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A METHOD FOR DESCRIBING BASIC WRITERS AND THEIR WRITING: LESSONS FROM A PILOT STUDY

ABSTRACT: *We present a holistic method for describing basic writers and their writing to encourage classroom research at two- and four-year colleges, the most under-represented sites, and enable comparisons of basic writers across institutions. Our method grows out of a pilot study of basic writers and writing at two community and one four-year private college. It makes use of a survey to understand the basic writers' backgrounds; "back talk," through which students respond to our preliminary interpretations of the survey; and analysis of student writing for use of some conventional discourse features and for rate, type and seriousness of error. We offer some preliminary results from our pilot study to illustrate the type of findings our approach yields and highlight the importance of such findings to classroom instruction.*

By now, it's obvious. A basic writer at, say, Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is not the same as a basic writer at Cambridge Community College in northern, rural Minnesota—and we might have picked any number of institutions to make this statement. In fact, we've known for a while that the very term "basic writer" and the research-based generalizations about students identified as "basic writers" work against understanding the individual writers referred to by the name. As early as 1986, Jensen's "The Reification of the Basic Writer" problematizes the very act of characterizing basic writers as a group and makes clear that student learning is sacrificed by such actions. Jensen comes to this conclusion after discovering that descriptions of basic writers according to Meyer-Briggs personality types do not support the general descriptions in the literature. Recognizing the diversity of the group, Jensen argues, "Even when dealing with a single population, or a single class, it is dangerous, and more reductionist than descriptive, to characterize basic writers" (59-60). Only a year after Jensen, Troyka adds to Jensen's view the practical perspective of a writing instructor. She observes, "Often when I read a new article

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about basic writers, I think: 'Not the ones I know.'" In a pilot study investigating this observation, Troyka solicits 109 essays — half from two-year colleges and half from four-year colleges — along with low, medium and high rankings by the faculty submitting them. She then compares faculty rankings to high, medium and low rankings by her team of trained readers. The results show a significant difference between essay rankings in the two-year context and essay rankings from the four-year context, thus offering a concrete reason for us to heed Troyka's caution to be wary of generalizations about "basic writing" students, particularly in light of the far greater number of studies coming out of four-year institutions (9). Given these early and strong warnings against generalizing about basic writers — and there have been others (e.g., Minot and Gamble, Sohn), and given the evidence supporting these warnings, one might hope that we now have a substantial body of classroom-based research emerging from individual institutions, especially from the two- and four-year college teachers who devote much of their time to teaching basic writing.

More than a decade since these well-supported cautions against overly-general definitions of "basic writers," we have found ourselves still thinking, "Not the ones we know." Despite Lewis's findings that the majority of basic writing instruction takes place in community colleges, the majority of sessions on basic writers during the 1996 Conference on Composition and Communication — the event that inspired this work — were based in university research: 37 of the 49 papers on this subject were by researchers affiliated with research universities, six by those at four-year institutions, and six by teachers at two-year institutions. A random sample of five years of the *Journal of Basic Writing*[1] also shows an unequal distribution. Of the thirty-five articles reviewed, thirty (86%) of the authors were affiliated with a four-year institution, three (9%) with a two-year institution, and two (6%) were difficult to code because one individual taught at both a four-year and two-year college and conducted his research at the four-year college. The other author was affiliated with a two-year institution but did his research at a four-year college. In citing these tallies, we need to emphasize that we are not criticizing university researchers for doing research in their own institutions, which working conditions demand and the field justifiably expects. We include this tally simply to draw attention to the preponderance of university basic writers and basic writing instruction featured in published work: a selective group disproportionately represents the whole.

Wanting to work against this "reification of the basic writer" (Jensen) and toward increasing the body of basic writing research from instructors in two- and four-year institutions, we have sought to develop an instructor-friendly research method that would ultimately lead to descriptions of basic writers and their writing that could in-

form classroom teaching and learning in local contexts. The first step in this process involves developing a research *method* that matches these goals. None of our tools is entirely new, and since we are not survey experts or statisticians, we do not advise on survey construction or data analysis. Rather, we advocate a holistic method of investigating basic writers and their writing and describe a set of tools for such a method.

Early on in our discussions about method we asked, *What do we need to know to make informed choices about teaching and learning strategies?* Answering this question with the help of past research has led us to develop a holistic method for learning about basic writers *and* their writing. No doubt, this need to know both writer and writing is apparent to most instructors. However, both Adler-Kassner's and Harrington's recent (1999) categorizations of basic writing literature point to a distinction between investigating the basic writer and investigating basic writing, with a call to return to the forgotten question, *Who is the basic writer?* While it is important for researchers to answer this question in a variety of contexts for the field to gain a national sense of the diversity of the basic writer, we are not in search of a national definition of "basic writer" or "basic writing"; rather, we are in search of a method for better understanding each basic writer and his or her writing in our respective institutions and classes. The key features of the method we believe can achieve this include the following:

1. a survey of the basic writer's background, followed by "back talk," a process that involves bringing our inferences from the survey about the basic writers' relationships to writing and the academic back to the students for their feedback,
2. text analysis, and
3. error analysis.

We begin learning about who our basic writers are through surveys (item 1), as have many researchers before us, but it is the "back talk" that draws the students' voices into our discussions about who they are and involves them in shaping their curriculum. This approach has some wonderful precedents, which, as a few examples make clear, vary in the way student feedback is brought back to the students. Buley-Meissner uses student-feedback from the Daly-Miller Measure of Writing Apprehension to engage students in discussion about how they can improve as writers over the course of the semester, with the result that students have a greater role in directing their own learning and lowering their writing anxiety levels. Haviland and Clark solicit student feedback on writing assessment exams and take this information directly into account as they rethink their pedagogy and redesign the

exams. Yorio also solicits student feedback, in this case from adult ESL learners; however, in the end, the feedback relates only indirectly to the conclusion of his investigation. Yorio asks students to respond to the questions "If you were an ESL writing teacher at Lehman, what kind of course would you design? What kinds of materials would you use and what kinds of activities would you and your students engage in?" (36). At a later date, students are asked to complete a question-naire that has them rank specific teaching practices, the large majority of which are drawn from responses on the open question. Interest-ingly, while it is the open-question responses that inform the student-questionnaire, the study's conclusion—that there is a significant dif-ference between instructors' and students' view of the effectiveness of particular teaching strategies—is not brought back to students. As a result, we are left to speculate about the reasons why the students fo-cus on different teaching strategies or areas of focus than instructors. Is it, for example, because they view this exercise as a chance to say "Here is what we're missing and would like to learn," a message that might be diminished if they were to pay too much attention to those strategies that are prevalent in the class? Is it, as Yorio suggests, that they don't understand that they are in fact learning to address error or expand vocabulary, to take one example, because instruction is inte-grated into the critique of an essay as opposed to being presented as a separate exercise (41)? Is it something we haven't thought of? It might have been interesting to continue the conversation at this point, to bring the findings, the inferences, the conclusions, *back* to the students. As Harrington says, "If our program assessments and our curricula are not designed to permit students' voices to interact with our materials, we promote a stultifying position for student writers in our classes. This is not to say that students' voices are always right, but student voices deserve more of a place in our discourse" (1999, 102). Our method carves out a space for student voices to respond to our inter-pretations of their words, their lives and their relationships to writing and academia.

