

## FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION PREPARES STUDENTS FOR ACADEMIC WRITING

Tyler Branson

I have a memory that really sticks out in my mind when I think of all the bad ideas about writing. I was at the dentist making small talk, and my dentist asked, “So what is it you teach at the university?” Squinting at the bright light above me, I responded, “I teach mostly first-year writing.” “Uh oh!” he chuckled, looking back at the dental assistants behind him. “Better watch my grammar around you, huh?” He paused and said, thoughtfully, “You know, I should send my son to you. He can’t spell to save his life!” To be fair, these sorts of comments are made innocently enough and, anecdotally, they tend to happen a lot. The reason for this, I think, is because of a particularly bad idea about writing and writing instruction, one that surprisingly hasn’t let up in the past 40 years: that first-year writing is a basic course in language, grammar, and syntax that prepares students for something called *academic writing* in the more “legitimate” courses in the university; and that its teachers consist primarily of error-correctors and behavior-modifiers armed with red pens and elbow patches. However, such an antiquated view of what first-year writing *is* and *can be* only scratches the surface of the kinds of learning possible in a writing classroom.

My dentist understands first-year writing as remedial instruction in language, but this is an outdated description for this universal course in U.S. higher education. You can actually trace this back to the 1800s, when more and more men and women started attending college. At the time, first-year writing instructors decided that the best way to provide this new influx of middle-class professionals with the tools to succeed in written communication was to focus on correctness and efficiency. Writing instruction back then taught

that good writing was correct writing, and that you can measure good writing by counting errors.

However, people in the field of composition have come to learn a lot about how writing works and how it is best taught in courses like first-year writing. As Seth Kahn has shown in this collection, researchers have known since the 1970s that teaching grammar and mechanics does not improve student writing. Andrea Lunsford and Karen Lunsford even recreated a famous study of errors in Freshman Composition essays and found that “the rate of student error is not increasing precipitously but, in fact, has stayed stable for nearly 100 years.” What they mean is that errors in writing are a fact of life. As writing teachers, the idea that errors are a fact of life has been quite helpful because it has allowed them to prioritize *higher order* issues in writing like *argument, analysis, audience, purpose, and context*. By having students focus more on argument and audience in their writing, the five-paragraph essay template becomes increasingly irrelevant because it doesn’t resemble anything about how writing looks in the real world or what different audiences expect in different reading contexts. Writing isn’t a set of formulas that you plug in to get different kinds of texts. Writing is a process of brainstorming, composing, revising, having your work read *by others*, and then revising again. This is a complex, in-depth process that goes way beyond correctness.

Yet, when first-year writing comes up in popular culture (or the dentist’s office), people still recall the image of the red pen. In 1975, Merrill Sheils wrote in a *Newsweek* article, “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” lamenting students’ “inadequate grounding in the basics of syntax, structure and style” and blamed it all on the “political activism” among English professors. This tradition of bashing what’s being taught in first-year writing continues to this day, from bombastic authors like Stanley Fish who publish *New York Times* editorials lamenting how college graduates of today are “unable to write a clear and coherent English sentence,” or popular books on higher education like Richard Arum and Josipa Roska’s *Academically Adrift*, which claims that college graduates are vastly deficient in writing. They report that 80 percent of first-year college students and 50 percent of college seniors have never written a paper longer than 20 pages. For many educated, well-meaning folks interested in higher education, these popular portrayals of writing in the university only reinforce the idea that first-year writing is a course that trains students to churn out 20-page academic essays, or worse, that these are examples of intellectual rigor in first-year writing.

It's also important to note that a lot of folks have a vested interest in keeping first-year writing courses tied to correctness and grammar. When writing instructors attempt to do otherwise, they are often met with opposition and charges of attempting to indoctrinate their students and politicize the classroom. Conservative website *Minding the Campus* describes this as little writing, but plenty of activism. When it appears that American students aren't writing well, it's easy to point to first-year writing and ask, well what *are* they teaching in there? In fact, first-year writing teachers are often scapegoats for political debates that extend beyond the writing classroom. So it is important to note that there are political dimensions to the debate about what first-year writing should teach, and ramifications for wanting to push the boundaries.

