CHAPTER SIX

COMPOSITION AS LITERACY, DISCOURSE, AND RHETORIC

As discussed in Chapter One, compositionists' research on place, like their local research on composition history, has been so extensive and varied that it challenges readers to specify the notions of place that they use to undergird their practices. Instructors have long drawn on concepts such as the communication triangle (Kinneavy), the rhetorical situation (Bitzer), and the dramatistic pentad (Burke). In recent decades, some instructors have also or instead drawn on notions of sustainability, interrelationship, and Thirdspace, to name a few of the ideas that have guided Rhetoric and Composition into place-focused research and theory. Simultaneously, detailed descriptions of social, political, and physical places have abounded in local histories of composition, reminding readers that college student writing has existed in more contexts than we usually imagine. Context matters enormously, local histories continue to show us. And conceptions of context, or theories of place, vary widely, other research suggests. So the consumer of these traditions of research is left with the question of how to make the descriptions and theories work for her given the specific institutional, cultural, political, and economic environment in which she works, an environment which, in many cases, may appear to lack the resources needed to support a place-conscious approach to studying and teaching college student writing.

Although my analysis of historical student writing at OU and UH cannot reveal everything that transpired before the 1950s at colleges and universities of other types throughout the country, the analysis can support the construction of flexible modern-day topoi that instructors can use and revise based on the texts available to them and the people, ideas, and places to which the texts allude. Like my experience at OU and UH, many instructors lack hoards of composition essays written by students across the years at their institution. Also, many instructors lack access to extensive notes from other instructors, especially past instructors, and to textbooks and other teaching resources used by their institution in the past. It may even be the case that instructors lack access to historical catalogs or to clear course and program descriptions from catalogs, bulletins, and related documents. However, the presence of these constraints need not prevent the instructor from learning from history about how student writing at her institution has been imbued with meaning, how the writing has done and may still do rhetorical work beyond giving students academic credit. My use of neos-

ophistic rhetorical theory, here meaning my evocation of concepts with sophistic roots—nomos, kairos, epideixis, and dynaton—for a contemporary purpose, helps me clarify how pre-1950s student writing was situated at OU and UH, and by extension, how student writing at other institutions might be interpreted along similar lines. The kinds of relationships that I unpack between college student writing and its surroundings provide options, ways to look beyond graded student essays, full textbooks, and detailed instructors' notes, for the researcher whose institutional sources are eclectic and unconventional.

By using nomos, kairos, epideixis, and dynaton, I keep in sight an intellectual heritage that encourages the modern-day researcher to embrace multiple narratives to describe composition's spatial work and to decide which narrative is most compelling and useful for her in light of her purposes and her teaching and research environment. Far from an intellectual exercise or game, the pluralization process that I am advocating has real-world benefits. Christopher W. Tindale puts the matter clearly when he analyzes Plato's dialogue the *Euthydemus*. He argues that in this dialogue, the sophists' attempts to keep their fellow speakers "rooted in the labyrinth of words" of their control (Tindale 94) has positive effects because it "encourages 'a sharpness of mind, clarifies problems, and helps to specify and define issues'" (Grimaldi qtd. in Tindale 95). Of course my goal in using concepts with sophistic roots is not to create a "labyrinth of words," but to clarify and specify different avenues by which instructors and scholars can conceptualize how student writing has related, and may still relate, to its surroundings. What results are *kinds* of relationships that may be applied with different effects to a number of postsecondary institutions. It is the job of each researcher to decide which relationship between college student writing and its surroundings holds the most explanatory power given the researcher's texts, students, and institutional history. As Tindale says in his defense of *Dissoi Logoi*, what's important is not to engage with "equally compelling arguments [or, I would add, equally compelling perspectives or interpretations] … as if the matters were beyond resolution. On the contrary it is through the weighing of the contrasting positions that the alleged merits are recognized and the preferred position identified" (104). Although below I expand on what my OU- and UH-based analyses suggest for composition and for the teaching of writing, I leave it to readers to identify what for them counts as their "preferred position[s]."

