# Coming to Terms: Vocabulary as a Means of Defining First-Year Composition

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## A story

*In 1999, North Carolina was developing a new set of curricular frameworks for kindergarten through grade 12, and I was invited to think with several members of the community about what those frameworks for language arts and English might look like. Margaret, the person chairing our group, is a former Parent-Teacher Association president for all of Mecklenburg County, which with over ninety thousand students at the time (and over one hundred thousand today) was one of the largest school districts in the state. At the first meeting of the group, I introduced the idea of reflection as a process we might want to include in the language arts curriculum, and was delighted at how much the idea was welcomed. When it came to writing, however, I found myself frustrated. Regardless of the approach I took, my colleagues persisted in seeing writing as grammar. Finally, in a conversation with Margaret, I said, "Margaret, I am glad to include grammar in the framework since I think some attention to grammar can do a number of good things. But honestly, writing isn't grammar. So what can we do about that?" Her reply: "It's prob-*

*ably not.* But it's what I was taught, and I can write, and it's what I know. *So I've assumed it's what kids should know, too."*

## Some Terms: Composition and Discourse Communities

The terms we—both in high school and in college—use in the teaching of writing are important, and as we know, those terms have changed over the last thirty years. Today, we talk about the teaching of writing in the vocabulary of composing processes like drafting, peer reviewing, and revising; in the language of texts like reading and interpretation and genre; and in the words of writing assessment like focus, organization, evidence, and style or voice. These terms speak to concepts and to practices that together are the stuff of composition.

Although composition in high school and college is similar, it is also very different from one site to the next in some significant ways, as two recent studies suggest. One of these, the "Portraits of Composition" study, surveyed 1,861 postsecondary writing faculty—the largest group ever consulted—about their teaching of college composition (Yancey et al.). When asked to identify one or two of their most important approaches to teaching composition, the respondents to the survey identified academic writing most often (57 percent) followed next by argument (40.9 percent). Likewise, when asked what writing practices they most used, faculty identified three: writing process, revision, and peer review. This composition curriculum is fundamentally different than that of high school, however, at least as it is portrayed both in the work of researchers like Arthur Applebee and in the more recent *Research in the Teaching of English* study of high school writing practices (Applebee, "Stability"; Scherff and Piazza). This study, based on the responses of 2,000 high school students to a survey inquiring into their writing curricula, showed a composition that is less oriented to process and more oriented to literature. According to Scherff and Piazza, of all high school students reporting on their school writing activities, the *only* students who engaged in peer revision and editing were the dual enrollment students (288–89). Moreover, the primary form of high school

writing is not academic writing, as it is in college, but "literary" writing (292), and the principal exigence for writing instruction, echoing Britton's study some thirty years ago, is test preparation. The high school composition curriculum thus differs from its college cousin in part because of the influence of tests—some thirty-eight states assess students' writing with an essay (Ketter and Pool)—and in part because the focus of the writing in both classroom and test is on literature.

Put differently, the discourse communities that these composition programs inhabit are quite different—for high school composition, the English classroom and the community of literature; for college composition, the college or university discourse community, where academic writing and argument are the preferred genres.

## A New Vocabulary for a New Genre

Brian discusses a new genre of writing, blogs:

> Upon first consideration, my claim is that blogs (also called weblogs) would constitute a new genre within electronic communication. However, upon reconsideration of what can constitute a blog and a survey of its various rhetorical exploitations, I am not so certain what it is. A determination would also be contingent upon the definition that I use for "genre."
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> Simply to lay the groundwork for beginning to talk about this, I think it would be helpful to define the terms. The word "genre" is a daunting and encompassing term, and its handling is important to my current meditation. To state it simply (to save myself from an attempt at an exhaustive consideration), a genre might be called a form that generally carries its own conventions, styles, syntax, content, etc. However, just as genre can often dictate boundaries for one of its manifestations, texts can expand or defy generic classification by playing with any of the aforementioned elements that animate the genre.
>
> Blogs are a new form of electronic communication that seem to have had their first emergence nearly 18 months ago, but have since spread all over the Internet and now seem to be a ubiquitous presence in cyberspace.

