

First-Year Writing: What Good Does It Do?

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First-year writing (FYW) courses, long a common introductory experience for college students, regardless of location or institution type, are currently being challenged by a number of alternatives. These challenges include online courses and/or MOOCs, various “test-out” options, and dual-enrollment programs. Although they differ from one another in approach, all of these alternatives disrupt the traditional face-to-face FYW courses that strengthen students’ writing abilities and play a key role in orienting students to post-secondary study. The current economic pressures on students and their families to complete degrees as quickly as possible and on higher education to limit the number of small enrollment courses make alternatives look especially attractive.

In this environment, it is important to consider research on what FYW courses contribute to undergraduate education and what might be lost if FYW courses were no longer part of the experience of students beginning their college careers.

FYW Fosters Engagement and Retention

One of the features of FYW courses is their relatively small size. Even in today’s budget-cutting era, students can count on the FYW course as one learning environment in which instructors will know their names. They can also look forward to regular opportunities, perhaps even requirements to, meet one-on-one with their instructor as well as to express opinions and engage in reflection and discussions with their peers. Research shows that personal attention and low student/teacher ratios are key factors in college student retention, both of which are provided by FYW courses. Furthermore, FYW courses have been identified by researchers as fostering engagement (a sense of investment and involvement in learning) along with persistence (the ability to sustain interest in an attention to short and long-term projects). Most important, when they reflect upon and discuss their own experiences with writing and writing processes, students often report a sense of investment and involvement with learning. Longitudinal studies examining students’ college writing experiences reinforce students’ reflections by identifying first-year writing courses as formative moments for students’ life-long learning and writing experiences.¹

FYW Enhances Rhetorical Knowledge

Another feature of FYW courses is their ongoing attention to processes of writing as well as opportunities for social and academic relationships with peers and instructors, feedback that improves communication skills, and active learning through research and writing. In contrast to, say, AP courses

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that culminate in a final test that can exempt students from FYW, suggesting that students have learned everything they need to know about writing, FYW courses encourage students to continue developing their writing skills throughout their college experience and beyond.

In addition, FYW courses provide students with rhetorical skills they can use in—or transfer to—many other disciplinary contexts. Students in FYW courses have regular opportunities to read the writing of their classmates in peer response groups and/or to participate in collaborative writing activities that expose them to the ideas of others as well as diverse styles and methods of work and a deeper understanding of audience. FYW courses require students to understand and articulate purposes for writing, and these courses provide students with strategies for summoning language appropriate for accomplishing their purposes. These capacities to consider new ways of thinking and being in the world prepare students well for the rhetorical and conceptual demands of college and career writing.²

FYW Develops Metacognition

Metacognition, or the ability to reflect on one's own thinking, increases student opportunity for academic achievement. Studies show that metacognitive awareness can help students engage more productively with and better understand instructor feedback, and more generally, to articulate the strengths and weaknesses of their own writing. Furthermore, the development of metacognitive awareness is crucial in developing the ability of students to transfer knowledge from and to differing and diverse educational experiences.³

One of the benefits of metacognition and the capacity for transfer that it engenders is an increase in ability to discern what type of writing a given context calls for. Even though students may enter college with knowledge about several genres, they can often become “locked” in the genre constraints of what they learned in high school. Instead of assuming that a five-paragraph theme is the best response to any writing context, students who have taken a FYW course are much more likely to know how to address expectations, audiences, and purposes for writing in many different contexts. They are able to transfer metacognitive capacities to a variety of situations in and beyond college. Research suggests that FYW is uniquely placed in the undergraduate curriculum to develop student metacognitive awareness, the development of which has the potential to have resounding consequences on student postsecondary education and writing.⁴

FYW Increases Responsibility

Research also suggests that metacognition goes hand-in-hand with students' sense of responsibility and ownership

towards their work and learning. Students who struggle with generalizing from (or thinking megacognitively about) and using previously known writing strategies tend to be more unaware of their rhetorical and discursive choices in writing, and thus have less agency in their learning and the ways they use knowledge.

Some studies show that a key element in achieving transfer of knowledge—from high school and from FYW alike—is to support students in becoming active, meta-aware agents who are in control of their learning as they negotiate the new, complex domains of writing in college/academia, and this process best happens *across time*. Indeed, students who were explicitly taught metacognitive strategies in FYW—along with writing strategies and genre awareness—gradually shifted from parroting the language of the assignment (the prompt, the assigned readings, the teacher's handouts) during the earlier part of the semester towards taking control of the writing task by making nuanced decisions about audience, genre, and rhetorical choices. They did this based on their own concept of what the accomplished writing task should look like, a shift that indicates high agency and a sense of ownership/responsibility in their own learning, and a shift that leads to higher transfer of skills to other courses.

Researchers emphasize that this sense of responsibility develops across time as students expand their writing repertoires *and* cultivate metacognitive strategies for using those skills in various writing tasks. High school and college students alike are empowered as agents responsible for their own learning when they are given the *time* and *space* to develop their meta-awareness as writers, and are explicitly taught how to do so. For beginning college students who must negotiate new, unfamiliar, and increasingly complex writing tasks, FYW courses provide them with the time, space, and pedagogical support to take control of their writing.⁵

Policy Recommendations

As education policy increasingly focuses on notions of career and college readiness, research shows us that common practices in first-year college writing classes reinforce the intellectual habits and behaviors needed for success in postsecondary studies or the workplace. Alternate routes to satisfy first-year writing requirements, such as online courses, test-out options, or dual enrollment coursework, can offer students useful preparation for FYW courses. However, such instruction cannot fully replicate the experiences of FYW because high school students' social and cognitive development is at a different level, and because none of the alternatives can provide the sustained attention to developing the habits of mind and strategies fostered in FYW.⁶

For these reasons, the first-year composition requirement remains a critical component of postsecondary education. Allowing college credit for writing courses completed while in high school will not help students to fully develop capacities for engagement, persistence, collaboration, reflection, metacognition, flexibility, and ownership that will help them to grow as writers and learners. Much of the research on the role of first-year college composition indicates that the following would be in order:

- In postsecondary institutions that do allow entering students to place out of FYW, the decision to exempt students should be made on an individual basis and should be based on actual writing samples from the student that are read by instructors at the school they will attend. Students identified as college ready based, for instance, on test scores that are determined by short, timed essays may not fully possess the rhetorical dexterity and awareness necessary for success in college.
- Decisions regarding college writing course requirements and student placement should acknowledge that writing development occurs over time and reflects students' emotional, social, and cognitive maturity. Writing competence—for students of all ages—is continually developing and depends on exposure to many diverse experiences requiring writing, revision, problem solving, and creative thinking.

Endnotes

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