TERMS AND TEACHING PRACTICES

Based on the historical analyses detailed in Chapters Two through Five, I argue that situating and resituating college student writing in relation to place (i.e., version of place clarified by sophistic ideas) generates useable new perspec-

tives on the writing's rhetorical work. The resituating process allows *composition* to overlap with activities that are usually associated with *literacy*, *discourse*, and *rhetoric*; the act of writing texts for college approval comes to involve attempts by non-students to make a point as well as attempts by students to achieve multiple goals and reach multiple audiences. Unpacking how this works allows us to accentuate the significance of students' (and faculty's and administrators') involvement in their surroundings and thus the significance of students' connections to literacy, discourse, and rhetoric. In the field of Rhetoric and Composition, one well-known definition of literacy is a process of interpreting and using information in a social context (Brandt 3-4). A widely accepted definition of discourse is language as it is imbued with the ideology (or in Foucauldian terms, power) of a community or culture. A broad definition of rhetoric, since Kenneth Burke and his intellectual successors, is the strategic use of symbols, especially alphabetic symbols, to persuade, create new identifications, or otherwise make a point. Although scholars have tended to treat each of these concepts apart from the others, and at some universities composition drifted away from rhetoric as early as the 1870s, when Harvard's required writing exams decontextualized student writing opportunities and when Alexander Bain's codification of writing influenced American textbooks, I see value in using historical information to put composition into conversation with literacy, discourse, and rhetoric. If focused with conceptual tools that embrace situational fluidity, a blending of categories lets us see student writing relating to others in ideologically managed social and physical places where information is used to further communally understood meaning-making practices—student writing as a literacy practice, a discursive strategy, and a rhetorical act. From this perspective, there is no way to view college student writing as separate from multiple interests, purposes, and audiences, and the responsible instructor can look selectively at the relationships between student writing and its surroundings in order to revise her writing assignments and activities.

Already, some writers of local histories have neared the point of treating writing in conjunction with literacy, discourse, and rhetoric, though ultimately terminological boundaries remain to tell readers how to place the histories into academically recognizable genres. For instance, in *Activist Rhetorics and American Higher Education, 1885-1937*, Susan Kates defines rhetoric as "elucidation in speaking, reading, *and writing*," and she says that she studies rhetoric as opposed to composition "because of [rhetoric's] historical association with philosophies of language" (2, emphasis added). Thus, she treats rhetoric as a broader category than composition and a category that foregrounds one intellectual tradition over another. Another example comes from scholars who frame their local histories as histories of *rhetorical education*, which David Gold defines as

"reading, writing, and speaking instruction" (x). Jessica Enoch defines rhetorical education as action that "prepares (or fails to prepare) the student to participate in and contribute to … civic culture" (152). This capacious term places these scholars' work in a tradition of education-focused rhetoric, as if the spirit of Isocrates is nearby. Meanwhile, in *Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition*, editors Patricia Donahue and Gretchen Flesher Moon proceed from the vantage point of *composition* to share historical narratives that stick closely to *the teaching of writing* at specific American postsecondary institutions. More expansively, Deborah Brandt, in *Literacy in American Lives*, and Stephen Parks, *in Class Politics: The Movement for the Students' Right to Their Own Language*, focus on individual people or on educational organizations in a specific time period to make claims about *literacy*, by which they mean people's uses of writing and reading to change their lives or the lives of others, regardless of higher education institutions.