Our method for describing student writing involves text analysis (item 2) and error analysis (item 3). We analyze students' texts (as opposed to their errors) primarily to determine their familiarity with some essay features that are fundamental to a variety of writing forms and contexts, including introductions, conclusions, and use of examples. In addition, we consider broad aspects of their essays, such as overall number of words and paragraphs, as well students' topic choice when this serves as a way to learn about their backgrounds.

We also analyze rate and frequency of errors in essays, with the realization that many composition researchers and teachers believe that the study of error is inappropriate, if not useless, and that teaching grammar should be abandoned. We include error for two reasons.

First, the error analysis allows for understanding of the students' writing in the context of past national studies of freshman college writing (Johnson, Witty and Green, Connors and Lunsford). Second, knowledge of our students' errors allows us to make informed decisions about how to (including whether or not to) address the issue.

Because our method grew out of a pilot study that we developed to investigate differences among three populations of basic writers, we offer as a bonus some examples of the types of findings this research might offer and how findings might relate to developing teaching strategies. Importantly, our consideration of teaching strategies should not be understood as suggestions on pedagogy, but only as examples of a small number of possible ways in which our findings can inform pedagogical choices. Ultimately, the results of this multi-dimensional approach may be used not only to understand writers at each institution, but also to make comparisons across institutions. Such comparisons let us gauge how well theories about any one group of basic writers and the instructional strategies which grow out of those theories can apply to another group of basic writers.[2] Importantly, while we have found our method — our particular mix of tools — extremely useful, we do not suggest adopting it without consideration of the contexts in which it will be used.

Chosen Institutions

For the study which lead to the development of this method, we chose three post-secondary institutions: Cambridge Community College (CCC, 2-year rural), Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC, 2-year urban), and Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science (PCTS, 4-year urban)[3]. We chose these colleges because they were not universities, they were deeply involved in basic writing instruction, and because we had easy access to them.

Cambridge Community College (CCC, 2-year rural) is a rural branch campus of a suburban Minnesota school; it is 50 miles north of Minneapolis, has 1300-1400 students, and enrollment is growing steadily, even while numbers have declined in many Minnesota two-year colleges. Forty percent of CCC (2-year rural)'s incoming students test into basic writing courses. About five percent of the students in a class have previously failed the course. CCC (2-year rural) has very few ESL students and no ESL program.

Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC, 2-year urban) is in the heart of downtown Minneapolis; it's a recently merged community and technical college with approximately 12,000 students. Forty percent of MCTC's (2-year urban) incoming students test into one of two quarter-long basic writing courses. Again, about five per-

cent of the students in a class have previously failed the course. While testing also offers some direction for placing students into ESL courses, ESL placement is not mandatory. The student can choose to take the ESL course first or to take only the basic writing course.

Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science (PCTS, 4-year urban) resides on the edge of Philadelphia; a four-year private college, it has 2600 undergraduates and 500 graduate students in master's programs. The college emphasizes an integrated liberal-professional education and is divided into five schools—General Studies, Architecture and Design, Business, Science and Health, Textiles and Materials Technology. At PCTS (4-year urban), about twenty percent of students test into one semester-long developmental writing course or a separate developmental ESL course if the testing indicates that they need the ESL version. During the spring semester of this study, some eighty percent of PCTS (4-year urban) students enrolled across the two non-ESL basic writing courses had previously failed the course.

Survey: Learning about Writers within and across Institutions

In order to learn about basic writers at the three colleges, we conducted a survey that requested demographic, personal, and attitudinal information (see Appendix A). At each institution, we surveyed the students from two basic writing classes (27 students from CCC (2-year rural), 23 from MCTC (2-year urban), and 17 from PCTS (4-year urban).[4] A contextually-sensitive survey, one which may include both traditional demographic questions and those which seem locally relevant, offered a way to describe basic writers at a particular institution, speculate about what those descriptions might mean, and ask for back talk from them about those speculations. Finally, the survey data enabled us to compare basic writers from one institution to another.

The Writer within the Institution

A basic writer description offers a thumbnail sketch of students at a particular institution. At CCC (2-year rural), for example, our survey revealed that two-thirds of the basic writers were female, almost all were of white European descent, and their median age was 21. While only 30% of these students were married, 41% of them were responsible for the care of one or more children. One striking piece of the CCC (2-year rural) surveys revealed that 27% of students' parents had not completed high school, with notable differences between the day and evening classes. While 37% of students' parents in the CCC (2-year rural) evening class completed at least some form of post second-

ary education, only 13% of students' parents in the day class had completed any post-secondary education.

Using the descriptions of basic writers that we created from interpreting background data, we developed theories about students' relationships with college work and life. This is not to suggest that these descriptions and speculations be used to prejudge students, but rather to open up a dialogue with them about what it means for them to be writers in college. With this latter goal in mind, we deliberately introduced back talk, a tool which would let us complete a full circle from student to researcher and back to student for at least a few of the survey interpretations.

Back Talk and The Individual Basic Writer

In a tape-recorded conversation, we presented the basic writers with facts from the survey and our speculations based on those facts and asked them to agree, disagree, or comment in any way they wished. The following student responses are chunked into conversational bites to show how this step can add texture to smooth, survey-based interpretations. Rather than organize their responses topically, we present them chronologically to give the reader a sense of their conversation as a whole.

The CCC (2-year rural) day class was presented with this fact: "It was uncommon for your parents to have completed any education beyond high school — only 13% of your parents did. My theory is that because your parents did not go to college, you might have difficulty knowing what it takes to be successful in college."

