my book ends up being more about how to think about doing things with texts. That is, while I think I am pretty clear about what I value in intellectual writing, most of my advice concerns not the crafting of sentences and paragraphs but broader issues of stance, tone, and intent.

And so, for instance, the kinds of questions I tend to ask students are: Where do the words and ideas in your writing come from? What have you drawn from other writers and what are you adding? Have you represented the texts you’re working with accurately and generously? Would you say that, for the most part, you’re working along with the writers you’re citing (forwarding) or against what they have to say (countering)? If you see yourself as working in the spirit or mode of another writer, how does your approach differ from or extend hers?
These strike me as different sorts of questions than most of those asked in Style or They Say/I Say. For instance, if a student writes a paragraph with a confused or inconsistent set of topics, then this is usually a problem that needs to be fixed and Style can show you how to do it. Or if a student fails to distinguish the position taken by another writer from the one she wants to advance . . . well, there’s a template for that in They Say/I Say. But, if a student writes an essay in a course I’m teaching in which she seems to be at once forwarding and countering the work of another writer—then that could be a problem, or it could be a sign that something very interesting is going on. And if that student then goes on in her essay to comment on the complexities of her relationship with the writer she is discussing, I usually grow more impressed and intrigued. Indeed, one of my favorite sorts of teaching conversations often begins with a writer saying something like, “Well, I’m not really sure if what I’m doing here is extending this idea or showing its limits”—after which the student and I may go on to decide that maybe it’s a little of both, or perhaps neither, or possibly something else entirely. My aim, that is, is not to teach students the way to define a writer’s project, or apply his ideas, or uncover his values, or whatever writerly move we may happen to be talking about. (Indeed, I’m aware that my indifference to the exact meanings of the terms in my book drives some of my colleagues and students a little crazy.) Rather, my main goal is to help students reflect on the uses they want to make of the work of others—to become a little more thoughtful or self-aware as writers. I want to engage them in a metaconversation about writing.

So—clear, smart, thoughtful. Style, They Say/I Say, Rewriting. These are by no means conflicting values; on the contrary, as a group, they describe a sort of prose that many of us strive for. But I suspect that the choice of emphasis matters. So let me try to offer you here a sense of what I mean by saying that I try in my courses to teach a metalanguage for writing— that is, to make students more thoughtful about the choices they make as writers.
I should note that this exercise stems in large part from my unease with teaching my own writing. How does Harris teach Harris? In trying to figure that out, I’ve been reminded of the scene from Being John Malkovich when John Malkovich, playing himself, goes through the mysterious portal that lets the other characters in the film enter into his mind (if this seems confusingly complex, that is part of the point) and once there—inside his own head, as it were—discovers a world where everyone has the face of John Malkovich. What a teaching nightmare! While I may aim to intrigue, to inspire, to provoke, the last thing I want is a classroom where people recite me to me.

And yet I feel it would be odd not to assign the book. Students in other courses at Duke read it, and it does still very much speak to my aims as a writing teacher. So when I teach Writing 20, our first-year writing course, I usually spend about a week in which I ask to students to read and make use of Rewriting. Here’s what we do:

Each year the Duke Writing Program publishes Deliberations, an in-house journal featuring some of the best work done by students in Writing 20 in the previous year. Many programs have such journals. I ask my Writing 20 students to read Deliberations with an eye for examples of the moves I talk about in Rewriting. In part, this is simply a way to make sure that they really do read the journal—and Rewriting, too. But it is also an attempt to get students to think about Rewriting as trying to describe the sort of intellectual work they are themselves already engaged in doing. We then spend a class talking about the passages they’ve noted in Deliberations, and answering any questions that they might raise about Rewriting.
The real work follows. Here’s how I ask students to respond as writers to *Rewriting*. (You have this assignment on Handout A.)

**Extending Rewriting**

Please read the introduction and first three chapters of *Rewriting* (pp. 1-72).

In *Rewriting*, I describe a set of moves that writers make in using the work of others: coming to terms, forwarding, countering, taking an approach. In this assignment, I'd like you to add to or revise that list of writerly moves.

