In the first chapter of James Berlin’s *Rhetoric and Reality Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* literacy is described as always being “the center of the educational enterprise,” because “no matter what else it expects of its schools, a culture insists that students learn to read, write, and speak in the officially sanctioned manner” (p. 1). This attention to literacy results in rhetoric’s role as a foundation of curriculum. Specifically Berlin addresses how the history of rhetoric and of education are so closely related that they react to one another.

Berlin defines rhetoric as a term referring to a diverse discipline that ultimately is made up of major systems that are eventually replaced (p. 3). Rhetoric should be deemed rhetorics, plural due to the fact that there always exist a dominant system of rhetorics, and other competing systems of rhetorical ideas and theories. This is a reflection of the epistemic nature of rhetoric. It is important to draw attention to the fact that Berlin prefers to use epistemology rather than ideology. Ideology refers only to the “conceptions of social and political arrangements” (p. 4) of a time and work to reflect the ideology of a dominant group. Berlin focuses on the epistemology because the rhetorical systems are based on “epistemological assumptions” on nature of reality, nature of the knower, and the rules for discovery and communication (p.4). Essentially, he argues that instead of looking back at the ideologies that influenced rhetorical systems we need to look at the epistemology. These assumptions are what he believes hold a greater influence of the rhetorical systems of the past, and ultimately the future.

Berlin uses three epistemological categories. The objective theories stem from the outside world. It is the nature of what is real. Truth exists before language. Subjective theories come from within. In the subjective truth is only known internally, and it is not shared through communication. Transactional theories come from the interaction or intersection of the objective and the subjective. Truth forms from that interaction, or intersection. Truth, then, can only emerge from “the material, the social, and the personal” as they interact.

Understanding truth in this way helps to understand to the nature of your realities. You need to know your realities because this is how you communicate and assess meaning, or truth. Berlin uses this when writing his overview of the curriculum changes from 1900 to 1985. For example, the progressive education movement reflected the desire to train students in writing so that they can participate in the democratic process. This is not dissimilar from earlier attempts at universities during the early 1900s to train students to write to their social status. Elite and aristocrats would learn a writing style and technique that reflected their status, while other students at less prestigious universities were taught the rhetoric and writing most common to their workplace. The chapters that serve as a historical overview are important for supporting Berlin’s claim that the rhetorical systems are not ideological but epistemological.

The importance of this particular understanding of rhetoric is that it pushes the filed forward so that we can focus on rhetorics, and what it means to approach the field of rhetoric in this way. Personally, I was most intrigued by the idea that there exists a dominant and/or power of one system of rhetorics while other rhetorics and theories also exist. This seems similar to the alternative rhetorics we discussed in class recently.