## Defining Terms

We often think that we define terms, but terms also define us. And in the context of postsecondary composition instruction, that's a problem, according to Greg Colomb. On the Writing Program Administration (WPA) listserv, he notes,

> [T]he terms students bring to our classes are not up to the job. They are a hodgepodge of folk theory, terms invented locally by various K–12 teachers, handbook terms based on antique and false theories of language, and a little MTV and Reading Rainbow thrown in. Terms like "attention grabber" or "the clincher" are too vague and too easily misunderstood. As Jay [Gordon] points out, not only is the language students bring or teachers invent seldom helpful, it is most often detrimental to a writer's performance.

Colomb further notes that what he sees as our reluctance to make use of appropriate terms intentionally cannot be because the students are not *ready* for sophisticated terminology, especially when we think about the terms students learn in other disciplines:

> Besides, are we seriously going to say that any of the following terms are too difficult for students who are contemporaneously learning organic chemistry and calculus: claim, reason, evidence, acknowledgment and response, warrant, noun, verb, character, action, topic, stress, old information, new information, topic string, main character, point of view, problem statement, common ground, destabilizing condition, cost, response, solution, etc. What do we say about ourselves when we say that we want to work in a field with NO special terminology?

Not least, Colomb helps me understand my earlier discussion with Margaret:

> Few writers in or outside the academy have an adequate vocabulary for talking about writing because WE FAILED to teach them such a vocabulary back when they were our students. Past failures are hardly a good reason not to do what's best now.

Which leads me to ask: What are the terms of composition today—and in the early part of the twenty-first century?

## New Genres, New Spaces, New Terms

Brian:

> Another interesting point about blogs is their use of space, which tends to vary. Beyond utilization of both written and visual material, the use of space varies between postings and blogs from snippets of information or language to lengthy arguments, comments, reportings, etc. The use of space that I have encountered thus far tends to fall on the lengthy side of the spectrum. Whereas instant messaging and chat rooms generally involve transmission of small, quick messages, blogs make provisions for the kind of organization, coherence, and length that *feels* like a print document.

## A Term for Our Consideration: First-Year Composition as *Brokering*

Deciding on key terms is not an easy task, but it is an interesting intellectual task. When creating a syllabus, I locate the material of the course in key terms that lead to key questions; it's a way of identifying what matters, of helping to provide a language for thinking and writing (see Figure 1). The students and I use these terms throughout a semester. Sometimes I ask students to map key terms so that we can tease out relationships, especially the relationships among terms that students are creating. Over the course of a semester, we see how relationships shift, extend, amplify. Sometimes—as in a course on genre, voice, and technology—I ask students to use the key terms as the basis of their reflections, in portfolios and out.