Find a passage from the most recent issue of *Deliberations* in which a writer makes what seems to you a particularly interesting or effective use of another text. You might ask: What would make a move particularly interesting or effective? I'd reply: When a writer uses a text in a way that is *not* well described by the terms offered in my book, that puts a new spin on coming to terms or forwarding or countering—or that does something altogether different.

In a sense, then, I am asking you to extend my project in *Rewriting*, to take my approach and make it your own. Your task is to write an essay in which you point to a way of using texts that I have not described. There are a number of challenges embedded in this task: You need to identify a clear example of an interesting move made by a writer in *Deliberations*, you need to give that move a name, and you need to show how this new move adds to what I have to say in *Rewriting*.

Good luck! I look forward to seeing how you push my work!

Form: Critical essay, about 750-1000 words

Deadline: etc., etc.

I should note that I don’t give these essays a letter grade, or ask students to revise what they’ve written. We do, however, talk about several of their responses in our next class meeting. My sense is that, whether they read *Rewriting* or not, students in a class that I teach will end up spending much of their time trying to inhabit the approach to writing that I have to offer. My aim in this assignment is to give them a chance to step back, to reflect on that approach, and to think about how they might move beyond it.
Most students find this an unusual assignment, but one that they take some real pleasure in doing. Handout B is from a class I taught a few years ago. It lists the new terms that the students added to the list of moves in *Rewriting*, along with the essays from *Deliberations* that they discussed. The writerly moves they proposed were:

- Relating
- Defending
- Self-speculating
- Interpreting
- Progressing
- Discussing social effectiveness
- Fully coming to terms
- Clarifying and refining
- Extending extending
- Connecting
- Backdropping, filtering, linking
- False forwarding
Handout C offers some excerpts from three of the essays that students in this particular class wrote. We don’t have time now to read through these examples, so let me offer a quick and brief gloss on each. In “Connecting,” Sandeep shows how sometimes the key move made by a writer is simply to bring two seemingly dissimilar texts together. What matters, he suggests, is not so much what the writer says about one text or the other, but their juxtaposition. This is not something I discuss in *Rewriting*. And in *interpreting*, Liz insists on the value and difficulty of a move that I tend to denigrate—the act of explaining what a complex text means. I am particularly impressed by how Liz shows how interpreting reverses the move I describe as forwarding. Instead of taking an idea from a text and using it in her own work, Liz argues, a writer sometimes needs to apply her own thought and experience to a text. In some ways, Joav continues this line of thinking. What he argues, though, in “Reclarify/Clarifine,” is that a writer can sometimes actually improve upon the text he is discussing, through the “one-two-punch combination” of first clarifying an ambiguously worded text and then refining the ideas it has to offer. Joav pushes my emphasis on generous reading an extra step, by suggesting that a writer can not only represent a text in the best light possible, but also make it a little better—more lucid, compelling—than it may, strictly speaking, actually be. I also like how he insists on the need for a writer to both clarify and refine by inventing his own portmanteau term for the new double-move: clarifining. And most of all, what I admire about these and most of the other essays that students have written in response to this assignment is that they do not simply restate or rebut or praise *Rewriting*, but rather continue the sort of work that I began in it.

I realize that there is an irony here, but I think it is a generative one. In asking students to push beyond the terms I offer in *Rewriting*, I am in effect asking them to rewrite my work—that is, to take my approach. As a student once remarked to me, “I never had to write about a book by somebody I knew. I felt like I had to be nice but also really try to say something.” The only thing I could think to say in reply was, “Yes, well, that’s what we do here.”
And *that* I will use as the closing defense for this sort of teaching. The student writing you see on Handout C strikes me as very much like the kind of work I’ve spent my own career doing—that is, thinking about what the writer of a text is trying to accomplish, what I find compelling in that project, and what I find troubling. It’s a sort of work I’ve found remarkably sustaining over the years, and that I want to invite others to do with me. But I’m not sure, though, that I have an explicit set of rules or guidelines for doing that work—other than that students should try to push against and beyond the few guidelines I do have to offer, in which case they are doing exactly what I want, which means that they need to resist that, which means . . . Well, I am back inside *Being John Malkovich*. And so I will end there.