

FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION SHOULD BE SKIPPED

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Whenever my dean cajoles me into attending our monthly 8:00am recruitment events for high school students, parents often ask me, “So, what does s/he [here they will nod in the general direction of their student] need to do to ‘skip’ freshman comp?”

I get it. These are anxious and expensive times. And if a college degree is just another product, as many believe, then it’s damn near one’s duty as an American to scrutinize every facet of the investment and save valuable credit hours whenever possible. But as the director of a writing program, I know the positive impact a well-crafted freshman composition course can have on a first-year student’s college career, and it bugs me that first-year composition (FYC) gets lumped in as just another add-on to an already pricey purchase.

State legislators and policymakers, in their efforts to make higher education faster and more flexible, are busy touting MOOCs (massive open online courses) and dual-enrollment programs that allow students to take FYC in high school as an alternative to the traditional two-semester, two-course sequence. Most institutions offer incoming students a way to skip or test out of FYC if they perform well enough on a placement exam. These exams are usually timed, superficial in their assumptions about writing, and not considered an accurate measure of students’ writing abilities, according to a great deal of research that examines how we assess the effectiveness or success of student writing.

Rather than indulging anxieties about having to take FYC, I try to explain to parents and students how useful the course can be for all incoming college students, regardless of majors or career plans. But I’m fighting a tough battle at this point. Everyone has heard of

that kid down the street who skipped freshmen comp, or took it in high school or online, or tested out, or something else. So naturally, you have this seductive idea floating around that by avoiding FYC, one is somehow beating the house.

Second, writing is a curious and ancient technology. Our familiarity with writing and with the many important tasks it performs—from texting to Twitter—leads people to assume that writing is a basic skill they’ve already learned if not mastered. Most of us don’t have the same misplaced confidence when it comes to college algebra. Then there’s the simple fact that a four-year college degree is just too expensive. A degree of some kind is now essential for most upwardly mobile Americans. According to *Bloomberg Business*, tuition has pole-vaulted some 1,225% since the 1970s, a rate that has vastly outpaced other essential costs like food and even health-care. Given the high cost of a four-year degree, it makes sense that parents and students—nearly 70% of whom will pay for school by taking out some sort of student loan—are looking for any opportunity to save a few bucks. All of this is to say that even though it may be a tempting one, for the majority of incoming college students, skipping FYC is a bad idea.

Here’s why that idea needs to die: Writing and language are like screens between humans and what we (can) know about the world around us. Even that which we perceive as cold, hard facts are ultimately filtered through the words and symbols we use to make sense of...well, everything. Thus, the process of learning to write is a matter of broader intellectual development and survival-gear-for-living. Writing, in other words, embraces much more than relaying a preset message to a reader. As students learn how to approach the written word—how to read it, yes, but also how to read the many voices, ideas, moods, circumstances, and rhythms that influenced and shaped the words on the page—they begin to understand how language is an essential tool for learning and exploration. FYC is uniquely qualified to provide this experience for several reasons.

Students in FYC, whether in face-to-face (f2f) or online sections, benefit from the interactions they have with other writers, texts, and their teachers. College writing teachers consider it an article of faith and a hard-won point of research that texts, meaning, and knowledge are created through the complex social intersections that occur among humans. In other words, meaning does not exist outside of texts and language; even the words and symbols we use to express meaning—like the ones you’re reading now—only *mean*

(or signify) by virtue of their difference from other words on the page and from the virtual universe of words that might have been chosen but weren't. *Meaning*, many in rhetoric and composition believe, is an effect of language, a by-product, so to speak, rather than something that exists before or somehow outside of language and what we call the rhetorical situation: reader, writer, purpose, medium, genre, and context.

According to reams of scholarship, rhetorical training is critical to students' growing awareness of their readers (audience), their ability to read situations (context, genre/medium, and purpose), and their developing identities as social and political beings (writers). In practical terms, possessing this capacity to do things with words means that a student can transfer the skills they've developed for one scenario—say, responding to an argument using evidence or even questioning the assumptions behind the argument itself—to other rhetorical situations and courses that require similar skills. Researchers who study this phenomenon, such as Linda S. Bergmann and Janet Zepernick, call this concept transfer, for obvious reasons.

This awareness of the essential social-ness of language is heightened through the training FYC students receive in the persuasive and purposeful uses of language. FYC is typically a student's first encounter with the ancient human practice known as rhetoric, the original being-together-through-language art of how to be persuasive using words, symbols, and gestures. From the Greeks onward, rhetoric has been central to human affairs. Indeed, until the 19th century, rhetoric dominated formal education in Europe and the United States; now, it's found mainly in graduate programs in rhetoric and composition studies, speech communication, and in FYC.