> Student response 1: "I disagree. I see how my parents live and I don't want to be like them. At all. Because of my parents, I'm more intrigued to go to school because I don't want their lifestyle."
> Student response 2: "Well, I'm just the opposite. I think that if I'd had parents that had gone to college it would have been in the atmosphere of the home and I would have gone up to the challenge sooner."
> Student response 3: "And they can tell you what to expect where my parents can't."
> Student 2 again: "Yeah, I'm first generation too, so it makes it even more difficult."
> Student response 4: "Seeing my parents go to college shows me that they got a better paying job, and they got a better lifestyle because they went to college, and it was easier for them and they could help me with my homework and stuff

so I may give that to my kids if I go to college I can help them and I can get a better paying jobs, a better chance at that."

Student response 5: "The fact that neither of my parents went to college it makes me stronger because I don't want to struggle the way they did. I want to get my career and get on get off on the right foot right away."

Another set of questions evolved from survey data which showed CCC (2-year rural) students working many hours, adding work obligations to the previous description which included family commitments as well. Again, differences between the day and evening CCC (2-year rural) classes emerged. Seventy-five percent of students in the evening class said they worked more than eight hours a day. That fact was repeated in this way to the night class: "You spend a significant amount of time (7-12 hours) working each day. My theory is that school is something you fit into your "spare time."

> Student response 1: "Yes, that's true. You have to work it around it, your set work schedule. The work schedule is set. You have to tailor it to fit that."
> Student response 2: "Cuts into my sleeping time."

A follow-up statement was made to probe deeper into their responses: "The second part of that theory is that you don't spend much time writing for this class."

> Student response 1: "I would say that I don't spend much time writing it down on paper, but even when I'm busy doing other things such as working, in my mind, sometimes when I have the spare time at work, which brings in the spare time factor, I do tend to think about things that I could write about. The initial sitting down and being able to do it is very hard."
> Student response 2: "At my work I have ten hours to sit and do nothing basically but watch TV or read books so that's where I can spend my time writing there. Plus I have three or four days off, so therefore I have that time too. I would actually say that I have more time."
> Student response 3: "I think the spare time isn't always available because of working full time, having families at home, and taking the other classes. It's not that we don't take the time but that we don't have the time to write as much as we would like to."

Based on our study, we firmly believe that back talk adds volumes to basic writer descriptions when the prompts for that student-

researcher dialogue evolve, in context, from the students as they've presented themselves and their lives in survey data.

Basic Writers across Institutions

Another way survey information can be used is to look concretely at ways in which basic writers are similar to and different from one another. Traditional demographic data can be easily and fruitfully compared. For example, our pilot study showed that ethnic backgrounds, ages, marital status, and dependent child responsibilities varied widely among the three institutions, even between the two-year colleges which might be expected to have similar populations (for the breakdown of some of this data, see figures 1 and 2). Such comparative information should be considered when one institution or instructor hopes to imitate another institution's basic writing program or instructional model.

Ethnic/Cultural Background

CCC   MCTC

PCTS

- White
- African-American
- Asian-American
- Native American
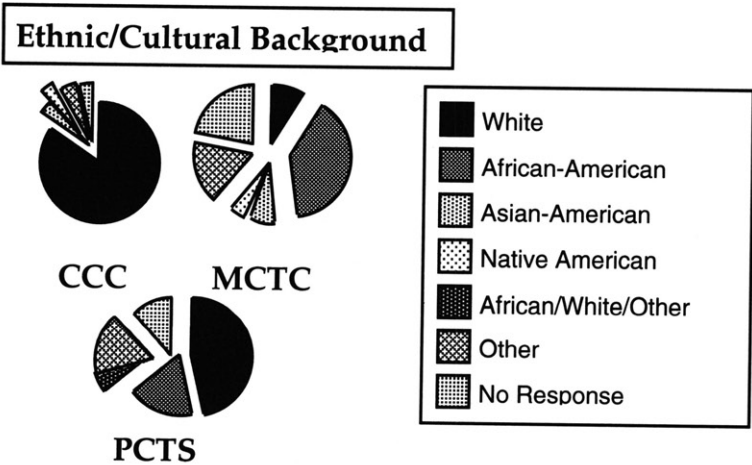- African/White/Other
- Other
- No Response

Figure 1: Ethnic/Cultural Background in Percentages

The importance of comparative analysis becomes clearer when one pauses to contemplate some of the differences among basic writers. The median ages, for example, were 26.5 at MCTC (2-year urban), 21 at CCC (2-year rural), and 18 at PCTS (4-year urban). In fact, PCTS (4-year urban) had no students over 20, and all of the respondents were single without children (Figure 2). Similarly, at both two-year institutions, most basic writers were single (Figure 2); however, forty-one percent of CCC (2-year rural) students and thirty-five percent of MCTC (2-year urban) students cared for children. Considered as a whole, the data showed that from PCTS (4-year urban) to MCTC (2-year urban)

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to CCC (2-year rural), an increasing number of students were adult members of their communities with work and family obligations outside of college, likely resulting in different relationships to college life and work.
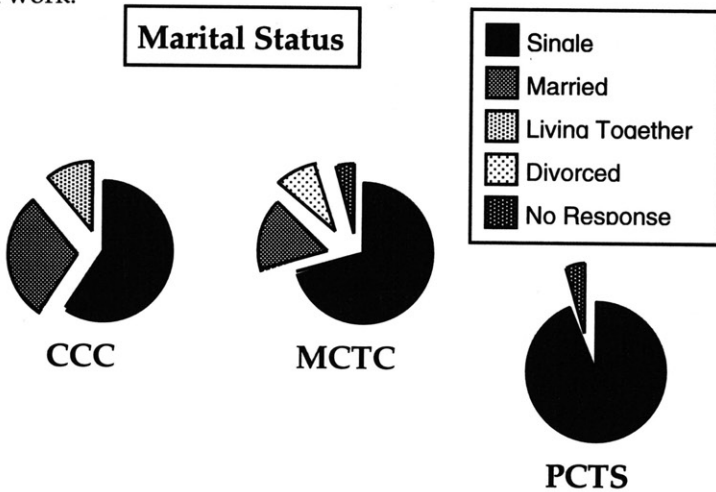

Figure 2: Marital Status

Being aware of differences in basic writers from one college to another while recognizing the individuality of basic writers at one's own institution can only lead to more thoughtful instruction. Of course, being just as thorough about understanding the features of the basic writing those students produce is equally important.

Text Analysis

So far, we have described a process for describing basic writers, using a demographic survey and back talk. To add to this description, we analyzed the writing collected from a subset of the same basic writers. We examined broad aspects of their diagnostic essays, including topic selection, discourse patterns and rate and frequency of errors and then considered how this kind of information might inform the way one teaches writing to the students at the different institutions.

