TEACHING IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE TEST: UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING STUDENT CONCEPTIONS OF WRITING IN THE ERA OF HIGH-STAKES TESTING

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of English

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Elizabeth Blomstedt

May, 2017

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Elizabeth Blomstedt

APPROVED:

James T. Zebroski, Ph.D.
Committee Chair

Jennifer Wingard, Ph.D.

Nathan Shepley, Ph.D.

Paul Butler, Ph.D.

Paullett Golden, Ph.D.
San Jacinto College

Antonio D. Tillis, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences
Department of Hispanic Studies

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I seek to understand and address the limited ways that students see writing as a result of being taught to write for high-stakes exams. Specifically, I use teacher research methodologies to explore the following questions: 1) How do students conceive of writing in the era of high-stakes testing?, and 2) How might we teach first-year writing in order to help students see writing more broadly than it is portrayed in these testing situations? First, I use interviews with my former first-year writing students to discover to what extent and in what ways writing instruction in K-12 is shaped by high-stakes tests. I present broad findings from coding these interviews as well as quotes directly from interviewees. Second, I use classroom-based inquiry to design and teach an online first-year writing class in which students perform inquiry into what writing is for them, in part by having them reflect on and contextualize their past experiences writing for exams and then research how writing overlaps with their own interests. I include my own course design and assignments as well as excerpts of student writing to demonstrate the successes of implementing this kind of reflexive, rhetoric-based, student-centered pedagogy in order to encourage students to think of writing more broadly. Using liminal theory, I argue that the first-year writing class is an appropriate place to help student re-see what writing is and can do, and this approach proves effective for addressing the limited ways students see writing and education in this era of high-stakes testing.

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Introduction

Tests of writing have served an essential role in shaping the field of rhetoric and composition. Many trace the foundation of the field back to Harvard's English A course, which was formed in reaction to the low scores students earned on the written entrance exam Harvard first administered in 1874 (Connors). And almost as quickly as these writing exams were implemented, they were questioned; in 1894 at the Harvard Conference on English, professor George Lyman Kittredge contended that there were "serious theoretical and practical objections to estimating a student's power to write a language on the basis of a theme composed not for the sake of expounding something that he knows or thinks, but merely for the sake of *showing his ability to write*" (qtd. in Elliot 53).

Yet questions about the validity of these tests and their ability to measure "writing ability" have not diminished the prevalence and power these timed writing exams have in our education system. Neoliberal calls for "accountability" and "progress" in education and along with the widely publicized "crisis" in education, especially in literacy, have led to a steep increase in testing in K-12, especially after the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act[1], which required state-mandated testing to measure annual yearly progress and secure federal funding. These state exams often ask students to write a timed essay on a topic they haven't seen before, limiting their ability to engage in the important steps of invention and revision or to write on topics that are meaningful to them. Due to their high-stakes nature, writing teachers in K-12 are often encouraged to spend large portions of their instruction time

[1] No Child Left Behind is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act originally passed in 1965. In 2015, NCLB was replaced with the Every Student Succeeds Act, which still relies on standardized testing for "accountability" purposes, leaving many education experts skeptical about its ability to improve our education system (Wong).

training students to write specifically for these exams, frequently teaching formulaic writing strategies in order to ensure student success. Though the timed exam essay is an important genre for students to be comfortable with, the emphasis placed on writing specifically for standardized tests in K-12 has displaced writing instruction on the carefully planned, revised essays that we often assign in our first-year writing classes.

When it comes to testing writing in high school, the damage does not stop at these state-mandated exams. Students encounter the genre of timed test essay in other high-stakes situations related to college credit, including on Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) tests, and college admissions, like the SAT and ACT. These exams can be especially damaging to how first-year writing students conceive of writing in college and beyond, suggesting to students (sometimes overtly[2]) that these exam essays are fair measures of one's ability to write in college or are consistent with the type of writing students will do in college.

As Kittredge suspected in 1894, the damage done by these exams is undeniable; scholars in the field of education have continually concluded that these exams disproportionately harm students from disadvantaged groups (Rose; Sacks), that their high-stakes nature makes them inherently corrupt (Nichols and Berliner), and that we do not hold the politicians who tout these reforms based on notions of "accountability" accountable for their own legislation (Vinovskis). Scholars in rhetoric and composition, most notably George

[2] The College Board, creator of the SAT, makes these kinds of claims about the now-retired twenty-five minute SAT-W essay most directly in their *SAT Study Guide*, beginning their essay chapter by telling readers, "In the essay component of the writing section, the student-written essay assesses your ability to develop and express ideas effectively. It evaluates your ability to do the kind of writing required in college" (99).

Hillocks[3], have found that these exams harm writing instruction and students' ability to conceive of writing outside of the testing environment. As a result, many in our field have called for those in rhetoric and composition to take action, partnering with K-12 teachers to decry the damages of standardized testing (Strachan; Kittle; Hansen and Farris) and to push instead for writing assessment that is more authentic[4] and sensitive to the local environment that students are writing within (O'Neill, Moore and Huot; Hillocks). The question in the meantime is what first-year writing instructors might do in our classrooms to help students see writing as something other than an exercise in replicating a formula and proving writing competence.

In this dissertation, I use interviews to better understand how first-year writing students conceive of writing after spending much of their time in K-12, especially high school, preparing to write specifically for standardized tests. I then design and teach a liminal first-year writing class that embraces disorientation in order to encourage students to explore and define writing for themselves. I argue that the first-year writing class serves a liminal role of helping students transition from writing in high school to writing in college and beyond, and in an era where much of the writing instruction taking place in K-12 is geared toward writing for standardized tests, first-year writing instructors must be cognizant of what their students' prior experiences with writing are in order to help them transition to seeing

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[3] In *The Testing Trap*, Hillocks not only concludes that poorly-formed writing assessments harm teaching and learning, but also harms thinking. He writes: "In my most cynical moments, I wonder if the master plan is to train people not to think" (204).

[4] I acknowledge that "authentic writing" is a problematic term, as one could argue that any writing done in a classroom setting is necessarily inauthentic. I am using the term to refer to writing that is not done purely to prove one's writing ability; ideally, authentic writing would ask students to write for a specific knowable audience within a given context to fulfill a set purpose (a purpose beyond proving competence) and would emerge from student motives and interests. In assessment, this means collecting writing samples that students do throughout the school year rather than having them write a single timed essay with the sole goal of proving their writing ability. Many calling for more authentic forms of assessment call specifically for using portfolio-based assessment for this reason.

writing as social, contextual, and purposeful. Using teacher research methodologies that positions students as co-collaborators on my research, I encourage students to reflect on their own thoughts about their past experiences with writing and standardized testing, and to then form their own understanding of writing through research projects that explore how writing overlaps with their personal and professional interests.

Testing and Assessing Writing: Reality and Recommendations

The first step in understanding and addressing student experience with these exams is to understand the problems with the ways that writing is currently assessed by looking specifically at the historical development of these exams, the material conditions under which they are produced, and the current body of scholarship about their effects on students. Large-scale standardized tests, including K-12 state-mandated testing like State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR), college entrance exams like the SAT and ACT, and exams for college credit like Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate exams, measure writing by having students write a timed exam on a question or prompt that the student has not previously seen without consulting peers, instructors, or outside sources. Over a century since Kittredge voiced his concerns over the admissions exam essay at Harvard, critics of large-scale standardized tests continue to decry the writing sections on these exams for similar reasons; these exam essays, despite claiming to accurately measure overall writing ability, only truly measure a student's ability to write an exam essay. By examining theories of writing assessment and writing development from scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition, we can see the overarching issues with how these large-scale standardized tests evaluate writing.

It is unsurprising that these exams fail to measure writing equitably or responsibly given the material conditions from which they have historically developed and continue to be produced. In his history of the College Board and the Educational Testing Service (ETS) *On a Scale*, Norbert Elliot finds that these college entrance exams and exams for college credit were influenced by historical events; Pearl Harbor, for example, prompted the College Board to remove the essay section from the SAT in order to allow more men to enter college at a time when many college-aged men were serving in the military. Large-scale assessment has played a more major role in the last quarter-century due to the increased role of the federal government in K-12 education, which Maris Vinovskis chronicles in *From a Nation at Risk to No Child Left Behind*. He traces the federal interest in education reform to the 1983 report from the Secretary of Education titled *A Nation at Risk*, which presented an overly grim picture of the state of American public education. Ever since the release of that report, it has been a popular move for politicians, especially presidential candidates, to claim education as one of their key issues. Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton both attempted to enact goals-based federal education reform during their presidencies, but it was President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act that pushed the corporate notion of "accountability" onto schools and enforced these measures with state-wide testing, doling out harsh punishments for not meeting federal education goals. Though theories of writing have been imposed onto many of these exams, their historical development was shaped by political agendas and historical events more than reliable theories of writing assessment, in part because no such theories existed or had been empirically tested.

In addition to their historical development, the material conditions under which these exams are produced and administered continue to undermine attempts to evaluate writing

accurately or fairly. Social scientists have found that state-mandated high-stakes exams administered under NCLB abide by Campbell's Law, which states that the greater social repercussions associated with some measure, the greater risk of corruption, which in this case includes not only cheating on these exams but also "gaming" the exam and narrowing the curriculum (Nichols and Berliner). We see clear instances of test prep companies trying to teach students to "game" these essay exams in prep books for the SAT and ACT, but more disturbing still are the ways that the writing curriculum in K-12 has narrowed so as to prepare students solely to write a timed essay on the state exam. Worse yet, the textbook companies that write these state-mandated standardized exams put the "answers," including exact questions that appear on reading exams and specific directives on how to write an essay that will be rated highly by their graders, into their textbooks (Broussard). Not only does this practice harm the curriculum, it also makes it difficult for students from low-income districts who cannot afford new textbooks to score as well on these tests as students from high-income districts can, reinforcing what Peter Sacks calls "the Volvo Effect" -- the fact that parental income (as demonstrated by the car they own) is the best predictor of how well a student will do on large-scale standardized testing[5]. The material conditions surrounding testing clearly worsens their ability to be a measure of student writing ability.

The watered-down theories of writing that these exams rely on further diminish their effectiveness and harm student learning, as George Hillocks finds in *The Testing Trap*, in which he studies the state-mandated exams from five states by reviewing the theoretical bases for the exams, testing and grading materials, instructional guides, and by interviewing

[5] While numerous studies have linked a positive correlation between parental income and test performance (especially on the SAT), it is difficult to prove a direct causal relationship between a student's affluence and their test performance due to access to textbooks or test prep books; higher parental income carries with it a number of benefits that could explain better test performance.

teachers. Hillocks finds that one of the biggest problems is how the majority of these exams are formatted; almost all feature a timed essay written in response to a prompt that the student has not seen before, limiting the student's ability to engage with the topic, interact with outside sources to gain a deeper understanding of it, or revise the essay. The best strategy for teachers, then, is to revert to the hallmarks of current-traditional rhetoric and teach students to thoughtlessly replicate a formulaic essay for that particular exam's specific genre. Even exams that were formed on richer theories of writing, like Texas' TAAS exam founded on the writing theories of James Kinneavy, were severely limited by the constraints of the exam. The test makers in Texas, for example, adapted Kinneavy's theory into a matrix of sixteen genres of writing based on four purposes (informative, persuasive, literary and expressive) and four modes (narrative, descriptive, classificatory and evaluative) for writing, but the TAAS only regularly tested students on four of the sixteen genres: informative narrative, persuasive descriptive, persuasive classificatory, and persuasive evaluative (Hillocks 44). Teachers in Texas thus tended to focus on teaching persuasion in their classes first and foremost because this was the genre most often tested[6].

There is also a fundamental mismatch between what standardized tests value and what writing assessment experts and those in the field of rhetoric and composition value. These exams replicate positivist ideas about writing, as reflected in the grading rubrics and teaching materials that come with them, which all assess writing using a numerical score and suggest that there is a "correct" way to approach and format an essay. Conversely, those in writing studies view writing as a rhetorical act that is inherently context-dependent and socially motivated, a fact that these exams necessarily ignore by urging students to write only

[6] The STAAR, Texas's current statewide exam, continues this trend of narrowing the writing curriculum by testing only a handful of genres. Students in grades 4 through 10 are required to write on expository and persuasive essays, and students in grade 11 are required to write expository and analytical essays.

to prove competence to a group of unknown graders (Adler-Kassner and O'Neill). Further, when these exams have been scrutinized, it has often been using theories from educational measurement, most notably the notions of "reliability" and "validity," rather than theories of writing assessment. "Reliability" refers to the idea that the exam consistently measures what it claims to measure, and "validity" refers to the notion that the exam does indeed measure what it claims to measure. As Elliot points out, organizations like the ETS have historically been more concerned with issues of "reliability," focusing on training graders to score essays in similar ways, whereas those in writing studies are more interested in the "validity" of the test, specifically whether an essay exam written within this context and under these material conditions can accurately measure "writing ability." But many in rhetoric and composition reject both terms, pointing out that writing should be social and rhetorically effective rather than "valid" and "reliable." In *Coming to Terms*, Patricia Lynne objects to the positivist nature of writing assessment and outright rejects the terms "reliable" and "valid," which she says suggests that writing is objective, universal, and uncontestable, and calls instead for those in writing assessment to create new terms for evaluating writing that reflect the constructivist nature of our field. Lynne suggests that "meaningful" and "ethical" might be better terms for evaluating writing, reflecting the fact that we view writing as social, dynamic, and dependent on the context in which it is written and the audience that it is directed toward.

What scholars in rhetoric and composition would suggest is that these high-stakes tests use a more authentic means of evaluating writing -- one that looks at student writing across texts and across time, is sensitive to local conditions, collects writing that students do in the classroom without putting them through the stress of a standardized test, and thus

reflects what a teacher has taught instead of forcing teachers to teach a narrow curriculum that is compatible with the test[7]. As Elliot and other historians have found, teachers have historically been excluded from writing assessment, a fact that Brian Huot takes issue with in *(Re)articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning*. Huot argues that we can make writing assessment more authentic by making it more teacher-centered, allowing teachers to determine how writing should be assessed based on how it is being taught. The most promising systems for linking teaching and evaluating writing are portfolio-based systems that collect and assess writing that students have completed within the context of a writing class because these evaluations respect curriculum more than they attempt to shape it, especially if evaluated based on the context in which they were produced and using on a pass/fail system instead of using specific criteria for "good writing" (Yancey). Hillocks found in his study that Kentucky's portfolio system of evaluating writing was the only system that did not greatly impact what or how teachers taught in their classrooms, though it is worth noting that teachers in Kentucky had to win a lawsuit against the state in order to adopt the portfolio system. We in the field of rhetoric and composition have a responsibility as experts on writing to speak out against the practices that are currently being used to evaluate writing and suggest viable alternatives (Brantley; Kittle).

These exams have increased the divide between writing in K-12, in which students most frequently replicate formulaic writing to demonstrate writing competence to a grader, and writing in college and beyond, where students write for diverse audiences and purposes

[7] In recent years, many parents, teachers, and scholars have begun to fight back against these exams and their high-stakes nature. In the spring of 2015, parents in the Houston area joined others across the state to "opt out" of the STAAR, citing the stress the exams causes their children and the ways in which the exam narrows the curriculum as reasons for keeping their children home on test day (Barr). In our field, Les Perelman spoke and wrote publicly about the damages done by equating the SAT-W essay with "college-level writing" (including his own research that high scores on the essay correlated most closely with essay length) in well-circulated pieces in the late 2000s, helping to build a movement that eventually convinced College Board to drop the essay section from the exam in 2014 (Wertheimer; Perelman).

in their disciplines, careers, and personal lives. The fundamental mismatch between what these types of high-stakes exams value about writing and what scholars in rhetoric and composition value about writing has created a greater chasm between writing in high school and writing in college (Strachan; Mosley; Winalski). The question now is how we might productively address this in the first-year writing class.

The Promising Potential of the Liminal Space

Liminal theory offers a new way of viewing composition that helps us understand why the first-year writing class might be a productive place to address the limited ways that students are taught to approach writing in K-12 in this current era of unfair, high-stakes writing exams. The term "liminal," derivative of the Latin term for "threshold," was first theorized by anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep in his work, *The Rites of Passage*. There, Van Gennep identifies the "liminal period" as the time in which one "crosses the threshold [...] to unite oneself with a new world" (20). Van Gennep described how rites of passage like marriage or coming-of-age rituals consist of three parts: rites of separation, liminal rites, and postliminal rites. The person undergoing the rite of passage is first separated from the group and stripped of the social status possessed before the ritual, spends time in the liminal period under the authority of a "master of ceremonies," and is finally reassimilated into society with a new identity. Van Gennep stressed that this liminal period was both destructive and constructive, consisting of both a metaphorical "death" of previous status and the acquisition of a new status.

Anthropologist Victor Turner borrowed and greatly expanded on Van Gennep's concept of liminality, beginning with his chapter "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period

in Rites de Passage" in his 1976 work *The Forest of Symbols*. Turner focuses entirely on Van Gennep's middle liminal stage of the rite of passage, which he is interested in as a site where society is both formed and unformed. Turner comments on the "cultural complexity" of the seemingly simple liminal stage (102), noting that it is these liminal experiences "that paradoxically expose the basic building blocks of culture just when we pass out of and before we re-enter the structural realm" (106). Even as liminal experiences occur in a structureless space and are held under suspicion by those in charge of enforcing these societal norms[8], they are also a source of structure for society, serving as a midway point between a starting state and and an ending state that serve important roles in the social structure of a community. They are relatively unstructured places where the neophytes acquiring a position within a society to learn about the structures necessary for that society to function. Turner explains that this central role for the liminal stage in society makes it a place for scrutinizing and changing central values of the culture: "Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (97).

In addition to expanding the importance and potential of the liminal space, Turner also further theorizes the role of the neophyte and the kinds of change she undergoes in the liminal period. He notes that the subject "is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, 'invisible'" (95); because she has nothing and exists in a state of structural

[8] Turner explains that this suspicion comes from a sense of people who have gone through the liminal period being "polluting": "From this standpoint, one would expect to find that transitional beings are particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor another; may be both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere (in terms of any recognized cultural topography), and are at the very least 'betwixt and between' all the recognized fixed points in space-time of structural classification [...] Liminal personae nearly always and everywhere are regarded as polluting to those who have never been, so to speak, 'inoculated' against them, through having themselves been initiated into the same states" (97).

ambiguity, she enjoys communal equality that does not exist in other sectors of society. Turner finds that those in the liminal state are seeking “entry into a new achieved status” (95), but one that requires “not a mere acquisition of knowledge, but a change in being” (102). Because of this necessary change in being, Turner, like Van Gennep, emphasizes that growth in the liminal period requires both tearing down and building up: "Undoing, dissolution, decomposition, are accompanied with the processes of growth, transformation, and the reformulation of old elements in new patterns" (99). Turner describes this complex process of growth in the liminal space at length, pointing to the need to incorporate reflection in order to achieve the goals of initiation within the liminal period:

> In discussing the structural aspects of liminality, I mentioned how neophytes are withdrawn from their structural positions and consequently from the values, norms, sentiments, and techniques associated with those positions. They are also divested of their previous habits of thought, feeling, and action. During the liminal period, neophytes are alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them. Liminality may be partly described as a stage of **reflection**. It is in those ideas, sentiments, and facts that had hitherto for the neophytes bound up in configurations and accepted unthinkingly are, as it were, resolved into their constituents. (105, emphasis added)

Reflection facilitates the difficult work of deconstruction and reconstruction, calling those in the liminal period to carefully consider the society from which they come in order to undergo the “change in being” necessary to continue to function in that society. It is this state of change that composes the “peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that,

and yet is both" (99). The liminal period exists both as a middle stage, a transition point, and a potential place for radical change.

Liminal Theory in Rhetoric and Composition

Liminal theory offers a promising way for compositionists to approach theorizing and teaching the first-year writing class. Though scholars in composition have productively applied liminal theory to WPA and writing center work (Decker; Ianetta; Sunstein), the role of graduate students as burgeoning scholars (Moghtader), and writing in the digital age (Handa; Strenski), few have considered how viewing the composition class as a liminal space might productively shape how we design and teach the class[9]. The dynamic nature of first-year writing is the result of the liminal role it serves as a transition point from writing in high school to writing in college; as writing in both high school and college has continued to change, the first-year writing class must also change in order to better facilitate the transition between these two types of writing courses. This explains why it is not only appropriate but also necessary for those in rhetoric and composition to be concerned with the types of writing instruction that take place in K-12, and, in our current era, to be concerned specifically with the large quantity of writing that students do for standardized tests during that time. For all the discourse in high schools surrounding "college readiness," the fact remains that this emphasis on writing specifically for standardized testing is making the differences between writing in high school and writing in college more stark as ever more writing instruction in high school is dedicated to formulaic strategies for writing a test essay rather than writing for

[9] One notable exception is James Purdy and Joyce Walker's "Liminal Spaces and Research Identities: The Construction of Introductory Composition Students as Researchers" in which they briefly draw on Van Gennep's theory of liminality to "highlight the nature of introductory composition classes as liminal spaces that mark a boundary between the inside and outside of the academy," providing a justification for their unique approach to teaching research in first-year writing (10).

specific audiences and purposes in college courses, their future careers, or personal interests. Until this focus on testing and meeting standards in K-12 is minimized, talks about "smoothing"[10] the transition between writing in high school and writing in college seem inappropriate -- the difference between how we teach writing in high school and in college for many students is so vast that it requires that the first-year writing class do more than just "smoothing." Instead of teaching writing in high school and writing in college as completely different, I suggest that we begin to view the first-year writing class as liminal and thus powerful, as a place where we might embrace disorientation in a way that challenges students to form their own understandings of writing, helping them to view it as something more than merely a tool for proving one's competence and writing ability.

Though few scholars call composition "liminal," much of the work in our field points to the liminal nature of the first-year writing class. Historically, first-year writing was formed to address perceived deficits in the writing ability of college freshman, aimed at bridging the gap between writing in college and writing in high school (Elliot; Hansen and Farris); we see this fact reflected in the naming of the initial first-year writing class at Harvard, which was called "English A," deemed unworthy of a more descriptive name because it was not a "real" college course (Connors). More recently, scholars in rhetoric and composition have found that the first-year writing class does not fully prepare students to write for college or career

[10] I am drawing the term "smoothing" from Rachel Edwards' WPA-CompPile Bibliography, "Alignments and Alliances: Smoothing Students' Transitions from High School English to First-Year College Writing." Though "smoothing" may not be an appropriate approach for the transition between writing in high school and writing in college in our current era, encouraging the use of unifying focus for writing instruction at both the high school and college is a worthwhile endeavor. Steve Fox, for example, suggests we use "literacy" as a united theme: "Instead of asking how to make high school writing prepare students for college writing, let's ask what literacy looks like, and we will have a better chance of developing a writing curriculum that fosters lifelong literacy" (80).

but rather serves an introduction to college writing and to a variety of genres[11] (Carroll; Haswell; Beaufort). The first-year writing class continues to occupy a liminal space between writing in high school and writing in college because of this increased emphasis on testing, as a result of which students enter the first-year writing class have experience primarily with writing in timed environments and must be familiarized with practices like emphasize the social nature of writing, like peer review, negotiating rubrics, or public writing and service learning. The first-year writing course is liminal, bridging the gap between writing in high school and writing in college, career, and beyond, a gap that continues to expand.

Teaching Writing in the Liminal Space

Though this liminal space is in some sense limited, it also carries with it the potential for leading students to reconsider their ideas of what writing is and what writing ought to do. By embracing the liminal nature of the first-year writing class, we can honor the importance of allowing students to revisit and rethink ideas and attitudes they adopted about writing in K-12 and envision writing anew. As Haswell and others suggested, the development of writing abilities is hardly linear, and students will instead "jump around" in their writing progress, regressing in some skills while progressing in others and producing pieces of writing that are in themselves inconsistent. Yet acknowledging this nonlinear nature of learning how to write is an affront to the current education system in the era of testing and standards, which portrays learning as a steady, linear acquisition of skills, a practice Donna

[11] Ideally, first-year writing would serve this purpose, but the first-year writing class at many institutions has increasingly become a course focused almost entirely on argument. This focus on argumentation is a continuation on the emphasis placed on argumentative or persuasive writing in K-12, perhaps due in part to the prominence of persuasive writing on standardized tests. Todd DeStigler has found that this focus on argumentation is underwritten by assumptions about the cultural capital, critical thinking, and social mobility associated with this genre of writing, but these assumptions are unsupported.

Qualley in *Turns of Thought* criticizes using the metaphor of the blind men and the elephant to illustrate this problem with our education system: "The rush to closure abbreviates thinking and curtails further inquiry. And the pressure students sometimes feel to name the elephant (so they can quickly move on to the next subject) replaces any desire for learning about it" (23). If we embrace the liminal role of the first-year writing class, we can take advantage of an important opportunity to pause this steady march of acquiring skills and proving one's competence and instead encourage students to critically examine the role that writing plays in their lives. The liminal space the first-year writing class occupies allows it to exist outside of this rigid structure of the ways students are taught to write in K-12, providing an opportunity for truly shifting students' views of writing. This view of first-year writing is consistent with Louise Wetherbee Phelps' view of literacy development in *Composition as a Human Science* in which she describes literacy as developing in three broad stages: the "natural attitude" of language acquisition, developing craft and skill, and developing critical consciousness (126-127). If we wish for our composition classes to help students develop critical consciousness, a stage at which, according to Phelps, "thought becomes reflexive and brings into question all meaningfulness, including that of literacy itself" (127), we must create space for the nonlinear, reflexive learning needed in the liminal phase, encouraging students to both deconstruct previous assumptions about writing and to form new ones in their place.

The liminal nature of the first-year writing class makes it an ideal space for encouraging students to shift the way that they think about writing, which is one of the core goals of my dissertation project. Specifically, I use interviews with former students about their past experiences with writing specifically for standardized tests in K-12 to better

understand how students are taught to write prior to entering the first-year writing class[12]. Given the ways in which student conceptions about writing in K-12 differ from what those in rhetoric and composition value about writing, I then use teacher research to design and teach a course that embraces the disorientation of the liminal space in order to help students reflect on and rethink their assumptions about writing and form their own definitions of writing. To do so, I draw heavily on reflection (as advocated by Turner and Qualley), emphasize the social nature of writing, and invite students to perform inquiry into how writing functions through topics of interest to them personally or professionally. I will discuss in greater detail the role that liminal theory played in how I shaped my Fall 2016 course beginning in Chapter 5, but I will note here that the kind of nonlinear, reflexive, disoriented pedagogical approach that I outline here is not less rigorous than the steady march of skills acquisition and is instead better suited to prepare students to write in a variety of contexts in their future. Instead, as I will demonstrate in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, this pedagogical approach trains students to think rhetorically about the texts they produce and the texts they read, forcing them to see the messiness and difficulty of writing for real audiences and purposes rather than seeing writing as solely an exercise in replicating formulas or demonstrating specific writing skills.

