What Is College Writing For?

ELLEN ANDREWS KNODT
Penn State Abington

Patrick Sullivan, one of the editors of this volume, notes that there is often broad disagreement among English faculty evaluating student papers and asks an excellent question: "What is college-level writing?" As he participated in a workshop attended by a number of English faculty from different institutions, he explains,

> We discussed a variety of sample student essays at this session, for example, and the range of opinion about this work was extraordinarily varied. In one memorable case, the assessments about a particular essay ranged from A-quality, college-level work ("This is definitely college-level writing. It is very well organized, and there are no spelling, grammar, or punctuation errors. I would love to get a paper like this from one of my students") to F ("This is definitely *not* college-level writing. Although this essay is well organized, it contains no original, sustained analysis or thought. It's empty. There is no thoughtful engagement of ideas here"). (375)

To arrive at an answer to Sullivan's question, we first need to ask: What is college writing *for*? I suggest that the wide disparity in evaluation that Sullivan experienced stems in part from a wide disagreement among composition programs and faculty about the goals to be achieved in college writing programs. In recent years, many college writing programs have come to serve many purposes. Some orient first-year students to campuses, serving as foci for ethics training including discussions of diversity on campus, plagiarism and cheating, binge drinking, and proscribed

sexual behavior such as stalking, date rape, and intolerance of gays. Other programs seek to shake students out of their complacency by introducing them to political and social movements with which they are not familiar or with which they might disagree. Some programs continue to emphasize current traditional rhetoric. And even within programs, individual faculty educated at different times and in different universities may have goals different from their fellow faculty. George Hillocks, Jr., vividly makes that case in his 1999 study *Ways of Thinking, Ways of Teaching*.

Acknowledging the difficulty of determining writing curricula, Edward White says:

> There is no professional consensus on the curriculum of writing courses, at any level. There is also no shortage of advice from researchers and practitioners; whatever approach to instruction an individual instructor might elect or inherit seems to have its prominent exemplars and promoters, and the profusion of textbooks is legendary. How can we arrange a sensible and useful syllabus in the face of so many theories, texts, research findings, pedagogical truisms, content suggestions, and methodologies? (419)

This is not to say that this variety of goals for writing programs is necessarily wrong, though some have argued that composition programs have been led away from their main mission of teaching writing to indulge the desire of college instructors to teach something else (see Hairston; Wallace and Wallace, "Readerless"). However, such variety may cause problems in assessment of outcomes across programs at colleges and universities and may pose complications for universities that accept many transfer students who may have completed their composition courses at institutions with far different writing programs. This essay will attempt to analyze the major types of college composition programs currently in use and to illustrate how the goals of such programs may affect assessment of outcomes for their students. While the types of programs discussed below are not the only curricular variations, they are the most common types of programs.

The Traditional Five-Paragraph Essay Program

Though one may not find compositionists to support this type of program, it is alive and well in American colleges and universities. A Google search produced dozens of college Web sites devoted to the five-paragraph essay or to its revised versions. Most instructors using this organizing principle acknowledge it as a formula but find it useful for beginning writers who have little sense of organization. They also point out that it is a quick way to organize an essay exam answer in history or psychology or other such courses. Programs using this approach often take their university service role very seriously, feeling that their main function is to prepare students to present information they have learned in an organized, coherent essay.

Such programs require students to do different types of work from, for example, a program at New York University described by Dombek and Herndon that defines college-level writing as being about creating something new, something original, a "hybrid kind of academic writing" that asks "writers to pose rigorous questions and speculate about multiple possible answers, analyze several texts at once, sustain complicated trains of thought, wrestle with contradiction and paradox, and develop new ideas" (4). As seen in Sullivan's example above, there is a fundamental disagreement over composition as conveying information in an organized way and composition as a creative process that produces new knowledge or insights. In one schema, a student's essay may be successful, but the same essay being evaluated under a different schema may not be deemed successful.

Students successfully completing one program may produce quite different texts from students completing another program, and assessment of such different texts may be problematic.