The sample size for our pilot study was quite small, 10 essays from the basic writers at each institution. In choosing the essays for this study, we were particularly mindful of collecting samples that reflected the goals and methods of instruction at each institution. We decided not to develop one external prompt to be used at each institution, but rather collected the first piece of in-class writing assigned by the instructors. Certainly, this compromised our ability to compare writing across institutions, but we felt that the sacrifice was worth un-

derstanding the students' writing as a function of the institution.

At MCTC (2-year urban), students wrote a diagnostic essay using an institutional prompt. The prompt asked students to write a paragraph characterizing their worst school experience and to "use examples, reasons, and details to support your main idea" (see Appendix B). The choice to elicit a narrative text was in keeping with these basic writing classes' usual approach to begin with and practice narrative before proceeding to expository or argumentative forms. CCC (2-year rural) did not have any institutionally determined in-class diagnostic essay, but the class did typically begin with an in-class narrative. In this case, the instructor was able to administer the same prompt used at MCTC (2-year urban) for a first day writing exercise. At both MCTC (4-year urban) and CCC (2-year rural), the essays were not timed, per se, but they were limited to about forty minutes of remaining class time. No students were allowed to continue writing when the class ended. There were no concrete benefits or drawbacks (e.g., high or low grade) linked to the students' essays at either institution.

PCTS (4-year urban) students' first in-class writing was a diagnostic exam that served as a back-up test to the placement exam (see Appendix C). Intended to elicit an argumentative essay, the prompt asked students to take a position on one of two possible topics and then argue for that position in fully developed, well-supported examples. PCTS (4-year urban) students were given 45 minutes to write their essays and had tremendous incentive to do well, as a successful essay might lead to placing out of the developmental class and into the first-year writing course. Overall, the writing situation at PCTS (4-year urban) urged the student to produce the best piece of writing possible (which, of course, does not always lead to the student producing his/her best work).

We first looked at essays to gain a broad understanding of students' familiarity with academic communities and discourse. Specifically, we identified students' topics, considered essay length to gain some sense of students' fluency, and looked at the number and length of paragraphs in texts, as paragraphs are an essential and basic part of academic essays. We then examined students' use of a few conventions fundamental to most writing: introductions, conclusions and examples. We also conducted an error analysis, in part to understand the students' writing in the context of past national studies of freshman college writing (Johnson, Witty and Green, Connors and Lunsford).

Students' Topics in Narrative Essays

Since one purpose of this study was to describe students at each

institution, it made sense to look at the CCC (2-year rural) and MCTC (2-year urban) students' personal narratives in response to the "worst school experience" prompt. As we read through all of those essays, we came to realize the value of this approach in revealing students' thoughts about their own lives, about learning experiences, and about academic institutions.

CCC (2-year rural) and MCTC (2-year urban) students produced a remarkable range of topics that reached as far back as one five-year-old's first day of school, as well as addressing recent experiences at the colleges under study. Not surprising to any of us who have suffered "fear of school" dreams, several papers from both institutions spoke of classic school traumas, including feeling lost in school, missing the bus, going to the wrong class, experiencing first day fear, and witnessing a dissected frog begin to move. Another group of worst school experiences shared by CCC (2-year rural) and MCTC (2-year urban) students might be named public humiliations in school. These involved slipping, throwing up, and discovering one's bra outline showing during a speech. There were also a few love problems at each college.

Although many topics from the MCTC (2-year urban) and CCC (2-year rural) writing samples were similar, some seemed distinctly different. Whereas CCC (2-year rural) students focused primarily on school-based events, such as walking down the hallway or giving a speech (the one exception is an account of an abusive boyfriend), MCTC (2-year urban) students often discussed topics more clearly connected to their socioeconomic situations or their lives in other countries. One student was ashamed of clothing that was shabby because he was on welfare; a student from Kenya talked of having no school to attend because he was in a refugee camp for two years. Another student, while living in a different country, skipped school and was beaten by the principal, and another, who was also living in a different country at the time of his story, told of staying up all night to protect the school because that's what students had to do. There were also accounts of prejudice, as well as six accounts of violence. At MCTC (2-year urban), even though the prompt asked students to focus on school, life outside of school — often in another country — clearly played a central role in their "worst school experience."

Number of Words and Paragraphs per Essay

Reviewing even short writing exercises for choice of topic revealed a remarkable range of ideas and individuals, but it didn't say much about the students' writing fluency (in fact, there was not even one narrative about writing). To address this, we looked at how much students wrote, on the assumption that those most comfortable express-

ing ideas in writing would write more words and a greater number of paragraphs in a given amount of time. Unfortunately, differences in the prompts made it difficult to draw conclusions. The PCTS (4-year urban) prompt asked for an essay, whereas the other two prompts called for a paragraph. One would expect longer products given the prompt for an essay.

In response to the same prompt, CCC (2-year rural) students wrote substantially more words than MCTC (2-year urban) students. However, this may well be the result of a variation in the presentation of the prompt at each institution. At CCC (2-year rural), the prompt was presented on half sheet of printer paper, and students responded on lined tablet paper provided by the instructor. The instructor gave each student a few sheets of paper and told them that they could ask for more if they needed it. The presentation of the prompt did not overtly suggest how much the student should write. This was not the case at MCTC (2-year urban), where the prompt was presented as the top part of an otherwise ready-to-be filled lined piece of paper, implying "this is how much space you should fill." Very few students went beyond that space—a clear lesson for future studies. Without question, variations in prompts resulted directly from our decision to work within the context of each institution's and each class's instructional goals and methods, to interfere as little as possible, but we might have interfered just a bit in this case and ended up with significantly more useful results.

Introductions and Conclusions

In designing the pilot study, we wanted, among other things, to address some skills fundamental to a variety of writing forms and contexts. We first investigated whether or not the students generally wrote introductions and conclusions, if they had a sense of the need to open and close a piece of writing. We defined an introduction as opening text that identifies the topic to be discussed in the essay. As a response to the prompt about the worst school experience, for example, the opening text would count as an introduction if it mentioned the worst experience or the specific experience, as in this example from a CCC (2-year rural) student: "Once in a English Class I was giving a speech, and I lost my voice and couldn't finish given it."

The introductions in the argumentative essays were typically full paragraphs and in some cases longer, as this next example from a PCTS (4-year urban) student illustrates:

> Technology has a great influence on our lives, especially when the wrong people get a hold of it, they tend to abuse it. Take

for example the defense of our country, and the military. With technology and hard work, we have made the United States the most powerful country in the world. That is one of the great examples of technology having a good influence. It's when leaders from other terroristic countries get a hold of it, that's when technology is bad.