As members of a discipline, how do we decide on key terms? One approach might be to review documents like the WPA Outcomes Statement, which is itself marked by key terms like *genre* and *process*. Another, complementary approach might be to think about how we understand the role of first-year composition in the academy. Is our purpose as it was in the time of World War II, to assure that students could communicate so that they could win battles (Good, *Writing*)? Is our purpose another one associated with the past, to introduce students to literature (Yancey et
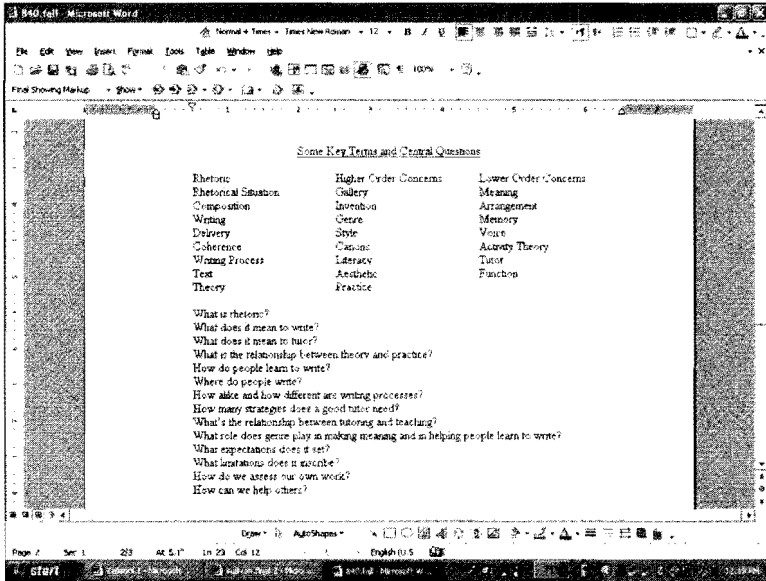
FIGURE 1. *Key terms.*

al.)? Is it to socialize students? Is it to prepare students for the classes in writing that they will encounter later? Apparently, the purpose is to help students write, but in what context?

Elizabeth Wardle, drawing on activity theory, sees our role as that of a broker. She says,

> FYC teachers . . . are faced with a very difficult task: preparing students for the varied genres used across the university and in its disciplines when the teachers themselves are usually involved in only one of those disciplines. FYC teachers faced with this goal for FYC are asked to be what Wenger (1998) calls "boundary brokers." Brokering is a connection made by a person with memberships in multiple activity systems; brokers "introduce elements of one practice into another" (p. 105). The immediately apparent problem with FYC teachers in English departments who are asked to be brokers is that they do not usually have the multiple memberships brokers need in order to translate, coordinate, and align between the perspectives (p. 109) (and genres) of the students, the English department, and the various disciplines with which students will become involved.

She seems to have a point; the report of the writing faculty in the "Portraits of Composition" study is that we teach academic writing (Yancey et al.), and yet, as Wardle claims, too often these are contexts we don't have the expertise to broker. At the same time, I still find brokering a compelling metaphor. Question: If we aren't brokering the conventions and genres of other disciplines, what are we brokering? Does this metaphorical term work?

## Models of Composition

In the old model of composition, we were not sure if we could require typed copies of essays. In a less old model of composition, not that long ago, we focused exclusively on print, even as we moved to word processing. Most of us continued to teach and assess writing without *seeing* that the writing composed with a word processor that allows one to **bold** and *italicize* and

♦ format

is quite different from the writing that is created with pencil and paper and different still from (merely) typing a final copy. A newer model is writing for the screen, to see the screen as the vehicle for delivery and to use the parameters and the resources of the screen as another composing space. A future model is to use all these composing spaces and put them (and the processes we use in each) in dialogue with each other, using terms like *medium* and *remediation* and *genre* and *rhetorical situation* to help students think about practice, and to use reflection as a means of articulating practice and creating a theory from practice. The term *circulation*—among rhetorical situations, among various media— allows us to consider how we compose now. If we were to use circulation as a central term, how might that shape composition?

## Another Story: The Things They Carried

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro offers a dual enrollment program called Fast Forward. Each summer, high

school English teachers from different counties gather on the college campus to think about how they teach composition, to share assignments and response strategies, and to compare what they do with practices in the college writing program. The teachers enjoy each other, and they like focusing on a writing curriculum.