Teaching Writing in the Online Writing Classroom

For this project, I taught an all-online first-year writing class that embraced the liminality of the first-year writing course and attempted to help students define writing for themselves. At first glance, online education shares many of the same pitfalls of our current

[12] Further explanation about why I chose to use interviews and how exactly I conducted, coded, and drew conclusions from them can be found in Chapter 2.

test-obsessed K-12 education system. Much like the emphasis on testing has led to an increase in the power and prominence of education companies who write textbooks and test prep materials based on the premise that they write the exams themselves, online education is supported by education companies that often value profits and promise higher efficiency at the cost of student learning. In his 2001 book *Digital Diploma Mills*, David Noble argues that the advent of online instruction is leading to the "commercialization and corporatization of higher education," threatening the integrity of higher education (5). Specifically, technology can be seen as yet another tool for implementing this corporatization whilst touting itself as a "natural" place for higher education to progress to:

> What drives this headlong rush to implement new technology with so little regard for deliberation of the pedagogical and economic costs and the risk of student and faculty alienation and opposition? A short answer might be the fear of getting left behind, the incessant pressures of 'progress.' But there is more to it. For the universities were not simply undergoing a technological transformation. Beneath that change, and camouflaged by it, lies another: the commercialization of higher education. For here as elsewhere technology is but a vehicle and a disarming disguise. (26)

Noble goes on to warn that we must be vigilant in examining the political agendas of those behind the implementation of online education, especially all-online colleges, and ask whether they truly benefit students. Cynthia Selfe raises similar concerns about paying attention to the political agendas of those behind the push for digital literacy in her 1999 book, *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Paying Attention.* Specifically, she challenges the notion that increasing digital literacy has led to greater equality:

> Thus the national project to expand technological literacy has not served to reduce illiteracy or the persistent social problems that exacerbate illiteracy. Rather it has simply changed the official criteria for the labels of both "literate" and "illiterate" while retaining the basic ratio of individuals in both groups [...] Touted as an educational effort designed to improve citizens' literacy levels and thus their opportunities for future prosperity, the project was targeted at producing a continuing supply of educated workers who had the skills necessary to design and manufacture increasingly sophisticated technological goods and could offer specialized services in international arenas. (137-138)

These views espoused by Noble and Selfe ring even more true over a decade after they were first written. Putting computers in K-12 classrooms and moving college classes to the online space has not created greater equality in or increased the quality of our public schools, community colleges, and universities. Further, the political motives behind these moves, specifically the ways in which they benefit education companies aimed at creating a certain kind of "educated workforce," are all too often ignored. Any attempt to teach effectively online must acknowledge these impulses, resist them, and work to ensure that student learning is still the first goal of the course.

The development of online writing instruction at the University of Houston has also been shaped by the corporatization of our university. The move to incorporate online instruction into first-year writing courses at the University of Houston began with the creation of hybrid courses that consisted of one weekly face-to-face class meeting and an online writing studio run by facilitators, the design of which is explained, studied, and critiqued in Michelle Miley's dissertation, *Thirdspace Explorations in Online Writing*

Studios: Writing Centers, Writing in the Disciplines and First-Year Composition in the Corporate University. Miley ultimately finds that these online studio components of hybrid courses were largely successful in helping students to better conceive of writing for an audience and see the value of a slowed-down writing process, but she also warns of the risks of using these online spaces in a corporate university, finding that "[t]he danger of institutional complicity intensifies with online education" largely because of "how little time and attention is given within the corporate university to theorizing how to make these spaces engaged and active learning spaces" (224-225). At the University of Houston, as with countless other universities, the move toward online education has been primarily motivated not by pedagogical effectiveness but by material concerns. Online education's risk of complicity with the corporate university is intensified at UH by the fact that these studios were developed as a part of a Writing in the Disciplines (WID) initiative of the UH Writing Center. The UH Writing Center uses a business model in which it develops relationships with colleges and departments that then "pay" the Writing Center for services. The corporate influences on the UH Writing Center are further explored by Rebecca Hallman Martini in her dissertation, *Listening to Stories About Writing (Centers): Sites of Innovation in (Online) Writing Instruction*, in which she uses critical ethnography to study both the partnership between the Writing Center and the Department of English that resulted in the hybrid courses Miley studied and a partnership with the College of Technology. Through interviews with members of the UH Writing Center community, she concludes in part that this business model results in assessment being based on "student satisfaction and not evaluation of student writing" (192). This is in part to the ways that the Writing Center is set up and what it prioritizes:

> Physically housed on the second floor of a business-school-owned building, the University of Houston Writing Center (UHWC) is geographically located completely opposite of the Department of English on campus. All of the UHWC administrators and full-time consultants are staff members who have little communication with the Department of English and little, if any, formal education or training in the professional field of rhetoric and composition or the sub-speciality of writing center studies [...] The UHWC includes as part of its mission assessment, writing instruction, curricular innovation, community outreach, professional development, and research in the teaching of writing, but does not mention improving student writing. Thus, the UHWC projects an image of itself as a hub for writing, a place whose mission moves beyond writing instruction or one-on-one tutoring. (11-12)

Despite this lack of formal training in rhetoric and composition or communication with the English Department, the Writing Center continues to train and supervise English Teaching Assistants (TAs) who "facilitate" these online studios for the hybrid courses during their first year of their Teaching Assistantship. This grew into the Writing Center developing and overseeing all-online sections of first-year writing, handpicking TAs to teach these courses and supervising training and mentorships for these courses within the Writing Center. The corporate mentality of the Writing Center that these hybrid and online courses grew out of and continue to be overseen by makes it especially important for online instructors at UH to think critically about the ways in which they use online pedagogies, specifically whether they are teaching online courses with the goal of satisfying students and addressing labor concerns or with the goal of improving student writing.

In my own online teaching, I have noticed a common problem of students expecting online classes to consist of consuming instructional content in line with the banking model of education, completing assignments to demonstrate their competence, and moving on to the next unit -- much like what Qualley calls "the covering of the elephant" in our current education system which prevents students from thinking deeply about topics or reflecting on their previous learning. This expectation often comes from previous online courses they have taken and can be attributed to online education's valuing of efficiency over effective instruction. In DePew, Fishman, Romberger, and Ruetnik's "Designing Efficiencies," they examine the many ways the ideology of efficiency is visible in online teaching; they contend is not a new idea for compositionists who spent years teaching Current-Traditional Rhetoric which espouses the "[p]ositivist epistemological notions of correctness and rhetorically bankrupt understandings of communication that consider language as a 'transcribing device'" that are also used to "support ideologies of efficiency" (52). The solution, then, is to recognize, as the field did when responding and replace to practices of CTR, that efficient practices are not always (or often) best practices and to thoughtfully design online writing courses in such a way that privileges effective teaching over efficiency. These best practices for OWI tend to be student-centered and thus time consuming. David Reinheimer finds this to be true in his article titled "Teaching Composition Online: Whose Side is Time On?", issuing the caveat that the title should perhaps read "mature, student-centered online teaching" rather than simply "teaching composition online"[13] (462). He uses experiential analysis to compare the workload of four sections of online writing classes, finding that workload is tied much more to individual student than to the number of sections taught

[13] Many scholars in OWI and teachers who have taught online agree that to teach online poorly requires little time or effort, whereas to teach online well takes an large amount of time.

because of the types of assignments that are considered best practice in online writing courses are individualized assignments:

> The introduction of process-based composition instruction to the online classroom demands the introduction of a student-centered design. In addition to group activities such as bulletin board discussions, teaching the writing process requires teaching activities—providing feedback, conferencing, and so on—that are one-on-one events. Thus, in an online student-centered paradigm, a teacher's workload is more likely defined by the individual student rather than the class as a whole. (460)

More specifically, Reinheimer finds that "teaching composition online takes about 85% more time than teaching the same course in a traditional classroom" and recommends that classes "be capped at eight students, but no more than eleven, and no more than thirty-three in a term"[14] (468). It could thus be concluded that effective online teaching is inherently inefficient -- requiring much more time than a traditional face-to-face course -- and to conform to the corporate university's desire to make it as efficient as possible would require a stark decline in the quality of education.

These problems with online instruction and with online writing instruction specifically create their own obstacles to teaching writing effectively to students who have been taught primarily to write to prove their writing ability. Students in online classes are often predisposed to see the class as a set of assignments to be completed in order to demonstrate competence in the subject area, especially in a required core course like first-year writing which some students feel they should not have to take. In my end-of-course survey for my Fall 2016 online English 1304 class studied here, 30% of my students selected

[14] At the University of Houston, all online composition classes are taught by graduate student teaching fellows, who are assigned two sections that are capped at 20 students each, meaning they teach 40 students per semester. Typical face-to-face and hybrid courses at UH are capped at 27 students.

"I didn't think I really needed to take first-year writing classes, and I thought this would be the simplest way to take care of this requirement" as one of their reasons for taking my class online[15]. This is a sentiment I've heard echoed in my conversations with my online writing students throughout the semesters that I've taught online. Like the scholars above, I am wary of the intentions and implications of teaching digital literacies as a means to create marketable citizens rather than literate citizens, and, in my case, the ways teaching an online course designed and supervised by a Writing Center run on a business model enacts this agenda. At the very least, I am concerned about the ways in which online education is enacted out of an interest to educate students efficiently rather than educating them effectively, as reflected in the completion mindset that my students often bring with them to my required first-year writing class. Nevertheless, I recognize that there is a need for those in the humanities and in rhetoric and composition specifically to be involved in the ways in which digital literacy and online instruction is shaped and studied[16]. Specifically, I see a need to develop pedagogical practices that counter those most common "efficient" practices of online instruction, which tend to be instructor-centered and mirror the banking model approach taken in K-12 in preparation for standardized tests, in online classes in order to productively shape online pedagogy in a way that is beneficial for students.

There are numerous benefits to teaching writing in the online environment that have been studied and documented by scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition as well as by those studying online education. These include making learning more user-centered

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[15] Specifically, the question posed was, "Why did you choose to take English 1304 online? Check all that apply." The most common response was "I wanted the convenience of completing coursework whenever I had time to (versus showing up to a classroom at a set time)" at 80% and "I thought it would be easier than taking it face-to-face or hybrid" at 45%. Full results of this survey can be found in Appendix F.

[16] Even so, I remain skeptical of claims that online instruction or digital literacy is inherently superior to face-to-face instruction or can create greater social equality. In Chapter 8, I acknowledge some of the inherent problems with teaching online, including the issue of instructor workload.

(Harrington and Day; Blythe), building community in the writing classroom (DePew; Gillam and Wooden), creating a truly interactive learning environment (Grady and Davis), teaching visual rhetoric in digital environments (Hocks), creating online writing groups (Olson-Horswill), and adapting traditional face-to-face peer-review practices to the online space (Breuch). These and other practices will be explored in more detail in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, where I detail my course design for my Fall 2016 online English 1304 courses. I will also discuss how I see online writing instruction as uniquely suited to teaching a liminal first-year writing course with many reflective assignments.

Summary

In this first chapter, I have provided context for my dissertation project by drawing connections between scholarship in education on standardized testing and scholarship in rhetoric and composition on writing assessment and examining how the disconnect between the two is leading to a deeper chasm between how writing is assessed and thus taught in K-12 and how it is viewed in college. I have also argued for **the need to view first-year writing as a liminal space well-suited for helping students develop a new view of writing**. For this dissertation project, I rely on **teacher research methodologies, specifically interviews and classroom-based inquiry, to understand how students were taught to write specifically for standardized tests in K-12, what impact this had on their view of writing, and how to teach a first-year writing class that responds to those views**. Using teacher research allows me to first understand the ways in which students are currently taught to write in K-12 and the impressions they have of writing due to this focus on testing through interviews with my former students, and to then determine how to enact a pedagogy

that takes advantage of first-year writing's liminal status as an opportunity to help students conceive of writing more broadly than they currently do. **The next chapter covers the methodologies used for this project in more detail,** including the way that I use teacher research to conduct and code interviews, study student writing, and perform classroom-based inquiry.

Chapters 3 and 4, along with the interchapter of vignettes that precedes them, cover results of the interviews I conducted with my former students. Chapter 3 provides context about my interviewees and the types of standardized writing tests that they took before presenting the themes in how interviewees discussed the rhetorical situation -- the context, audience, and purpose -- of standardized testing, explaining why writing primarily in this restricted rhetorical situation prevents students from seeing writing more broadly. Chapter 4 examines the specific ways students were taught to write for these exams, including the amount of class time dedicated to them and the formulaic strategies teachers employed in preparing students to write for them, and contrasts that with how students talked about self-sponsored writing and writing they have done in college. That chapter ends with implications for first-year writing based on my interviews.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 describe the online first-year writing class that I designed and taught specifically to address the issues with how students think about and approach writing as a result of being taught to write primarily for tests that I found through my interviews. In Chapter 5, I provide the rationale for the basic course design and assignment sequence, ending with three low-stakes daily writing assignments from Unit 1that exemplify three key emphases of the course: reflection, thinking about writing rhetorically, and honoring students' personal writing. Chapter 6 presents the core of the course, students

performing research on and arguing about a way that writing overlapped with a personal interest of theirs, highlighting the ways in which these two units helped students form their own ideas about writing, encouraged student engagement in this online writing class, and reinforced the social constructivist view of online writing instruction by drawing students to reflect directly on the social nature of the course. Finally, in Chapter 7, I cover two pivotal assignments from the final reflective unit of the course -- a public narrative on testing and a Reflective Portfolio assignment -- that demonstrated the so

In **Chapter 8**, I provide an account of **my own personal experience with standardized test writing** in K-12 and an examination of how that impacted how I viewed writing as an undergraduate and how I approached this project. I end with c**onclusions and implications** of my work for first-year writing instructors and scholars in rhetoric and composition along with **areas for future study**.

Chapter 2

Methodology

As alluded to in the introduction, my choice to rely on teacher research as a central methodology for this project is both practical and political. From a practical standpoint, there is an immediate need for first-year writing instructors to be able to understand and address the ways their students think about writing and the purpose of writing as a result of spending much of K-12 writing primarily to prove their competence on standardized tests of writing. Of course, the pedagogical strategies I present for structuring the liminal first-year writing class to help students define writing for themselves should not serve as a substitute for taking action to shape assessment policy; K-12 writing teachers and scholars in rhetoric and composition should critique the ways in which these exams narrow our curriculum and deprive our students of a high-quality education and provide viable alternatives to assessing writing. But I also see adopting a teacher research methodology as an inherently and productively political move. As previously discussed, makers of large-scale high-stakes assessment have infamously neglected to seek valuable teacher perspectives, resulting in measures that limit the ways teachers teach instead of best measuring the kind of learning that is already occurring in the writing classroom. Many of the ideas circulating in testing culture -- that exams and the educational researchers who create them can better assess learning than the teachers, that teachers must be held "accountable," that teachers cannot create knowledge about teaching as well as researchers can -- are countered in teacher research, which posits that teachers are best suited to perform valuable inquiry into teaching and learning. Choosing to use teacher research methodology and arguing that teachers can and should shape pedagogy and assessment is an important argument against what testing

culture tells us[17]. I am bringing both of the two sub-methodologies that I will be using for this project, interviews and classroom-based inquiry, under the umbrella of teacher research for this reason. I chose to conduct interviews with my former first-year writing students (as opposed to students that I had not personally taught) because I felt that my knowledge of them as their former teacher would allow me to conduct more substantive interviews that I could better apply to my teaching, and because this project grew out of my teaching them in the fall of 2014. In this teacher research project, I aim to first better understand my students' experiences (through interviews) so that I might better teach them (through classroom-based inquiry). I then disseminate these findings in hopes of shaping assessment and pedagogical practices.

In this chapter, I outline my methodology for this project in greater detail. First, I detail the core philosophies and strengths of using teacher research, demonstrating why teacher research is an especially appropriate methodology for my specific project. I then explain the value of using interviews to gain a new perspective on the impact of standardized testing on how students think about writing before describing my specific process for conducting, coding, and interpreting interviews for this project. Finally, I provide a fuller explanation of what I mean by "classroom-based inquiry" and describe the specific steps I took to record the ways that I designed and taught my course and how I approached writing about the semester.

Teacher Research as Empowering Teachers and Students

[17] Some scholars advocating for teacher research point directly to recent testing legislation in the United States for creating this distrust in teachers. Kathryn Herr and Gary L. Anderson, for example, cite "the deskilling tendencies of the No Child Left Behind legislation" as leading to teacher perspectives not being taken seriously in their book, *The Action Research Dissertation* (23).

Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle define teacher research simply as the "systematic and intentional inquiry about teaching, learning, and schooling carried out by teachers in their own school and classroom setting" (27). Because this project has developed out of my own observations as a teacher of writing, I rely on teacher research as a way to shape my own personal pedagogy and to contribute knowledge to the field about teaching writing within this era of widespread testing that we currently find ourselves. Many in the field point to teacher research as an appropriate methodology for instructors performing research because of the inextricable connection between good teaching and research or inquiry (Boomer; Britton). In her crucial 1993 work *The Practice of Theory: Teacher Research in Composition*, Ruth Ray argues that teacher research is an important methodology for creating knowledge in composition studies because "teaching *is* theorizing and teachers are theorists in the sense that they create new knowledge by examining and reflecting on the assumptions and principles that underlie the construction of their particular classrooms" (21). Teacher research is an important tool for disrupting the traditional power divide between researchers and teachers, asserting that teachers can be both users and creators of theory by reimagining the relationship between practice and theory[18] (Ray; Berlin; Cochran-Smith and Lytle). The inclusion of teacher research as a valuable methodology in composition studies, Ray argues, should be seen as an asset rather than a liability, encouraging diverse forms of knowledge-

[18] Cochran-Smith and Lytle perhaps describe the power of teacher research to transform knowledge most strikingly in the preface to their work, *Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge*: "It is our intention in this book to argue that teacher research is a form of social change wherein individuals and groups labor to understand and alter classrooms, schools, and school communities and that this project has important implications for research on teaching, preservice and inservice teacher education, and language and literacy education. Because teacher research interrupts traditional assumptions about knowers, knowing, and what can be known about teaching, it has the potential to redefine the notion of a knowledge base for teaching and to challenge the university's hegemony in the generation of expert knowledge for the field" (xiv).

making in our field[19]. As Fecho, Allen, Mazaros and Inyega have found, inquiries into the origins of teacher research point to "Comenius, Rousseau, Montessori, Dewey, Freire, Piaget, and Vygotsky as planting the methodological and theoretical seeds that have flowered in teachers' observing, reflecting, and writing about their classrooms," which is appropriate given that teacher research frequently arises "from the necessity of improving practice" (109). In the liminal composition classroom that is always changing alongside the changes in the views of writing students bring with them and the skills they will need when they leave our classrooms, pedagogies must continually be adapted and improved, and teacher research offers a way to do that by building theory directly from the wealth of information produced by our teaching (Berthoff).

In regards to my specific project, teacher research also possesses the potential to encourage for both teacher and student an attitude of reflection and reflexivity, inquiry into learning, and a reclaiming of the classroom, all of which stand in stark contrast to the educational approaches advocated in our era of standards and widespread testing. Ann Berthoff points to this quality of teacher research as one of its core strengths as a research methodology, because "research, like REcognition, is a REflexive act. It means looking -- and looking again" (30). This reflective form of knowledge creation also aligns with my view of the first-year writing class as a liminal space in which students question, revisit, and

[19] Similar arguments have been made in the field of education. Miles Myers, in *The Teacher-Researcher: How to Study Writing in the Classroom*, explains that there are fundamental differences between teacher-researchers and basic and applied education researchers, differences thought ought to be acknowledged by ought not to be used to privilege one form of research over the other: "[B]asic and applied researchers should not criticize teacher-researchers for not treating writing as a multiple construct, and teacher-researchers should not criticize basic and applied researchers for not providing lesson designs. The two types of researchers have different goals" (7). In *The Practice of Theory*, Ruth Ray also sees this "'us' against 'them'" mentality of teacher researchers versus education researchers as divisive and unproductive, ultimately suggesting that "[t]eacher-researchers would gain more by arguing for the necessity of broader definitions of *research*, encouraging alternative forms of inquiry, and opening up the province of research to other inquirers" (53). Both argue that teacher researchers should posit their research as equally valuable, not superior or inferior to traditional forms of research.

reshape their former conceptions about writing. Ray touches on the potential for teacher research to radically democratize an unfair education system based on testing and standards specifically, making space for teachers to have a real impact on that system:

> In an era when nationally normed test scores, exit-level-proficiency exams, and reports from outside experts, rather than classroom teachers' professional judgments, are looked to as the "real" measure of students' learning, teachers are seeking change. They want to influence the development of curricula, have more say in decision making, make more choices about what goes on in classrooms. Teacher research, then, is a movement both intellectual and political in its impetus, motivated by a national need to professionalize teaching, thereby investing practitioners with more authority and control in classrooms, schools, and ultimately the fields of education and English studies at large. It is a grass-roots effort to address the problems of schools and universities from the inside out, starting with individual teachers documenting successes and failures, questions and answers, from their own classrooms. (49)

Teacher research is thus an important reversal from the top-down means of disseminating educational standards, approaches, and materials that has been the norm in the era of NCLB. Teacher research is a political act in the sense that it values the knowledge, observations, and lore of teachers rather than solely relying on the findings of educational researchers.

But teacher research projects like this one also work to elevate the role and influence of students in two ways: first by privileging their voices in scholarship, and second by allowing them to impact the course that they are participating in. James Berlin argues that the "democratization of authority" created by teacher research "extends to students," specifically

because "their language patterns in all their cultural uniqueness are privileged" and "are indeed called upon as the basis for learning effective language use" (10). We see this clearly in the historical import of early teacher research projects like those of Janet Emig and Mina Shaughnessy that took the writing of students seriously as valuable objects worthy of study. By conducting and disseminating a teacher research project that privileges student voices, thoughts, and writing, specifically about their past experiences in an education system fixated on testing and standards, students play an active role in pointing out the inequities in the current system that ought to be reshaped. This is why I've chosen to include student voices, both from interviews and from writing produced in my first-year writing classes, in order to allow those voices to be heard and to have an impact on the greater educational landscape.

There is also space for students to shape their experience in the first-year writing classroom where the instructor is engaged in teacher research. Teacher research is inherently student-centered; as Lee Nickoson explains, "teacher research can aid us in simultaneously developing a deeper understanding of our students as writers, building our abilities to reach them and make a positive difference in their literate lives" (110-111). Many speak to the potential for students to function as "co-researchers" in the classroom, providing not only important material for study but also providing important feedback on how the course is functioning[20] (Ray). Creating this space for students to work with us on our research can help them become more engaged in academic inquiry, which is particularly important today[21]. By

[20] Ray sees this as working to elevate both teachers and students: "Students involved in teacher research are not merely subjects or statistics, as they are in other kinds of educational inquiry, but co-researchers and key sources of knowledge and insight. Rather than imposing meaning of classroom situations, teacher-researchers construct meaning in negotiation with their students. The result is an empowerment for both teachers and students" (66).

[21] As Garth Boomer points out, in our current education system, "most of those who succeed merely learn the social and economic advantages of 'academic' knowledge and how to *show evidence* that it has been possessed. Few, I think, learn how to seek out knowledge and to test it in action; that is, do *research*" (5). Teacher research can offer the opportunity for that engagement with research and inquiry.

allowing students to contribute knowledge, both in the classroom and in the field, we can also use teacher research to better serve liberatory pedagogies, as Seth Kahn explains:

> [T]he [teacher research] movement opens up an important space for talking about students as collaborators in the work of composition studies rather than recipients of its wisdom. Of course Composition Studies has a history of describing and claiming student agency in various ways: liberatory pedagogies, expressivism, auto-ethnography, various kinds of "decentered" classrooms, and so on. But these descriptions tend to claim students' power in terms of their relations to teachers, oppressive cultural formations (institutions, mass media, etc.), or processes of textual production. Teacher-research, when it happens in writing courses, and more specifically when it happens in writing courses that address cultural formations outside the classroom and the academy, synthesizes all of those agencies for both teachers and students. (80-81)

In a class that not only draws heavily on reflexivity but is also taught by an instructor involved in a teacher research project aimed at best serving her students in order to make them better writers, students may feel that their concerns about how the course is being run are being heard, their personal interests are privileged, and, perhaps most importantly, that their instructor is an expert in writing studies whose approach to teaching the course ought to be respected. As I will describe in more detail later in this chapter and in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 dedicated to my classroom-based inquiry, in designing and teaching the first-year writing class for this project, I've treated students as co-collaborators in my research in order to take advantage of this potential liberatory function of teacher research that Kahn describes,

though a careful balance must be struck between taking student feedback into consideration[22] and shaping the course in a way that is rigorous and pedagogically sound. Teacher research that treats students as co-collaborators decentralizes the classroom by giving students some say in shaping the projects their exploring and helping to adapt the course as necessary, but ensures that the course does not become solely about student satisfaction by establishing the instructor as a knowledgeable and participating member in the field of writing studies who is guiding the course.

This dissertation draws on two methodologies, interviews and classroom-based inquiry, both grounded in teacher research. First, I conducted interviews with former students primarily about the role that standardized testing played in how they were taught to write in high school and in K-12 more broadly, which I then transcribed, coded, and interpreted, drawing several key conclusions about how these exams shape student thinking about writing in K-12 in the era of standardized testing. Based on my findings from those sources along with the research I've studied from the fields of education and rhetoric and composition on the effects of writing for high-stakes standardized tests, I used classroom-based inquiry to design and teach an online first-year writing class aimed at helping students rethink some of these potentially damaging approaches to writing that students possess. I describe my specific methodological approach for those two parts of my project in the sections that follow.

Interviews as Providing Personal Perspectives and Challenging Testing Ideologies

[22] Specifically, I avoided making this course centered on student satisfaction rather than improving student writing ability. The focus of reflective assignments was on reflection, not on explaining what they liked or did not like about the course. I did not incorporate all student suggestions, and I was firm with students who resisted some of the core assignments of the course, like those who did not want to form a research question related to writing.

Teacher research makes use of hybrid methodologies[23]. Interviews with students are an especially appropriate methodology for a teacher research project because of the ways in which interviews privilege student voices and experiences. As Selfe and Hawisher explain, interview-driven research "constructs a participatory model of research that challenges more conventional understandings of investigations and the power relations between the researcher and researched subjects," allowing students to share their experiences in their own words (37). For my project, interviews are also an important first step because we as a field have not extensively studied how testing has impacted today's average eighteen-year-old first-year writing student who has spent their entire K-12 career under No Child Left Behind. The field of education has produced quantitative analyses, histories of the development of large-scale assessment, and studies of the damaging effects of standardized testing practices (Vinovskis; Elliot; Nichols and Berliner; Sacks), and scholars in rhetoric and composition have critiqued high-stakes writing assessment (Adler-Kassner and O'Neill; Lynne; Huot; Yancey) and studied it from the K-12 instructor's perspective (Hillocks; Thompson; Hansen and Farris). But as Richard Haswell said in his presentation at the 2015 meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, we have conducted no large-scale study in our field about how **students** experience large-scale assessment, or even to different forms of writing assessment, and without such study, we cannot be entirely sure what impact these exams have had on how students view writing. Though recent studies of the transition between writing in high school and writing in college have inevitably touched on the complicating effect that testing has on that transition (Cobb; Ruecker), there is a need for scholars in the field to talk to students about their experience writing in high school and in

[23]As Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein put it, "in teacher research we use whatever we need to answer a question and share our findings" (84). In this case, the lack of student voices in the existing scholarship on standardized testing led me to use interviews to bring those voices to the forefront.

college after spending years writing primarily for or in preparation for standardized tests in order to be better prepared to teach today's composition student.