As helpful as it is for local histories to play by genre rules that tell readers from Rhetoric and Composition how to place the histories into clear and often distinct traditions of thought and practice, I maintain that we can learn from a largely untapped source of insight when we examine how even the most formulaic and acontextualized-seeming uses of language, even writing that appears to be nothing more than a college student's attempt to earn a grade (a narrow and, to many people, unattractive conception of *composition*), is also writing that "takes place," to echo Sid Dobrin ("Writing" 11). Pieces that students write for college credit or other approval can bear traces of interest from community members, university leaders, and politicians; and students' writing can look outward or be made to look outward to engage with any number of people, ideas, and places while still serving college purposes. A controlled tracking of connections between college student writing and other forces demonstrates some of how this can be and what it can mean for modern-day teaching and learning. As Chapter Two explains, students can write to push back at institutional codes mandating student behavior. As Chapter Three argues, students can respond through writing to sociopolitical conditions surrounding a university's founding conditions or a university's recently acquired status. As Chapter Four shows, non-students can use student writing to advance an institutional reputation. And as Chapter Five argues, individuals involved with student writing at a university can move through and beyond a single discipline at one postsecondary institution. Each of these relationships supports the notion that context is too fluid a concept to be pinned down, its exact features and various manifestations cataloged and memorized. Some ecological theories of writing account for this (Rice; Cooper), but a sophistic sensibility takes this as its starting point and urges scholars to continually situate and resituate language so as to clarify options and allow audi-

ences to choose the best option for them in light of their purposes and locations.

THE TEACHING OF WRITING TODAY

By sharing ways for scholars and teachers of writing to apply the primary analytical threads from this book to their own institutions, I am assuming that there is value in seeing student writing as composition as well as rhetoric that springs from the intentions and audiences designated by students and/or non-students, composition as well as literacy practices in vogue among members of a particular locale or profession, composition as well as facilitators or co-shapers of city and state discourses. I am suggesting that although students, instructors, and institutions may indeed see the work of student writing as giving students grades and advancing students through their coursework, what students are doing when they write can and should be conceptualized more broadly and pluralistically. Many college faculty members and administrators already see their extracurricular offerings and their internships and other professional preparation options as connected to many surrounding contexts: nearby town or city needs, state requirements, state or national funding sources, local or glocal occupational trends. The writing that college students do, even if for courses whose official descriptions and curricular functions have gone years without modification, is no less connected to its surroundings.

Of course, instructors may need to adjust the teaching suggestions that I discuss in this chapter; differences in student populations, institutional missions, or town-and-gown relations can necessitate the creation of other, perhaps most modest, versions of the teaching practices and learning occasions that I summarize here. Because course overhauls or the addition of new student organizations may be impossible or impracticable for some institutions to implement at the given time, I want to emphasize that small changes to existing courses, assignments, or in- or out-of-class activities can benefit students. Whatever the exact changes made, the point is for instructors and students themselves to re-see writing of all kinds as a spatially rich and multi-contextual activity. Also, I offer suggestions while realizing that gathering and learning from historical texts takes time and effort, time that is often consumed by grading, conferencing, planning classes, attending committee meetings, and the like. As I hope I have shown, universities with short histories and universities that have retained texts other than those typically valued in composition history (texts about layers of context, texts from a variety of perspectives within an institution) can still inform a researcher's sense of the situatedness of student writing at her institution. The researcher need not emulate the historiographical decisions of Albert Kitzhaber's, John Michael Wozniak's, or Robert Connors' historical studies, and need not

wait for the local history movement to shed light on the researcher's institution or on similar institutions.

Many are the ideas that can be recontextualized to suit the histories and present-day teaching practices of various postsecondary institutions. First, supported by Chapter Two, instructors at numerous kinds of higher education institutions—two-year colleges, technical colleges, women's colleges, historically Black colleges and universities, land-grant institutions, private colleges and universities, recently founded institutions, state flagship universities—can revise their existing assignments and activities to highlight their institution's construction of student identities: the behaviors that students are supposed to show, the goals that students are supposed to have. Using student handbooks, websites, and other institutional literature, students can summarize, describe, respond to, analyze, or critique these constructions. Writing assignments that ask students to examine a social group or, more specifically, that ask students to examine their role within a social group can be paired with writing assignments that ask students to discuss the roles crafted for them by their college or university. Such writing drives home what notions like social construction and performance, via Erving Goffman, can mean for students from the time when they enroll at their institution to the time when they complete program requirements.

