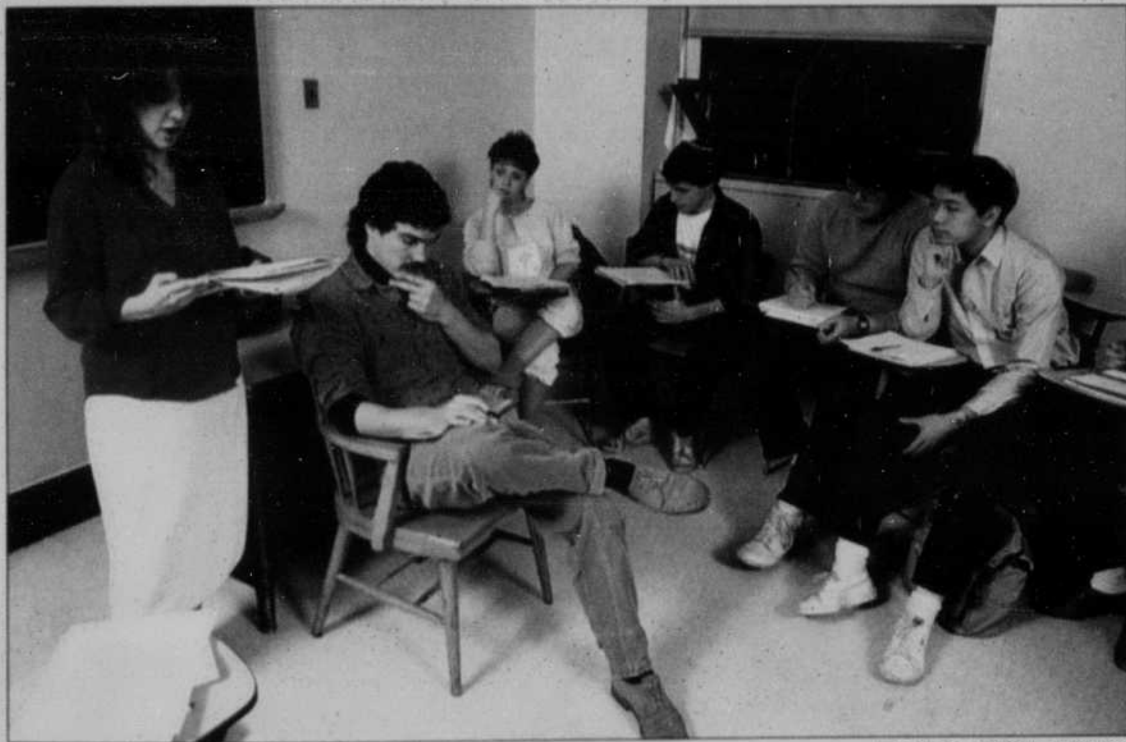


JACQUES M. CHENET—NEWSWEEK

Marketable commodity: *Richard Frye (seated) leads a New York University writing workshop*

identified through the assessment test—enroll in a special writing course, the one I teach, which no one ever calls remedial. They write and rewrite every week and attend a weekly half-hour tutorial session with their instructor. At least one-fourth of the freshman class could benefit from such a course, but because it is an intensive-care operation, it is limited to the neediest.

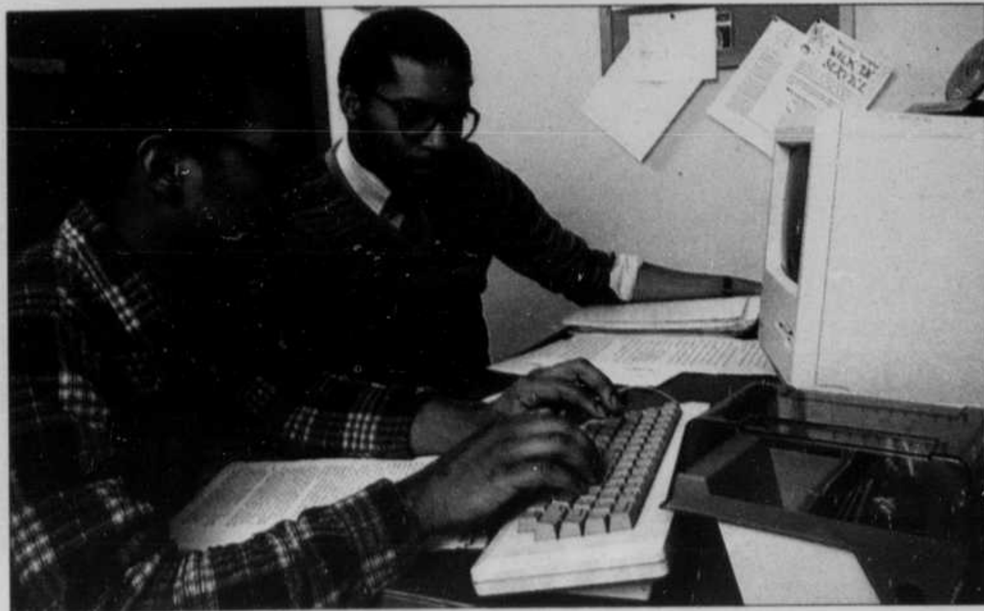
Those students who do prove most in need of writing help are not a predictable lot. They are not all (or even mostly) black and Hispanic students admitted on some sort of affirmative-action discount pass. They are not all farm-bred aggies or ice-bound jocks or digitally programmed engineers. The only safe generalization is that a significant percentage are foreign-born students who have not yet worked all the kinks out of a tough new language. There are, in short, no scapegoats among these students, no easily isolated groups to make one feel that writing woes are limited. The students are perfectly bright, hard-working young people from nice families and good schools, who have earned their admission to a selective university and will probably lead successful lives. They just don't write very well.

Dos and don'ts: The main reason is that they were never taught to write well—and that is not a blanket indictment of elementary- and secondary-school teachers. Writing takes time, and time is what teachers don't have. My students, 24 of them, write perhaps three pages twice each week: a first draft and a revision, both of which I read and correct. A typical high-school teacher who assigned that much writing would be looking at more than 700 pages a week.

Partly because of the time limitations, high-school teaching often presents writing in terms of rules and formulas, handy references like timetables designed to yield "correct" answers. Students have told me, for instance, that previous teachers instructed them never to begin a sentence with "and" or "but" and that they should write concluding paragraphs that are virtually identical to their introductory paragraphs. Such rules, at best, may lead to decriminalized prose, free from major grammatical and stylistic transgressions. But (yes, *but*) they do not always have much to do with good writing. In fact, they may inhibit good writing.

'Comma splice': As a novice, I often lack the authoritative buzzwords that might cow a student into submission. Terms like "comma splice" and "dangling participle" tend to work because they sound official, even if the student doesn't know exactly what they mean. At times, however, I encounter grammatically "legal" passages that are so tortured, or word choices so bizarre, that my diagnostic vocabulary fails me when the student asks why I want him to make a certain change. What can I say—because it sounds dumb? Because no one will know what he's trying to say? Because it reeks of that special aroma found in student writing? In effect, I end up relying on the plea of the crafty suitor: trust me.

Students seem never to have been exposed to writing as an art form rather than a science. They look for answers, not guidance in a process. If I tell a student, for example, that it doesn't bother me if he starts a sentence with "but," he may protest, then look confused, then shrug. The



JON REIS

Learning how to deliver the product: *Williams working with student Damien Chin-On*