In addition to producing valuable knowledge about student experience with testing, interviews with students also provide a specific type of knowledge that runs counter to the knowledge valued by standardized tests that can in turn speak back to one of the most damaging aspects of these tests. Though I can draw generalizations about the experiences current first-year writing students have with testing in K-12 based on my own teaching[24], I see collecting interviews from students an important step in not only better understanding the problem of testing but in being able to critique one of the key problems with testing. As their name indicates, these exams seek to **standardize**, both by encouraging a singular idea of "good writing" and by turning individual students into data points. But as Lin Norton explains in *Action Research in Teaching and Learning*, interviewing "appeals to those researchers who are interested in the 'lived experience' of their research participants, rather than some second-order perspective where the aim is to get some sort of objective reality that is researcher driven (first-order perspective)" (98). By seeking out the "lived experience" of students taking and preparing these exams through my interviews, I speak back to these attempts to erase individual students voices in favor of data related to proficiency or progress and instead provide individual accounts of what the human experience with these exams looks like in the voices of those who experienced them[25]. Further, my goal for these

[24] Specifically, in the past three years, I have asked all of my first-year writing students early in the semester to write reflections on their experiences writing for these standardized tests, which we follow by contextualizing how this kind of writing exists in what Chris Anson calls a "closed system" as opposed to the "open system" that most writing exists within. Reading hundreds of student reflections on writing for these kinds of high-stakes exams has given me a fairly comprehensive idea of what effect writing for standardized tests is having on my students at the University of Houston.

[25] Hawisher and Selfe cite this ability to capture experience as one of the core strengths of interviews in their 2012 collection *Writing Studies Research in Practice*, in which they write, "We cannot imagine any other method that allows us to assemble more-direct information of personal literacy values, more-intimate glimpses

interviews was to capture both the experiences that students have had writing in the era of standardized testing and their impressions of these experiences, insight that the test makers ignore altogether. I also hope that by conducting and interpreting these interviews, particularly through sharing excerpts of student voices in my presentation of them in Chapters 3 and 4, I will provide a more complete picture of what the first-year writing class looks like in the era of high-stakes testing from the perspective of the lived experience of students[26], providing an important addition to the research related to testing that has largely focused on exposing the exams' faulty design and implementation as a means of eliminating or reforming them. Inquiring into the ways in which these exams have personally impacted students further serves these efforts of critiquing the exams by putting a human face and voice to the dehumanizing experience of large-scale standardized testing.

While research specifically on student experience with standardized tests in K-12 is lacking, interestingly, there has been recent research in the field that interviews English Language Learners, many of whom are put through additional rounds of high-stakes testing before they are allowed to enroll in the first-year writing class. For example, Jennifer Mott-Smith interviewed five generation 1.5[27] students to determine how their performance and impression of the high-stakes Writing Proficiency Exam (WPE) affected their "accommodation or resistance to the norms and values about language and literacy that were embedded in the discourses of standard language ideology and standards of the high-stakes

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into what literacy means in the lives of individuals, and more-meaningful ways of testing our theories about language use against the realities of people's' literacy practices and their understandings about these practices. We think other literacy researchers, too, would identify similar benefits of using semi-structured and unstructured interviews as a research method" (45).

[26] As Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein note in their guide to teacher research, "Without informants' voices, you have no perspective to share except your own" (124).

[27] Generation 1.5 students are those who arrived in the United States when their parents immigrated to the U.S. when they were children or adolescents.

testing protocol" (120). She found that these students gathered notions of what "good writing" was from this limited genre of test essay, leading her to call on administrators to use contextualized versions of assessment, like portfolios or classroom assessments, instead of these high-stakes measures. In my interviews with my former students, I sought to reach a similar level of understanding by helping to create a fuller picture of student experience with testing, both in terms of what students experienced in the classroom in preparation for these exams and in terms of how these experiences with these exams shaped their views of writing. I conducted my interviews in the recent tradition of Jennifer Mott-Smith, Harriet Allison, Nancy Duke Lay et. al., and other scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition who have used interviews as a tool to understand both **what** students are experiencing in terms of writing instruction before they reach our first-year writing classes and **how** those experiences are shaping their perceptions of writing.

Process for Conducting Interviews

For this project, I conducted interviews to gain insight into the ways that students are taught to write in K-12 and their perceptions of writing as a result of writing primarily for timed standardized tests; I then used those findings to shape my approach to teaching my first-year writing class. I use a grounded theory approach to conducting and drawing conclusions from these interviews. First developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, grounded theory values "the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research" (2); Kathy Charmaz further explains that the "grounded theory method stresses discovery and theory development rather than logical deductive reasoning which relies on prior theoretical frameworks" ("The Grounded" 110). Similar to how teacher

research contends that teachers can develop theory from their own teaching, grounded theory views qualitative research as means of creating new theory rather than merely confirming existing theory. I also see this methodology as fitting for my particular project; because little research has been conducted on student experience with testing, there is little theory to test and thus new theory must be generated. In conducting grounded theory interviews, my focus was on both hearing my interviewees' stories about testing to better understand what those experiences were, the forces shaping their understanding of those experiences, and the implications of those experiences for how they view writing (Glaser and Strauss; Charmaz).

I interviewed four of my former students from my Fall 2014 English 1304 classes at the University of Houston, which were taught face-to-face[28]. Though certainly UH students' experiences are not monolithic, interviewing students at UH gave me a better idea of the kinds of experiences that my local population of students have had with testing in K-12. Because both the students that I interviewed and the students that I taught in my Fall 2016 class were taking the second semester first year writing class -- English 1304 -- in the fall, interviewing this specific group of students was particularly helpful for designing my Fall 2016 class because of the similarities between these two groups, including the fact that many of them took AP English exams (or another exam to gain credit for English 1303) or delayed taking English 1304 until later in their college career. Interviewing my own former students was also a conscious decision rooted in the philosophy of teacher research. First, I had a familiarity with these students that I would not have had if I had not worked with them on their writing for a semester, which made them more comfortable with me than they may have been with another interviewer and improved the overall quality of the interview. Second, I

[28] More details about the four students I interviewed can be found in Chapter 3.

knew about them as both individuals and as writers; that knowledge allowed me to better guide the interview, including asking specific follow-up questions, and also helped me make sense of the interviews after they had been conducted. Throughout the process, I was mindful of the possible biases I brought to my research, while also recognizing that biases always exist in qualitative research and should be acknowledged and accounted for (Cintron; Brueggeman), and I have tried to identify those biases in my presentation of the interview results in Chapters 3 and 4. I contend that my deeper knowledge of my former students enhanced our interviews by making them more focused and in-depth than they would have otherwise been.

I conducted all four interviews in the Spring 2016 semester at a location on the UH campus of the interviewee's choosing, which included an on-campus coffee shop, my office, and the campus library, to ensure that they were comfortable. Each interview took between 25 and 45 minutes. I began each interview following common interview procedure, including briefly catching up with the interviewee, explaining the nature of my research and my broader dissertation project, and gaining permission to tape the interview (Norton 101). I used the interview questions in Appendix A, but I approached the interview in a semi-structured[29] fashion to allow interviewees to reflect authentically on their past experiences and give me a better understanding of their experiences and their perceptions of them (Norton; Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein; Briggs). Overall, I sought to make these interviews

[29] I am using the term "semi-structured interview" as Lin Norton uses it in *Action Research in Teaching and Learning*: "Semi-structured interviews follow an interview schedule with predetermined questions but are more flexible than a structured interview in that you use probes designed to elicit further information when necessary. The purpose of a semi-structured interview is to understand the respondent's point of view, so you can use open-ended questions to enable the interviewee to talk more freely" (99).

conversational[30], and I chose not to take notes during the interview, since all participants agreed to be recorded, so that I could be fully present in the conversation and able to follow interesting leads or ask follow-up questions or probes when relevant. In the tradition of grounded theory interviewing as "unfolding stories"[31], I encouraged my interviewees to share any stories, tips from their teachers, or other experiences that stuck out in their minds related to the questions I asked instead of asking them to make broad generalities about their K-12 educational experience, viewing these stories as powerful reflections of the most striking ways in which testing culture has shaped their perceptions on writing. At the end of the interview, I asked interviewees permission to use a piece of reflective writing on their past experience with test writing that they completed in my first-year writing class in my dissertation, allowing them to look over that piece of writing before making a decision. All allowed me to use their in-class writing.

Interpreting Interviews

I chose to interpret the interview data using thematic analysis to first generate general findings from my research, then writing vignettes of each of the four participants in order to give a fuller sense of each individual interviewee. The basic steps of my process of interpreting interviews were:

1. Transcribe each interview in its entirety
2. Carefully read through each interview
3. Label sections of each interview for thematic and topical categories

[30] Here I embraced Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein's philosophy of good interviewing: "Interviewing, like good conversation, is a highly developed skill that takes practice, flexibility, risk, and empathy" (75).
[31] Kathy Charmaz uses this term for grounded theory interviewing. I followed her suggestions for conducting interviews in the tradition of grounded theory, including interviewing to "explore, not interrogate," and to answer the question, "What is happening here?" (314-315).

4. Collect list of categories from across all four interviews; collapse into eight categories
5. Color code physical copies of transcripts for eight categories
6. Collect all sections pertaining to each particular category into one document per category
7. Read through each category and write memos about conclusions and findings related to that category
8. Consult student writing for any relevant passages to better inform memos
9. Compile vignettes for each of the four interviewees
10. Draw broad conclusions from memos and vignettes for Chapters 3 and 4

My process for thematically analyzing the interviews (steps 1 through 8 above) comes primarily from Kathy Charmaz's "The Grounded Theory Method: An Explication and Interpretation" in *Contemporary Field Research* and Lin S. Norton's chapter on analyzing qualitative data in pedagogical research in his *Action Research in Teaching and Learning*. I chose to transcribe all interviews fully first because the number and length of the interviews conducted made doing so manageable, and I wanted to be able to access all of the interview data as easily as possible. I then read through each interview several times, noting themes that stuck out during the interviews as well as ones that emerged when transcribing and reading through the data[32]. After that, I labeled each transcript with general categories identifying both the content of the passages and more conceptual categories[33], being careful to carry categories across interviews, before collecting a list of the categories to then collapse, combine, or eliminate. I then physically grouped these categories across the

[32] Both Norton and Seidman refer to this as "immersion" in the data, citing it as crucial for helping you see emerging trends and findings from the data. Anything less than this immersion can result in sampling or in misusing interviewee's words to support pre-existing ideas, which is not what grounded theory analysis values.
[33] Charmaz explains that these kinds of "[c]odes range from simple, concrete, and topical categories to more general, abstract conceptual categories for an emerging theory" (111).

interview transcripts, first by color-coding the physical copies of transcripts and then by copying and pasting all sections related to each category into a single document. I read through these category documents, considering how to best label each of these categories and what conclusions could be made about them based on what each interviewee said, typing this up into "memos" on each of these categories. I also noted similarities across categories in these memos, drawing me toward a few key findings from these interviews from the many categories generated during coding.

I chose not to include the in-class writing my interviewees completed in the Fall of 2014 in the coding process, choosing instead to refer to this writing only to shed additional light on student experiences and perceptions of testing. This writing was handwritten in class in response to the prompt in Appendix B, which specifically asked them to reflect on the rhetorical situation of test writing, including the idea that writing for tests occurs in a "closed system." I chose not to use these writing samples in the coding process because the prompt could be seen as leading students to draw specific conclusions about test writing, unlike the interviews, which were focused on having students share their experiences and impressions of writing for standardized tests in K-12[34]. Additionally, because writing is inherently different from an interview, I did not feel it was fair to include writing alongside transcribed interviews in determining categories and drawing conclusions. However, the similarities between experiences detailed in interviews and in this in-class writing were striking, helping to triangulate student experience of testing, and I chose to include a few excerpts from this

[34] It is possible that the students I interviewed may have retained specific ideas about the "closed" nature of test writing from taking my English 1304 class. I interviewed students 14 to 16 months after they completed my course, and in this particular class, we spent only one day on contextualizing test writing, completing the in-class writing assignment referenced here and discussing the audience, purpose, and context of test writing. At the end of the interviews, when I showed students the in-class writing I included here, most remarked that they did not remember this assignment, making the similarities between students' interviews even more powerful as confirmations of the long-lasting impacts that testing had on how these students think about writing.

writing in Chapter 3 when that writing expanded on or confirmed ideas students brought up on their own in their interviews[35]. I've also included these in-class writing assignments in their entirety in Appendix C, because they help paint a fuller picture of how students conceive of their experiences writing for standardized tests in K-12.

The interchapter between this chapter and Chapter 3 contains vignettes[36] from each of the four students that I interviewed which I composed after coding the interviews. While I found the thematic connections between each of these four interviews striking and important for understanding the broader implications of test writing, I did not want to lose my individual students' voices or experiences in looking at the throughlines or connections between their experiences, and I certainly did not want to suggest that all students view testing in a specific way. Moreover, I wanted to preserve the individual student's experience of testing in a coherent narrative in order to speak back to the ways that testing attempts to erase individual students in favor of datapoints and larger trends. As Irving Seidman contends, profiles and vignettes of participants are "most consistent with the process of interviewing," giving readers a better sense of the experience of talking with each of these individuals about their experience with testing[37] (119). In the tradition of Studs Terkel's *Working*, I composed profiles in the first-person voice of my interviewees, stringing together the most important passages from each interview. I present the material in the order that it

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[35] I've been careful to attribute the writing excerpts I include in Chapter 3 as excerpts from writing, not interviews. I did not include any excerpts of writing in Chapter 4.

[36] I am borrowing this term from Irving Seidman, who uses it to refer to a shorter profile of interview participants "that usually covers a more limited aspect of the participant's experience" than a full profile does (119).

[37] Seidman elaborates: "We interview in order to come to know the experience of the participants through their stories. We learn from hearing and studying what participants say. Although the interviewer can never be absent from the process, by crafting a profile in the participant's own words, the interviewer allows those words to reflect the person's consciousness" (119-120).

appeared in our interview, and marked any material added for emphasis or clarity using brackets.

Classroom-Based Inquiry as Elevating Teachers and Shaping Pedagogical Practice

I use what many teacher researchers refer to as "classroom-based inquiry" to design, teach, and reflect on my Fall 2016 course aimed at having students perform inquiry into what writing is, an approach that appropriately counters what I found from my interviews was an approach to writing taught in K-12 that was centered on "correctness." While teacher research uses methodologies and approaches beyond teachers studying their own classrooms[38], this specific type of teacher research is especially appropriate for my project because it reflects teacher expertise in the classroom and creates pedagogical knowledge that can be disseminated amongst teachers. Cochran-Smith and Lytle explain that "teacher research makes accessible some of the expertise of teachers and provides both university and school communities with unique perspectives on teaching and learning" (23), and, as Berthoff and others point out, thoughtful teachers are already engaged in performing this kind of inquiry into their teaching. Classroom-based inquiry honors teacher expertise over the classroom space, which is especially appropriate in a project addressing issues with assessment, an area of education that teachers have often been excluded from. Ray asserts that teacher research empowers teachers to "'reclaim the classroom' through careful observation of and reflection on their own teaching" and by performing classroom-based inquiry "in order to have a counterbalancing influence on disciplinary knowledge making [and] contribute to the making of composition theory by forcing other scholars to question

[38] Some do assert that teacher research must be done by teachers in their educational setting, including Cochran-Smith and Lytle, who define teacher research as "[s]ystematic and intentional inquiry about teaching, learning, and schooling carried out by teachers in their own school or classroom settings" (27).

their assumptions and conclusions" (23). Classroom-based inquiry reflects teachers' deep knowledge of and inquiry into the happenings inside their classrooms, demonstrating why we ought to trust teachers' insights into forming education policy, specifically assessment practices.

The portion of my project using classroom-based inquiry also contributes practical knowledge on writing pedagogy to the field of rhetoric and composition[39], which is especially important in the interim as we continue to work to reform large-scale writing assessment practices at the K-12 level. Of course, there are limits to the types of knowledge that classroom-based inquiry produces; as Miles Myers contends, "findings from teachers have a dependence on context that cannot be escaped," but these are still "findings that other teachers can adapt to their own circumstances" (6). Classroom-based inquiry allows teachers to create and test pedagogical approaches and write thick descriptions of how exactly these "tests" went in their own classrooms. It also allows them to critique existing pedagogical practices; as Cochran-Smith and Lytle describe it, classroom-based inquiry draws on "the potential of teacher research to reform classroom practice by prompting powerful intellectual critiques of assumptions, goals, and strategies" (35). Classroom-based inquiry both challenges me as a teacher to become a better teacher by forcing me to perform inquiry into which of my pedagogical practices are working and which are not and allows me to confirm or challenge accepted best practices and contribute alternative or adapted classroom practices as well[40]. And, as Ray explains, this approach to changing pedagogical practice not only

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[39] I do not suggest that my project, or teacher research in general, produces curricula or approaches that can be thoughtlessly applied by any teacher in any setting. Instead, teacher research can present general approaches and types of assignments that teachers can adapt to fit their unique student population and constraints.

[40] As Lin S. Norton explains in *Action Research in Teaching and Learning*, this is one of the core goals of teacher research: "The fundamental purpose of pedagogical action research is to systematically investigate

reclaims power for teachers but also serves as a more effective means of shaping the education system: "Teacher research forcefully illustrates a political reality: most significant changes in education occur not from top down through dissemination of new theories generated by university researchers, but from the bottom up through the questioning and experimenting of teachers attempting to solve real problems in their own classrooms" (71). Teacher research is valuable because it not only shares findings in the form of classroom practices that are adaptable and useful for other teachers, but also because this form of knowledge dissemination is most effective and will lead to other educators becoming more invested in performing inquiry into their own teaching practices, as has undoubtedly been the case since Ray first published *The Practice of Theory* in 1993.

Designing, Teaching, and Reflecting on a Class Using Classroom-Based Inquiry

Using the strategies for adapting pedagogy based on interview findings laid out in Henning, Stone and Kelly's *Using Action Research to Improve Instruction*[41], I used the insights I gained from conducting and interpreting my interviews with students along with what others in our field have found about the impact of testing on student writing (Hillocks; McCrimmon; Williams; Qualley) to design a first-year writing class aimed at helping

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one's own teaching/learning facilitation practice, with the dual aim of improving that practice and contributing to theoretical knowledge in order to benefit student learning" (59).

[41] Specifically, they recommend a similar method of coding interview data to the one that I am using here, and urge interviewees to "remember that interviews are investigations into the thoughts and opinions of the participants, which may or may not be an accurate reflection of the actual situation" (94). After analysis, Henning, Stone, and Kelly recommend teacher researchers engage in the following steps:

(a) Interpret.
(b) Develop new teaching strategies.
(c) Justify your teaching strategies.
(d) Write a summary report. (95)

I have followed these steps in altering my teaching practices according to my interview findings, a process that I describe in more detail in Chapter 5.

students see writing as more than an activity in proving competence[42]. In addition to designing my class based on these findings, I also relied on a blend of pedagogical approaches to teaching writing that I have developed in my years of teaching[43]. I draw heavily from reflexive pedagogies, which encourage students to engage in the careful work of thinking and reflection that are often absent in our current test-based education system that focuses so heavily on mastery and linear progress (Qualley). My personal approach to teaching writing has also been shaped by ideas from critical pedagogy (Seitz; Shor; Delpit), expressivism (Newkirk; Coles; Murray), and from post-process theories of writing that emphasize its social and contextual nature (Kent; Breuch). I also draw on scholarship on best practices for online writing instruction, some of which was discussed in Chapter 1 and will be described in more depth in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. The influence of these philosophies and approaches to teaching writing combined with my specific focus at addressing the ways students view writing as a result of testing that I found in my interviews played a role in how I planned and designed my course before the semester started, which will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 5.

In terms of capturing and studying the course, Online Writing Instruction (OWI) lends itself especially well to a classroom-based teacher research project because of the wealth of text that is produced in this medium, despite there being few examples of teacher-research OWI projects in the field at this point. My entire course, with the exception of face-to-face conferences with students, is captured in our Course Management System (CMS),

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[42] The broad conclusions I drew from my interviews that I used to shape my course specifically can be found in the final interview implications section at the end of Chapter 4, and the specific ways in which I adapted my pedagogy to address those conclusions can be found in Chapter 5.

[43] As Cochran and Lytle explain "[w]hen teachers do research, the draw on interpretive frameworks built form their own histories and intellectual interests" (43). It is impossible to detail the full extent of my own personal history and intellectual interests here, but the most prominent ones are briefly mentioned here and in Chapters 5 and 6.

Blackboard, and remains available to me after the semester has ended. I am able to read and search all of the discussions, personal reflective writing, drafts of major papers, peer review feedback, email conversations with students, and other components of the course, making it much easier to study and reflect on the course in its entirety once it has ended. Many performing analyses of the research done on OWI have called for more research to be done, especially analyzing student experience and student learning in the online writing classroom (Hewett and Ehmann; Miller), which a teacher research project like this one that draws heavily on student writing, reflection, and feedback provide.

I also kept a teaching journal throughout the semester to capture my thoughts and reflections on the course in real time, adding another artifact to study once the semester drew to a close. This approach of using a "teaching journal" or "research journal" whenever performing classroom-based inquiry is advocated by many scholars in teacher research (Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein; Cochran-Smith and Lytle; Myers). Specifically, I followed Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein's urgings to "note my initial and ongoing thinking" as my research progressed (71). I typed my teaching journal, making entries roughly twice a week after doing work for the course, whether that was writing weekly emails, designing assignments, grading assignments, or reflecting generally on the progress of the course. I found myself relying on my teaching journal in a similar way to how my students relied on their freewriting and journal assignments, using it as a space to reflect on, make sense of, and plan my course. I often copied and pasted sections of student writing that I found particularly striking or that I might want to include in my write-up of this class into my journal so that I could easily see my students' work and return to it once the course finished and I began to reflect on and write up its successes and failures. In this way, my teaching journal functioned

as both a research journal in which I tracked myself as I carried out my study, recording my "opinions, feelings, digressions, annoyances, and the surprises [I] encounter[ed]," and also as field notes that provide a "wide-angle lens on the people, languages, places, and material in [my] study" (Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein 117, 119).

Positioning Students as Co-Researchers in Classroom-Based Inquiry

I submitted an application to and received approval from the University of Houston's Internal Review Board before the Fall 2016 semester to study the writing that students produced in my course. Specifically, I was granted permission to study all text that students who consented to participating in the study produced and uploaded to our course Blackboard site, including journal entries, freewriting, discussion board posts and replies, peer review feedback, written reflections, and major paper drafts. In order to prevent any retaliation on my part toward students who did not want their writing to be included in my study, students were not asked to grant me permission to study their writing until December 2016, after final grades were due. Out of my class of 20 students, 11 submitted consent forms and agreed to allow their writing to be included in this project. All students were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity[44].

Though students did not have to decide whether or not to participate in the study until after the semester ended, I did notify them in the Welcome Letter that I sent them before the course began that I would be writing about this course as a part of my dissertation project. In

[44] In conversations with both students I interviewed and students in my Fall 2016 course about the required use of pseudonyms, I found that many would have preferred I use their real names here. I also would have preferred to have used real names in the study, especially for the students in my Fall 2016 class who collaborated with me on my research in many crucial ways, in order to recognize the work that valuable contributions of the students I worked with these semesters. However, the University of Houston's Internal Review Board requires anonymity in accordance with standard research practices, and thus pseudonyms were used.

that letter and in my weekly emails, I emphasized the theme that I had designed for the course ("What is writing?") and also the fact that I wanted their input on the course for this dissertation project, positioning them as co-researchers who gave me valuable feedback that would make me a more effective teacher and make this course more beneficial for them. I designed the course week by week (whereas in the past I would have planned out the course by unit or even by semester) in order to make appropriate adjustments based on my perceptions of the assignments that were working well to improve student writing and those that were not. This approach focused on responding to students' progress and ensuring they are engaged in the course is also consistent with the views of critical pedagogues and others in favor of a decentralized classroom that privileges student voices and perspectives. This careful balancing of asking for student feedback, seeking student engagement, and not letting the path of the course be dictated purely by whether or not students were "having fun" will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

Drawing Conclusions from Classroom-Based Inquiry

Though the ability of the online writing class to capture all instruction and student writing completed in a course largely beneficial, it also produces a wealth of text which can be difficult to sift through and draw specific conclusions from. Rereading the my teaching journal at the end of the semester along with my students' reflective portfolios and the anonymous surveys my students they filled out about the course overall helped me identify broad findings on my pedagogical approach to teaching this course. I then focused on a handful of assignments throughout the course that I thought best reflected by overall approach to the course -- students performing inquiry into what writing is -- and that

produced the most growth in my students' writing abilities and conceptions of writing. Based on those broad findings, I chose to tell the story of my course chronologically, rather than thematically, as both my teaching journal and my students' reflective portfolios did. This chronological approach better captures my students' growth throughout the semester and allows for thick descriptions of how I taught and adapted the course, changing and creating assignments based on what I noticed about my students' writing development, especially in their unit reflections, throughout the semester. The decision to tell the chronological story of my course also reflects a central idea of this project that narratives are important and impactful. Through both interviews with students and writing students produced in my class, I continually found that narratives are effective in attaching a human face to experiences described, and I concluded that telling the chronological narrative of our course would best reflect the experience of teaching this course.

Further, the decision to present the entire "story" of our course is consistent with how rhetors understand texts, as coming from specific audiences and contexts. To present assignment designs and student submissions without further contextualizing them does not tell the entire story of the course, especially in a class that focused on building community and scaffolding assignments. In "Through the Eyes of Researchers, Rhetors, and Audiences: Triangulating Data from the Digital Writing Situation," Kevin DePew discourages those studying digital writing from simply using textual analysis, an approach that he says is problematic because of its tendencies to "eliminate or de-emphasize the human feature of digital writing" (67). Instead, he advocates that "digital rhetoric researchers adopt strategies framed by the communicative triangle -- the rhetor, the audience, the digital text or discourse, and the contexts" in order to recognize the ways in which the discourse being studied is

"culturally and socially produced and received" (52; 67). Though his comments apply to digital writing more broadly, they are especially salient for those studying OWI, specifically a small class where students shared their writing primarily for an audience composed of their instructor and peers they got to know well over the course of the semester. To share samples of student writing without sharing more about the students themselves and the progression of the course over the semester would ignore the broader context in which this discourse was produced, and telling the story of the course chronologically enables me to share those contexts and to, as DePew argues is important, recognize my own role as teacher researcher and "justify the position that [I] create for [myself]" (56).