Communication Studies professor Ronald J. Pelias sets the stage for this type of inquiry when, in Chapter Three of *Writing Performance: Poeticizing the Researcher's Body* (1999), he foregrounds how students and instructors project a strategic sense of self during the first day of a college class. Tellingly, Pelias titles this chapter "Performing in the Classroom." It would be up to the writing instructor, then, to guide her students through writing activities that bring students into meaningful contact with institutional scripts (not just classroom scripts) that tell students how to behave, what to do and what not to do. Students can keep a dialectical journal detailing their immediate and measured responses to institutional codes for student behavior. Individually or collectively, students can locate themes that emerge across multiple sets of institutional expectations (perhaps comparing historical and current institutional expectations). Student can even try their hand at describing a day in the life of a student who follows the institutional codes perfectly: where must that student go? What must the student spend her time doing? With whom must that student associate, why, and how? Despite the fact that generally colleges and universities, including those of a conservative bent, have relaxed their codes for student behavior in recent decades, institutional expectations persist in guidance that specifies the kind of thinker and social agent that each student is urged to become. Institutional expectations can be studied as a situated text, and students can in turn create texts that suggest alternative or additional behaviors—making modest

revisions like the historical students at OU and UH did or proposing sudden and large-scale changes if the case so warrants. An example of the latter proposal could stem from students' realization that some groups of students, such as transgendered students, have been overlooked in behavioral codes that assume two static gender identities. The work that students do to see and re-see institutional expectations for student behavior could comprise the core of a class unit, a major paper, or a food-for-thought exercise.

After students investigate how and with what consequences institutional expectations bear on their daily lives at their institution, the students will be in a better position to consider new or revised behaviors and to consider what new ideas institutional leaders will be likely to heed. This step, which is more appropriate for a composition course whose primary focus is persuasion, brings students into contact with questions such as, what genres best lend themselves to my purposes and my audience? What revisions are important to me and show respect for the institution's construction of student identities? If, as Nathaniel A. Rivers and Ryan P. Weber argue, a text creates effects if it works in concert with many other kinds of texts (195), then students can consider how different genres play off each other within a larger attempt to begin or change an institutional conversation. For example, would a poster (a visual argument) be seen and remembered by students' desired audience? Would a poster reach people in ways that a brochure, an editorial, and an essay on the same topic would not? Not merely academic exercises, writing and research opportunities along these lines prepare students to think and write in terms of organizational discourses and give students practice deciding which strategies will most realistically affect those discourses. From here, transitioning to writing in business or professional contexts (contexts prized by increasing numbers of students in today's business model of higher education) is a small step—a shift in genre and style, from essays to reports and proposals. Whatever its contours, the shift would need to keep in sight the relationship between student writing and institutional nomoi, that is, between student writing and rules that not only clarify the customs expected of members of a society (or organization), but that also imply what the society or organization considers morally right.

The assignment adjustments above could spring from an instructor's review of historical records or just as easily from an instructor and students' shared inquiry into behavioral standards distinguishing their institution during or since its founding. In other words, the instructor who creates opportunities for her composition students to write about institutional subjectivities need not pause her teaching, grading, mentoring, and committee work so that she can spend a semester excavating archived institutional details alone. Particularly with the digitization of archived holdings, options arise for assignments and activities

that apply students' primary research, even if focused on a single document or collection, to arguments for the present.