Bot that is only one example of many things technology has done for the world. The good, definitly out weigh the bad.

Although it took this student several sentences and more than one paragraph to develop his "thesis," he/she did begin this paper by presenting the view of technology that is developed in the main text. For this reason, we determined that this essay did have an introduction. In cases where students presented a series of examples and/or opinions without any overarching statement, we did not consider the opening text an introduction.

Conclusions were defined similarly to introductions: a conclusion involves final text that generalizes the previous discussion to say something about that discussion, even if the closing text does not differ significantly from the introductory text. A simple *That was my worst school experience* would suffice. To conclude the discussion of the awful experience with giving a speech in an English class, the CCC (2-year rural) student did actually go beyond repeating the introduction to comment on the event: "I did pass, but from then on I hated to give speeches in front of people and I still hear about it from friends that were in that class with me." To conclude the discussion about the pros and cons of technology, the PCTS (4-year urban) student previously quoted wrote:

> Now that we are in the computer age, by learning what these machines can do, it only makes us that much smarter. Even though they do have some disadvantages and problems, the overall picture is very positive. By creating this kind of technology, it has only made this country, much smarter, and powerful.

In keeping with our definition of conclusion, the student stepped back to make a final judgment: "the overall picture is very positive." Through this generalization, the student demonstrated the fundamental function of a conclusion.

At all three institutions, the majority of students demonstrated a basic sense of essay structure, of beginning, middle and end. At CCC (2-year rural), eight of the ten essays have introductions, and eight of ten have conclusions; at MCTC (2-year urban), nine of ten have introductions, and eight of ten have conclusions; and at PCTS (4-year ur-

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ban), all essays have introductions and conclusions. Equipped with this kind of information, an instructor could enrich the students' skills in these areas and draw parallels between the form and function of introductions in different kinds of writing to help students build on what they know and become more flexible writers. Equally important, used as a diagnostic, this kind of text analysis can help instructors quickly identify and tutor those few basic writers who are least familiar with those basic discourse conventions.

Examples

In our work with teaching and program administration, we have frequently encountered "example," "support with example," "more examples," and the like in marginal comments from instructors to students. Because of this, we began to wonder to what extent writers in our study used this basic explanatory tool. Specifically, we looked at how often a writer used examples (a skill called for in all prompts (Appendix B and C)), at the number of words per example as a measure of development, at the writer's movement into and out of examples, and at whether or not the example was discussed in terms of the paper topic.

Primarily interested in whether or not students had a basic familiarity with producing examples in writing, we defined this feature as a reference to or description of a specific instantiation of an idea. The idea could come before or after the example. The transitions into and out of examples were defined quite liberally: any text that was linked to the example and that referred to the idea being exemplified counted as a transition. The following example from a PCTS (4-year urban) essay will help clarify our definitions:

> Since then, we have seen a lot of things arise that are only beneficial to us, the people, not the trees, plants, animals or even our atmosphere. Some things are vehicles, t.v.s, vcr's, computers, etc . . .

The first sentence presents the idea; "some things" serves as a transition linking the examples to come back to the "things" discussed in the first sentence; and "vehicles, t.v.s, . . ." serve as the concrete instantiation of "things," or the example. In this case, the student does not offer any transition between the end of the example and the following text, nor is there any discussion of the example with respect to the topic. Rather, the student moves immediately into a new paragraph and a new take on the general idea that technology is bad: "Personally, I have a hard time understanding why the way of life today

sees modern technology as a necessity. It seems to me that because of all the material things around us, just about all of us are selfish and looks at life as a game."

Using this approach to analyze examples led to a useful overview of how examples were used by each group of students (see table 1).

Use of Examples	CCC (2-year rural)	MCTC (2-year urban)	PCTS (4-year urban)
# of examples	10	11	25
# of words devoted to examples	1838	1154	686
% of words devoted to examples	74%	76%	22%
Transition into example exists	8	9	21
Transition from example to Paragraph or paper topic exists	7	8	11
Example discussed in terms of topic	7	1	8

Table 1: Use of Examples in Basic Writing at CCC (2-year rural), MCTC (2-year urban), and PCTS (4-year urban)

Though our small sample size and variations in essay prompts prevented us from drawing conclusions, our results did suggest the kind of information this type of research yields. We found, for example, a striking difference between PCTS (4-year urban) and the two community colleges: even though PCTS (4-year urban) had by far the greatest number of words per student paper and a greater number of examples per paper, PCTS (4-year urban) had dramatically fewer number of words devoted to examples. Such a result in a larger study might reveal under what circumstances students are and are not able to develop examples and to what extent this ability is a function of essay form or content, or, as one reviewer pointed out, the relationship between the demands of the exam question and the allowed writing time.

We also found that transitions into examples were quite common, whereas transitions out of examples were noticeably few in the argumentative essays from PCTS (4-year urban). When it came to the task of discussing an example, CCC (2-year rural) students demonstrated greater skill than did MCTC (2-year urban) students. More often than not, PCTS (4-year urban) students did not discuss examples.

Considered as a whole, what might these various pieces of information about introductions, conclusions, and examples say about a

writer? If we look only at the CCC (2-year rural) writers for the sake of demonstration, this pilot suggests that CCC (2-year rural) students have a good grasp of the basic structure and a number of parts of a narrative essay and can move well from the abstract to the concrete and back again in the process of developing a single idea. With such information (verified, of course, by a larger study), an instructor could start working from what the students can do in the narrative framework and help them transfer those skills to other writing forms and contexts.

Such individual and institutional descriptions might also help us understand and articulate differences and similarities across groups of basic writers. As did CCC (2-year rural) students, the majority of MCTC (2-year urban) students demonstrated a familiarity with the concept of the introduction and conclusion, with moving into and out of examples in a limited way, and with moving from an idea to a concrete example and back again. However, MCTC (2-year urban) students differed in that they did not typically discuss examples. This information suggests that this group might do well to work within the narrative framework to practice relating examples to the essay's topic — a very different approach than that suggested by the CCC (2-year rural) information.

Error Analysis

To offer several views into the writing of basic writing students, we also analyzed the type, frequency, and seriousness of error in students' essays. This involved reading through all of the essays in classes at each institution and making a list of every error found. From this list, we developed a template of the twenty most frequent errors made at each institution. We then used this template (see Appendix D) to analyze 10 randomly selected essays from each college.

While we do not think it useful or appropriate to report all the results of this study, we do think it worth pausing to note the error rates we determined in comparison to past error analyses of first-year college and University writers (Johnson; Witty and Green; Connors and Lunsford) (see table 2).