This approach runs counter to how many recommend structuring and writing about action research or teacher research. Henning, Stone, and Kelly, for example, suggest that researchers write up their research findings -- which "should be limited to absolute facts, what anyone could agree on" -- and their research reflection -- which is based on "inferences" made by the researcher -- as separate sections (155). They suggest that "[i]f the findings are well organized, they will lead to the ideas expressed in the reflection section" (155). I have chosen to present both facts and inferences in my chronological narrative of the course. This will capture my inherent bias as an insider researcher doing research on my own class; my own subjectivity here will not be obfuscated by a presentation of supposedly unbiased facts found from my research on the course that I designed and taught. There is precedent for taking this kind of approach to write about teacher research, most notably William Coles' *The Plural I,* which tells the story of a freshman composition class he taught in a style that is part memoir and part fiction.

In my classroom-based inquiry chapters, I begin with an overview of my online English 1304 course design and my rationale for structuring the course in that particular way, a rationale I established before the semester officially began. From there, I move through the course chronologically, drawing on examples of student writing from minor and major assignments in the course to demonstrate the ways in which this course design helped my students see writing more broadly. Attempting to capture the entire chronology of the course in a week-by-week basis is beyond the level of detail possible or desirable for this project, and thus, I did choose to highlight assignments that I thought were particularly effective, and those that reflected how students view writing as a result of writing for tests instead of people in K-12 and how I guided them in performing inquiry into the broader ways that writing could operate[45]. I used my teaching journal, student writing, and student reflection or surveys to triangulate[46] which assignments and interactions were most important and worthy of writing about. I detail my decision to include certain assignments or structure chapters as I did at the beginning of those chapters.

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[45] Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein put forth that studying different kinds of data helps researchers zero in on the most important and relevant data: "As you become more expert at understanding the intricacies of your topic and question, you develop an almost magnetic attraction to the data that fit. And you learn to discard (at least for your current project) the data that don't fit. This process, of course, takes time, independence, and concentration" (144). For my project, I wrote expansive chapters with extensive student examples before narrowing them drastically to the most important and salient assignments and samples of student writing.

[46] Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein define triangulation as "the process of verification using multiple sources of information" (144). While triangulation is a term largely associated with social science quantitative and qualitative research, they see triangulation as play a pivotal role in telling the story of your teacher research project: "You wouldn't necessarily believe one person's snip of of gossip, but when you begin to hear the same story from several disparate perspectives -- and see evidence for yourself in several different places -- the story becomes richer and more believable. As you're adding color and texture to construct a possible narrative, you're also challenging evidence that does not fit well with the snip of gossip you heard in the first place" (144).

Interchapter

Student Vignettes

Juan

I was living for ten years in Mexico and going to a Catholic private school, so I spent ten years of education over there, and ten over here [in Houston]. I had English classes [in Mexico], but all they taught me there was "I," "he," "she," "we." Even in private school, that's all they taught us. When I came here, I learned English really quick -- within a year or half a year. The first thing I did writing/English [test] related was probably in fifth grade. Back in Mexico, the way we wrote, I mean the tests were hard, but the writing was more free. We could write about anything over there, as far as I remember. But once we came over here, and they told me you had to write on this prompt on the TAKS, and you had this much time -- it wasn't really something I was used to. But I did well. I think I wrote the best essay in the class, and my teacher was pretty proud. I feel like they were surprised at how out-of-the-box it was, the way I wrote it. I feel like the other students -- it wasn't because I was smart or anything like that, it was just because they were really limited ever since kindergarten -- they weren't as free to write.

Back in middle school was probably the most pleasant English experience I ever had. [I had a] really nice English teacher. The way she set up the class was around two notebooks: a reading notebook and a writing notebook. We would read and basically we'd have to write our own views of the books we read. And our writing notebook was literally write anything you want, no borders, nothing. We had to write as much as we could for the week, and Friday

we would present it in front of everyone. I felt like that was a really pleasant experience, to be free to write about anything. I like writing like that.

[In my AP English classes in high school, my teacher] would give us a lot of timed essays to prepare for the AP [exam]. That was 99.99% of [the writing we did for the class]. The other .01% was "How was your summer?" and "Who are you?" They are really there to prepare you for the AP test. Even during PreAP [classes], they focused on preparing us for [the AP exam]. When I came here [to college], I was sick of it. No more AP.

[My AP] teacher was lovely, but when it came to grading our [timed practice AP] essays, she was really strict. She'd get in that voice, and say, "Do this, don't do that. I like that." She would really limit what we could write over. We would go in a certain direction, and she would say, "Oh yeah, that was really creative, but talk about this in this certain way." It didn't matter that it was interesting because it wouldn't get us a passing grade. We have to [write the essay] in a certain sense where there's a paragraph with a topic sentence, after that, you have to make this point, after that, this point, then this point, then this point, then end it like this. Basically the whole essay, she wanted it as she wanted it.

I feel like, in a certain way the AP test kind of helped me set up the basis of my argument, but I feel like the thing that influenced me the most was the honors debate classes I was taking during high school for three years. It was a lot of research and evidence. There were really weird arguments, but we had to be ready for them. We had to be able to think on our feet, and we had to speak formally, and in a way, that really prepared me for essays in college. Every debate student will tell you the same thing. We'd have a list prepared for every argument that we think the opponent might spring on us. And we would write [those lists] in formal writing, just like a sentence, then read it right off the bat, and argue it and

answer it like that. We couldn't waste time. If we had 10 minutes, we needed to have an answer for every argument that came our way.

Writing wise, what I'm doing [now] is mostly kind of like formal business kind of writing, especially for the business plans we do, which is kind of like describing the marketing, the competitor analysis, the cost advantages, all the major steps for setting up a business. I've been wanting to maybe write a book. I'm not really sure what type, but maybe I'll start thinking about it and start writing it. I'm actually one of those people that agrees that creative writing and writing in general should be spread out through like different professions. Engineers do very little writing, but at my church, there's a woman who used to be involved a lot with my priest's classes -- since he was a philosophy major, he used to have like almost like a college-level class about philosophy in our church on Wednesday nights, he still gives it. But she became a chemical engineer with a minor in philosophy and writing, because she just liked it. And I've seen a lot of articles as well, engineers and architects and those who do they more logical-type of fields, they still enjoy to do things like philosophy or writing.

Caroline

In elementary school, if the topic [for the TAKS test] was, "Write about a time I had an adventure," [my teachers would] always say, "Make sure you say, like at the end or somewhere in there, 'This was the biggest adventure!' or address that it was an adventure." And they always said that because then the graders wouldn't dock you for not answering the prompt, because if you said it was an adventure, then it had to be an adventure, or something like that. And then like as I grew up, of course, all my teachers were like, "That is so stupid,

obviously you're writing about an adventure." But I always used to rewrite the prompt in my paper just to make sure that I addressed it in elementary school. And as I grew up, I stopped doing that. It was just funny because teachers used to teach one way, and then when you get older, they'd say, "Forget that," and change their style of teaching.

I always passed the test with flying colors so I wasn't really worried about passing, but I could tell that the teachers always were worried about their students passing. But when I wrote stuff on my own, because I used to like writing like all the time, I would be more relaxed because I didn't have to like focus on hitting certain things. I obviously wouldn't be like, "Oh my god, am I addressing the prompt?"

I was in pre-AP English my freshman year and my sophomore year [of high school], and then I was in AP English my junior year, that's how I got the credit for English [1303], and then I took AP lit my senior year, but I didn't take the AP test, because I got thyroid cancer, so I missed so much of that class. [Preparing for the AP exam] was completely what the whole class was based off of. We had timed writings all the time, and then we also had like AP multiple choice questions, and those were so hard. I feel like everything was based off of the test. The only time we didn't do things based off of the test was after we took the test [in] May.

[To prepare for the essay section of the AP exam] we had to get with partners and talk about [the prompt], or give three words to describe what the prompt was. There was a lot of I guess talking about [the prompt] and how we would respond, and reading other people's papers that were 5s or an example of a 5. Or so we'd look at papers and say like, "What do you think this got? Why did it not get a higher grade? What could they have done better?" Answering the question complete and putting it in the right format [got you a high score].

My [AP English] teacher is actually an AP grader, so she was really good. [On the exam] I felt like I was writing to my teacher and thinking, “What she would think?” because I knew that she graded them so she knew what she was doing. Or like, in the back of our mind we’d always think like, “The AP graders are on the other side of this test.” I think one grades it, and then another person grades it, and they have to be similar, or maybe they average the two or something. But if they're like really different then they’ll have other people look at them too. But then the average would be the grade. [They spend] like less than a minute [grading your essay]. At first I was kind of like, “Okay, how can they actually like have a good analysis of my paper if they’re not even reading it, essentially?” But I know that my teacher was really experienced and had lots of years of practice, and you have to go through a lot to be an AP grader, so they had to do something right.

[One] kind of writing I do [now], I’m a motivational speaker for cancer-related stuff. I wrote out what I wanted to say before -- so that was like a different kind of writing. I speak for [a pediatric cancer organization] at their fundraisers and stuff, and that speaking and writing I try to write and say stuff that would pull at people’s heartstrings so that they would open up their wallets and donate to this organization. It’s like knowing your audience. This other one I did at [a hospital] was more informational, and we talked about our patient experience and that was almost like teaching them stuff about how they should like change or keep doing their patient stuff.

I always I kind of thought that the AP test, “Okay, I’m not really going to need this ever again.” I understand it’s important to be a good writer, and it obviously created a really good foundation for me in the future when I’m writing things, but now I don’t think writing has to be that structured and perfect, you know what I mean? It was always stressful to me

writing essays and wondering -- because it's not like like math, yes you got it right or no you didn't, it's based off of someone else's opinion of how you wrote your thing. But now I don't think it has to be that precise.

Victor

In the younger grades, I don't remember when we first started [taking statewide standardized tests], I just remember it being TAAS at the time, and I remember being nervous about it. Since high school was the most recent memory, I remember there would be a time like before we had the exams that you know we would do practice exams from older exams, and timed writings as well, because there was a portion of the exam where we had to write something. [My teachers] really preached the intro with the thesis, then the body, then the conclusion, and the body has to have the three main points that you talk about. And then when we took the TAKS exams and there would be that portion with the writing, [our teachers] told us that English teachers were grading them, so make it sound good and fill up the paper and then kind of give them a sob story, like something that they would want to read. And I was like, "Ugh, this is just lame," but I did it every time, and I passed.

Yeah, I do remember that when the exam was coming up, they got example [TAKS essays] from students from previous years and they'd be like, "This one is not good, it's missing all this, it's jumbled," and "This is a really good one, it has all the points." I do remember those -- it was on the old projector screen, which was so old-school.

[Our teachers] said that there would be English teachers would be grading [TAKS essays] and they had to grade a ton of them, so try to make it interesting for them so that they

would be a little more lenient with you. I'm not really sure where [my essays] went, which is kind of interesting. We did all this work, and I have no idea where it went.

But it wasn't until 12th grade when I took creative writing. That was a lot better -- that was a huge jump from [test writing]. It was really interesting seeing the characters in this class and what they could come up with. I thought I had a good imagination, but listening to these people's poems and any kind of projects that we did that involved some kind of figure that inspired you, mine was just below par. It was good because we didn't have structure, it was just like, "This week we're gonna write something about this." Even in the mornings, we'd do some warm ups where [the teacher would] just give us some random prompt and be like, just read it and write what you feel about it. I wish they did more like creative writing type classes instead, because I have zero imagination, and I don't know if that's why I work well in engineering, but like just the whole structure of ideas, I don't feel like I'm actually going out of my comfort zone or thinking outside of the box when it comes to writing, and that class helped a lot when it came to doing something you're not used to doing.

I'm not even sure why they do the TAKS test. I wish they pushed other stuff, but, they do it this way which is really interesting to me. When we graduated high school, I feel like we weren't as prepared as we should have been. They trained us so hard for the TAKS to pass the TAKS and get the state funding that they didn't really teach us how to survive in college. I wish they were more helpful when it came to deciding what you want to do with your life because I feel like a lot of people come out, and they're like, "I'm going to do this because my parents did it, I'm going to do it because it's easy or I'm going to do it because it makes the most money," and sometimes these can be the wrong reasons to do something and then you end up spending a lot of time wasted doing it, which is, I guess is good for the

school because they get the money and you're constantly staying in school, but it's not good for everyone else because they end up graduating and they're in debt.

When we did the timed writings [on standardized tests], they would give us a prompt [that] was like an interview, it was ridiculous. It would be like, "Write about a time you overcame adversity," and I was like, "How am I gonna think of this on the spot and then write three paragraphs about me fighting adversity?" It was ridiculous! And I feel like if they were just like, "I don't know, just write about something," and maybe that would help a little bit more because then people would not have to come up with something that was complete BS like I always did -- I'd just write a bunch of stuff to fill up the paper. But I don't know, maybe if they gave you like an idea, or something like, more broad, just write about it, that would be better. If it was more broad, then those people who I guess aren't really used to it, they would have a hard time -- because if they were given a prompt, they think, "Okay, I can write about this, I can just do it." But I mean how often in life is everything just right there? Life is random.

Amanda

I can tell you about the stories I wrote on [the statewide exam] -- I remember one story in particular that I got a low grade on because I tried to be abstract about it. I don't remember the prompt exactly, but I tried to write it like I was a little kid, and I had a child leash on -- those little monkey backpacks, have you seen those? And I know my creativity probably wasn't appreciated because they were looking for a specific kind of writing, because the way I see how they prepare you for standardized tests isn't exactly to write, it is to be comprehensive. I view writing as a way to express yourself and that isn't necessarily

easy to grade. I honestly think writing should be viewed as more subjective. It should be viewed more as a creative thing than as an objective thing.

I took advanced English classes at a science and engineering academy [in high school]. The AP English classes, they wanted you to pass those tests, a lot -- they really wanted you to pass those tests. I hate timed writings because they don't capture who you are as a writer; they capture how fast you can write and how fast you can display an idea without having grammatical mistakes. But we have tutors now, we can edit ourselves, and in most places we can edit everything that we send to someone, so the timed writing doesn't really capture how well you can communicate by today's standards.

There was a structure that our teachers wanted us to follow, but I don't remember that structure because I don't care for it anymore. It was like you have to write your introduction and your thesis, and then your body paragraph, body paragraph, body paragraph, conclusion paragraph. And I remember every few weeks or every now and then before the exam we would go over sample essays and how the other people scored, and it was just like, "If I can write in a way that you can understand, why do I need to write any better? Why do I need to write exactly like them?" Low-scoring was mostly grammatical mistakes and the writing didn't flow. In high-scoring essays, you could see where the writing was going, and it was easy to read and easy to follow. They had obviously managed to put a lot of thought into the short amount of time that they were writing this, and not everyone can do that in that short amount of time. But it was obvious that they had some writing talent -- they could think through sentences, and then think about the next one was they were writing. It was more asking you to be creative with your words [than your ideas], which I view as two different

things. If you could have made your entire paragraph sound beautiful and do the exact same thing as another person's more concise and dry paragraph, you'd get a higher score.

[Besides preparing for the AP exam, in AP English] they wanted us to write argumentative essays, so what I would usually choose was the death penalty because that's what I used to feel strongly about and other things you could use for argument. We weren't really focused on literature at all or how to dissect literature at all, they were more focused on if you could build an argument, and by that point it becomes a debate class, which I also like, but it's not the point of an English class. We also had journals where we had warm-ups every day or every other day, we would write short stories or narratives, but they weren't a huge part of our grade. They weren't where the main focus was, they were just somewhere to start writing, which I guess is a good exercise because that lets me be creative. That's not what I'm being graded on. I'm being graded on whether or not I wrote the way you want me to.

The TAKS test was, in my view, a way to make sure you got the minimum requirements of education. They did benchmark tests every now and then [at my high school] to see where you were, and if you didn't make that score, they asked that you did extra tutoring or extra studying. For the two or three weeks before TAKS, that's all they taught, just the TAKS test and things that could throw you off or things that you were gonna miss or things that you should focus on in your studying. In AP classes we were just sitting there like, "This isn't the test that I'm concerned about. I want to talk about the test that will give me credit for college."

For the lower-level [non-AP] classes, [they prepared for the TAKS] more than just the weeks before, because I would often hear other students complain about how other teachers were teaching to the test at our school, which doesn't surprise me because [my high

school] had a bad rep and they also didn't have a lot of money. I know that how you score on the standardized tests helps the school get money. In fact, in 6th grade, I was in middle school, I was at the normal middle school somewhere in San Antonio and I had to get foot surgery, and it wasn't a surgery I could delay, and it happened to be the week of the TAKS test, and the school had called my parents and asked them to move my surgery, because I was in honors classes in middle school, [and] they expected me to do well [on the exam]. That was how important these tests were to that school. My mom loves telling that story.

Chapter 3

Interviews: The Rhetorical Situation of Standardized Testing

In "The Rhetorical Situation," Lloyd Bitzer defines the "rhetorical situation" as the "natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance" (5). Bitzer argues that "rhetorical discourse comes into existence as a response to a situation," and "the situation controls the response in the same sense that the question controls the answer and the problem controls the solution" (5). Perhaps more than any other genre of writing, the rhetorical situation surrounding standardized test writing controls the responses that students write. My interviewees spoke extensively about the context in which these exams were written, the audience who reads their essays, and the purpose for which they wrote. Yet it's obvious that the rhetorical situation students write within on these exams differs from the rhetorical situation envisioned by Bitzer and others[47]. On these exams, students are writing for graders to prove competence within extreme constraints, including narrow prompts and time limits, and often for high-stakes aims, including securing funding for their schools and earning college credit or placement for themselves. Chris Anson characterizes this as the difference between writing in a closed system and an open system. He explains that most "writing takes place within an open system: as constantly evolving, contextually mediated, and contextually determined practices, influenced by social and institutional histories, conventions, and expectations" (114), but there is a closed system of writing in which "activities admit little variation, are habituated over long periods of time, and are learned through repeated practice" (115). His given example of writing that occurs in a closed system is helpful in understanding its potential damages:

[47] Further discussion about the rhetorical situation, including Richard Vatz's response to Bitzer's definition of it, can be found in Chapter 5.

> If a person's total writing experience were limited to producing a 100-word, audience-less synopsis of their day, every day, using a chronological narrative structure and simply filling in the details, they would be working in a relatively closed system. Of course, an infinite number of events can instantiate the form, and the form itself admits at least some variation in its lexicon, the structure of its sentences, and so on. But if we assume that the writer's "ability" has been contained mainly or only to this textual world, we can easily imagine how difficult it would be to perform well outside it. (115)

While the standardized test essay offers more freedom than the 100-word synopsis Anson describes here, it shares similar qualities to this form of writing, as we see in the formulaic way students are taught to write for these exams and in how students think about these standard elements of the rhetorical situation in regards to test writing specifically. When students spend much of their time in K-12 writing within this closed system, they are not given the opportunity to practice writing for real audiences, purposes, and contexts, as they will be required to do in their future careers and lives. Instead, they are taught to replicate a formula often derived from successful sample essays.

This chapter presents how I used interviews to better understand the ways in which students conceive of the rhetorical situation surrounding standardized testing in order to better understand how the closed nature of the exam impacts how students think about writing, especially when so much time in K-12 is spent writing specifically for these kinds of closed situations. I begin this chapter by providing more background information about my interviewees and the types of standardized tests that they took, giving a fuller context of their specific experiences with these exams. I then discuss the rhetorical situation of standardized

test writing as described by my students, dividing the rhetorical situation into three broad categories: context, audience, and purpose. In this discussion, I include excerpts from both student interviews and from in-class writing assignments on the rhetorical context of standardized testing that students completed while in my English 1304 course, roughly 18 months prior to their interviews[48]. The following chapter will discuss the implications of these elements of the rhetorical situation on how students were taught to approach test writing as opposed to other genres of writing and draw conclusions from the data presented in both chapters about how students are taught to write in K-12 in the era of high stakes testing and what impact that might have for first-year writing.

Introducing the Interviewees

Though the vignettes from the interchapter provide a fair overview of my interviewees and their experience, more background about them is helpful in order to fully understand the context from which they speak and write about their experiences with test essays. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, I have the advantage of having taught these students for a semester a year prior to interviewing them[49], aiding each of them as they formed a research question, read and assessed sources, and constructed a rhetorically sound researched argument, the final project and chief focus for English 1304 at the University of Houston. The rhetorical situation of standardized testing was the focus of our fourth class meeting in Week 2; students completed the in-class writing assignment included in this study, and we followed up this writing with an in-class discussion in which I asked

[48] See Chapter 2 for more discussion of how I used this in-class writing alongside student interviews, as well as the prompt for that assignment in Appendix B and full transcripts of interviewee's writing assignments in Appendix C.

[49] To be clear about the timeline: I taught these students in the Fall 2014 semester and interviewed them in the Spring 2016 semester.

them to share aspects of the context, purpose and audience for these exams that I then put up on our whiteboard[50]. Both classes' discussions ended with the conclusion that test writing was only one genre of writing -- a limiting or restrictive one, based on the experiences that students shared during this discussion -- and thus strategies students were taught to employ when writing for standardized tests were not applicable to other writing situations, like writing revised essays for English 1304. Unlike the classes I've taught in the semesters since, we did not do any readings or additional discussion or writing about standardized testing during that semester.

All interviewees were in one of two face-to-face sections of English 1304 that I taught during the Fall 2014 semester, my seventh semester teaching first-year writing at the University of Houston. As with many fall sections of the second-semester English 1304 course that I have taught, many students in this class were freshmen in their first semester of college who had credit for English 1303 through dual credit classes or AP credit, while others were further along in their college careers and had put off this required English classes. Juan, Amanda, and Victor were in the course that met from 7 a.m. to 8:15 a.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays, which despite its early time was one of the most visibly engaged and talkative classes that I have taught; Caroline was in my second section which met from 8:30 a.m. to 9:45 a.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays, which was quieter during discussion and more resistant to group work, but consistently produced high-quality work.

Juan was the first student that I interviewed. Though he was soft-spoken in our class, he participated consistently, especially in small group settings. In class, he was articulate and presented ideas that were carefully thought-out and well-developed. His final project for the

[50] Photos of our whiteboard after this discussion along with a brief commentary about what this discussion often looks like can be found in Appendix D.

course was an argument in favor of open carry, the practice of openly carrying a firearm in public, a relatively new topic in 2014. Juan lived in Mexico from birth until he was ten years old and attended a Catholic private school there. His family then moved to Houston, where he attended a public middle school and then a public high school magnet program where he learned Italian and was active in debate club. Because he spent half of his time in K-12 in Mexico and the other half in Houston, he found the introduction to the genre of test essay to be more memorable than my students who were prepared to write for the genre early on in elementary school, beginning with the statewide TAKS test in the third grade. In high school, Juan took AP English his junior and senior year, and he recalled being taught to write for both the TAKS test and the AP exams, both of which he disliked in comparison to freewriting or writing about literature that he did, especially in middle school. As a business major, Juan explained that most of the writing he did in college after my class was focused on "formal business kind of writing," including business plans and formal emails. He expressed a personal valuing of writing, describing it as a creative exercise he thought everyone should be engaged in.

Caroline, another business major and the lone student from my 8:30 a.m. class to volunteer to participate in the interview study, attended public schools in Texas throughout her K-12 career, spending second through twelfth grade in public schools in an affluent suburb of Houston. Like Juan and Amanda, she took AP English her junior and senior year, but she did not take the AP English exam her senior year after a cancer diagnosis caused her to miss school for months to undergo treatment, and she did not feel should "catch up" enough to take the exam. Caroline wrote about the specific kind of cancer she battled for her major project in my English 1304 course, advocating for greater awareness and more

research into treatment options. In her interview, she conveyed a deep knowledge of the process of grading AP exams and had vivid memories from elementary school and middle school of how her teachers taught her to write for the TAKS test, advice that she interpreted as contradictory across different teachers and grade levels. When it came to the relationship between writing done for standardized tests and the writing that she did now, Caroline described a timed essay exam for her U.S. History class she was preparing for, expressing frustration that she was given possible prompts ahead of time but still forced to write in this in-demand setting, and the speeches she now writes to raise awareness and funding for cancer organizations who helped her with her treatment.

Victor was the only student I interviewed who did not take AP English, explaining to me that he was in football and other extracurriculars that took up too much time for him to take challenging courses. He transferred to UH from a community college where he had taken the first semester freshman composition course. In terms of his background, Victor is a first-generation Venezuelan-American who was born in Kansas, but he moved to a Houston suburb in elementary school and attended public school there until he graduated. Out of all of my interviewees, Victor was able to speak most extensively about being taught to write for the statewide TAKS test and the high-stakes nature of that exam. He contrasted that writing and the writing he did in his high school English classes with the writing he did in a creative writing elective he took his senior year of high school, which he found enjoyable despite his feeling that he was “not creative,” an idea he expressed multiple times in both his interview and his in-class writing. He insisted he did not do any writing in college as an engineering major, though when asked specifically he did say that he wrote a lot for lab reports and other genres that engineers are familiar with. He also cited his engineering focus as a reason that he

needed this kind of creative writing -- to push him outside of his comfort zone. This perhaps influenced Victor's thoughts about why writing for these exams ought to be more free and less prompt-driven. He fully embraced the opportunity to write on a topic that was of interest to him in my English 1304 class, choosing to design and advocate for a new system for paying college student athletes in his researched argument.

Amanda is a self-described "military brat" who grew up all over the world, attending schools on military bases across the country as well as overseas. Beginning in middle school, she attended public schools in San Antonio, including a charter school for junior high and a science and engineering academy for high school. She described her high school as a school with a particularly bad reputation for poor academic performance, explaining that this led the school to put a heavy emphasis on testing in order to secure funding. Amanda had perhaps the most negative view of testing, positioning herself as someone who saw writing as a creative, personal activity that she saw as inherently incompatible with the ways in which these tests were shaped. Amanda took AP English classes in high school, but she was also taught specifically to write for the TAKS test, which she saw as a measure of basic competencies that asked for a limited version of writing, stifling her creativity. While in my class, Amanda was an architecture major, and she wrote about the true definition of art, exploring what should be considered art and why.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the interview style I adopted was semi-structured and conversational. I did draw on my knowledge of each of my interviewees I had from them being in my English 1304 class, most notably in asking them about specific kinds of writing they did related to their major, specifically because when initially asked most simply answered that they had done very little writing since leaving my class. I did attempt to ask all

of the open-ended interview questions provided in Appendix A, encouraging students to bring up stories or strategies that stuck out most of in their minds instead of asking them to summarize their experiences writing for these exams or calling out specific strategies I suspected their teachers may have used to prepare for the exams. Toward the end of the interviews, especially in those that I conducted later, I often followed up on a few commonalities, like the use of sample student papers in preparing for standardized tests. In these two chapters detailing my interview findings, I've tried to be clear about when my interviewees brought up specific strategies and when I asked them specifically about them.