Second, as shown in Chapter Three, instructors who work in different areas—rural, urban, suburban, exurban; physically near sites of political and economic power, far removed from sites of political and economic power—can build on existing writing assignments and activities to encourage students to investigate how academic as well as creative writing forms reach audiences. In addition to writing traditional arguments, students can explore, in writing, class discussions, and other learning arrangements, cases when indirect and artful writing can expose an audience to new perspectives or change an audience's tone or stance on a topic, much as historical OU and Houston-area students used descriptive, personal, explanatory, and persuasive writing to contribute to discussions of state or city concern. For example, taking a cue from critical regionalism (Powell 6-7), students can use academic as well as creative genres to show how a dominant, mass-mediated representation of a region can be rethought, how the region itself can be conceptualized anew. A classical argument can allow students to discuss whether the region's commonly recognized definition and borders withstand scrutiny. However, a story, poem, or other creative piece, perhaps embedded in or mixed with another genre, can be used to depict new configurations of the region—Houston not as a metropolitan region comprising a handful of counties on the Gulf Coast, but, if illustrated by compelling creative portrayals, a branch of American industrial interests intent on extracting natural resources from the Appalachian Mountains and the ocean floor alike (i.e., the Gulf Coast and the Appalachian Mountains as a shared region). A traditional argument may also be used to propose new regional conceptions, but a poetic addition can prompt students to explore how imaginative writing can help writers re-see, or in literary terms, defamiliarize, a common concept. The point is that students show awareness of the rhetorical significance of language typically prized in composition courses, or simply in composition textbooks, and the rhetorical significance of language prized in literature and creative writing courses.

To an extent, today's textbook writers, some of whom also theorize and research composition, have already broken down the concept of argument so that it considers how aesthetic or otherwise artful moves can further an argument. To pick a well-known example, Lester Faigley and Jack Selzer's textbook *Good Reasons: Researching and Writing Effective Arguments* explains components of traditional (classical) arguments as well as narrative arguments, visual arguments, and so on. And instructors have long availed themselves of the literacy narrative assignment, which encourages students to make a point (or an argument) based on vivid details from personal experience about the students' past textual encounters. The mere presence of description or narration does not usually

trouble the waters of composition courses. But owing to the long history of inequality between composition and literature in particular (see, e.g., S. Miller), eyebrows are raised if an instructor encourages students to study and write poems or imaginative prose in a class labeled composition. While understandable given longstanding disciplinary tensions between composition and literature at many institutions, this reaction disallows consideration in composition classes of how imaginative writing engages differently, but not arhetorically, with the world. Strategies of symbolism and suggestion can have real-life effects even if they operate within artistic forms, as many a reader of the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and many a viewer of the comedy television show *Saturday Night Live* can attest. However, many compositionists have not yet shown comfort encouraging writing that has been deemed creative, artistic, or literary. So, without inciting a disciplinary rebellion, the composition instructor can push her students to consider the rhetoricity of imaginative writing by including reflective writing assignments asking students to examine how and why activist writing (e.g., editorials, public awareness bulletins) relies heavily on some forms over others, and how and why creative writing may affect audiences differently or reach entirely different audiences. Composition instructors need not create a full course or unit on imaginative writing in order to spur students to examine how textual moves incite wonder, awe, bewilderment, or, sure, understanding. Simply adding occasions for written meta-reflection can give students opportunities to question textual choices and effects while also ensuring that some textual traditions don't escape rhetorical scrutiny.

Moreover, the fact that students from early OU and students in pre-1950s Houston responded to issues of local concern over time and in campus newspapers and other out-of-class literacy sites deserves notice in light of our information age's abundance of writing genres and platforms—websites, blogs, Twitter accounts, Facebook pages, newsletters, and digital and print newspapers, some of which distribute information more widely and quickly than others, and some of which encourage written responses more directly than others. The recent surge in writing and publishing opportunities enhances modern-day students' chances to respond more than once and over time to state or city conversations affecting the students' college or university. Therefore, both the rate and venue of students' written responses to a local issue can become part of students' rhetorical strategy. If a local issue lacks publicity and is likely to persist for some time, students can discuss how to initiate a conversation that will catch people's attention (an ironic Facebook post that students create and share? a satirical story published in a digital magazine?); then students can determine how to explain points that a particular audience should know (in a classical argument that takes the form of an article? In an article that assumes an earlier text will shortly elicit

a widespread reaction?). Timing, including calculated periods of waiting, and venue, including non-academic sites of textual production, become factors for students to interrogate.