	CCC	MCTC	PCTS	Johnson	Witty & Green	Connors & Lunsford
Errors/100 words	8.10	19.00	10.20	2.11	2.24	2.26

Table 2: Errors per 100 Words in This Study and Previous Studies

Compared to the number of errors noted in studies of first-year

college-level writers, the error rate per 100 words for our basic writers was quite high for each institution. In 1917, Roy Ivan Johnson looked at 198 papers from sixty-six freshmen and found an error rate of 2.11 errors per 100 words. In 1930, Paul Witty and Roberta Green looked at 170 papers written by freshman, and they found about 2.24 errors per 100 words (qtd. in Connors and Lunsford). In Connors and Lunsford's 1986 national study of 3,000 papers, they found an error rate of 2.26 errors per 100 words. In our study, the best basic writer certainly tripled and others often quadrupled the error rate of the average freshman writer in these national studies spanning nearly 70 years.

To measure error frequency in the ten sample papers from each class, we identified the number of total errors in the papers and the number of papers with specific errors. This second frequency rating was included to make it possible to think beyond how many errors were being made by a group in order to consider how many students in the class were making the same errors, an especially important piece of information for designing classroom instruction.

After determining overall error frequency rates, we determined frequency rates for specific constructions and rated errors according to their perceived seriousness (Noguchi, Hairston). Our interest in ranking seriousness grew out Noguchi's observation during his 1996 CCCC presentation that in deciding which errors to address when teaching writing, instructors should certainly teach students to understand and correct those errors which produce strong negative reactions, as well as those which occur with high frequency. To determine which errors produced strong negative reaction, we looked to Maxine Hairston's "Not All Errors are Created Equal: Nonacademic Readers in the Professions Respond to Lapses in Usage." Hairston surveyed eighty-four business and industry professionals and asked them to respond to sixty-five different language constructions and determine whether they bothered the reader a lot, a little, or not at all. From this, Hairston developed a rating system describing the relative seriousness of various types of error in the professional world, ranging from "outrageous" to "unimportant." In a complementary study, Donald Ross, Jr. discovered that in a business letter, errors do affect the reader's impression of the writer. He found that spelling errors caused the strongest negative reaction and that all types of error were wrongly interpreted by readers as spelling errors (167, 172). It should also be pointed out that many of the errors found in our pilot study were not rated by Hairston's or Ross's study, so we do not offer any information about the relative seriousness in these cases, except to suggest that the reader consider his or her own response to them.

As tables 3, 4, and 5 illustrate, error analysis allowed for a close look at abilities within and across institutions.

CCC (2-year rural) Error or Error Pattern	# found in 10 papers	% of total errors	# of papers with error	degree of seriousness
1: No comma after intro element	42	20.9%	9	Med/Low
2: Spelling	40	20.0%	8	Serious
3: No comma in compound sentence	25	12.4%	9	No rating
4: No comma (non-restrictive or series)	15	7.5%	6	M/L-serious
5: Tense/aspect problem	15	7.5%	4	Serious
6: Comma splice	12	6.0%	5	Med/Low
7: Articles wrong or missing	10	5.0%	2	No rating
8: Wrong/missing/ extra word	9	5.0%	4	Serious
9: Possessive apostrophe error	7	3.5%	4	No rating
10: Prepositions wrong or missing	6	3.0%	2	Serious

Table 3: Top Ten Errors in Developmental Writing at CCC

Three of the ten errors in table 3 — spelling, tense/aspect problem, and wrong/missing/extra word — were serious. Hairston rates some spelling errors as being more serious than others (796-798). For instance, an its/it's error is not rated as being particularly serious, but affect/effect is considered serious. It should be noted that, according to our observations and her discussion of the study, Hairston did not include test sentences with simple spelling errors (e.g. recieved for received). Hers were either homonym or spelling/punctuation errors. In the open-ended section of the questionnaire, however, several of her respondents singled out spelling as "the most annoying error they encountered" (798). For those reasons and based on Ross's complementary study, we ranked spelling as a serious error. With reference to non-spelling errors, fewer than half of the CCC (2-year rural) writers produced serious errors, and the number of serious errors was relatively low. CCC (2-year rural) students did make two unique types of error, that is, errors that were not part of the top ten at either MCTC (2-year urban) or PCTS (4-year urban). These involved the comma splice and the possessive apostrophe. In general, CCC (2-year rural) students produced relatively few serious errors compared to MCTC (2-year urban) and PCTS (4-year urban).

MCTC (2-year urban) Error or Error Pattern	# found in 10 papers	% of total errors	# of papers with error	degree of seriousness
1: No comma after intro element	30	13.6%	8	Med/Low
2: Tense/aspect problem	27	12.0%	7	Serious
3. Improper verb form	27	12.0%	6	Med-Outrg
4: Spelling	23	10.4%	6	Serious
5: Wrong/missing/ extra word	18	8.2%	7	Serious
6: Prepositions wrong or missing	15	6.9%	6	Serious
7. Run-on or fused sentence	15	6.9%	5	Serious
8: No comma in compound sentence	14	6.4%	8	No rating
9: No comma (nonrestrictive or series)	7	3.2%	5	M/L-serious
10. Articles wrong or missing	5	2.3%	4	No rating*

Table 4: Top Ten Errors in Developmental Writing at MCTC
*While error pattern # 10 received no rating in Hairston's study, article problems are very typically E.S.L problems, and we suspect would fall under her classification of status-marking errors which proved to be "outrageous" in their level of seriousness.

MCTC (2-year urban) basic writing students produced a greater number of serious errors with higher frequency than their CCC (2-year rural) and PCTS (4-year urban) counterparts. The tense/aspect problem, ranked second, was identified as serious by Hairston and occurred with high frequency: seven out of ten students produced this error, and 12.3% of the group's total errors fell into this category. Improper verb form, ranked third and also occurring with high frequency, may be very serious, particularly when it involves verb usage associated with particular socioeconomic or cultural groups, what Hairston calls "status verbs." As noted earlier, spelling may or may not be serious. Run-on or fused sentences were ranked as very serious, and half the students produced such structures. Having no comma in a series was also considered a serious error, and again, half-the-students made this mistake. Unique errors for this group were the run-on or fused sentences and improper verbs, both of which may be fairly serious. Clearly, MCTC (2-year urban) students produced a lot of serious errors with high frequency.