Test Writing in the State of Texas

For the purpose of these interviews, I defined "test writing" broadly and began each interview by describing its basic properties -- writing that was done in a timed setting, usually under the direction of a prompt, for a grade or other academic incentive. Though occasionally my interviewees discussed essay exams for high school classes or other forms of test writing, primarily they talked about preparing to write for AP exams (most often AP English exams), the state-mandated Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), and college entrance exams including the ACT or SAT, in that order. In this section, I provide more background on these three most common forms of test writing so as to better understand the type of instruction and approach teachers advocated and students implemented for each of these exams. While the specifics are worth noting, I contend that the universal limitations of these exams -- specifically that they ask students to write a timed essay on a specific prompt to an unknowable audience for the purpose of proving competence and gaining some tangible benefit for themselves or their schools -- are what

make them so damaging, and thus we can make some generalizations about "test writing" across the board based on what my students were taught about these specific exams.

Because three of the students I interviewed took AP English classes their junior and senior years, the two years prior to them enrolling in my first-year writing class, this was the exam discussed most frequently during our interviews. Both exams begin with a one-hour multiple-choice section consisting of approximately 55 questions, largely based on literary or historical readings. The junior year AP English Language and Composition exam features three free response questions -- a synthesis question based on three provided sources, an argument, and a rhetorical analysis of a given text -- that students must write within 2 hours and 15 minutes. The senior year AP English Literature and Composition exam also features three response questions -- all of which are based on the analysis of literary works, including the final essay, where students may choose any work they wish to analyze -- that students must write within 2 hours. The essays are scored in a central location by high school English teachers and college instructors who teach the same courses that the AP exam will earn them credit for[51]. Students earn credit for first-year writing for scoring high enough on these exams, saving them hundreds of dollars in college tuition. These exams cost roughly $100 to take, but many high schools subsidize or completely cover the costs of taking these exams. Though the AP program seeks to empower teachers to create their own curriculum and discourages teachers from teaching solely to the test[52], these exams are nevertheless

[51] I participated in the 2016 AP English Language and Composition reading event in Kansas City, Missouri, as an AP reader. I was assigned the rhetorical analysis essay, which I graded roughly 1300 of over seven day, working from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. in a large room in a convention center with hundreds of other English Language graders.

[52] This idea came up several times during the AP Open Forum for English Language and Composition at the 2016 grading in Kansas City in the evening on Monday, June 13th, at which College Board representatives shared updates and fielded questions from AP English Language and Composition graders, most of whom were AP English teachers. Specifically, Brandon Abdon, Director of Advanced Placement English at College Board,

emphasized heavily in AP classes, since the students' performance on them determines whether or not they earn college credit for the course[53].

The Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) was the state-mandated high-stakes test associated with No Child Left Behind that my students most often took and thus discussed in their interviews. The TAKS replaced the Texas Assessment of Academic Knowledge (TAAS) in 2003, and thus a couple of my interviewees did take the TAAS in elementary school. The TAKS has since been replaced by the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) beginning in 2012, when the students I interviewed had already finished their required statewide testing. The TAKS assessed writing using a standard timed essay in grades 4, 7, 10 and 11. Though the TAKS writing test differed across grade levels, it typically consisted of a multiple choice section, a written composition, and open-ended short answer questions. Across all grades, essays were graded on a four-point scale, with 1 being the lowest and 4 being the highest, using the categories of "focus and coherence," "organization," "development of ideas," "voice," and "conventions." The written composition consisted on a one-sentence prompt asking students to write some kind of narrative or expository piece of writing, though the purpose is not always entirely clear. Past prompts include: "Write an essay about a time you helped another person," "Write an essay explaining the value of the small, everyday events of life," and "Write an essay explaining what courage means to you." The prompt is followed by a box containing the following pointers, with checkboxes[54] beside them:

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who presented much of the information at this meeting, emphasized that this was a core goal of the AP program and that there would be no master textbook or curriculum for AP English Language teachers to work off of.

[53] Contrast this to dual credit English courses, where students earn credit for both high school and college English courses simultaneously.

[54] The choice of checkboxes over bulletpoints is significant to me, emphasizing the mentality that many of my interviewees echoed that good writing was writing that had all the necessary elements.

REMEMBER—YOU SHOULD:

- ❑ write about the assigned topic
- ❑ make your writing thoughtful and interesting
- ❑ make sure that each sentence you write contributes to your composition as a whole
- ❑ make sure that your ideas are clear and easy for the reader to follow
- ❑ write about your ideas in depth so that the reader is able to develop a good understanding of what you are saying
- ❑ proofread your writing to correct errors in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, and sentence structure

Students were given an entire school day to complete the English Language Arts exam, which consisted of several pieces of writing students answered "reading" questions about and sample essays that students answered "revising" questions about, amounting to approximately 50 multiple choice questions in total. Students were given the front and back of one lined page to write their composition, with strict instructions not to write outside of the box.

Students also discussed the the essay sections of the SAT and ACT exams as one of the forms of test writing they prepared for in high school specifically, both in the form of expensive test prep classes and from instruction from their high school English teachers on how to best approach the exam essay. The writing section for both of these exams has changed significantly since my students took them, which was between 2012 and 2014. At that time, the SAT had a mandatory writing section comprised of a 25-minute written essay written in response to questions like, "Should we question the decisions made by figures of

authority?" or "Can success be a disaster?"[55]. Similarly, at that time, the ACT featured an optional writing section that featured a timed essay on a prompt that asked students to take a stance on an issue:

> Watching TV can be bad for your brain. However, sometimes it's educational, so some people think it's good for your brain. So in your opinion, do you think that TV is good or bad?
>
> In your essay, take a position on this question. You may write about either one of the two points of view given, or you may present a different point of view on this question. Use specific reasons and examples to support your position.

Students were given 40 minutes to write an essay in the space provided on the exam[56].

As discussed in Chapter 1, there is a clear disconnect between how standardized tests assess writing and how those in rhetoric and composition say writing ought to be assessed. The exams discussed here are a far cry from authentic writing assessment that respects local conditions and asks students to produce writing for a knowable audience and a meaningful purpose on a topic that is relevant to them. Furthermore, it's worth considering the damages done by the claims that these last two types of test writing make about what college-level writing is. Though both the SAT and ACT have made major revisions to their writing sections in the past few years, the fact that these two major college entrance exams require students to write argumentative essays supported by evidence and reasons and even encourage binary approaches to these topics in the ways that they structure their prompts may

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[55] College Board announced in 2014 that it would be overhauling the SAT-W essay, which was added in 2005, altogether, explaining that the essay section "has not contributed significantly to the overall predictive power of the exam" (Jaschik). The essay is now optional, and it asks students to respond to a piece of writing and to analyze evidence.

[56] The ACT also changed their writing section in 2015, creating a more analytical essay prompt that asks students to analyze three different points of view on an issue. The ACT cited a desire to better align the exam with the CORE curriculum as one of its chief reasons for changing the exam.

lead students to conclude that this is what "college writing" typically is, or that producing this kind of writing is a fair measure of writing ability and competence[57]. These conclusions are worsened when colleges use these college entrance exams to give students credit for or place them in specific first-year writing classes, as well as through the AP exam, which gives students college credit for earning a certain score based on a multiple choice section and a timed essay. The suggestion from these exams that producing this limited form of writing can effectively gauge one's ability to do "college writing" may lead students to conclude that this approach to writing is appropriate for all the writing they do in college and beyond; these exams carry this genre of formulaic test writing beyond the realm of K-12 and brings it to a place of prominence in the university as well.

Context: The Economics of Testing

The context surrounding standardized tests has such a major impact on how students view the exam and how teachers teach students to approach the exam that it must first be understood in order to make sense of the kinds of instruction, strategies, and attitudes students bring with them to test writing. Because all students that I interviewed lived in Texas for most of their K-12 education, all took Texas's statewide exam, which, during their time in school, was the TAKS. Two students I interviewed spoke about the high-stakes nature of this specific exam, including Victor, the only interviewee who did not take AP English and thus was subjected to more preparation for the statewide exam than my other interviewees whose schools saw them as advanced students who were less in need of

[57] As mentioned in Chapter 1, these claims are often made overtly in test prep texts, including College Board's *SAT Study Guide*, which begins its chapter on the SAT-W section: "In the essay component of the writing section, the student-written essay assesses your ability to develop and express ideas effectively. It evaluates your ability to do the kind of writing required in college" (99).

preparation for the TAKS. Victor told me he remembered being "nervous" the first time he took the statewide exam in elementary school, explaining, "At [our school] when we got the grades back, they'd be like, 'Hey you got x percent' passing, and they were really happy about it, and if we got 100%, we'd get a pizza party, and we were just like, 'Alright, I guess that's how they do it.'" Though a pizza party seems like a fairly harmless way to reward students for their performance on standardized tests, the fact that these incentives stick out in students' minds speak to the significant ways in which schools emphasized performance on the exam above all else[58]. In both overt and subtle ways, schools reinforce that the importance of these exams, and by extension this narrow genre of writing they represent. Amanda offered an even more striking example of how highly her schools valued the test:

> In 6th grade, I had to get foot surgery, and it wasn't a surgery I could delay, and it happened to be the week of the TAKS test, and the school had called my parents and asked them to move my surgery. That was how important these tests were to that school. I was in honors classes in middle school, they expected me to do well [on the exam]. My mom loves telling that story.

This is a powerful example of how much schools value the exam, placing it over even the health of the student. While the ways in which teachers talk about the importance of these exams within the walls of their own classrooms certainly have an impact, even a teacher who wishes to teach the standardized test essays as only one genre in a whole range of writing activities that students will engage in are undermined when the school administrators place so much emphasis on performing well on these exams.

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[58] Victor's anecdote reminded me of a memory from fifth grade, when my elementary school principal broke down in tears of joy as she read over the announcements that every grade had passed the statewide TAAS test, an incident that scared and confused some students in younger grades and was reenacted on playgrounds and at talent shows for laughs.

In addition to these anecdotes that highlight the extent to which the schools value these exams, another crucial piece of my interviewee's conception of the context for these exams is the idea that these exams get schools money from the state. When I asked Victor whether he felt there was pressure from the school to pass the TAKS, he answered, "Yeah, especially at our high school. I believe if you have good grades you get more money from the state -- I'm not sure how it works." The reason Amanda cited for her school asking her to move her surgery was because "how you score on standardized tests helps the school get money." She elaborated on this in her in-class writing from my English 1304 course:

> My high school never had enough funding from local taxes, due to a poorly chosen location. Since they needed the funding, they stressed two things: attendance and standardized testing. The more people who went to class, the higher scores they received on the TAKS, the more money the school got. So in high school, I had "benchmark exams" every other week. Instead of teaching us material, they taught us tests.

Though the details were not always clear or accurate, my interviewees and my students often have some idea that their performance on the statewide exam is tied to funding for their schools[59]. None of my interviewees and few of my students interrogated this idea or sought to understand why funding might be linked to school performance on standardized tests, which reflects the way in which our education system has been damaged by the prominence of neoliberalism, the idea that the free market ought to govern all aspects of our society[60],

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[59] Though this was not the case for any of the students I interviewed, this phenomena is further worsened when schools with low test scores in the state of Texas are under threat of closure or charter takeover. At these crisis points, students are pressured to pass the test or face major traumatic changes to their educational environment.

[60] Giroux and Searls Giroux define neoliberalism as "one of the most pervasive and dangerous ideologies of the twenty-first century" resulting in "[f]ree-market fundamentalism rather than democratic idealism [as] the

that are so prevalent in our culture they seem invisible. Henry Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux, along with many others, point to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the accompanying increase in testing as evidence of neoliberalism invading our education system because "the reform places high priority on accountability, tying what little federal monies schools receive to improved test performance," essentially linking student performance to economic gain in a way that runs counter to democratic views of education and encouraging standardization and competition over critical thinking (210). I saw a passive acceptance of the unfair realities of the world in the ways my interviewees discussed the financial rewards of testing. Amanda, the same student who lamented the ways in which tying funding to test results limited her high school curriculum, matter-of-factly explained why she did not receive much instruction for the SAT test in her high school without evaluating that system: "The SAT is a bit more important than the TAKS test in my view, though I guess they [the schools] don't get money from the SAT test. I guess that's why they don't care as much." Toward the end of his interview, Victor, who spent a year at a community college before transferring to UH and switching majors, complained about the ways that the focus on the statewide exam displaced instruction that could have helped him succeed in college:

> I'm not even sure why they do the TAKS test … because like when we graduated high school, I feel like we weren't as prepared as we should have been, because they trained us so hard to pass the TAKS and get the state funding that they didn't really teach us how to survive in college, which is the worst part. I wish they were more helpful when it came to deciding what you want to do with your life because I feel like a lot of people come out, and they're like, "I'm going to do this because my

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driving force of economics and politics in most of the world," infecting many social relationships, including that between "teacher and student," by reducing them to the roles of "supplier and consumer" (204).

> parents did it, I'm going to do it because it's easy or I'm going to do it because it makes the most money," and sometimes these can be the wrong reasons to do something and then you end up spending a lot of time wasted doing it, which is good for the school because they get the money and you're constantly staying in school, but it's not good for everyone else, because they end up graduating and they're in debt.

Victor mentions money twice here, both of which refer to a school benefitting financially in a way that disadvantages the student. First, high school (and K-12 more broadly) students are not taught what they should be taught -- which in his view, as he explained later in the interview, is a curriculum that encourages exploration and development of personal interests and concrete preparation for college -- and are instead taught to perform for a test in order to secure funding for their schools. Second, college students waste time deciding what they should be majoring in, paying the college to take courses that may not benefit them. From here, we continued talking about the ways that the curriculum could better help students instead of schools, specifically by including more classes that push students outside of their comfort zone, like creative writing, but even his comments there touched on the economic realities of the world we live in, remarking that "if you graduate and you don't go into higher education, well, where are you gonna go from there, just knowing basic algebra and stuff?" **Though I see some frustration in the ways that my interviewees discuss the high-stakes nature of these exams and the ways in which they are tied to funding, I primarily see a complicit attitude about this being the way that the world works: performance is tied to economics in a way that is not fair but cannot be changed**. The fact that this reality extends to education is not particularly noteworthy or surprising to them. This is consistent

with the unfortunate pervasiveness of neoliberalism. The notion that the free market should govern all is so ingrained in our society that it is difficult for all, especially for young college students, to question it, and teachers must take specific actions if they wish to encourage their students to reflect critically on the prominence of this ideology in their lives and especially their education[61].

This link between test performance and economics is also evident in the ways students think about the AP English Language and Literature exams as courses that will get them credit for college. Amanda, Juan, and Caroline all took AP English classes, and all expressed having personal stakes in that class and that exam because it would earn them college credit. Amanda puts it perhaps most strikingly, explaining that when they took time out of her AP English class a couple weeks before the statewide TAKS exam to teach strategies for that specific exam, she would think to herself, "This isn't the test that I'm concerned about. I want to talk about the test that will give me credit for college." It's worth noting here that, like the statewide exam, there is a significant economic reward associated with high performance on the AP exam; the difference is that students often feel this reward more personally, and thus feel even greater pressure to perform well on this exam in order to save money on college tuition[62]. In other words, the economic incentive to perform well and the neoliberal ideology that undergirds that notion apply not only to the statewide exam, but

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[61] Giroux and Searls Giroux have ideas about how specifically teachers might achieve this: "We live in very dark times, yet as educators, parents, activists, and workers we can address the current assault on democracy by building local and global alliances and engaging in struggles that acknowledge and transcend national boundaries, while demonstrating how these intersect with people's everyday lives. Democratic struggles cannot underemphasize the special responsibility of intellectuals to shatter the conventional wisdom and myths of neoliberalism with its stunted definition of freedom and its depoliticized and dehistoricized definition of its own alleged inevitability" (214-215). This shattering is risky and painful precisely because it is so deeply ingrained in how we all view the world.

[62] I personally can attest to the economic gains of performing well on AP exams. In high school, I took 10 AP exams that earned me 33 hours of college credit, all of which I was able to claim and apply to my degree at the University of Texas at Austin, allowing me to graduate a full year early and save thousands of dollars in tuition and living expenses.

to most standardized tests, as college is increasingly viewed as a financial exchange first and foremost where students trade tuition dollars for guaranteed employment[63].

Audience: The Overworked Graders

The notion that writing is an inherently social activity aimed at reaching an audience is a central concept in rhetoric and composition[64]. The audience of graders for a specific standardized test is similarly emphasized when preparing students for these exams. Of course, the problem is that this notion of audience is incredibly limited; students are writing to an unknowable grader who will assess their writing in a short period of time, providing only a score. Victor voiced frustration over the unknowability of his audience of graders in his interview: "I'm not really sure where [the essays] went, which is kind of interesting. We did all this work, and I have no idea where it went." He similarly wrote about this phenomenon in his in-class writing: "It's funny that you ask who our audience is, because I still don't know that at this point in my life. Teachers would tell us the 'TAKS people' -- but who is that?! If we had an idea, I think that could help with topic choices instead of writing the same crap every year." My interviewees and many of my past students have described a similar, somewhat contradictory approach to viewing the audience for these exams; they were constantly taught what graders would be looking for in these exams, but they were unsure of who these graders were. For the AP exam specifically, both Caroline and Amanda explained that they knew graders flew to a central location to grade exams together, Amanda

[63] The PSAT, SAT and ACT, for example, earn students college acceptance, scholarships, and other incentives that can be tied to economics. For example, when I applied to the University of Texas at Austin, students were given credit for first-year writing if they received a 600 or above on the SAT-W section, further incentivizing performance on these exams

[64] Further discussion of the social nature of writing and the role of audience in shaping a piece of writing can be found in Chapter 5.

remarking specifically on the fact that if graders "were grading too many 9s, they would bring you back and see if they were still 9 to their AP standards." Caroline described the process of grading an AP exam essay as she understood it in her interview, explaining that she thought graders took "like less than a minute" to assess each essay and what her impression of this process was:

> I think one grades it, and then another person grades it, and they have to be similar, or maybe they average the two or something. But if they're like really different then they'll have other people look at them too. But then the average would be the grade … At first I was kind of like, "Okay, how can they actually like have a good analysis of my paper if they're not even reading it, essentially?" But then, like also I know that my teacher was really experienced and had lots of years of practice and you have to go through a lot to be an AP grader, so they had to do something right[65].

Caroline's comments here point to another interesting theme among how my interviewees talked about the graders: many saw the fact that their teachers had graded AP or SAT exams as a sign of their expertise in this kind of genre, leading them to further trust how their teachers told them to approach the essay. Caroline told me, "I felt like I was writing to my teacher and thinking what she would think because I knew that she graded [AP exams] so she knew what she was doing. Or like, in the back of our mind we'd always think like, 'The AP graders are on the other side of this test.'" Juan discussed how his English teacher went over the SAT-W the them and gave them tips -- "the ways they wanted to see their writing

[65] In actuality, in order to be an AP reader, applicants must have taught the subject they're applying to read for for at least 3 years at the high school or college level. First-time readers receive no additional training; for AP English Language and Composition, first-time readers are simply taught the norm alongside other experienced readers on the first day of reading.

section" -- and that because "she was hired as a SAT grader or something," he found her pointers "helpful"[66].

The problem of students writing to graders who evaluate their writing instead of an "authentic" audience interested in understanding rather than merely assessing has been a problem in writing assessment in educational settings for decades, even before the rise of test culture. Yet the problems of writing for someone who will mainly assess your writing are elevated in the testing environment. Students write to graders they do not know, often ones that are unfamiliar with the local environments and situations they write out of, encouraging them to view writing as an objective, sterile, contextless endeavor. They do not receive any kind of feedback from these graders, negating the social elements of writing. Further, in this scenario in which teachers are valued for being graders of the test and therefore qualified to speak about what the graders "want" in a successful exam essay, the idea of test writing existing in a "closed system" is perpetuated and strengthened; students write a highly specialized form of writing for a highly specific grader looking for highly specific qualities within their writing, and they trust their teachers to be the guides of what exactly they should write because of their knowledge of these standards. This problem is compounded by the fact that we now have people who have taken these tests assessing these types of writing. Drawing on my own experience grading AP English Language exams, I scored that exam 8 years after I took that very exam, though I could have done so sooner, and found my own junior year AP English teacher grading there as well. This is hardly an unusual experience;

[66] Interestingly, this idea of trusting teachers because they were graders also worked in the inverse at the AP English Language and Composition reading that I participated in. Readers are placed at tables with ten other readers, including a table leader who occasionally verifies that everyone is scoring essays accurately. We'd often have discussions at our tables about sample essays and why they received the scores they did, during which oftentimes readers who were high school teachers would refer to specific practices they used in their classrooms or things that they told their students to include in the essay in order to get a higher score as explanation for why sample essays earned the score they did. Seeing it from this side of AP reading confirmed my views of the fact that this writing takes place in a "closed system."

the AP English Language exam celebrated its 60th birthday last year, and as it continues to grow, we will likely reach a point at which most of the graders for the exam will have taken the exam themselves, further exacerbating the problem by reinforcing that what AP considers to be "good writing" is indeed "good writing"[67]. **This closed way of evaluating contradicts the notion that writing is subjective, leading students to see teachers as judges of good writing and their peers or other readers as unqualified to provide feedback on their writing**.

A couple of my interviewees also discussed the limitations placed on the graders as shaping how they chose to approach the essay, specifically by trying to be entertaining or eliciting a certain response from graders who they knew would not spend much time evaluating their essay. Juan described in his in-class writing from my 1304 course: "When I write a piece of writing for an exam, I try to be formal, academic and smart about my writing since I know the people who will read my writing will be teachers and educators that expect that much. I also try to entertain the sore and tired eyes of the graders when I can." This notion of making their writing entertaining in order to keep the overworked grader interested was something that Victor also described when I first asked him how he was taught to write for standardized tests:

> When we took the TAKS exams, and there would be that portion with the writing, like they told us, like, "Yo, just fill up the paper, make it sound good," because they

[67] The AP exam has several redeeming qualities, including the number of essays and variety of genres that students produce for the exam. However, there are several problematic aspects about how AP assesses writing, even beyond the fact that they do so only through the use of timed essays. Specifically, I was discouraged by the ways in which language (specifically language that seems "impressive") is privileged over ideas, and how relevant background knowledge about the subject for the essay (which students obviously do not know ahead of time) is rewarded. These along with other factors suggest to me that AP graders attempt to assess a students' intelligence or "college readiness" based on somewhat shallow and inaccurate factors. Certainly similar essay exams have similar problems; graders forced to assess a piece of writing quickly may rely on shallow or unimportant factors.

> said that English teachers were grading them, so make it sound good and fill up the paper and then kind of give them a sob story, like something that they would want to read. And I was like, "Ugh, this is just lame," but I did it everytime, and I passed, so … I don't remember which [teacher] said it, but that's what stuck out in my mind, because almost every single time I'd write something about some political leader that had a downfall or something.

Again, this concept of writing a "sob story" or something otherwise full of emotional appeals was not a surprising idea to me[68]. The unknowability of the audience coupled with the constraints students know are placed on their readers -- namely that they will spend very little time reading their papers and the only feedback given is a number -- lead to these kinds of tactics to write an essay that will appeal to that anonymous reader's emotions.

Purpose: Writing to Prove Competence

The biggest determinant in how students approached test essays was their conception of the purpose for their writing. Specifically, when I asked students why they were writing essays for the AP exam or the TAKS test, I was often met with blank or confused stares. At two separate points in our interview, Caroline told me that the reason she was writing any test essay was "to get a good grade" and "to address the prompt fully," and that what would get you a good grade was "answering the question completely and putting it in the right format." This was an echo of what she wrote in her in-class writing 18 months before our interview: "The purpose is to convince whoever is reading the essay, most likely the grader, that what you are saying is true and makes a compelling story or argument that is fully

[68] Though I can't say that any teacher ever told me to take this approach, it was common for friends to write narratives about ridiculous tragedies that had befallen them under the impression that such stories had to earn a high score, especially on the statewide TAKS test.

answering the prompt." Her fixation on "answering the prompt" as the central reasons for writing any test essay is further explained by the first anecdote she told me when I asked her to talk about the ways she was taught to write for standardized tests:

> If the topic was, "Write about a time I had an adventure," [my teachers would] always say, "Make sure you say, like at the end or somewhere in there, 'This was the biggest adventure!' or address that it was an adventure." And they always said that because then the graders wouldn't dock you for not answering the prompt, because if you said it was an adventure, then it had to be an adventure, or something like that. And then like as I grew up, of course, all my teachers were like, "That is so stupid, obviously you're writing about an adventure." But I always used to rewrite the prompt in my paper just to make sure that I addressed it in elementary school.

She contrasted this feeling of being pressured to make sure that you answer the prompt when writing for the state exam in contrast to the other things she wrote in elementary school, which were much more open-ended, including freewriting and writing journals. For younger students, these exams are often the only time that students are forced to write in response to a specific prompt, which explains why teachers emphasize the prompt so heavily in lower grade levels, as Caroline recalled.

This focus on the prompt and the need to answer the prompt completely was a theme among my interviewees that I did not anticipate, but one that makes sense, given the rhetorical situation surrounding testing. If, as James Kinneavy contends, the "purpose in discourse is all important"[69], then the prompt for these standardized tests is all important because it invents the purpose (48). Students understand the importance of the exam and

[69] See Chapter 5 for a fuller discussion of purpose.

have some vague notion of who will be reading their work, but the entire reason for writing is contained in the prompt. Problems arise, though, when the prompts are not well-written or related to topics that students are interested in writing on. Victor mocked the types of questions asked on the TAKS exam during his interview:

> They would give us a prompt, like, "Write about" -- and it was like an interview, it was ridiculous, it would be like, "Write about a time you overcame adversity," and I was like, "How am I gonna think of this on the spot and then write three paragraphs about me fighting adversity?" It was ridiculous! And I feel like if they were just like, "I don't know, just write about something" and maybe that would help a little bit more because then people would not have to come up with something that was complete BS like I always did, I'd just write a bunch of stuff to fill up the paper.

In his frustration, Victor highlights one of the core problems with having students write for prompts and graders instead of purposes and people: teachers resort to teaching students how to replicate easy formulas that will work regardless of the prompt and discourage students from using creativity or thinking in their approaches to these tests, as will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4. Students rarely engage in invention or even think carefully about their essays for these exams due to the narrowness of the prompt and the ways in which students are constrained by time and by space for writing, as Amanda astutely described in her in-class writing: "The audience we wrote for didn't care if we showed intelligence, only if we could follow a simple order, answer this question with these rules on language. This kind of testing doesn't hold a purpose outside of a manufactured English, with everyone saying, writing, and thinking enough to get work done." The focus is solely on answering the prompt adequately and completely rather than achieving any aim.