The Classical Rhetoric Program

Such programs are based on analysis of classical sources of rhetoric such as Plato and Aristotle, usually as a basis for analysis of contemporary essays. In their written work, students are expected to

read, summarize, and apply classical rhetorical concepts to the contemporary essays they read. For an example of this approach, see Marvin Diogenes' "An Honors Course in First-Year Composition: Classical Rhetoric and Contemporary Writing." Students in such a program will be expected to learn and apply terms like *pathos*, *logos*, and *ethos*, among other concepts, which students in other programs may not be exposed to, at least in the same words. Admittedly, Diogenes' course is for honor students, but classical rhetoric curricula may be found in several texts and is taught at many traditional liberal arts institutions.

The Sociopolitical Program

Another variant program goal is making students more politically and socially aware. James Berlin has declared that the mission of a composition course is to "bring about more democratic and personally humane economic, social, and political arrangements" (116). One clear description of such a program comes from Karen Fitts and Alan France in "Advocacy and Resistance in the Writing Class: Working toward Stasis":

> Our politics are materialist-feminist, and they are central to our pedagogical and professional ethos. It is important to us, for example, that our teaching practices actively challenge the white, middle-class consensus that Americans can afford to ignore the poverty-strangling inner-city life, the general erosion of women's reproductive rights, and the growing ecological threat of Western technologies. . . . At the same time, as professors of rhetoric, we are also committed to open democratic forums, free expression of conflicting arguments, and an empathetic classroom environment for our students' apprenticeship in the public discourse of self-governance. (13–14)

In their discussion of class assignments, the authors explain that among other topics they ask students to investigate gender practices of other societies and to examine advertisements or other media representations of gender. Their analysis in the article of their students' papers from the course concentrates on students' "rhetorical strategies to avoid confronting" (17) certain issues,

not on whether their students were more or less successful in explaining their views.

Again, one can see that a student successfully passing this course would have an entirely different background in terminology and technique from a student who had taken the classical rhetoric course described above. Would a transfer student from one institution understand what is expected of him or her in subsequent writing courses at the new institutions? Would the respective instructors be able to evaluate papers from each other's classes?

The Writing Across the Curriculum Program

Beginning in the 1970s, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs are sometimes housed in English departments and sometimes are campus-wide programs administered separately from English departments. Shared assumptions are that students need to learn to write in many college disciplines and that many (or all) members of the faculty need to be involved in creating writing opportunities for students. Students in such programs write reports, observations of experiments, summaries of readings, in addition to essays. Readings are often in many disciplines. Responsibility for teaching and grading a WAC course is often shared between an English faculty member and faculty from another discipline or is the sole responsibility of the English faculty but with curriculum decided on by multiple disciplines. WAC programs share a service emphasis with other service-oriented programs mentioned here.

Following the Boyer Commission recommendation in 1998 to link writing to coursework (V,1), Kerri Morris suggests that composition reform should remove the first-year writing course from the English department and place writing instruction in the hands of all faculty (120). Such a move has many implications, of course, but for composition students, this change might further fragment the goals of the course because now faculty from many disciplines with presumably even more varied notions of what college-level writing entails would be teaching the subject.

Students participating in a WAC program would have quite different writing backgrounds from students participating in several of the other programs discussed here. Their assignments would depend on the kinds of writing that faculty both inside and outside the English department feel is important to success at that institution.

The First-Year Orientation Program

This program sees first-year composition as an opportunity to reach all or most first-year students in order to introduce them to academic life. At the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, Odyssey, a summer reading program, becomes the common subject matter of composition which places "the composition program directly in the service of the administration, so that its retention goals become the primary object for the first weeks of the class" (Helmers 91). Odyssey chooses one book as the focus of discussion for the first-year students in their writing course. Issues for such programs are the creation of a unified intellectual experience for entering students and focuses on the shared reading assignment as a way to engage students in academic discourse. Such programs are often unique to the particular institution both in the readings chosen and in the activities engaged.