I was invited to create an assessment program to see how well this dual enrollment program worked. Put in the form of a question, we wanted to know: How do the students who complete this program fare on college campuses? To answer this question, we completed several tasks: reviewing portfolios, analyzing self-reported grades of students and retention rates, and, not least, interviewing students. The interviews were the most informative. We talked to eleven students who attended a range of institutions, including the University of North Carolina, North Carolina State University, and North Carolina A&T University. They told a story of writing located in key terms, and they explained how those key terms allowed them to create a theory allowing them to construct college writing tasks and complete them well. In other words, they pointed much more to the terms—like rhetorical situation, audience, genre, conventions, and evidence—than to the practices. In high school, the students had developed practices that they could carry with them into college, and that, they said, was good. What was even better was having a language that helped them think about how to make sense of writing assignments and how to begin working on them and how to begin to see if they were successful.

In college writing circles, we often talk about transfer, about the ability of students to take what they have learned about writing in our early classes and take it to other sites of writing, including other classrooms. These conversations are often characterized by frustration since the research (e.g., Haswell; Sternglass; Carroll) suggests that students do not in fact transfer very much or very well. What's the point, we might well ask.

What I want to ask is *what* is it that we hope will transfer? It seems to me that these Fast Forward students have articulated for us what can transfer: practices, yes, but theory—our theory of writing, which is the material of the curriculum and *their* theory

of writing as they have lived it. Put together, this is a combination worth transferring. As important, being explicit about this transfer—about what this means and how it works—means that students are likely to take it seriously.

It also of course means that we would need to change our curriculum.

## Whither Blogging?

Brian:

> The columnist Dave Barry uses a blog to post humor, anecdotes, and announcements. A number of bloggers in the United Kingdom recently published, in a blog, a writing discussing whether blogs are "fair" because of the influences of socioeconomic factors and gender. One blog I discovered involved the daily reportings and happenings in the life of a European prostitute. Another one is used to discuss opposition to war. This is just a mere sampling of the uses of the space in weblogs that are to be found on the Internet. I think, amongst the larger number of bloggers, there are possibilities for blogs that have not been fully explored and exploited.

## Terms for Faculty

If composition in the twenty-first century—a century already well underway—is to change along the lines sketched out above, faculty too will need new terms. And another way to think about this is to consider first-year composition as a foundation for advanced writing. If we thought of first-year composition (FYC) that way, we might well build a program that shifts from process arhetorically applied to practices that are situated and a program that moves from whatever theme the faculty prefers to a content and theory that are, well, *composition*.

Robert Connors, in the Afterword to *Coming of Age*, talks about such a writing curriculum, one that rewrites literacy education. He focuses on advanced composition, which relies of course on the foundation we find in FYC. He says,

the changing socioculture of college English departments is central here, and it must be seen as the basis for the centrifugal forces that have traditionally kept advanced composition a congeries of unrelated courses taught by staffs with no essential mutual interests, courses related only in being composition beyond freshman English. We are all living in the back wash of the creation of an English curriculum that features this unconnected and relatively primitive curricular lineup of writing courses, as juxtaposed to the God's Plenty of the literature curriculum, with its many proliferating mansions. (144)

The program, according to Connors, is "a program for an entirely new conception of undergraduate literacy education . . . based on the centrality of writing rather than literature" (150). If we thought of writing in *this* way, what foundation might we create? If faculty were to come to terms in this way, what might those terms be?

They might, I think, include:

- ◆ *Composition*: which includes how we write, where we write; how art informs writing; how the composing that is writing is like and unlike other composings, in music, in art, and so on.

- ◆ *Material*: which includes what spaces we write on and in and what tools we write with, and how some of those tools (like software) can write us. Or: composition is a material practice: what differences do different materials and tools make in what and how we write and what and how we become?

- ◆ *Visual*: which includes, as John Trimbur suggests, the typefaces we use; and as Ann Wysocki suggests, the interface of the page; and the processes of storyboarding that contribute to complex electronic documents.

- ◆ *Practice*: which refers to the processes we use to write as well as the communities in which we use these processes.

- ◆ *Theory*: which refers to how we make sense of what we know, informed by the thinking of others; and created by ourselves as we learn more. What are the theories of writing that we share with students? What theories of writing do we invite students to create?