The question remains, then, as to why these exams include prompts at all, especially if the grading process seems to be more about replicating a certain form regardless of the prompt given. In his interview, Juan described his surprise at discovering this was a common practice after he moved to the United States in fifth grade and took the statewide standardized test: "They told me you had to write on this prompt on the TAKS, and you had this much time, it wasn't really something I was used to ... I feel like the writing [I did in my classes in Mexico] was really free, like I never seen something where they give you a prompt, write an essay about this -- nothing like that." Throughout his interview, Juan lamented the narrowness and lack of creativity allowed on these kinds of exams, which he also wrote about in his in-class writing on the rhetorical situation of standardized tests: "I like to write from time to time, but the fact that I will be timed and graded on what I convey seems like a hindrance. I wished I had the chance to write to my heart's content on whatever subject I wished to write about at the time." This was an idea that Victor also seemed enthusiastic about in his interview, after expressing frustration at the narrowness of most test essays:

> But I don't know maybe if they gave you like an idea, or something like, more broad, just write about it, because they should. I just don't get it … See that's the tough thing because if it was more broad, then those people who I guess aren't really used to it, they would have a hard time - because if they were given a prompt, they think, "Okay, I can write about this, I can just do it." But I mean how often in life is everything just right there -- life is random. I'd prefer it, but it's tough to make it for everybody because people have different experiences.

Here he describes the ways in which the prompt creates a feeling of safety for some students, while creating restrictions for others. I saw this in the confidence with which some of my interviewees, most notably Caroline, continually told me that their objective on the exam was simply to answer the prompt, whereas others were unsure of exactly why they were writing -- some even struggled to pick whether these exam essays were arguments, persuasive pieces, narratives, or description, even when I listed and described each genre. There is a safety in being able to answer a specific question that does not exist when students are allowed to determine their own topic or purpose, but with that lack of safety comes a greater opportunity for exploration and meaningful writing than comes from writing done only to answer a prompt and earn a high score. And this safety extends to the graders as well; it's difficult to assess varied forms of writing quickly. Amanda speaks to this, explaining, "The way I see how they prepare you to standardized tests isn't exactly to write … I view writing as a way to express yourself, and that isn't necessarily easy to grade."

Both Juan's shock at the existence of these narrow writing prompts and Caroline's insistence that the sole purpose of her test essays was to "answer the prompt" reflect the ways in which these prompts eliminate any true purpose for writing. Amanda and Victor both expressed frustration with the ways that these prompts eliminate any creativity in order to ease grading, and rightfully so. **The prompt is created to narrow the kind of writing that students produce in order to make it easier for graders to assess student writing, but in reality, it is the prompt that makes it impossible for these essays to truly reflect writing ability. Students are writing only to answer this prompt and demonstrate their writing ability instead of writing for a real purpose, and thus this is merely an exercise in replicating an uncreative, shallow form instead of writing for an actual purpose to**

reach a real audience. The test essay does not assess anything except for a student's ability to write a test essay.

Conclusion: Critiquing the Context of Testing

In the next chapter, I will discuss the specific ways that students were taught to write for these high-stakes exams, contrasting this with how they approached writing in other settings and in the years since they graduated from high school, and concluding with implications for the first-year writing classroom. These tactics for approaching and viewing writing in our current test-centric education system have a major impact on how our first-year writing students view writing and they result directly from the context under which these exams are written and produced. Specifically, **students' purpose of proving competence to graders in order to ensure advantages for themselves and their schools proves most problematic, creating a writing curriculum that focuses on formulas and strategies for earning a high score with a grader looking for specific qualities of "good writing."** Though certainly, as Thomas Newkirk argues, it is reasonable for writers to be aware of certain expectations their readers have, problems arise when specific criteria are identified that are not mutually agreed upon by reader and writer, as is the case with the Educational Testing Service and other large-scale assessments:

> In the late fifties and early sixties, Paul Diederich (1974) of the Educational Testing Service developed a scale that could be used to evaluate the writing samples that would be built into the ETS's standardized tests. His four-item set of criteria for general merit -- ideas, organization, wording, and flavor -- are variants on the terms developed in the late nineteenth century. These various scales often provide the

> comforting illusion that the qualities of good writing are something a piece of writing has and that our apprehension of these qualities equates to our reading experience. [...] To the extent that readers of student work share this tacit aesthetic, this sense of performative expectation, it can appear that these categories are solid and explanatory. Paradoxically they are clear only if known, clear only if there is a shared substratum of experience and expectation. (7)

We can see this formalist assumption that "qualities of good writing are something a piece of writing has" in the exam materials themselves, including the checkboxes that appear on TAKS prompts. As will be seen in the next chapter, much of the instruction students received for these exams were attempts to familiarize students with the expectations of the graders, instruction that could be better spent teaching students to write for naturally varying, socially and contextually mediated rhetorical situations. Yet the high-stakes nature of these exams, specifically the fact that schools earn funding and students earn college placement, credit, or scholarships for performing well on them, incentivizes corruption by means of narrowing the curriculum and teaching students specific strategies for writing the successful test essay that, to use Caroline's words, "answer[s] the question" and appears in "the right format" (Nichols and Berliner).

Finally, while most agree that a timed essay is not the ideal way to assess student writing ability, **there is a false sense of hopelessness when it comes to rethinking how we assess writing**. Those designing these assessments are guilty of posing timed writing as the only way to fairly evaluate student writing ability. When fielding a question from an AP teacher at the AP Open Forum for English Language and Composition at the AP reading in June 2016 about whether AP might consider replacing the synthesis essay, which asks

students to write an essay citing three different sources, with a portfolio containing a research paper, Brandon Abdon, Director of Advanced Placement English at College Board, remarked that though AP students should not be writing solely timed writings, there was no other way for them to assess writing, calling this the "paradox of assessment." The reality is that there are ways to assess writing that are fairer and more open than this, but that there are no **cheap** or **easy** ways to assess writing in this way. Money would need to be allocated to collect and transport essays. Graders would have to be given ample time and compensation to read and consider a variety of essays on different topics. As Anson points out, these alternatives are "too often silenced by the political power and reach of the large-scale testing industry and the politicians and policy-makers at various levels who blindly adopt the industry's products" (124). It is our responsibility as experts in writing to speak up against these unfair measures of assessment and to furnish alternatives, as Anson calls for:

> As more and more teachers in high school narrow students' practice to a single, artificial, but nationally institutionalized test, it is not only important that we advocate for the cultivation of such meta-awareness and the diverse practices that nourish it, but that we also let the over-tilled fields of testing lie fallow and plow new ground based on more authentic forms of assessment. (125)

Based on what writing scholars value about writing, this new ground for more authentic form of assessment may include many factors, including assessment that is locally controlled, portfolio-based assessment, and assessment of writing that is done for real audiences and contexts on prompts that resonate with students, or on no prompts at all. The important thing is that we do not stop at critiquing the ways in which writing assessment currently operates, but that we also take real steps to offer alternatives that allow students to see writing as

operating in an open system rather than a closed system that allows for little variation or rhetorical decision-making.

Chapter 4

Interviews: Writing for Tests versus Writing Outside of Tests

Test writing, or writing in which students produce writing on demand within a set of constraints usually including a prompt and time limit, is not in and of itself damaging. Problems arise when high stakes are attached to these exams. High-stakes exams are damaging primarily because of the ways in which they limit the curriculum and convey to students that a particular form of writing is the most important. As Nichols and Berliner argue in *Collateral Damage*, the high-stakes nature of these exams reinforces and worsens the effect they have on education, incentivizing corruption and shortcuts in order to achieve optimal results. In testing, this occasionally manifests itself in teacher or student cheating and other more extreme versions of corruption, but it also takes the form of narrowing the curriculum and encouraging students to "game" the exam in various ways. The greater the stakes, the more teachers teach only to the exam, and, for writing specifically, the more prescriptive and formulaic writing instruction becomes in order to ensure that students pass the exam and gain the rewards associated with the exam. This is consistent with George Hillocks' findings in *The Testing Trap*, where he studies state writing tests from five states, interrogates, and ultimately disproves the idea that encouraging standards through writing assessment improves our education system and student learning. Instead, he found through studying the exams themselves as well as studying classroom practices that because of these tests teaching is limited to teaching the five-paragraph essay in the tradition of current-traditional rhetoric in the presentational mode; teachers ignore more dynamic means of teaching writing through inquiry or through constructivist or epistemic approaches because

they are considered too risky when the stakes for exams are so high and test makers are so clear on what they are looking for in student essays.

One of the practical goals of conducting interviews with my former students was to gain a better understanding of what was happening in the classroom to prepare students for these exams from the student's perspective. Many, including Hillocks and more recently the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) through their Assessment Story Project[70], have asked teachers how they see their classroom practices being shaped by testing, but few have taken the time to discover and study what students think about the ways that these exams have shaped their education, leading me to want to investigate this in more detail. I then wanted to contrast this specific genre of "test writing" and their impressions of how they were taught to approach it with the ways in which they were taught to approach other kinds of writing, including both writing they did in K-12 that was not geared toward the test, writing they did and continue to do in college, and other forms of self-sponsored writing. In this chapter, I will share my interview[71] findings about how students are taught to write specifically for standardized tests, and how this contrasts with the writing students do that is not for exams. I will conclude with implications based on these findings for how we might approach first-year writing the era of high-stakes testing.

Emphasis on Test Writing in the K-12 Classroom

[70] The Assessment Story Project began in early 2016 with the NCTE collecting a five-question survey from English teachers at all levels about (1) about their uses of literacy assessment(s) and (2) about the impact of assessment on them and their students. The survey closed in July 2016, and the NCTE is now "compiling the results into a variety of resources so we can share the views of educators with legislators, the media, school administrators, education reformers, and other teachers."

[71] I am drawing solely on interview findings in this chapter, not on the in-class writing students completed. That in-class writing was focused on the rhetorical situation of testing and their impressions of it rather than specific classroom strategies enacted by their teachers, making it more relevant for the topic of Chapter 3.

One of the unfortunate but unsurprising findings from my interviews was that much of the writing instruction done in the K-12 classroom is geared toward preparing students to write for standardized tests. Again, this is not surprising given the high-stakes nature of these exams, which encourages teachers to narrow the curriculum and teach students to "game" the exam. But one surprising finding from my interviews was the emphasis put on this same limited genre of timed test essay in the Advanced Placement classes, which purport to promote rigor and encourage college readiness. All three of the students I interviewed who were enrolled in AP classes at three different high schools in the state of Texas described the AP English classes they took as being primarily focused on preparing students to take the AP test. When I asked Juan how much of the writing he did in his AP English classes was geared toward writing for standardized tests, he answered, "99.99%. That .01% was 'How was your summer?' and 'Who are you?'" He elaborated that because this was an AP class, "the focus was on AP. It was geared toward us taking the AP right then and there. Even during PreAP[72] they focused on preparing us for that." Amanda's experience was similar; in her words, she explained that in "AP English classes, they wanted you to pass those tests, a lot, they really wanted you to pass those tests." When I asked Caroline how much of her AP English classes were geared toward preparing her for the AP test, she indicated that that was the core focus of those classes, and that her teachers prepared her through both practice multiple choice sections and through "timed writings," the term AP teachers and students use to describe practice AP essays completed in class:

> I feel like everything was based off of the test. The only time we didn't do things based off of the test was after we took the test. So like we took the test at the

[72] Students often taken PreAP English their freshman and sophomore years in high school. These are considered more advanced courses, and students begin to prepare for the exams even in these courses, years before they will take them.

> beginning of May, and school wasn't out till June, so after that we just watched movies, because they were like, "you guys worked so hard, you deserve a break." [Preparing for the test] was completely what the whole class was based off of. We had timed writings all the time, and then we also had AP multiple choice questions, and those were so hard. Like I remember people, like we would read the thing and then answer them, and then we'd ask ourselves, what was the point of even reading the topic? Because everyone got like 2 right out of 10.

This emphasis on the test is unsurprising because of the way that the AP program is set up; students take AP courses for high school credit, and then choose to pay to take an AP exam, and if they earn a certain score on that exam, they earn college credit and can be placed into more advanced courses in college. Though AP's identified focus is on "placement" rather than "credit,"[73] the students I interviewed as well as those I've had in my classes in the past speak about AP courses through the mentality of earning college credit, not placement in advanced college courses, as we see in Amanda's remarks when being prepared to take the TAKS test: "This isn't the test that I'm concerned about. I want to talk about the test that will give me credit for college."

This focus on teaching to the AP test is an important and often overlooked piece of our current test-centric education system. First, the AP program purports to not want this kind of narrow, teach-to-the-test mentality in their classrooms, determined to empower teachers to develop their own curriculum and teach students a variety of writing and reading

[73] I am taking these ideas from the AP Open Forum for English Language and Composition meeting held on Monday, June 13th at the 2016 AP Reading event in Kansas City, Missouri. Specifically, Brandon Abdon, Director of Advanced Placement English at College Board, emphasized that the name of the program was "Advanced **Placement**," elaborating, "We don't ask that colleges necessarily give credit [for the exam]. We've proven to you that they can perform, so don't make them sit next to someone who can't write a paragraph [in first-year writing], put them in advanced composition."

skills that will benefit them both on the exam and outside of it[74]. But because of the high-stakes nature of these exams, in this case earning students college credit, teachers and students alike fixate on the exam and focus on preparing for success on these exams above developing writing and reading skills that can apply to many different environments. Though the writing section of the AP English Language exam is admittedly better designed and more involved than the TAKS, SAT, or ACT writing sections[75], the reality is that assessing writing using these "timed writings" will incentivize teachers to teach to this specific genre instead of teaching students to think, write, and revise essays[76]. Furthermore, because this exam does purport to measure college readiness, it sends a dangerous message to students that the kind of writing done for these exams -- specifically a timed essay requiring little thought or revision -- is the kind of writing that will be expected of them in college, perhaps even more so than college admissions exams.

The way that I most clearly saw how much of my students' time in K-12, and high school especially, was spent writing for timed writing tests was to ask students what other kinds of writing they did in their English classes. Caroline and Juan both told me that they did hardly any -- two or three -- written and revised essays in their AP English classes. And unsurprisingly, these papers were often based on literary works; both Juan and Victor named specific works of fiction that they struggled to write about for a major paper assignment. But

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[74] Again, this idea comes from Brandon Abdon at the AP Open Forum for English Language and Composition, where he stated that there would be no springboard AP textbook because AP's focus is on "building capacity for teachers so that they can go and build lessons for their course," an idea echoed in their materials.

[75] See discussion in Chapter 3 about the design of the AP English Language exam.

[76] At the AP Open Forum, Abdon said, "In some classes, teachers are just doing timed writings all year, and they're not writing papers. That's bad practice. If you're sending students to a college classroom and telling them they're reading for a college course when they're not." He dismissed a suggestion from an AP teacher in the audience about replacing the synthesis essay with a revised researched paper portfolio without much explanation as to why and despite calling himself a dedicated "process person." He ultimately dismissed this as "the paradox of assessment," suggesting that this timed writing format as the only practical way to assess writing.

perhaps most interestingly, when I asked Amanda whether she wrote essays that she revised for her classes, she explained that she actually revised her timed writing she did in preparation for the AP exam:

> With our timed writing essays, we did revise them, and we just made them look better, but that doesn't necessarily help me write it better when we're sitting down in a test and writing my essay, because I don't have extra time to go back and revise it. I have to move on to the next essay. So it helps me realize where my mistakes are, but it doesn't help me write any longer than I did.

This kind of exercise of revising in order to learn from one's surface-level mistakes strikes me as especially damaging to how students think about the writing process. If revising becomes an exercise in finding mistakes, correcting them, and trying to recognize how to avoid them in a timed writing environment in the future, then revision is reduced to correction. I also found it striking that Amanda stated that this kind of "revision" did not help her "write any **longer**," not necessarily "write any better." Based on my experience reading AP English Language and Composition exams, this issue of not writing enough is a central issue for low-scoring essays, which is unsurprising given that students are given only two hours and fifteen minutes to write three essays[77].

Interestingly, the former AP students I interviewed said that their teachers employed a cramming strategy to teaching them to write for the statewide exam, the TAKS. Juan described going over TAKS "reading packets" a month or two before the exam, and Caroline said that the AP class hardly talked about TAKS at all. Amanda explained that for AP students, in the weeks before the exam, her teachers taught "the TAKS test and things that

[77] When grading AP exams, it was often clear that students had chosen not to write an essay or had run out of time to write a full essay, often despite writing two complete essays. More time would certainly be beneficial for ensuring that students have time to fully develop their ideas and write complete essays.

could throw you off or things that you were gonna miss or things that you should focus on in your studying." The presumption here is that AP students, because they are "advanced," do not need extensive training on how to perform well on these statewide exams that are not perceived as rigorous or challenging, yet there is still some necessary training for students to be able to perform well on the exam. This focus on small strategies for the exam in the weeks before the test, including looking at sample successful and unsuccessful essays, is evidence of teachers "gaming" the exam, or teaching students specific strategies that they believe will make them successful on the exam instead of teaching them more broadly applicable reading and writing skills. Ideally, assessment would not require "cramming." It would assess writing ability rather than measuring one's knowledge, familiarity, or ability to appropriately approach an exam, and there would be no need to warn students about potential places where they could be "tricked" on the exam.

Teaching to Write for the Test

As indicated in the responses above, the primary way in which students prepared to write for these standardized test essays was through "timed writings," an exercise in which students take a practice version of these essay portions of these exams in their English classrooms. Several interviewees mentioned taking "benchmark exams" and practice exams for the TAKS test, as well as full practice versions of the AP English exam. These exams were scored by their teachers using the scale and rubric that would be used by the exam graders (again, the authority of some teachers as experienced graders of these types of exams comes into play here), and students were given feedback on how to improve their test scores in the future.

In terms of how to approach the genre of test essay, unsurprisingly, all of my students described an approach that closely mirrors ideas from current-traditional rhetoric, specifically the five-paragraph essay. Caroline explained that for any AP English essay "you need an intro, a body, and a conclusion" and included "putting [the essay] in the right format" as one of the key aspects of a successful AP essay. Amanda similarly said there was a structure her teachers told her to follow for the TAKS, AP and SAT exams: "you have to write your introduction and your thesis, and then your body paragraph, body paragraph, body paragraph, conclusion paragraph." Victor said that for the TAKS test (and most of other forms of writing he did for K-12) his teachers "preached the intro with the thesis, then the body, then the conclusion, and the body has to have the three main points that you talk about," and his teachers warned him that when it came to organization, "Don't make some really confusing thing." It was evident as I interviewed all of my students that the focus was on replicating a specific format, not only for the sake of clarity, but for the sake of correctness, as directly evidenced by Caroline's mention of "right format" and by how my other interviewees discussed being taught to write this specific type of essay. The word "structure" was said by all four of my interviewees, and appears a total of eleven times in the transcripts from my interviews.

Unsurprisingly given the rigidity of these approaches, all of my interviewees discussed feeling some level of frustration with how they were taught to write these essays and the perceived lack of creativity they were able to use in writing them. Juan described to me how the writing he did in Mexico before moving to the United States "was more free," and he was allowed to "write about anything," which he contrasts with the writing he did for specific TAKS prompts once he moved to Texas, noting that his classmates "were really

limited ever since kindergarten. They weren't as free to write." Amanda also spoke extensively about how she found the ways she was taught to write for standardized tests limiting. When I first asked her to share her experience writing for standardized tests in K-12, this was her response:

> I can tell you about the stories I wrote on them -- I remember one story in particular that I got a low grade on because I tried to be abstract about it, and I know that's why I got a low grade. I don't remember the prompt exactly but I tried to write it like I was a little kid, and I had a child leash on, those little monkey backpacks, have you seen those? And I know that the humor I put into it was not appreciated, because I had written a decent short story for that project, and my creativity probably wasn't appreciated because they were looking for a specific kind of writing.

This emphasis on a "specific kind" of writing that is put in a "specific format" pervades how my students talk about test essays and how they were taught to write for them. From the rubrics and descriptions of how these kinds of tests are evaluated, we see that "risk taking" is not valued by the graders, and, furthermore, because of the high-stakes nature of these exams, teachers are more likely to teach students to write an essay that adheres to a specific, "proven" formula rather than encouraging students to write essays that are interesting or that take risks.

One of the central tools for discerning the "proven" formula for writing a successful test essay is the sample essays released by the test makers. All four students that I interviewed talked about the centrality of these sample essays to how they were taught to write for these standardized tests, with Victor and Amanda specifying that this was done in

the few weeks leading up to the test. The ways in which these sample essays were presented to students varied, with Caroline's teacher's approach being the most promising:

> There was a lot of talking about [the sample essay prompt] and how we would respond and reading other people's papers that were 5s or an example of a 5. Or so we'd look at papers and say like, "What do you think this got? Why did it not get a higher grade? What could they have done better?" That was a lot of it, too.

Caroline's English teacher approached the sample essays for the AP English exam from the angle of inquiry, encouraging students to consider what was successful or unsuccessful about an essay, even if this was couched in the view of essays as earning a certain grade rather than successfully achieving a certain purpose for a specific audience. Other interviewees discussed a more narrow approach to emulating specific aspects of the sample successful essays. Victor remembered these sample essays specifically because they were always shown using an overhead projector, an outdated piece of equipment that otherwise was not used in his class: "Yeah, I do remember that when the exam was coming up, I guess they got example [essays] from students from previous years. And they'd be like 'This one is not good, it's missing all this, it's jumbled' and 'This is a really good one, it has all the points.'" Amanda similarly explained that these were some of the key aspects of successful and unsuccessful essays: "Low-scoring was mostly grammatical mistakes and the writing didn't flow. High scoring was like the exact opposite which is kind of obvious. In high-scoring essays, you could see where the writing was going, and it was easy to read and easy to follow." The emphasis on structure and on including specific points was an idea echoed continually by my interviewees; sample essays were one tool used by instructors to

demonstrate exactly which elements to include in a standardized test essay and what order to put them in.

Juan and Amanda described feeling most limited by this use of sample essays, specifically by their teachers' attempts to get them to align their writing with the sample essays. Amanda described feeling frustrated even when her teachers presented sample essays for them to work off of:

> And I remember every few weeks or every now and then before the exam we would go over sample essays and how the other people scored, and it was just like, "I can't write this well, why are you expecting me to? If I can write in a way that you can understand, why do I need to write any better? Why do I need to write exactly like them?"

This gets at the central problem with how sample essays are used to teach writing for standardized tests specifically. Testing companies often release only a select few sample essays[78], choosing those that they view as "representative" of an essay that earns that score which are often those that are bland or formulaic rather than innovative or risky. Then, because of the high-stakes nature of these exams, teachers are encouraged to teach their students to "game" the exam, or produce a formulaic essay that closely aligns with the samples. Amanda elaborated that the writers of these high-scoring essays seemed to have writing talent that she did not see as replicable:

> These high-score essays, they had obviously managed to put a lot of thought into the short amount of time that they were writing this, and not everyone can do that in that

[78] Brandon Abdon explained at the AP Open Forum for English Language and Composition that the main reason AP releases only a select number of essays each year was due to the necessary ADA accommodations, including typing and creating audio versions of each sample essay they select. His announcement that sample essays for all scores, 1 through 9, would be made available this year was met with cheers from those in attendance at the forum, indicating what an important tool sample essays are for AP teachers.

> short amount of time. But it was obvious that they had some writing talent -- they could think through sentences, and then think about the next one was they were writing.

Often times, especially for the TAKS and AP exams, the sample high-scoring essays are much longer than the average essay, in addition to being especially insightful or polished, leading students to feel frustrated with their inability to produce an essay of this caliber within the constraints of the exam. With the AP exam especially, the essays that earn the highest scores (8s and 9s) often seem to have an especially deep knowledge of the context surrounding the prompt or were able to come up with an original and insightful argument, which students may not be able to do based on their knowledge of the topic.

Juan described the ways in which his teachers would attempt to restrict what he wrote in order to make his writing match up with what his teachers told him his essays needed to look like on these standardized tests. He described how one of his high school teachers would walk him through how to write a timed writing in preparation for the AP English exam:

> We would practice, and, our teacher, she was lovely, but when it came to grading our essays she was really strict. She'd get in that voice, and say, "Do this, don't do that. I like that." She would really limit what we could write over, really limit it. We would go in a certain direction, and she would say, "Oh yeah, that was really creative, but talk about this in this certain way." I mean it didn't matter that it was interesting, because it wouldn't get us a passing grade. So I was like, "Yeah, okay, I'll do it." [She would tell us that] we have to [write] in a certain sense where there's a paragraph with a topic sentence after that you have to make this point, after that, this

> point, then the quote, then this point, then this point, then end it like this. Basically the whole scale of the essay, she wanted it as she wanted it.

The notion of "that was really creative, but talk about this in this certain way" was especially striking to me, and Juan characterized it as a clear departure from the freer forms of writing he did before coming to the United States. These sample papers and the ways in which English teachers derive specific forms and directives for their students based on them lead students to feel, in their own words, that they cannot be creative or that the genre of "test essay" is beyond their ability to succeed at. Further, this idea that "it didn't matter that [the writing] was interesting, because it wouldn't get us a passing grade" violates what many would consider to be a basic principle of "good writing," trading writing that is interesting for writing that fits a set formula.

But this formulaic structure does serve an important role when it comes to grading, allowing graders to assess pieces of writing quickly[79]. Only one student that I interviewed, Victor, identified creativity as an asset rather than a liability due to the fast pace of grading and the volume of papers that the graders would assess. He was also the only student I interviewed who did not take an AP English exam, and he was speaking specifically of the TAKS test, which is often narrative-based or more open than AP and other writing exams, when he told me that his teachers told him "give them a sob story, like something that they

[79] From my experience grading AP English Language exams, I can attest to the fact that it is easier to assess hundreds of pieces of writing in a single day when the writing follows a particular formula. Grading the rhetorical analysis essay, most students would follow a formula of a five- or four-paragraph essay, identifying two or three rhetorical devices and explaining each in a paragraph. Students who took a different approach ran the risk of having their essay discounted because of this. For example, some of the most successful essays might identifying the rhetorical situation of the text in more detail first before then explaining how the rhetorical strategies were fitting of that situation, but given the fast pace of grading, these students ran the risk of being dismissed by graders as merely summarizing instead of analyzing the piece, especially if the grader did not carefully read the entire essay. The formulaic approach to the essay also also led some graders to take shortcuts in assessing the essays; several admitted to only skimming the introduction or not reading the conclusion altogether.

would want to read" because "English teachers would be grading them and they had to grade a ton of them so try to make it interesting for them so that they would be a little more lenient with you." But even this recommended strategy is not so much creative or thought-provoking as much as it is emotionally manipulative. The difficulty on these exams is that students are given little time to think about their responses before they begin writing and may not feel that they have anything at all -- much less anything creative or complex -- to write the prompt they are given, in which case the safer approach is to replicate a formula. Further, for other exams, especially those that ask students to synthesize, analyze, or respond to specific texts, teachers often encourage students to follow a specific formula, simply plugging in certain elements from the given text, and not deviate from it in order to ensure that they earn the highest possible score. Juan and Amanda both spoke specifically about the ways in which being creative or expressing yourself through writing was not acceptable on these exams because of the ways that they are assessed. As we can see in Juan's description of how his teacher limited how he wrote essays in the previous paragraph, what I found was that students are taught that writing for high-stakes tests should be formulaic, clear, and bland rather than interesting, creative, and carefully considered. Amanda echoed this idea when explaining to me how she saw standardized tests writing as fundamentally at odds with what she considered writing to do and be, based primarily on how the writing was assessed. She told me, "The way I see how they prepare you for standardized tests isn't exactly to write, it is to be comprehensive, I guess. I view writing as a way to express yourself, and that isn't necessarily easy to grade." This is a fundamental problem with the way these tests are structured; to set them up in a way that would allow students to approach them creatively or take different approaches with them would require that graders assess the writing

thoughtfully and slowly, the opposite of conditions under which most of these exams are currently graded. Amanda's awareness of the fact that standardized test writing isn't exactly "writing" is impressive; my fear is that this is not an awareness that all students, especially those who have gone through many different kinds of testing in their K-12 years, possess, and that many instead assume that this thoughtless, banal, easy-to-grade genre of writing is what all writing ought to be.