Third, building on Chapter Four's updating of epideixis, instructors can extend writing assignments and activities beyond the mere production of texts by allowing students to examine uses to which their (or other students') writing has been put: how has the writing been referenced in promotional material about the English or writing department or about the college or university itself? How has the writing been presented for public consumption? How has the writing figured into claims by faculty members and administrators about students? Class discussions can facilitate this inquiry, but students can research, document, and interpret the process as well, not to criticize their academic institution (though responsible critiques should be allowed), but to show awareness of how readers and interested parties extend the lifespan of texts, use the texts to support other arguments. Granted that FERPA protects students from having their personal information or academic work revealed to public sources without the students' written consent, but still instructors ask students if the students will let one or more of their papers be used as model papers in other classes taught by an instructor. Also, it is common for students to submit their writing to competitions where the writing will be judged by experts and referenced at later events, such as award ceremonies. How often do students who consent to these conditions understand the number and kind of audiences that will scrutinize their work, perhaps scrutinize the writing across years or decades if it is preserved publically? How fully do students comprehend the programmatic, institutional, or disciplinary interests supported by their writing as it circulates beyond a single class? With these considerations in play, students in modern-day composition classes can write and make decisions about whether and how to circulate their writing.

Specifically, students can formally or informally publicize a text that they have written and then revisit the text at a later point to see how its meaning has migrated in the hands of respondents and others. As applicable as this step is for texts that circulate online, it need not apply to online writing exclusively. Students who write editorials in a print version of their campus newspaper, essays for a first-year writing competition, or institutionally solicited evaluations of their major, department, or college may find their work summarized, paraphrased, or quoted in promotional material and institutional research bearing the stamp of approval of institutional leaders. That is, student writing might be repurposed insofar as it supports or illustrates a point that others, usually people with more institutional authority, wish to make. Within a unit in a composition class, students can compose a short text, anything from a slogan to a criticism to an argument, and put the text into circulation to see where it goes, whom it

affects, how it gets reused in the service of other people's claims. (If time is short, students can study, discuss, and write about the ripples made by another person's text.) In informal, reflective writing, students can track how or whether their text contributes to other people's written exchanges; if the text is not remembered and evoked in other people's writing, then students can examine who else's ideas are and why. Clearly, the type of activity that I am describing highlights the collaborative potential of writing, but importantly, it also highlight how ethos, especially ethos within an institutional or organizational setting, affects which messages circulate widely and persistently. To take a dramatic example, a university president who publishes a comment from a student on a banner displayed across campus will probably have a more powerful effect than a positive reaction in a campus newspaper from one first-year student about another first-year student's article.

Composition perspectives that centralize collage and juxtaposition have begun to foreground the degree to which texts appear and are thereafter used and reused by others (e.g., P. Sullivan). What remains to be seen in composition pedagogy is how well students can put their own writing into circulation to strategically influence subsequent discussions. Remembering the historical OU and UH students who may not have known how many readers would use their writing to judge their institution's worth, I propose the writing activity above with the hope that it keeps students in the picture as informed and potentially active agents as their writing circulates. As time allows in a composition class, students who monitor uses to which their text was put can explore questions such as, how did other people use my text differently from how I used it? To what extent did my text change in appearance, meaning, or context? In these ways, students can chip away at the idea that they alone control their text if the text circulates among readers and perhaps the idea that their writing circulates only within clear, pre-established boundaries.

Fourth, supported by Chapter Five, which poses historiographical options for composition historians accustomed to seeing postsecondary institutions via commonsensical features (e.g., geographical location, institutional type), contemporary instructors can help students articulate associations (we might say identities) of theirs and ours that follow us into the composition classroom and, regardless of intention, shape how we understand and value the work of writing. Although writing instructors, we are not *only* writing instructors, and although we interact with our students, our students are more than *just* students. The dynaton-inspired approach to conceptualizing composition instructors and students that I detailed in Chapter Five sets the stage for pedagogical practices that lean toward Sharon Crowley's constructionist perspective of history—the idea that terms and concepts change based on the time and culture in which they are

used (10). Crowley focuses on the history of rhetoric, but her perspective could also apply to the teaching of writing today.