The Professional Writing Program

Some institutions envision their composition programs as preparing students for the writing they will do *after* college. Donald Samson advocates teaching students to write "proposals, reports, letters, memos, resumes, briefing materials, speeches," etc. because "our function as writing instructors should be in part to prepare them to succeed in the writing they will have to do" (124–25). Samson's program emphasizes writing to provide information for different audiences rather than what he sees as writing for personal development or writing to prove what the students have learned (writing as testing). While some schools have business or technical writing courses that address Samson's

goals, he feels that this professional approach to first-year composition would engage students more fully than what is currently offered on most campuses.

An Overview and a Practical Suggestion

While all of these programs have legitimate rationale for their approaches, especially within the context of their colleges and universities, they offer very different experiences. Students completing one such composition course (at one institution or even from one instructor) might approach a writing assignment at another institution or even a later course at the same institution in quite different ways. And a statewide assessment of college writing skills with students from multiple institutions would be even more problematic, leading to just the experience Patrick Sullivan describes in his opening essay.

So what are we to do? Do we want just one universal approach to composition? And if we did, what one might that be? It seems to me that a single approach is both unrealistic and undesirable. However, we might do a better job of talking to each other in our English or writing departments about what we are doing and why. We might also begin dialogues with institutions that our students transfer to or with institutions from whom we receive transfer students to discuss what we both think are the important writing experiences that our students should have. To aid in these dialogues both within and without our institutions, perhaps the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition could serve as a template or touchstone for discussion. The Outcomes Statement does not dictate content of readings, types of assignments, or political approaches, but focuses on the kinds of writing experiences and skills that a broad spectrum of experts think are desirable:

> The Council of Writing Program Administrators adopted the following Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition in April 2000. [I have included here the statements for composition classes only, not the advice to faculties in other programs and departments on how to extend this knowledge.]

Introduction

This statement describes the common knowledge, skills, and attitudes sought by first-year composition programs in American postsecondary education. To some extent, we seek to regularize what can be expected to be taught in first-year composition; to this end the document is not merely a compilation or summary of what currently takes place. Rather, the following statement articulates what composition teachers nationwide have learned from practice, research, and theory. This document intentionally defines only "outcomes," or types of results, and not "standards," or precise levels of achievement. The setting of standards should be left to specific institutions or specific groups of institutions. . . .

These statements describe only what we expect to find at the end of first-year composition, at most schools a required general education course or sequence of courses. As writers move beyond first-year composition, their writing abilities do not merely improve. Rather, students' abilities not only diversify along disciplinary and professional lines but also move into whole new levels where expected outcomes expand, multiply, and diverge. For this reason, each statement of outcomes for first-year composition is followed by suggestions for further work that builds on these outcomes.

Rhetorical Knowledge

By the end of first year composition, students should

- Focus on a purpose
- Respond to the needs of different audiences
- Respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations
- Use conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation
- Adopt appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality
- Understand how genres shape reading and writing
- Write in several genres

Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing

By the end of first year composition, students should

- Use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating

- Understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources
- Integrate their own ideas with those of others
- Understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power

Processes

By the end of first year composition, students should

- Be aware that it usually takes multiple drafts to create and complete a successful text
- Develop flexible strategies for generating, revising, editing, and proof-reading
- Understand writing as an open process that permits writers to use later invention and re-thinking to revise their work
- Understand the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes
- Learn to critique their own and others' works
- Learn to balance the advantages of relying on others with the responsibility of doing their part
- Use a variety of technologies to address a range of audiences

Knowledge of Conventions

By the end of first year composition, students should

- Learn common formats for different kinds of texts
- Develop knowledge of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics
- Practice appropriate means of documenting their work
- Control such surface features as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling

These outcomes may seem unreachable in their entirety for many students in many programs, but I suggest that as departments and institutions discuss their approaches to composition as com-

pared to this list of outcomes, they may clarify their priorities and may reach some consensus as a department on their goals for their students. (Council)