What I see continually echoed in the way that my students talk about how they write for these exams is the ramifications of the wholly closed nature of standardized test essays. Students are taught to replicate a specific formula, one that has been deemed by the test makers to result in a successful test essay, by teachers who often claim expertise as graders of these exams. The focus is on producing a specific "test essay," and this test essay leaves little room for creativity or even thinking. This problem is further compounded by the prevalence of the genre of standardized test essay in K-12 and in exams for college admissions and college credit, and by the grading conditions for these exams. The conditions under which graders assess these pieces of writing -- specifically the fact that they typically look at hundreds of essays in a single sitting and assess each within a matter of minutes, if not shorter -- incentivizes students writing predictable pieces that can be easily skimmed and assessed as either fulfilling the graders' expectations for a "successful essay" or failing to do so. As the prominence and importance of these kinds of exams continue to grow in K-12, this extremely limited form of writing may become the only genre (or one of only a few genres) that students have experience with, leading them to conclude that for all forms of writing, how they write (specifically, according to a set formula) is more important than what they are writing. For the college writing classroom, tests like AP, SAT and ACT that purport to

measure “college readiness” further spread a dangerous message that this extremely limited genre is indicative of the kinds of writing that students will do in college.

Writing for Real Outside of the Testing Environment

The limitations of test writing are made clearer when contrasted with how students talked about writing that was not done for a test, including both writing done for school and self-sponsored writing. The first thing to recognize here is that standardized test writing did dominate the writing that students did in their English classrooms, especially in high school and for those in AP classes. When I asked about writing done for K-12, students mostly described writing done for standardized tests and writing about pieces of literature they read in their English classes. When I asked follow-up questions about specific genres of writing, many of my interviewees were confused, as seen in this exchange I had with Amanda:

> **Did y'all write any kind of research papers or anything like that [in high school]?**
>
> We did, in that AP class. They were argumentative, like the death penalty paper I mentioned ... They were mostly debate papers.
>
> **So a lot of argument and persuasion, did you have to do anything besides argument and persuasion?**
>
> How so besides?
>
> **Oh, any personal writing, or narrative, or analysis, or anything like that? Or was it all pretty argument-centric?**
>
> I mean we had journals where we had warm-ups every day or every other day, we would write short stories or narratives, but they weren’t a huge part of our grade, they

> weren't where the main focus was, they were just somewhere to start writing, which I guess is a good exercise because that lets me be creative. That's not what I'm being graded on. I'm being graded on whether or not I wrote the way you want me to.

This exchange reflects a few trends I saw in how students talked about the way they were taught to write for standardized tests versus how they wrote otherwise. First, the focus, especially in high school, was on writing argumentative or persuasive papers, and students have little exposure to other genres or knowledge of what "genres" are. This makes sense given that some skills for writing revised argumentative essays can translate to the test essay genre, many of which are argumentative or persuasive. I'm also struck by Amanda's topic for her research paper -- the death penalty -- because it is one of those "off limits" topics that many first-year writing instructors would forbid their students from writing about precisely because they are so frequently written about, increasing the risk for tired, unoriginal arguments or even plagiarism. But when so much of the writing done in K-12 is focused on following a specific formula and filling it with pre-made examples, it makes sense that students would be allowed or even encouraged to write papers about these overplayed topics. I also see in this exchange the ways in which the high-stakes nature of the exams students take in K-12 unfairly emphasizes a specific kind of writing, leading students to discount writing that does not prepare them to succeed on these exams. What Angela says here about creativity not mattering as much as writing the way that her teachers taught her to write closely aligns with what Victor said about "interesting" writing not mattering because it would not earn a high score. Test writing, which does not ask that writing is interesting or creative, is given prominence over other forms of writing because of its high-stakes nature,

leading students to discount other more interesting forms of writing that do not "count" for as much.

As explained in the previous chapter, part of the reason emphasis is placed on this particular genre of test essay is because its purpose is both limited and important; students write standardized test essays to prove their competence in this specific form, but they also write to secure funding and other monetary gains for themselves and their schools. Doing so incentivizes a kind of gamed "test essay" that does not resemble actual writing. It is this tie to high-stakes assessment that makes students feel limited in the way that they can approach the test essay in a way that they do not feel as limited when they do other forms of writing, as Amanda expressed in her comment that writing was "a way to express yourself, and that isn't necessarily easy to grade." Caroline echoed this sentiment in more detail when I asked her how her view of writing shifted from how she saw writing in high school to how she views it now that she was in college:

> I guess I always I kind of thought that the AP test, as soon as it ended, I was like, "Okay, I'm not really going to need this ever again" […] I understand it's important to be a good writer and stuff, and it obviously created a really good foundation for me in the future when I'm writing things, but now I don't think writing has to be that structured and perfect, you know what I mean? It was always stressful to me writing essays and wondering, because it's not like math, "Yes you got it right" or "No you didn't." It's based off of someone else's opinion of how you wrote your thing. But now I don't think it has to be like that precise and stuff.

This sentiment was especially interesting to me because it came from Caroline, who emphasized that what made a successful AP essay was answering the prompt fully and

putting the essay in the correct format and suggested that AP graders were highly qualified and thus could score essays much quicker than we would expect them to be able to. Here she describes how her view of writing has shifted in college; she now views writing as subjective and based on how your reader interprets it. The key here is for students to recognize that writing has a purpose beyond proving competence -- that it is social and occurs in a real context. When students are able to see this, they can see the role that considerations like audience, genre, and context have on the real, "open system" writing that they do in college and beyond.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that when my interviewees talked about the kinds of writing they did that were not related to a test, they were often able to pinpoint a specific purpose for their writing[80]. This was true even of the writing that they completed while still in K-12; my interviewees expressed delight at being given occasional opportunities invent their own purpose and approach to writing instead of having to adhere to a specific prompt or use a specific formula to approach the essay. While speaking about elementary and middle school specifically, Caroline made a distinction between how she thought about writing that she did for the exam versus the writing she did that was not for the exam:

> I remember, for the test, I mean I always passed the test with flying colors so I wasn't really worried about passing, but I could tell that the teachers always were worried about their students passing … When I wrote stuff on my own, because I used to like writing like all the time, I would be more relaxed kinda because I didn't have to like

[80] Though I do not want to suggest that I am solely to blame for this particular phenomenon, I would be remiss to mention that these were my former English 1304 students, and I continually stressed to them the importance of considering audience, genre, and purpose within writing. I taught them roughly 18 months before I conducted these interviews, which leads me to believe they were not merely parroting what they remembered from my course. I was also careful not to ask leading questions about "purpose" or "audience" -- I instead asked open-ended questions, like, "What was the difference between the writing you did for tests and the other writing you did in high school?" or "How has your view of writing changed now that you're in college?"

> focus on hitting certain things. And I mean even in high school, I obviously wouldn't be like, "Oh my god, am I addressing the prompt?"

This freedom from addressing a prompt was something that my students found particularly valuable about the writing that they were able to do that was not in preparation for a test. Three of the four students that I interviewed spoke extensively about journals they kept in their K-12 classes as a place where they were able to invent their own purpose for writing apart from demonstrating writing ability, thus enabling them to enjoy writing more[81]. Juan spoke extensively about a teacher he had in middle school who used notebooks throughout her course:

> The entire class was around two notebooks we had, a reading notebook and a writing notebook. We would read, and basically we'd have to write our own views and points of the books we read. And our writing notebook was literally write anything you want, no borders, nothing … We had to write as much as we could for the rest of the week and Friday we would present it in front of everyone and read our piece. I felt like that was a really pleasant experience, to be free to write about anything. I like writing like that.

Here we see a form of writing that allows students to both invent their own purpose and share that writing with a specific audience, in this case their fellow classmates, as a form that Juan found really enjoyable and worthwhile. Though certainly this form of writing cannot dominate the school curriculum, it allows students to see writing as something more open than the closed test essay genre, allowing them to invent a purpose for their specific

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[81] As we saw in the case of Amanda, above, this disconnect between the freedom of a writing journal and the highly structured form of standardized test writing may lead some students to discredit the journal as a less valuable exercise. Even she expressed some gratitude for having that space for creative writing, though.

audience. It also allows for an important counterpoint to test writing, allowing students to experiment with different forms, language choices, and content.

Beyond having opportunities to invent their own purpose through freewriting, my interviewees discussed writing for specific purposes beyond proving competence, both within and outside of school. At the very beginning of his interview, Victor mentioned an elective creative writing class that he took his senior year of high school, contrasting the kind of writing he did there with the approach taken to preparing students for tests. I asked him later in the interview to talk more about that class and why he enjoyed it:

> I did enjoy it -- I mean, it was a good class because it was senior year, and I loved the teacher there, he was a really cool guy, and it was really interesting seeing the characters in this class and what they could come up with, because, apparently I thought I had a good imagination, but listening to these people's poems and any kind of projects that we did that involved some kind of figure that inspired you … [The class] was a lot of fun. It was good because like I said we didn't have structure, it was just like, this week we're gonna write something about this, and even in the mornings we'd come in there and we'd do some warm ups where [the teacher would] just give us some random prompt, and be like, "Just read it and write what you feel about it." It was really interesting.

Victor valued the lack of structure in both the shape of the course and in the types of writing they produced, and he also, like Juan, valued the opportunity to share this unique type of writing with his peers. Writing that allows students to choose their own topic or purpose for writing, like the writing described by Juan and Victor here, lends itself better to this kind of sharing with an audience, unlike students reading each other's' work in response to the same

narrow prompt or the same specific text which is both repetitive and artificial. Victor also mentions the fact that this teacher would occasionally give them low-stakes "random prompts" to write on. As with other journal or notebook assignments that my interviewees described to me, the purpose of these low-stakes prompts was to generate ideas or encourage creative thinking, not to assess overall writing ability. He later elaborated on why he thought this particular form of writing so valuable for him and what he sees as his own personal shortcomings:

> I wish they did more like creative writing type classes instead [of teaching primarily for the test in English classes], because I have zero imagination, and I don't know if that's why I work well in engineering, but like just the whole structure of ideas, I don't feel like I'm actually going out of my comfort zone or thinking outside of the box when it comes to writing, and that class helped a lot when it came to doing something you're not used to doing.

Though as his teacher I disagree with Victor's assessment of himself as having "zero imagination," I do think his comments here demonstrate the value of having students engage in many different genres of writing, including freer forms of personal or creative writing, in order to help them see the full potential of writing and encouraging them to "think outside of the box," as he puts it. This confirms what defenders of personal writing, including Thomas Newkirk in his *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, argue about how this kind of open personal writing can lead to greater engagement from students who genuinely enjoy this form of writing and, like Victor, express gratitude for being given the opportunity to write in freer styles outside of more common "academic" genres like argument[82]. Juan echoed this

[82] Newkirk defends "hedonistic" personal writing done primarily for pleasure, like the journal assignments and creative writing assignments my interviewees described enjoying, finding that this kind of personal writing

idea in his interview as well, linking writing with philosophy as a tool for personal improvement and explaining that this is why he would like to write a book one day, even if he is unsure of what exactly this book will be over. We should not ignore the practical reasons why students need to learn writing skills for their future classes and careers, but we can also recognize the role that personal writing or other less formal, academic forms of writing might serve for our students.

On the opposite side of the spectrum of purposeful writing done in high schools from Victor's experience in a creative writing class was Juan's experience with high school debate. When I asked Victor how he saw the writing that he did in K-12 preparing him for the writing that he's done in college, this was his response:

> I feel like the thing that influenced me the most … was the honors debate classes I was taking during high school for three years. It was a lot of research, and evidence, and we had to do almost everything most of the time impromptu ... For example, there were really weird arguments, but we had to be ready for them. We had to be able to think on our feet, and we had to speak formally and in a way that really prepared me for essays in college. Every debate student will tell you the same thing. But we had to think on our feet, we might have to argue, "Racism is good," and we'd have to use evidence from philosophers, from authors from books, and you had to answer it, you could not say, "Oh, it sounds ridiculous." You had to explain it and let it form the basis for your argument, in less than 7 minutes … We'd basically have a list prepared for every argument that we think the opponent might spring on us. And we would write it in formal writing, just like a sentence, then read it right off the bat,

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"lifts the burden of 'significance' and replaces it with the hedonistic goal of pleasure or happiness. In doing so, it dramatically opens the field of topics for writing" (73). For a fuller discussion of Newkirk's book, see Chapter 5.

> and argue it and answer it like that. We couldn't waste time. If we had 10 minutes, we needed to have an answer for every argument that came our way.

There are a few notable things about how Juan explains his experience in high school debate and how it overlaps with the kinds of writing tasks he does now in college. Most noticeable to me is the thinking and invention involved in preparing for debate. While much of what Juan explains here is thinking quickly on your feet once you are given a topic to debate, he also stresses that much of the preparation for debate was to come up with reasons and support for a broad range of arguments, including multiple sides of an issue or argument. This is far different approach than that advocated for standardized tests, where students are often told to choose a position (often one presented by the prompt) and quickly argue one side of it. Again, this kind of thinking -- the planning involved in preparing for any kind of debate topic that might come your way and considering both sides of that topic -- allows students to write better arguments and to engage in the careful work of invention that's often missing by helping them to consider all sides of an issue.

Perhaps the most powerful example of self-sponsored writing came from Caroline, who was diagnosed with cancer in high school[83] which she overcame with the help of numerous charitable organizations helping to fund her treatment at hospitals in Houston, many of whom she now speaks for at fundraisers and other events. She brought up this writing when I asked her what kind of writing she did now that she is in college:

> [One] kind of writing I do [now], I'm a motivational speaker for cancer-related stuff. I wrote out what I wanted to say before -- so that was like a different kind of writing. I speak for [a pediatric cancer organization] at their fundraisers and stuff, and that

[83] Because she missed so much school her senior year while battling cancer, Caroline elected to not take many of her AP tests, including the AP English Literature test which would have likely excused her from taking my class.

> speaking and writing I try to write and say stuff that would pull at people's heartstrings so that they would open up their wallets and donate to this organization. It's like knowing your audience. This other one I did at [a hospital] was more informational, and we talked about our patient experience and that was almost like teaching them stuff about how they should like change or keep doing their patient stuff.

Caroline named two specific organizations she spoke for here, describing two unique purposes and a few rhetorical strategies she employed in order to reach these different audiences and purposes. While I'd love to take credit for this kind of rhetorical awareness as her former first-year writing teacher, I'd argue that this comes from her having the opportunity to write works that will be received by an authentic audience for an important, authentic purpose[84] that was important to her.

Overall, the way that students described the writing they did that was not for tests varied greatly from how they described test writing, as we can see just by looking at the terms they used. When describing test writing, my interviewees used terms like "limited," "not free," "certain way," "right format," "skeleton," "structure," and "writing exactly like this." Conversely, when describing the writing they did that was either self-sponsored or writing not for the test, my students used terms like "free" and "no borders," "not as structured," "more relaxed," "outside of the box," "creative," and "subjective." We see in this word choice that students took greater enjoyment in writing where they were able to determine their own purpose, know their audience, and share that writing with that audience.

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[84] Again, I recognize that the term "authentic" here is problematic. In this case, I use it to mean that Caroline was writing outside of the classroom setting to achieve specific aims (specifically to raise money for these organizations doing charitable work) for a knowable audience, one that she could see sitting in front of her as she gave the speech.

These other forms of writing serve an important role in helping the students I interviewed see writing as something beyond the standardized test essay.

Writing in College in the Wake of Standardized Testing

In all of the interviews I conducted, I asked students both about the writing that they did now that they were in college and how they saw the writing they did in K-12 preparing or failing to prepare them for that writing. The most frequent response to the first question was some version of "I haven't done much writing since your class," which might be explained by the fact that students don't take writing classes within their specific majors until later in their college careers[85]. But often times, I had to point out to the students I interviewed that certain kinds of writing they did for their classes did indeed "count," as seen in this exchange I had with Victor:

> **So tell me about the writing you've done in college or since leaving high school.**
>
> I mean besides your class I don't think I've written that much. I wouldn't call like grocery lists or stuff like that writing or anything like that. Obviously engineering is mostly math- and science-based so there's not a lot of reading and writing involved, I mean reading, but not much writing. So I wouldn't say I've done too much.
>
> **Okay. Have you had to take labs or classes like that where you've done a lot of writing?**
>
> Oh yeah, the labs. That's true. That's a different kind of writing but they do have a structure that they want, and I'm kind of glad I'm out of that, because I had terrible

[85] The students I interviewed were all in their second year of coursework at UH when I interviewed them, though some had progressed further in their degree plans and did recall their major-specific writing courses when I asked them about these classes specifically.

> handwriting, and you had to write them in lab notebooks. So yeah, I guess that's the last writing I've done.
>
> **Do you have to take a "Writing for Engineering Majors" class?**
>
> Yeah, we have to take a technical communications class. I've taken it. It's an interesting kind of writing, because it's all engineering-based, like a lot of proposals, like everything is engineering-based, but it does involve you know the English I and II that you get from college level transfer over to that.

This idea that certain kinds of writing -- like lab reports for engineers, which can become incredibly lengthy and involved -- don't "count," or the related idea that certain majors do not do much writing, is one that I see repeated by my students throughout the semesters that I've taught. Juan, similarly, when asked what kind of writing he did in college, explained that what he did was "formal business kind of writing," explaining business plans that he wrote, but describing that form of writing as something entirely separate from the writing he did in my English 1304 class and especially from the "freewriting" he said he enjoyed so much in K-12. The reason that this kind of writing is dismissed is perhaps best explained by Amanda in her answer to a follow-up question I asked about what kinds of writing assignment she'd done for her other classes, which she answered, "I've had to do writing assignments for other classes, but none of the classes was focused on the writing." She went on to describe a paper she did for a design history course that was ten pages long, though when I remarked on the impressive length, she dismissed it by stating that "most of it was diagrams and pictures." Many students have this notion that if the course is not focused on writing, or if the text is multimodal as in the case of a lab report or this particular paper that Amanda was describing, it does not "count" as "real" writing. There is a need to teach students to recognize that a

variety of genres do count as writing and to encourage them to apply the same choices that they made about the papers they write in their first-year writing classes to the writing they do in other college classes and beyond[86].

Of course, this timed essay genre does have its place in the college curriculum, though its prevalence may be declining[87]. Caroline was the only student to mention this genre among the kinds of writing that she did in college, and Amanda denied that she had ever had to write a timed essay in college, citing that as one of the reasons she was frustrated with the prevalence of timed writings in her high school curriculum:

> I hate timed writings because they don't capture who you are as a writer, they capture how fast you can write and how fast you can display an idea without having grammatical mistakes. But we have tutors now, we can edit ourselves, and in most places we can edit everything that we send to someone, so the timed writing doesn't really capture how well you can communicate by today's standards. I never had a handwritten timed test while I was in college. No. Multiple choice, yes, but I'm not required to write an essay. I'm not even required to write the theorem of linear algebra matrices.

Amanda touches on several important issues here surrounding the way that these tests are administered, chief among them being time and technology. In most settings that our students will be composing pieces of writing, they will be given the opportunity to think and revise

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[86] As Ann Beaufort finds in *College Writing and Beyond*, there is also a need for all teachers, not just teachers of writing, to emphasize the transfer of writing skills between classes. All teachers should emphasize writing as socially and contextually mediated, aimed at a specific audience for a specific purpose. I contend that we can use the first-year writing class as an important place to begin this discussion so that students can see the writing they do in their other classes as related to the writing they did in first-year writing.

[87] In the semesters where I've prompted my first-year writing students to think through how their experience writing test essays might transfer to other genres, many students have not taken any timed essay exams in their college classes. There are many reasons for this, but chief among them may be class sizes, which prevent instructors or TAs from being able to grade large amounts of writing.

the writing they're doing, but they will also most likely compose those pieces of writing on a computer, in a word processing program. While the close relationship between literacy and technology requires, as Selfe argues, that we teach writing within these digital environments (*Technology* 3), tests continue to require handwritten essays in test booklets often with limited space for writing. This again highlights the artificial nature of the testing situation; it is not only unideal, denying students the opportunity to carefully consider and rewrite their work using the tools they will rely on for most of their composing in the future, but it also places some students at a disadvantage when the test becomes the focus of the exam because it is written under conditions far different from those they will face when they write in other situations. Time students spend handwriting timed writings in preparation for these exams could be better spent having them type essays, giving them the opportunity to revise their work and to being more proficient in their use of technology. At the very least, test makers ought to consider moving the exam onto a computer so that students are writing in an environment similar to how they will be writing most of their lives[88].

But the reality is that many students will have to write at least some timed test essays while they are in college. Caroline and I talked extensively about a U.S. history class she was enrolled in that semester, as she described to me the preparation she was doing for an upcoming midterm that featured an essay section:

> I'm in this history class and I have a test on Tuesday, and it's an essay test, and [the professor] gave us five prompts and he said that two of them will be on the test, and

[88] The major obstacle to doing so, of course, is the lack of technology in our schools. At the AP Open Forum for English Language and Composition, there was mention of moving the exams onto a computer, which was met with disapproving comments from most of the teachers at the forum because of the inability to get computers for all students who would be taking AP exams. From seeing the sheer amount of labor needed to physically move and organize the paper books at AP grading, though, it's clear that moving the test to computers would also help from the point of view of logistics and cost as well.

> we have to write both of them, like two essays, and he said the hardest thing is finishing, because it's really hard to finish on time. And then he just gave us the prompts on Thursday and the test is on Tuesday. Yeah, so I was like, "What the heck? Why didn't he give us at least a week." So over the weekend -- I don't know if I'm going to write out 5 whole essays, but obviously I'll go over them and put bullet points for like each paragraph that I want to talk about and make sure that I know how to answer them. [The professor] said that he wanted... the prompts would ask the question and then they would list like maybe four things and so he said he wanted a paragraph on each one of those things that was listed. Like don't cram it in -- he wanted pretty detailed explanations of each one.

What was interesting to me was that this professor, much like the teachers my students described from their K-12 careers, gave specific directions on how to approach the test essay based on the prompt. We see another kind of gaming happening here, specifically by the professor explaining to his students exactly how they should structure a successful essay. Again, this strategy will lead to essays that are easier to grade, especially in large lecture classes, but this also in some ways undermines the purpose of having students write an essay, especially if the professor is explicit about what he wants to see in each essay[89]. Essays present an opportunity for students to engage with course material in a unique way, but if they resort to simply having students regurgitate given formulas and pieces of information, that knowledge might be better assessed in other ways, like through multiple choice or short answer questions. If essays are solely used to prove competence, then this notion that how you write is more important than thinking about what you shape your writing will continue to

[89] Having not seen the specific essay prompts or been present to hear how Caroline's professor told her to approach them, I cannot comment on how well-designed his specific prompts were.

be reinforced for our students. The problem is that many of these timed essays are used only to gauge competence, whereas writing that students are given the opportunity to think about and revise will present more original ideas and a deeper engagement with the material. Caroline came to this conclusion later on in the interview:

> I think that the timed writing thing was really helpful because a lot of assignments are take-home essays so you have all the time in the world to do it, but other things, like my history exam, is in-class, so if I didn't have my AP lit experience of timed writing, then I don't know how I'd do on my exam that I'm taking on Tuesday. But I definitely like essays that you can take home and take time to edit and work on better, and that's just obviously going to be a much better essay because you had time to think about it, edit it, peer edit and get that feedback, you know what I mean? I think that they know that too, it's obviously not going to be your best work if you only had like x amount of minutes to write the essay.

I asked Caroline why she thought they chose to assess writing in this timed fashion if writing that you got to revise was better, and she struggled to come up with an answer:

> I don't know. I really have no idea. Like I just, I don't know. I think it's weird. It would definitely make my life so much easier if I could ... I don't know. I guess maybe to see how well we know the material and like so if we know it really well we can write about it easier, but like if we don't, we can go home and research the topics and write it then and sound really intelligent on it. Yeah, I guess that's why. It's a one and a half hour exam … I took AP US History, too, and I didn't take the exam for some reason, I guess just because it was so much information, there's no way I'm going to be able to get all of this. But I should have gone for it.

Minimizing the risk of plagiarism is doubtless a central reason why we continue to use these kinds of essay exams, though I would contend that this is mainly a concern when these essays ask students to merely repeat or regurgitate material instead of doing something interesting or unique with it. If prompts are designed in such a way that students are required to engage meaningfully with the material, then there is significantly less risk for this kind of plagiarism, and students could write insightful timed essays that serve a purpose.

Implications for the First-Year Writing Classroom

Through interviewing my former students, I gained insight into how students make sense of writing in a test-centric K-12 experience and now that they are in college. Hearing their experiences in their own words is both powerful and valuable, giving us a fuller picture of how current first-year writing students view writing as well as ample evidence for why we as experts in writing ought to speak out against these unfair assessment practices and supply viable large-scale alternatives for assessing writing. But the trends in these interviews can also be used to draw valuable conclusions about how we might teach a liminal first-year writing class in order to help students see writing as something open, subjective, and purposeful. If we are going to use the first-year writing class as a place where we help students rethink some of the problematic assumptions that they have about writing from K-12, then there are several themes from these interviews that will prove helpful as we begin to think about how to teach writing in the wake of high-stakes testing.

While the specific strategies that students were taught to use to approach the test essay have obvious effects on how first-year writing students approach writing, we also cannot overlook the implications of the rhetorical situation surrounding testing discussed in

Chapter 3 for how students think about the goals of education. **The high-stakes nature of these exams has not only incentivized gaming and corruption within our educations system, it has also reinforced neoliberal ideas about education, encouraging competition and a system of financial rewards for performance**. This idea is internalized by our students in surprising and alarming ways, causing them to view their education through the lens of earning financial rewards for their K-12 schools (in the form of funding) and personal financial gain (through college admissions, college credit, and ultimately, the well-paying job they will hopefully land after they graduate). As has been well-documented, college students today tend to think of their education as a stepping stone to these financial gains through employment first and foremost, an attitude that carries over from the growing neoliberal influence on K-12 education that we see in these exams.