- ◆ *Rhetoric*: which as theory and practice refers to fundamental concepts like rhetorical situation, pathos, logos, ethos, identification, knowledge, truth, and ethics that inform all writing.

- *Circulation*: which refers to how information is distributed, and in today's world, that means putting print and electronic in dialogue with each other; it means as well considering how specialized knowledge is articulated for experts as opposed to lay people; and to the patterns of information and overlaps—print papers and Web sites and blogs and text messaging and books.

- *Transfer*: which refers to the ability to take what one learns in one site and to use it in another.

- *Broker*: which refers to the role that we play in assisting students as they enter college and as they move on. This term provides a way of thinking about what we broker: writing theory and practice, negotiated through reflection.

- *Reflection*: the process of reviewing so as to understand and sometimes to self-assess and sometimes to project, which Donald Schön talks about as reflective transfer, which relies on prototypes to think about best practices and to make theory.

## New Practices, New Terms

Writing is changing more quickly than we can record those changes. We went, in what seemed an instant, from hard copy print to wireless classrooms where students simultaneously text message and e-mail. Indeed, this summer, in the new Seattle Public Library, I sat next to a young woman engaged in such multi-tasking, and no one paid any attention to it. It's the new normal of composition—much of which takes place out of school.

In school, we tend to think of the new normal as using the Web for fairly traditional tasks:

> There was a time when researching a high school or college term paper was a far simpler thing. A student writing about, say, Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin, might have checked out a book on the history of aviation from the local library or tucked into the family's dog-eared Britannica. An ambitious college freshman might have augmented the research by looking up some old newspaper clips on microfilm or picking up a monograph in the stacks.
>
> Knowing where and how to find information, they agreed, was just the beginning. Interpreting, sorting, evaluating, manipulating and repackaging information in dozens of forms from thousands of sources—as well as having a fundamental understanding

of the legal and ethical uses of digital materials—are also important components. (Zeller C1)

And no question, this kind of information literacy is challenging all of us. At the same time, we are all engaged in new forms of writing, which is why, as we see in Brian's writing, one assignment asks students to think about these new forms and to define them and to learn about them—for them of course, and for us all. Brian, who at the time of the writing of this essay was a senior, looked at blogs; another student, Jason, has looked at instant messaging; and still other students, like those in a first-year class, have looked at what writing looked like in the 1940s.

Writing, then, is the content for the college class in writing.

## Eyes Wide Shut: College Composition and the Future

Tina Good, in mapping out a history of writing based on articles in *College English*, shows that at mid-twentieth century, college writing classes served two purposes: introducing students to literature and ensuring that student writing prepared them for the roles the country needed them to play, especially in the Second World War. Ironically, writing was both utilitarian and canonical. During the second half of the twentieth century, as we know, writing, much like a boat tacking, changed course, primarily through the language and activities of writing process. That's what we see in the "Portraits of Composition" survey (Yancey et al.), and that's what we see in the WPA Outcomes Statement—and that's what we see, to a greater or lesser extent, in the many textbooks that are intended to serve writers in the first-year course. But that *process* language and *process* activity have been used to serve many purposes, even those of the 1940s, though more often now they are intended to serve what Elizabeth Wardle calls the brokering function, what the "Portraits" survey called academic and argument writing.

But I think it's past time that we tack again: I am arguing that we have a good deal to broker, and that what we have to offer relies much less on what awaits our students in other classes and much more on what we can all learn about writing now.

Toward that end, I have identified a set of ten terms—an incomplete list, to be sure—that gives us a core to think with. In revisiting them now, that list seems very full. On the one hand, it contains what I want my first-year students to know, certainly. Yet on the other hand, I also want them to study writing, that of the past, that of the present, and that of the future, and I have suggested the barest outlines of one such assignment; we have seen that assignment embodied in Brian's work.

What I am proposing is a full agenda, a full content, and a beginning for a college composition that has a content: composition.

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