PCTS (4-year urban) Error or Error Pattern	# found in 10 papers	% of total errors	# of papers with error	degree of seriousness
1: Spelling	58	18.5%	9	Serious
2: No comma after intro element	39	12.4%	10	Med/Low
3: No comma (non-restrictive or series)	17	5.4%	7	M/L-serious
4: Wrong/missing/extra word	15	4.8%	7	Serious
5: Prepositions wrong or missing	12	3.8%	6	Serious
6: Extra commas (between p/c,s/v)	12 (6/6)	3.8%	5	Serious
7: No comma in compound sentence	12	3.8%	5	No rating
8: Tense/aspect problem	11	3.5%	4	Serious
9: Non-parallel structure	10	3.2%	5	Serious
10: Vague pronoun reference	8	2.5%	5	No rating

Table 5: Top Ten Errors in Developmental Writing at PCTS (4-year urban)

The student writing samples from PCTS (4-year urban) revealed a fair number of serious errors, but no errors that fell into Hairston's "very serious" or "outrageous" category. Spelling problems (of varied seriousness) accounted for the largest proportion of errors. Two less frequent but "serious" errors included missing a comma in a series and including an extra comma between the predicate and complement (e.g., *This is the boy, that Sue knows.*). It is worth noting that six out of the twelve errors of this sort were actually subject/predicate comma splits, which were not specifically ranked by Hairston. Also on the top-ten errors list, the serious tense/aspect problems and non-parallel structures appeared in five out of the ten papers reviewed. Unique errors for PCTS (4-year urban) students included non-parallel sentence structure, vague pronoun reference, and extra commas.

The worth of the error analysis can be found not only in what it reveals about each student's writing ability, but in what it suggests about basic writers as a group: not all basic writers make the same kind of errors (Tables 3, 4, 5), making any single approach to teaching them suspect. Joseph Harris discusses three major metaphors that have dominated the field and had a strong impact on writing instruction — growth, initiation, and conflict (29). In nearly all approaches represented by those metaphors, language use at the sentence level or

lower is typically addressed at the end of the course, possibly too late to adequately address the issues at hand. Our research supports a different approach: the instruction for any class of students should depend on the students' actual writing abilities. The CCC (2-year rural) classes with relatively low frequency of serious errors may find it a poor investment to address usage errors in a class context, opting instead for a more individualized approach. MCTC (2-year urban) classes with relatively high frequency of serious errors (and students with many outside obligations and minimal time for individual tutoring) may, on the other hand, determine it worthwhile to address usage early on and throughout the quarter or semester. It is this kind of holistic view of the student we hope to encourage as we design our teaching and learning strategies.

Final Thoughts

Offering feedback on an earlier version of this paper, Don Ross, Director of the Upper Division Composition and Communication Program at University of Minnesota during the tenure of Director Chris Anson, asked us a seemingly simple question: are the institutions studied here meant to be representative of certain kinds of institutions? If so, should we refer to them more generally — that is, replace the acronym MCTC (which is how we referred to Minneapolis Community and Technical College in earlier drafts) with "2-year urban," CCC with "2-year rural," and PCTS with "4-year private urban." He felt the change would help people remember which college was which. Formulating an answer to this apparently simple question helped us to articulate the strengths of our research method. If we replaced MCTC with "two-year urban institution," for example, we might wrongly imply that MCTC could in fact fairly represent all members of "two-year institutions," but if we only used MCTC, we might risk sending the untested message that MCTC could not in any way represent "two-year urban" institutions. The answer, then? At the risk of wordiness, we chose to refer to the college using the acronym *and* the descriptor, thus using "MCTC, 2-year urban, " for example. Similarly, as we developed our research method, we felt that only investigating the basic writer or piece of writing at the individual level, or only within the confines of a single institution, or only across institutions would fail to offer a complete enough picture of basic writers. In fact, as we investigated the basic writer from a number of personal and text-based perspectives, we learned that the view of basic writers and basic writing is quite mutable. The CCC (2-year rural) student represented by the survey, for example, differed from the CCC (2-year rural) student represented through back talk; the overall error rates for basic writers

across institutions represent basic writers quite differently than the analysis of the basic writers at any one of the institutions. To understand and teach responsibly to the basic writer, we must understand him or her as an individual writer, as a writer within an institution, and as a member of a larger group of writers who share a particular range of skills.

Not surprisingly, as we sought to learn about basic writers as a group, we confronted the greatest objection to our work. We posted a general, institution-centered survey on both the Basic Writing and Writing Program administrator list servers, asking how those teaching in or directing basic writing courses would describe their students. We asked, among other things, "While this may seem almost impossible, try to describe a 'typical' basic writing student at your institution in terms of individual characteristics, life circumstances, and his/her writing abilities." Typical comments from the seven who responded were: "first generation college working class background—often second or third generation in U.S." and "large nontraditional population but BW are overwhelmingly traditional age." One comment stood out: "this is almost impossible, and I think, possibly pernicious. The last thing in the world we want to do is to pathologize 'basic' writers by sorting them into various demographic categories. (Sorry for being difficult)."

It is a difficult issue. We understand and, to a certain extent, agree that it could be dangerous business to classify or pigeonhole basic writers. Nevertheless, taking time to know more about the actual students we've already identified as needing extra help to write successfully in college strikes us as a responsibility, a way to do as Ann Berthoff suggests—"to begin where they are" both in life circumstances and writing proficiencies.

Notes

1. To complete the random sampling, a number was assigned to the 70 selections from Spring '93 issue through Spring '98 issue. Everything which had an author listed in the table of content (articles, responses) was counted, but a special Mina Shaughnessy reprint section of her work from the 1970s was not. To select 35 articles for review, we used the random sampling table in Lauer and Asher, *Composition Research*, resulting in the following list of authors: Adams, Berthoff, Biser, Bloom, Cody, Creed and Andrews, Crowley, Dykstra, Elliot, Fitzgerald, Fox, Gaillet, Hilgers, Hindman, Laurence, Maher, Marinara, Miraglia, Mlynarczyk, Moran, Newman, Norment, Parisi, Purves, Roy, Scott, Segall, Servino (1994), Servino (1996), Sheridan-Rabideau and Brossell, Sirc, Wiener, Winslow, Wolcott, Young. The confidence lim-

its for this data, with the correction factor, are +/- 12 percent.

2. The small number of basic writers studied restricts conclusions which can be drawn from the data in these ways: for survey information and topic analyses, the sample of CCC (2-year rural) and PCTS (4-year urban) students is equal to the population as a whole, so conclusions can be drawn, but for MCTC (2-year urban), the sample size does not approach the size of the population and is therefore unreliable; similarly, the number of writing samples analyzed (10) is too small across all institutions, but is more reliable for CCC (2-year rural) and PCTS (4-year urban) because it represents 37% and 59%, respectively, of the entire population during the academic term of the study.

3. Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science was granted university status July 13, 1999.

4. At CCC (2-year rural), those two classes included all basic writers being served at the college that quarter; technically, the course being offered (Eng 090) is the higher of two levels in the college catalog, but because CCC (2-year rural) cannot sustain enrollment in its lowest-level course (Eng 089), all developmental writers at CCC (2-year rural) end up in Eng 090; at MCTC (2-year urban), we use data from the lowest of two levels of developmental courses; at PCTS (4-year urban), we examine data from non-ESL developmental classes.

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Appendix A: Survey

SURVEY: To find out more about the needs of particular groups of
       writers.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION (Circle appropriate information)
Sex: M F
Ethnic/Cultural: African-Amer Asian-Amer NativeAmer White
       Other
Marital Status: Single (S) Living Together (LT) Married (M)
       Divorced (D)
Your Age:

Children (if applicable, please list ages of all children--include date
of any expected children if you are currently pregnant, your approxi-
mate age when you had her or him, and your marital status at the
time--use above classifications-S, LT, M, D)

Child's current age or due date	Your age at his/her birth	Marital Status at the time
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		

Check all of the following resources you have used to support
yourself (and your children before you entered college):
_____working full-time
_____working part-time
_____income from a spouse or co-habitor
_____financial (or housing/food) support from family or friends
_____child support payments
_____AFDC
_____medical assistance
_____other (please name)

Check all of the following resources you are using to support your-
self (and your children) during college (now) — include college
expenses as part of that support:
_____working full-time
_____working part-time
_____income from a spouse or co-habitor
_____financial (or housing/food) support from family or friends
_____child support payments
_____AFDC
_____medical assistance

_____grants or scholarships (for college)
_____financial aid (for college)
_____other (please name:

Education:
Did you finish high school?   yes or no
Complete your G.E.D.?   yes or no
If you did not finish high school, what is the highest grade you completed?

Circle the highest level of education completed by your parents.
Mother:7 8 9 10 11 12   A.A./A.S. B.A./B.S. M.A./M.S. Ph.D.
Father: 7 8 9 10 11 12   A.A./A.S. B.A./B.S. M.A./M.S. Ph.D.

PRIORITIES
1. What's most important to you? In each blank, write in a number between 1 and 5 which shows its importance to you. (1=most important; 5=least important; NA= does not apply)
_____spouse/significant other and/or children
_____parents
_____friends
_____work
_____school
_____church
_____home (upkeep, cleaning, etc.)
_____hobbies or sports
_____community activities or volunteer work
_____relaxation
_____entertainment (parties, movies, etc.)

2. How do you prioritize the things that are important to you? Using the same list, rank order them from 1 to 11 using each number only once (1=most important; 11=least important; NA=does not apply)
_____spouse/significant other and/or children
_____parents
_____friends
_____work
_____school
_____church
_____home (upkeep, cleaning, etc.)
_____hobbies or sports
_____community activities or volunteer work
_____relaxation
_____entertainment (parties, movies, etc.)

3. How much time do you spend with the people who are important to you or doing the things that are important to you? In each blank, estimate the number of hours you spend on a typical day.

_____spouse/significant other and/or children
_____parents
_____friends
_____work
_____school
_____church
_____home (upkeep, cleaning, etc.)
_____hobbies or sports
_____community activities or volunteer work
_____relaxation
_____entertainment (parties, movies, etc.)

4. Look back at question #2 for the top three things you ranked as most important to you. **In what ways does writing interfere with these things?**

5. Look back at question #2 for the top three things you ranked as most important to you. **In what ways does writing help you succeed in these areas?**

6. What are your reasons for being in college? **Why is it important to you?**

7. **How valuable or useful is writing to your success in college?** Rank its value or usefulness with a number from 1 to five; 1=most important; 5=least important. _____ Explain why you gave it this ranking.

8. What kind of job do you hope to get when you graduate from college?

9. **How valuable or useful is writing to your future career?** Rank its value or usefulness with a number from 1 to 5; 1=most important; 5=least important. _____ Explain why you gave it this ranking.

Thank you. If you would be willing to discuss these issues more fully in a small group and/or an individual conference with me, please complete your name, address, and phone number below. **There would be some compensation (money or assistance with school or resume writing) for your time.**

Name:

Address:

Phone #:

Appendix B: Narrative Writing Prompt for CCC (2-year rural) and

MCTC (2-year urban)

Write a paragraph on the topic that appears below. Begin with a topic sentence and then develop it based on your experiences and observations. Use examples, reasons, and details to support your main idea. Make the paragraph as clear and error free as you can. Please skip lines to make your handwriting more legible.

My Worst School Experience

Appendix C: Argumentative Prompt for PCTS (4-year urban) Students

Diagnostic Essay

Directions

This essay will be used to confirm that you have been placed in the appropriate writing course. Based on the results, your professor may need to notify you of a change in your writing placement; therefore, be certain that you include your telephone number as well as your name and social security number at the top of your essay.

You have the remainder of the class period to plan and write your essay. Before you begin to write, you may wish to take a few minutes to think about your topic and make some notes to yourself on a page of your bluebook. You should also have some time at the end to read and correct what you have written.

To do your best you should:
* express your ideas clearly.
* write in fully developed, well-supported paragraphs.
* avoid serious grammatical errors which could interfere with a reader's understanding of your essay.
* follow the directions carefully and completely.

You have a choice of two topics. Read both carefully before you choose one of them.

Essay Topics

1. Technology (for example, telecommunications and genetic engineering) is having an increasing influence on our lives. Some people find the increasing influence exciting, but other people find it threatening. Explain why you think technology has had a good influence <u>or</u> a bad influence on our lives. Use specific examples to support your position.

2. It is said that the fact people are living longer is limiting opportunities for young people. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain, using specific examples to support your position.

Appendix D: Sample Error Tally Form
Error Type and Number

spelling	
tense	
pronoun agreement	
vague pronoun reference	
subject/verb agreement	
improper verb form	
wrong/missing inflected endings	
extra commas	
comma splice (in place of .)	
no comma in a compound sentence	
no comma after introductory element	
other missing comma	
improper separation of independent clauses, run on or fused sentence	
fragments	
articles wrong or missing	
prepositions wrong or missing	
singular/plural agreement problem	
apostrophe misused	
subject/object mix-up	
wrong word	
# paragraphs	
intro sentence or paragraph	
conc sentence or paragraph	
# examples	
# words devoted to examples	
total # words	
transition into example	
transition sentence from example back to topic	
is example discussed in terms of topic?	