To be clear, though, I'm not saying that academic writing and correct writing are bad. On the contrary, courses in rhetoric and composition can be very helpful in allowing students to practice academic-level reading and writing in other disciplines, and this often helps students better understand the various kinds of writing they are bound to encounter in the university. And even in professional writing courses, it's important to teach students that making errors in your writing is often a way to turn off your audience, or worse, it impedes your audience's ability to understand what it is you're trying to say. However, the idea that first-year writing exists to train students to write correctly does everyone a disservice. It obscures all the other opportunities for learning in first-year writing that go way beyond the production of essays that are academic in nature.

For one, academic writing is context-dependent. As Elizabeth Wardle writes in this collection, "There is no such thing as writing in general. Writing is always in particular." The expectations in, say, Introduction to Sociology may differ wildly from what another instructor expects in Introduction to Film. Also, while first-year writing can teach students basic skills in conducting research or structuring arguments, it is quite limiting to say that these skills are only specific to academic writing *in general*.

In fact, we might be better off thinking of first-year writing as a course in the practice of citizenship than a course in writing academically. I would argue that society needs students skilled in civic discourse now more than ever. One only has to look to the so-called exemplars of civic discourse—our politicians and other public figures—as evidence. Talking heads on cable news showcase

a malignant style of uncivil, boorish argumentation in which pundits unabashedly bend, distort, or even make up facts to advance their positions. And while this may make for good television (for some), it promotes a pernicious argumentative style that teaches students that winning a debate is more important than exploring their biases, increasing their empathy, and accepting differences. That is why it might be better to imagine first-year writing not as a remedial course in academic writing, but as a productive space for respectful argument. In fact, by having students practice making claims and offering counterarguments in a range of contexts, first-year writing works like no other course to promote empathy, ethics, and compassion in public discourse. First-year writing isn't just about preparing students for academic writing. It's about modeling and practicing writing as an act of citizenship.

First-year writing also works like no other course to push students to explore the possibilities of language, to work with new and uncomfortable ideas and genres, and to analyze important issues and how they are argued in the public sphere. Part of this means getting students to develop better methods of writing and reading in digital environments, which involves discerning what philosopher Harry Frankfurt has called bullshit. A recent survey found that 84% of American students indicated they would benefit from learning whether or not certain online sources are trustworthy. Another study reported that around 82% of middle-schoolers were unable to determine what was sponsored content and what was a real news story on a website. And being able to sift through the bullshit to find reliable sources, meaningful arguments, and a deeper intellectual exchange in public deliberation is a literacy skill developed specifically in first-year writing.

Getting smarter about the purpose of first-year writing means vanquishing one of the worst ideas about writing: that it consists of mechanical, prescribed, product-centered, decontextualized instruction in language. At its worst, first-year writing teaches students that good writing is correct writing, that the course is merely a hurdle, and that its content is mostly basic instruction without much depth or substance. At its highest potential, though, first-year writing gets at the political and cultural contexts of language use; it asks students to consider how those contexts work to inform their own positions on important public issues; and it pushes students to think about how they can ethically and persuasively position themselves in ongoing public conversations.

## Further Reading

For more information about the purpose of first-year writing, see Linda Brodkey's *Writing Permitted in Designated Areas Only* (University of Minnesota Press), which is a series of essays detailing Brodkey's experiences in the 1990s incorporating a first-year writing course focused on difference at the University of Texas. Her ideas touched a cultural nerve, landing on the front pages of the *New York Times* amid charges of political indoctrination. Additionally, see Sharon Crowley's *Composition in the University* (University of Pittsburgh Press), which is a meticulously detailed examination of the first-year writing course in American colleges and universities. Crowley makes a spirited case that the universal requirement of first-year writing has severely limited both the course itself and the discipline of composition studies.

For more about first-year writing as teaching citizenship and participation in public discourse, see John Duffy's "Essay on the Value of First Year Writing Courses" in *Inside Higher Ed*, in addition to his chapter "Writing Involves Ethical Choices" in Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts in Writing Studies* (Utah State University Press).

Scholars in rhetoric and composition have also published excellent scholarship on the various paradigm shifts in the evolution of first-year writing. See for example James Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality* (Southern Illinois University Press), or Maxine Hairston's "Winds of Change" and Sean Zwagerman's "Local Examples and Master Narratives: Stanley Fish and the Public Appeal of Current-Traditionalism," both in *College Composition and Communication*. These studies not only offer historical context for the evolution of first-year writing, but also discuss the relationship between first-year writing and its public reputation.

## Keywords

citizenship, current traditionalism, freshman composition, process theory, writing studies

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