In *English Composition and Rhetoric* Alexander Bain defines rhetoric as something that “discusses the means whereby language, spoken or written, may be rendered effective” (p. 1146). He writes, “in speaking there are three principal ends,” which he identifies as “to inform, to persuade, to please” (p.1146). As we’ve seen in readings assigned in previous weeks Bain links these three ends to the human mind, which further addresses the relationship between psychology and rhetoric. Working from this definition and understanding of rhetoric Bain attempts to present what he believes as the best means to teach composition in focusing on the paragraph and style.

Bain introduces the method of prescribing paragraphs. He sees this practice as leading to the student understanding in their mind what is good composition. These paragraphs that exemplify good composition would not only help students understand what is good composition, but also how to unburden the student from what Bain refers to as “finding matter as well as language” (p. 1146). Bain prioritizes the paragraph because it “has a plan dictated by the nature of the composition” (p. 1148). Bain’s approach and understanding of rhetoric, according to Lunsford, suggests, “he looked upon rhetoric primarily as an analytic study of style, its causes, and its effects” (p.293). Lunsford’s observation is evident in his section on paragraphs. Not only does Bain view them as means to teach good composition, but he pays great attention to style. If “every pertinent statement has a suitable place; in that place, it contributes to the general effect,” then I think he also values the relationship between style and arrangement.

Lunsford in “Alexander Bain’s Contributions to Discourse Theory” refers to this approach as his system, which essentially clues students in to their own “judgments through an appreciation of first principles,” followed by practice and analysis. Lunsford goes on to argue that Bain’s work was not deductive, and while his work on rhetoric may have been thought of in this way, she herself does not believe that is accurate. She views Bain’s forms not as “an exhaustive list of those types,” but as an “act of forms through which we can understand and analyze writing” (p. 299). Ultimately she sees value in Bain’s work as something current and future rhetoricians can aspire, which is formulating a theory that can be applied to other disciplines and useful enough to describe discourse.

The significance of these two articles is not that Lunsford helps to explain what may prove difficult to understand in Bain’s work, but that Lunsford pulls from Bain the important, and at easily overlooked, work on discourse, and teaching composition. It is important that we not shun our own history, or treat older methods and approaches to rhetoric and composition as archaic. There is value in older works, and understanding the context that created these approaches is not significant for a scholar of rhetoric. We must also look to these works as a means to learn from and possibly apply to our current understandings of rhetoric and composition. We often discuss why we study history of rhetoric when many of these movements have come and gone, and Lunsford skillfully supplies us with a reason to continue to go back, as well as look forward.