Perhaps, given the mushrooming of disciplinary specializations that has characterized academe since the 1900s, we downplay the significance of our interactions with people from other disciplines, professions, and physical places. But many undergraduate students, especially first-year students, show greater willingness than us in considering how disciplines other than English (experienced via general education requirements) and how their involvement in student clubs, in work outside of academe, and in various social groups inform their understanding of situated language use. To an extent, Jonathon Mauk, in his *College English* essay "Location, Location, Location: The 'Real' (E)states of Being, Writing, and Thinking in Composition," capitalizes on the richness of students' non-academic lives to break down barriers between academic writing assignments and students' home communities. However, what I think deserves more attention is work of this sort from the instructor's end—work from writing instructors to connect composition assignments and activities to other spheres of disciplinary and professional activity that instructors know or have known well. Despite the specialization, some would say the hyper-specialization, of scholarly fields today, instructors who obtained their degrees in Rhetoric and Composition can consider how their work in other capacities—as writing center tutors or magazine or newspaper editors, their time as undergraduate students taking general education classes, their involvement in local or glocal civic organizations that shape their perception of writing—migrates with them into the classroom and enriches their interactions with students about writing. For instructors with degrees outside of Rhetoric and Composition, taking this action may require reflection on their past or present exposure to other sectors of English studies (e.g., linguistics, literature); to other fields, nearly or distantly related (e.g., communication studies, theater, journalism, sociology, or political science); and to other spheres of work (e.g., volunteer work for neighborhood groups or consultations with people in business or industry). Assignments grounded in this point transcend requests for students to investigate a subculture or discourse community; the assignments assume a migration of influence from one sphere of activity to another.

To take a personal example, an activity that I was once involved in as an undergraduate English major who did not yet identify with Rhetoric and Composition was college forensics, generally defined as competitive intercollegiate public speaking and debating. Throughout the last two-and-a-half years of my undergraduate life, I spent my free time writing and rewriting speeches to deliver from memory at speech tournaments held at colleges and universities of various kinds around the country. At the tournaments, I delivered my speeches

to multiple judges as well as to fellow competitors and other audience members, and afterward I discovered whether the rankings and scores that I received from the judges were sufficient to advance me to a tournament's final rounds. If so, I would deliver the same speech again, this time preceding or following a more select group of students and in front of a wider audience. After the tournaments, I would receive written comments from the judges, and I would meet with my coaches, usually communication studies faculty members at my college. While today I don't endorse the highly competitive and hierarchical tendencies of college forensics, and while I realize that that activity differs in important ways from writing a paper for composition classes, I can tap into my history of forensics involvement to see how it informs my in-class explanations of audience and context. For instance, the fact that some of the humorous appeals that I used in my after-dinner speeches made positive impressions on judges in the South but not on judges in the Midwest told me about audience analysis and regional differences. The fact that some of the rooms that I spoke in distracted the judges or me told me about the influence of classroom configurations. The fact that the same speech delivered in what I perceived as the same way could yield vastly different audience reactions each time that I delivered it told me that a communication situation could not be replicated perfectly.

Without reproducing forensics culture in the composition classes that I teach, I can discuss my forensics experience as it pertained to my emerging sense of a rhetorical sensibility, and I can encourage my students to develop similar examples. After subsequent occasions for exploratory low-stakes writing, I can ask my students to analyze or develop an argument whose assumptions about purpose, audience, credibility, or adaptability (or any other key feature of rhetoric) stem from the students' involvement in a particular academic, professional, or civic organization. For example, depending on the institution's student demographics, some students could gravitate to writing prompts such as, how has your paid work in an off-campus setting taught you to revise a message so that it has a desired effect? In what ways is that setting similar to and different from the writing that you do for your college composition classes? Other students could gather more experiential raw material in response to questions such as, how does your participation in a social group shape the ways that you compromise and the ways that you consider multiple perspectives in your arguments? Before assigning a writing assignment based on the latter question, instructors would need to ask themselves how well they have modeled reflective thinking and writing about their own participation in a disciplinary, professional, or social group. Much as catalogs from early 1900s OU show composition linking college students to various academic disciplines, composition today can be used to help students see anew the activities (disciplinary and otherwise) in which they participate

and the ways that insights gleaned from those activities accompany students into required composition activities. All this is not to say that composition lacks any parameters of its own, but to say that composition, like rhetoric (Leff 62), lends itself to analysis of other activities, resisting isolation from campus and non-campus life. Instructors who create opportunities for students to examine and compare the work of language to structure disciplinary, professional, or social activities are, I think, preparing students to see including classroom writing as another kind of spatially nuanced and rhetorical meaningful activity.