Conclusion

As I see it, departments could use the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition as a checklist to ascertain whether their departmental program is meeting the needs of their students, regardless of the overall approach the department had decided to follow. For example, a department following a professional writing approach could ensure that the proposals, reports, and speeches that students write are sufficiently complex to challenge students' rhetorical knowledge by requiring them to write for different audiences, vary the formality and tone of their content depending on audience and situation, and understand the different purposes of their communication. Similarly, students using a professional writing approach should have experiences leading to the outcomes of critical thinking, reading, and writing, understanding writing processes and common conventions of writing. Such a course can succeed through peer group discussions, drafting and revising written work, integrating information into texts, and other classwork. Activities and assignments can be structured to accomplish most, if not all, of the WPA goals within each department's approach.

There still remains the difficulty a student may have transferring from one college's writing program to another that may use quite different readings and writing assignments. For example, let us imagine a student moving from a program in which a student writes a report analyzing moving a factory to a country outside the United States and the resultant implications for a business and a community to a program in which a student is expected to analyze the different realities of the two sisters in Alice Walker's story "Everyday Use." If, however, the instructors in each program are making students conscious of the WPA outcomes and are explaining students' writing tasks in similar terms, students will have a much easier time adapting their writing to meet these new writing situations. Perhaps our biggest failure in

helping students and colleagues to understand what is college-level writing is our failure to be explicit in what we seek.

Works Cited

Berlin, James A. *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1996.

The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University. *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities*. 24 April 1998 <http://naples.cc.sunysb.edu/Pres/boyer.nsf/>.

Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA). *WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition*. April 2000. 19 July 2006 <http://wpacouncil.org/positions/html>.

Diogenes, Marvin. "An Honors Course in First-Year Composition: Classical Rhetoric and Contemporary Writing." *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition*. Ed. Duane Roen et al. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2002.114–32.

Dombek, Kristen, and Scott Herndon. *Critical Passages: Teaching the Transition to College Composition*. New York: Teachers College P, 2004.

Fitts, Karen, and Alan France. "Advocacy and Resistance in the Writing Class: Working toward Stasis." *Pedagogy in the Age of Politics: Writing and Reading (in) the Academy*. Ed. Patricia Sullivan and Donna Qualley. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994. 13–24.

Hairston, Maxine. "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 43 (1992): 179–93.

Helmers, Marguerite. "Constructing Bridges between High School and College Writing." *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition*. Ed. Duane Roen, et al. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2002. 89–96.

Hillocks, George, Jr. *Ways of Thinking, Ways of Teaching*. New York: Teachers College P, 1999.

Morris, Kerri. "The Service Myth: Why Freshman Composition Doesn't Serve 'Us' or 'Them.'" *Reforming College Composition: Writing the Wrongs*. Ed. Ray Wallace, Alan Jackson, and Susan Lewis Wallace. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000. 113–22.

Samson, Donald. "Preparing Composition Students for Writing in Their Careers." *Reforming College Composition: Writing the Wrongs.* Ed. Ray Wallace, Alan Jackson, and Susan Lewis Wallace. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000. 123–36.

Sullivan, Patrick. "What Is 'College-Level' Writing?" *Teaching English in the Two-Year College.* 30.4 (2003): 374–90.

Walker, Alice. "Everyday Use." *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973. 47–59.

Wallace, Ray, and Susan Lewis Wallace. "Readerless Writers: College Composition's Misreading and Misteaching of Entering Students." *Reforming College Composition: Writing the Wrongs.* Ed. Ray Wallace, Alan Jackson, and Susan Lewis Wallace. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000. 79–98.

Wallace, Ray, Alan Jackson, and Susan Lewis Wallace, eds. *Reforming College Composition: Writing the Wrongs.* Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000.

White, Edward M. "Philosophical Statement." *Twelve Readers Reading: Responding to College Student Writing.* Ed. Richard Straub and Ronald Lunsford. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 1995: 419–21.