Students in FYC also receive one-on-one coaching that they are not likely to get in other classes. FYC is often one of the few courses that a student can count on to be small—almost always 25 students or fewer—compared to the massive lecture halls or online courses that characterize one's early college years, especially at larger universities. FYC teachers get to know their students by name, lead discussions, coach students on writing-projects-in-progress, and provide crucial support both in the classroom and in one-on-one conferences. Together, students evaluate texts and explore the many facets of meaning and meaning-making. Crucially, they are provided adequate time and space to do so. For these reasons and more, research shows that FYC encourages student engagement and helps retain students during and after their first year.

FYC provides a space in the all-important first year for students to nurture the habits necessary for effective writing, research, and inquiry into complex problems and questions. Data from large-scale research studies such as the Stanford Study of Writing and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) indicate that the ways of writing students practice in FYC—analyzing, synthesizing, integrating contradictory ideas from multiple sources—promote deep learning, which enables students to integrate what they are learning with what they already know. As we’ve discussed, writing is closely connected to exploration, to putting down on paper and seeing the limits of what we know. Writing in FYC allows students to expand those limits by relentlessly pushing back against the stubborn boundaries between the known and the new.

Students can—and often do—use their FYC experience to engage theretofore untapped interests and passions, thus unlocking possibilities for futures they perhaps were not even aware existed. FYC allows students to break out of their educational molds. They can (and sometimes do) fail the course altogether. And this, too, can be a good thing.

Several forces conspire against the continued success of FYC: decades of waning funding for higher education, bad ideas about writing and how it works, and unethically sourced, flexible labor. Recently, it has become something of an academic bloodsport to poke at FYC’s relevance and what it can do. But FYC courses succeed in jogging first-year students out of their comfort zones and into the complex, messy realm of texts, meaning, intent, revision (literally “to see again”), and ultimately *otherness*. As John Duffy writes, “To make a claim in an argument is to propose a relationship between others and ourselves.” When students seriously consider ideas, values, and opinions that they themselves do not share, they learn how to, as Duffy puts it, “sacrifice the consolations of certainty and expose themselves to the doubts and contradictions that adhere to every worthwhile question.” Even with its primary focus on writing effectively and learning how to enter an ongoing conversation, somewhat ironically, FYC’s greatest gift to students may be that it teaches them how to listen.

Further Reading

For a short, timely discussion of what FYC can do for students that also considers the ethical dimensions of the teaching of writing, see John Duffy’s article “Virtuous Arguments” (InsideHigherEd.

com). And for a book that's equal parts art history, gallery tour, and head trip, check out Geoffrey Sirc's iconoclastic statement of composition's untapped creative potentials in *English Composition as a Happening* (Utah State University Press).

In a somewhat more traditional vein, Robert J. Connors's *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy* (University of Pittsburgh Press) is a modern classic among standard histories of FYC; the book's introductory chapter alone provides a wide-angle focus on the history of writing instruction in American colleges and universities going back to the 18th century. For a somewhat more theoretical take on FYC's history and fortunes, David Russell's chapter "Institutionalizing English: Rhetoric on the Boundaries" in *Disciplining English: Alternative Histories, Critical Perspectives* (State University of New York Press) is terrific on the tangled political and curricular histories that continue to bind FYC to English departments at most U.S. institutions. James Slevin's edited collection *Introducing English: Essays in the Intellectual Work of Composition* (University of Pittsburgh Press) is an excellent overview of the disciplinary politics of composition and FYC (see especially Chapter 2).

Considered by many in the field to be one of the more trenchant and politicized statements on the university-as-social-institution to appear in the last decade, Marc Bousquet's 2008 book *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York University Press) takes on such sacred cows as student employment, WPA "bosses," and FYC's complicity in the adjunctification of higher ed (see especially Chapter 5). But if you read one book in the course of your life about the university-as-idea and its role in contemporary Western societies, the late Bill Readings's *The University in Ruins* (Harvard University Press) is hands-down the one you should read.

Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee's *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students* (Pearson) is a hybrid rhetoric textbook/history-of-rhetoric tome that's been around for about as long as the Gutenberg Bible (not really, obviously), and it contains everything from artfully written histories of rhetorical theory to end-of-chapter exercises, some of which date back to the ancient Greeks (really!). For a much shorter, article-length articulation of how classical rhetorical principles can be adapted for today's undergraduates, David Fleming's "Rhetoric as a Course of Study" (*College English*) offers a curricular blueprint that is useful for implementing some of the ideas explored in this short chapter.

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rhetorical listening, contingent labor, deep learning, dual enrollment, ethics, first-year composition, literacy, rhetoric, writing pedagogy

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