LOCATING WITHOUT LIMITING STUDENT WRITING

As I have argued throughout this book, historicizing college student writing at specific institutions can help scholars and instructors make sense of the locatedness of the writing of their own students, the ways in which the writing relates to people and ideas in its various surroundings. Rather than attempt to account for all of the ways that writing has related, and still relates, to its surroundings, I have applied four lines of analysis to a rural university and an urban university in order to show the explanatory power of sophistic outlooks when applied to pre-1950s college student writing and, in this chapter, current student writing. Future scholars and instructors may rethink these analytical threads or argue for the importance of other lines of analysis. No matter how other scholars proceed, it is important that they refrain from viewing the analytical options before them as fixed, as topoi of the kind that, during and after the period of classical antiquity, hardened into lengthy codes of rhetorical properties and strategies. Any attempt to codify once and for all the many relational qualities of historical or contemporary college student writing is doomed to fail because no context is static. Just as rhetoric considers always shifting situation-based language (or symbols), college student writing relates pluralistically, and perhaps contradictorily, to complex and unfixed surroundings. To some degree, the study of rhetoric has long incorporated the sensibility that I support, for the late twentieth century saw tremendous excitement about the rehabilitation of sophistic concepts to describe rhetorical practices in a contemporary, pluralistic world. But Edward Schiappa then argued—and many scholars listened—that the label *sophistic* was too problematic to use today because it failed to point scholars to a unifying definition of sophism ("Sophistic" 15).

I believe that foregrounding and updating concepts used by individual sophists to put language-based meanings into motion, despite whether the concepts support one overarching definition of sophistic thought, has value for compositionists because the concepts direct us to blind spots in our usual understandings of context, place, situation, or the like. We may already think about institutional

context, but not by tracking relationships between student writing and institutional expectations containing moral implications, as an updated version of nomos would have us do. We may already think about state or city politics, but not usually by examining parallels between student writing for academic activities and issues of concern for the students' institution and immediately surrounding region, as an updated version of kairos would encourage us to do. We may already think about public dimensions of student writing, but not by unpacking strategies used by college faculty and administrators to re-present the writing so that it supports other arguments, as an updated version of epideictic practices would allow us to do. We may even be preparing to borrow from Patricia Donahue's suggestions for new kinds of local histories of composition, but we have only begun to study migrations of people and ideas for their ability to link student writing to many social, disciplinary, and physical places, as a historiography guided by dynaton could prompt us to do. If our understanding of college student writing comes from a perception of classrooms, textbooks, and course requirements as fixed in time and space, and if our histories of composition emerge from descriptions of these factors at a specific site, then we can expect our discussions about writing context to be similarly neat and commonsensical. But a generative view of writing contexts unfolds and analytical opportunities for composition historians and instructors arise if we build on concepts with sophistic roots.

As local portraits of student writing in the past and present proliferate, they should be received as attempts to frame writing in some as opposed to many other ways, as accentuating some of writing's numerous, perhaps countless, relationships. Although these relationships will not take the same form at every college and university, noticing patterns—basic kinds of relationships—across geographical regions and institutional types gives us starting points for new research projects and teaching initiatives whether we work at institutions with long-established and generously supported archives or at institutions with eclectic and recently added records. While no historical collection is ever in fact complete, we can gain usable historical and pedagogical insights even if we work with sources that speak primarily to contexts of student writing, for the right tools enable us to treat context as an active and multidimensional component of our work.