In writing specifically, this manifests itself in the ways that **students talk about writing primarily as a means of demonstrating writing ability rather than for any real purpose,** especially within the context of these testing environments. We see this most strikingly in the way that at Caroline described her purpose for writing an AP essay: to answer the prompt fully and put the essay in the correct format. Writing becomes more about **how** students write something than **what** they write, an exercise in replicating a predetermined formula for a successful essay, often in order to minimize risk on a high-stakes assessment. Unfortunately the conditions are present for this mentality to continue into the first-year writing classroom. Students often come into first-year writing, and all other required core courses in college, with the mentality of demonstrating competence, completing assignments, and checking a box on their degree plan. This mentality is worsened in the online writing classroom, especially when students are familiar with other online

courses that have them complete discrete modules at their own pace. The temptation is there for students to treat the first-year writing class as yet another exercise in proving writing competence, students who have spent much of their time in K-12 writing essays aimed at that sole purpose. The challenge, then, for first-year writing instructors is to design the course in such a way that students see writing as more than proving competence in order to earn college credit and achieve other financial goals.

Within this high-stakes frame, and in part because of it, **students produce writing within a closed system that limits their ability to think about writing as rhetorical or to tackle other genres besides the artificial test essay once they leave that testing environment**. In addition to the narrow context of proving competence, students are writing to unknowable graders within a set time frame on a prompt they may or may not have any interest in. Because of these constraints, students are taught to replicate an essay that has proven successful with graders in the past, filling the essay with pre-packaged examples or simple reasons based on opinion. Students who spend much of their time in K-12 writing for this narrow genre within this closed system of writing are not as well equipped to write for a variety of genres as students who write in an open system where they are able to acknowledge that contexts, audiences, and purposes vary and determine the shape of a piece of writing.

Further, **students are taught how to do so using something that closely resembles current-traditional rhetoric and the banking model of education**, which is appropriate for the artificial, high-stakes nature of the exam essay. Teachers deduce exactly what students need to include in these essays in order for them to be successful (often by participating in grading events or studying materials provided by the test makers), and because those

elements do not include much creativity or thinking, it makes the most sense for teachers to tell students what to include and how to structure their essays rather than having them take a risk, determine that approach for themselves, and fail on a test essay with high stakes attached to it where the graders are given only a few minutes to look over each essay and determine whether it is adequate or inadequate. The enemy here is not so much the five-paragraph essay as it is the lack of thought put into the content and rhetorical effectiveness of the essay. As teachers of first-year writing, we have to be aware that the concept of inventing ideas for writing or approaching and structuring an essay may be an entirely new concepts for our students who are used to being told exactly how to approach an essay in order to minimize the risk they incur it they approach a high-stakes test essay in a unique way. We are likely to meet resistance when we ask students to engage in deep thinking in their writing, and we may have to take extra steps to walk our students through how to go about these important but often neglected parts of the writing process in order to prepare students to write in a variety of genres beyond the argumentative test essay.

Though the limitations on how my students thought about writing based on how they were taught to write for these standardized tests were striking, I was encouraged by the ways my interviewees talked about the writing they did that was not specifically for these exams. These discussions demonstrated to me that **students are still engaged in other forms of writing, whether they are within their English classrooms or outside of them, and many still view writing as an enjoyable activity serving a variety of purposes**. All communicated, directly or indirectly, that the ability to determine one's own purpose in writing was crucial for their ability to make meaningful rhetorical choices about their writing. There is also a need to be able to be experimental or playful in writing. Several of my

interviewees spoke to the enjoyment they found in various forms of "freewriting" where little if any constraints were placed on what they wrote, in creative writing where they explored new purposes, or in activities like Juan's debate preparations where they explored different points of view. In the first-year writing class, we need to embrace having students write for different purposes and even encourage students to invent their own purposes for writing. If we do not extend this opportunity to our students, we risk having them continue to view writing as merely fulfilling a prompt that they have no interest in, proving their ability to replicate a set form instead of seeing writing as a subjective, rhetorical endeavor. Likewise, an important aspect of writing for true, varied purposes is allowing students to write for real audiences, whether that is their classmates or a broader public audience. Doing so makes classroom writing less artificial and more authentic, allowing students to see writing as a way of communicating unique ideas with a real audience rather than proving competence to an all-knowing judge of "good writing."

Closely aligned with determining purpose, engaging with an audience, and encouraging students to see writing as occurring in an "open system," I also see in my interview data a **clear need to bring inquiry and reflection into writing**. First, students should feel prepared to perform inquiry before beginning any piece of writing in order to determine how the rhetorical situation will shape how they approach their writing. There is also space for inquiry in the writing process, including asking students to reflect on what exactly it is about sample essays that make them successful or asking similar questions during peer review. This approach honors the subjective nature of writing, privileging student perspectives as fellow readers rather than how a teacher instructs students to form a piece of writing.

Similarly, **students need to be given the opportunity to reflect on and contextualize their past writing experiences**, especially those experiences with standardized tests. It is important that students are able to recognize the closed nature of this specific genre of test writing before moving on to more open forms of writing. Despite the long gap between when my interviewees were in my English 1304 class and when I conducted my interviews, the reflection I led them through in that class doubtless helped them be able to critically reflect on the context of these standardized test essays and determine why the strategies they used on these exams were not transferrable to other writing situations. I've found great success in my first-year writing classes in encouraging students to reflect on what exactly their audience, purpose, and context for writing a standardized test essay is, then discussing the implications of the answers they come up with. This proves a much more effective means of highlighting the limitations of this specific genre than telling students that what they learned about writing in K-12 was inaccurate or useless, and it can also help them see scenarios where the skills they learned for these test essays might transfer well, like an essay exam in a college history class.

Likewise, **we need to give our students the opportunity to perform inquiry into what writing is to them and to reflect on the many different kinds of writing that they engage in**. The more that students can recognize **all** the writing they do -- from lab reports to text messages to rhetorical analyses -- as valid, the more they will recognize their own abilities to successfully move between different genres and determine their own approaches for their writing projects. Unsurprisingly, many of my interviewees did not view themselves as "writers" or people who "wrote a lot," but they are all engaged in writing frequently throughout their day. Similarly, my interviewees and my students often fail to see the writing

they do in their college classrooms or outside of them as “counting” as writing if it does not closely mirror the genres we teach in first-year writing (argument, persuasion, analysis, etc.). Though this is not entirely the fault of standardized testing, they are not unrelated; when a limited genre is used to assess writing, and that genre is continually taught to in the K-12 writing classroom, students are less likely to recognize other genres as “valid” forms of writing, yet these genres require similar rhetorical choices and use skills that students learn in our first-year writing classrooms. If we can get students to recognize the ways in which the writing they are doing for their majors and other classes “counts” as writing, we can help them to better see the value of our first-year writing classes. On a related note, this ability to perform inquiry into what writing is will help students be able to transfer the skills that they learn in our first-year writing classes to the other writing projects they will do, in school, work, and beyond. The lens of rhetoric is a helpful way to think about this; if we can equip our students to approach each writing project inquiring into what their audience and purpose for that piece is, then we can prepare them to write in many more scenarios than a timed essay for a standardized test. Again, there is a need to give students true purposes to write for in order to make this a reality -- proving competence to a grader or teacher is not enough.

Chapter 5

Teaching: Designing and Beginning a Liminal First-Year Writing Class

Based on the core findings of my interviews, I set out to teach a liminal first-year writing class with the seemingly simple goal of making writing "real" for my students in a way that it hadn't been for them up until this point in their education. Because of the way writing is taught in K-12, specifically the ways writing is taught for standardized tests, students do not see writing as occurring within a real rhetorical situation and instead write primarily to prove writing competence, replicating a formula for teachers or graders who are viewed as ultimate judges of writing. My goal, then, was to help them see that writing occurs in real rhetorical situations, written to real knowable audiences for purposes they fully understand or determine for themselves.

As I argued in Chapter One, the first-year writing class can be understood as a liminal space between writing in high school and writing in college, their future careers, and lives[90]. Those in the liminal space are "withdrawn from their structural positions and consequently from the values, norms, sentiments, and techniques associated with those positions" and "divested of their previous habits of thought, feeling, and action," then "alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them" (Turner 105). In order to tap into the promising liminal potential of the first-year writing class, my course design focuses on having students define writing for themselves by reflecting on their past writing experience and exploring what writing could

[90] Many have attested to the fact that the first-year writing class serves a limited but powerful (in other words, liminal) role in students' writing development. For example, in her study of 20 students from first-year writing to graduation in *Rehearsing New Roles*, Lee Ann Carroll finds that "first-year composition served primarily as a transition from high school -- not the capstone of their K-12 literacy careers but an introduction to the more diverse ways of writing expected of prospective psychologists, scientists, philosophers, or business managers" (5).

be. I created low-stakes writing assignments that gave students the opportunity to experience the disorientation of the real writing situation, allowing them to determine their own purpose for writing and shape their writing as they saw fit given that purpose, not in accordance with predetermined assessment criteria. Creating space for this kind of disorientation or fluidity both makes the first-year writing class into a liminal space for students to reconceptualize writing and mimics the conditions for writing in a real rhetorical situation rather than in a testing environment. I sought to create an open course[91] in which students were free to bring in their own personal backgrounds and interests in order to gain a broader sense of how writing operates outside of the narrow testing situation often presented to them in their K-12 English classes.

In this chapter, I cover my basic design and rationale for the course including my decision to theme the course on the question "What is writing?" in order to encourage students to define writing for themselves instead of accepting a pre-existing definition. I explain the broad plans for the course, including the importance of and the spirit behind open low-stakes daily writing assignments and the ways I positioned myself as their instruction. I end this chapter with three representative assignments from Unit 1 that each highlight one of three key emphases of the course: reflection, thinking about writing rhetorically, and honoring students' personal writing.

Framing the Course on "What is Writing?"

[91] Lad Tobin advocates for teaching the writing course as an open space or "common" rather than introductory course the "language of the academy," arguing that such an approach allows students to see writing broadly and allows them to try something different than what they have done or will do in other writing classes. I advocate for a similar approach in my liminal first-year writing class focused on exploring the question, "What is writing?"

I decided that theming the course on the question "What is writing?" would best facilitate my desire to make writing real for my students, as I explained in the opening paragraph of the Welcome Letter[92] I sent the week prior to the course. I saw this theme enabling me to accomplish many of the goals I had for the course. First, it opened our course up to the possibility of serving a liminal role for my students as a place where they could reconsider their past instruction, experience, and views of what writing was and form new ideas about what writing could be for them going forward. It also worked to facilitate reflection and inquiry into how writing functioned as we continually returned to this question throughout the semester. Finally, it made the course more egalitarian and student-centered, positioning me as more of a guide through their individual processes exploring this question rather than an all-knowing expert on "good writing." This approach closely mirrors the pedagogical strategy proposed by Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle in "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies.'" Specifically, they argue that teaching first-year writing as an introduction to a fictional, monolithic genre called "academic discourse" reinforces the idea that writing studies is trivial and skill-based, emphasizing form over content, an idea carried over from K-12:

> Not surprisingly, those impressions focus on syntactic and mechanical concerns and assume that "writing is writing," involving "learn-once/write-many" basic skills. The content-versus-form misconception -- as old as FYC itself -- appears in standardized testing, with the SAT "writing" test giving better scores to longer essays and completely discounting factual errors. (555)

[92] All introductory course materials, including the Welcome Letter, can be found in Appendix E. It includes the Welcome Letter, Syllabus, Course Schedule, Guidelines for Daily Writing, Assignment Sheets for Major Papers 1, 2, and 3, and the Assignment Sheet for the Reflective Portfolio.

Instead of reinforcing this narrow view of writing, Downs and Wardle propose teaching first-year writing in such a way that asks students to "think about writing in school and society" and ask questions like, "How does writing work? How do people use writing? What are problems related to writing and reading and how can they be solved?" (558). Their approach includes having students read relevant scholarship from the field of composition studies, perform primary research about writing, and complete reflective assignments that ask them to "take stock of their literacy educations, experiences, and habits" and "identify sources of their attitudes and approaches to literacy" in order to "help students clarify their open questions, problems, and skepticisms regarding writing" (561). My own approach adapts this approach proposed by Wardle and Downs and focuses specifically on the personal; instead of teaching this as an "Introduction to Writing Studies" course akin to similar freshman-level courses across the university, I taught my class as an a liminal course in which students we called to investigate their own personal views of writing. Instead of assigning students scholarship from the field of rhetoric and composition as core readings in the course and leading them to conduct research that would "fit" into this discipline, I focused heavily on the kinds of reflective assignments proposed by Downs and Wardle in the first half of the course and had students form research questions on topics that explored how writing overlapped with their personal and future professional interests in the second half of the course. Many in rhetoric and composition have found that personalization as key to getting students to "care" about their writing (Dubson; Ruecker; Chiseri-Strater); likewise, critical pedagogues emphasize the importance of respecting student expertise as a key step in democratizing the classroom (Freire; Shor; Deplit). In the online writing course, this also allows students to present themselves and better facilitates community building (Gillam and Wooden; Rendahl

and Breuch). Focusing our course on the question of "What is writing?" allowed for a high level of personalization that helped achieve these goals.

Teaching a "writing about writing" course this way also created space for students to bring their own interests into the class and see exactly how those interests related to writing. I divided the course into four units, each culminating in a major paper. The designated learning outcomes for English 1304[93] emphasize the writing process, collaboration, and rhetorical awareness, as expected, but have a particular focus on research and source integration as well as exploring "personal responsibility"[94]. Our textbook[95] focuses on argument, and the suggested assignment sequence for English 1304 typically culminates in a researched argument. Thus, major papers tend to focus on familiarizing students with argument, research, and source use. For Unit 1, I assigned an Analysis of a Source, specifically Mike Rose's "No Child Left Behind and the Spirit of Democratic Education" from his book *Why School? Reclaiming Education for All of Us*. I presented this unit to students as not only an opportunity to practice carefully reading and analyzing sources but as a unit exploring how one of **my** interests, standardized testing, overlapped with writing. The research question we (and Rose) explored there was, "How does standardized testing impact how students think about writing?" In Unit 2, students developed their own research question related to writing, found sources that voiced a variety of perspectives on that research question, and wrote a major paper that consisted of narratives of their research process and source annotations

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[93] The full description of these learning outcomes can be found in my syllabus in Appendix E.

[94] "Personal responsibility" was recently added by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) in 2014 as one of the four Core Objectives for this course (along with critical thinking skills, communication skills, and teamwork) as a course in the Texas Core Curriculum. It is defined by the THECB as "to include the ability to connect choices, actions and consequences to ethical decision-making."

[95] The required text for this course is the 11th edition of Dorothy Seyler's *Read, Reason, Write: An Argument Text and Reader*. I assigned instructional chapters on rhetorical analysis, argumentation, and source use, but I also assigned additional readings and instructional materials.

similar to those required for an annotated bibliography. We then turned our attention to argument for the third unit, which culminated in a researched argument on their research question from Unit 2. Unit 4 was only two weeks long, giving them time to reformat a prior writing assignment that we made public on a course blog and to complete their Reflective Portfolios.

Exploring Purpose through Low-Stakes Writing Assignments

The major papers for the course were the ultimate focus of each unit, but low-stakes "Daily Writing" assignments made up a large portion of the class, in both the amount of writing students did and in the portion of their final grade, 40%, determined by these Daily Writing assignments. "Daily Writing" was comprised of everything that was not a final draft of a major paper or the reflective portfolio, including discussions, journals, quizzes, drafts, freewriting, annotations, and other minor assignments that made up the "day-to-day" going ons in our online course. When I was planning the course, I noted that these Daily Writing assignments would be crucial to the success of the course and that they needed to balance giving students the freedom to determine their own purposes for writing with the structure that students need to stay on top of deadlines and feel confident in their work in our online course. This focus on purpose emerged from my interviews. I was struck by how often I heard from my interviewees that their purpose for completing different writing assignments or timed essays was "to answer the prompt" or "to pass the exam" and how I had to push them to identify other purposes, even those as seemingly straightforward as "to inform" or "to persuade." In order to make writing real, students' purpose for writing must extend beyond completing an assignment and demonstrating their writing ability, as is often the

tendency for both test essays and online writing assignments. I wanted to make the required Daily Writing assignments open enough that students were able to form or negotiate their purpose for writing within them.

In *A Theory of Discourse*, James Kinneavy identifies purpose as "all important," as the condition which "determines everything else in the process of discourse. 'What' is talked about, the oral or written medium which is chosen, the words and grammatical patterns used -- all of these are largely determined by the purpose of the discourse" (48). Yet clarity on the issue of purpose seemingly ends there. In her article surveying the research on purpose, Nancy Blyler finds that "*purpose* has not been the subject of concentrated, comprehensive study" (97) and that more specifically "[l]iterature on **teaching** the rhetoric of purpose has been sketchy at best" (105, emphasis added). Despite consensus on the importance of purpose in writing and the frequency with which it appears in scholarship in rhetoric and composition, there is little agreement on how to understand it or teach it to students, and often instructors fail to do much more than ask students to identify their own purpose for writing prior to beginning an assignment. Linda Flower explains in her 1988 article "The Construction of Purpose in Writing and Reading" that "[p]urpose is problematic. Everyone agrees that it is an admirable thing: we encourage students to 'have' one and we are justly impatient with texts that don't. However, our traditional ways of talking about purpose—as that singular, stable entity one should possess—seem painfully limited" (528). Instead, what Flower found from studying thinking-aloud protocols is that writers form a "web of purposes" as they write:

> Writers at work do not decide on "their purpose" as the textbooks advise; they create a web of purposes. They set goals, toss up possibilities. They may respond to one of

> those ideas with a negative evaluation, which can lead to new criteria for what they have to do, if only they could figure out how to do it. They think through possible content and leap back into goal setting, generating provisional, tentative ideas of what they want to achieve, working hypotheses that they may soon ditch or even forget. They worry over questions ("Do I want to .. .?"), confusions, and conflicts as a workable plan or cherished goal seems at loggerheads with other goals or a piece of text they don't want to throw away. They create a multi-dimensional network of information-a web that radiates in all directions, anchored to points unknown. (531)

Flower and others observed what they called a “constructive planning process in which writers actively constructed and integrated a body of goals, plans for meeting those goals, criteria for success, and discoveries and new ideas,” finding that the planning of purposes “often emerge by a stubborn timetable of their own” (533, 534). It is important to instruct students that there is no monolithic purpose that determines exactly how they will structure a piece of writing; they should instead have the flexibility to determine and adjust their purpose as they write. In addition to discussing purpose as it pertains to the rhetorical situation and continually encouraging students to identify the audience and purpose for the writing they read and the writing they produced in the course, I emphasized the role of purpose by creating some low-stakes assignments with very little structure that allowed them space to explore what the purpose for their major writing assignments were and others that allowed them to determine their purpose for writing that specific low-stakes assignment, like open-ended discussion boards. These assignments allowed them to do the kind of open exploring of purpose that Flower describes.

Also in regards to purpose and daily writing assignments, I was careful to not have students submit work to the discussion board unless it made sense to share it with other readers. In the past, I would have asked students to begin a discussion post by sharing summaries of readings before moving into their responses or analyses. Instead, I had students submit annotations of their sources (which both demonstrated to me that they read the material and provided them with an annotated document to refer back to when writing major papers based on these readings or sources) and share only their original thoughts and contributions on the discussion board. This helped them to see that the purposes for discussion board writing that their peers accessed was not simply to demonstrate that they had completed the required assignments but rather to communicate some ideas with an audience, helping them better see the true purpose behind their writing.

Beginning the Course and Creating an Online Persona

A week prior to the course beginning, I sent out an email welcoming the twenty enrolled students to the course[96]. Attached to that email were a more in-depth Welcome Letter and a copy of the syllabus, both of which can be found in their entirety in Appendix E. I followed the first paragraph in the Welcome Letter about the course being centered on the question "What is writing?" with the following paragraph explaining the ways in which I wanted the course to be focused on them and their interests:

[96] I learned much about my 20 students, including their prior experiences with online learning and motivations for taking the course, through informal conversations in meetings with them at the beginning of Unit 2 and from information they disclosed in their assignments for Week 1. I confirmed my findings in an end-of-course survey, the full results of which can be found in Appendix F. Just over half of my class (11 students) took English 1303 at the University of Houston, while 25% got credit for the course through AP credit and 15% took English 1303 at a community college or another institution. The majority (60%) of my students took AP English classes in high school, and 80% of them attended high school in the state of Texas. This fit the demographic for other courses I had taught at the University of Houston, especially in regards to the number in fall English 1304 courses who had experience with AP English courses.

> That's something I want you to know right off the bat: this course is focused on y'all (or "you guys" -- sorry not sorry, I'm from Texas). I want you to feel like you can bring your own interests to this course, especially as you explore a research question related to writing in Units 2 and 3. Those interests can be personal, academic, or professional. I'm also seeking feedback from you and adapting the course as necessary throughout the semester. True, this is a required course with some set objectives, but I want it to be as helpful for you as possible. The online course offers lots of room for customization, and we should take advantage of that.

The introductory "Course Goals and Methods" portion of the syllabus voiced similar ideas[97], though in slightly more formal diction. In the Welcome Letter, I followed this with a paragraph articulating my views on the nonlinear nature of writing and the importance of reflection in understanding one's writing development and developing as writers:

> Another thing that I think is important: learning isn't linear, especially not for something as complex as reading and writing. Reflection is going to be key this semester. You'll start the course by reflecting on your past writing experiences, you'll end each unit by completing an extensive written reflection on that unit, and you'll end the course with a reflective portfolio that asks you to look back on your writing development this semester. There will also be lots of responding, rereading, revisiting, and, yes, revising.

The remainder of the letter consisted of details of the course given that it was conducted in an online format (including that the course is not self-paced, not easier than a face-to-face or hybrid course, and that the majority of it would be conducted through our Course

[97] The exact wording can be found in the syllabus in Appendix E.

Management software, Blackboard) and tips for succeeding in an online writing course. I also included a paragraph explaining that this class was a part of my dissertation research, emphasizing that my goal in studying the course was to identify "effective ways to teach this first-year writing class" and that I'd love their help throughout the semester doing so[98]. This gave students an idea from the outset of the course that I was taking this course seriously as a research project of importance to me, that I wanted their feedback in order to make the course more effective, and that they had the opportunity to allow their writing be a part of this project at the end of the semester. Finally, I ended the letter with a reminder that they still had time to switch into another course if this one did not fit them well. I signed it with my name and instructions that they ought to call me "Liz," and I also included a photo of me so that they knew what I looked like.

As seen in the Welcome Letter and in other materials I wrote for the course, especially in the Weekly Emails I sent to students explaining the specific assignments for that particular week, I was careful to craft an authentic persona that was both approachable and informed. As with any course, it was a careful balancing act of making myself friendly and welcoming to students while also presenting myself credible and authoritative to them as a teacher, but the online space creates unique challenges for this act of self-presentation. In "The Body of Charlie Brown's Teacher: What Instructors Should Know about Constructing Digital Subjectivities," Kevin DePew explores how online instructors might use rhetorical strategies to present themselves in digital classrooms to different effects. Much like the instructor's body in a face-to-face class is a "text" shaped by rhetorical decisions made by the instructor, online instructors make similar rhetorical choices when presenting themselves in

[98] The exact wording of that paragraph can be found in the Welcome Letter in Appendix E.

an online course. While I upheld a commitment to writing messages to students in edited, grammatically correct Standard English, I did include informal word choice and asides -- as in the "this course is focused on y'all (or "you guys" -- sorry not sorry, I'm from Texas)" in my Welcome Letter -- much like I would in a face-to-face class. My hope was that this less formal means of self-presentation would encourage students to feel comfortable interacting with me over Blackboard and through email, much like presenting myself as a friendly, genuine person in a face-to-face class (rather than adopting a false "professorial" tone) would. I remained careful to adopt a tone that was fitting of the genre in which I was writing in order to teach students that each rhetorical situation demands a different approach. For example, in the introductory materials in the syllabus, which is an important legal document, I abandoned the "cheesy"s and "yall"s in favor of a writing style that was still personal (using "I") but with an elevated tone: "Our focus for this semester will be on answering the question, 'What is writing?' I anticipate that the answer to this question will be slightly different for each of you, and I hope that through this semester you will discover and better understand the many functions that writing serves in your personal and professional lives." I typically reserved my more conversational writing for Weekly Emails and direct interaction with students (in my comments on their journals and other assignments or my replies on the discussion board, for example) and kept the language in my assignment sheets and instructional materials (like handouts and presentations) more formal. I also chose to include short videos videos of myself instructing my students on key concepts for the course and explaining assignments at least every other week, which gave them a better sense of my personality and helped them feel more comfortable with me in this all-online course.

The Guidelines for Daily Writing handout[99] is another document that is important for understanding the course that students were assigned to read during the first week of the course and instructed to refer back to as they completed daily writing assignments. The second half of the document explains the grading process for Daily Writing assignments, including a detailed rubric developed by Scott Warnock. I also provided specific instructions for submitting daily writing, including reading all posts in a discussion, checking back in on the discussion board, and signing names at the bottom posts. The first section of the handout discussed more of the spirit in which I wanted them to write these assignments. Specifically, I ask that they be semiformal, detailed, formatted carefully, and referenced. The description for "semiformal" echoed what I was trying to achieve in my own less-formal writing for the course:

> Your posts should contain some degree of formality: spell-checked, organized, and proofread so that your audience (your classmates and myself) can understand what you're saying. However, they will also be part of a dialogue, so in that regard they will be less formal than, say, a researched argument. Think of discussion board posts and journal entries as the online equivalent of the conversations that would occur between your peers and myself in our weekly meetings in a face-to-face class. They should be written in your voice.

I was careful to frame this from a rhetorical standpoint, emphasizing that there was a set audience (classmates and instructor) and purpose (to have a dialogue) for the kinds of writing assignments we use discussion boards for, and that these factors dictated why a semiformal style was appropriate. I took this approach in order to build a greater sense of community

[99] This document can also be found in its entirety in Appendix E.

within our class by empowering them to write in their own unique voices rather than adhering to what they thought "academic writing" should sound like, but also in hopes that students would think through complex ideas and take risks in these low-stakes assignments written in their own voice, rather than writing in a formula and voice they thought was appropriate for a writing class. Similarly, I encouraged them to use a format that made sense to them:

> Undoubtedly, the content of your posts is more important than the aesthetics of your post. That being said, in this all-online course, you have the opportunity to practice presenting your work a way that is rhetorically effective from both a content and a visual standpoint. Blackboard offers you a whole host of tools for editing your posts, including embedding images and changing text effects, and you should take advantage of these when appropriate.

Here I also included a screenshot of the editing bar that appears at the top of each textbox in Blackboard, which allows users to format text, add images, insert hyperlinks, etc. I wanted students to feel free to choose their favorite font for their posts, but I also to format the text and images they included in a way that was genuinely helpful and made for a better experience for the reader. My students are also constructing "digital subjectivities" through this course, and I wanted to welcome them to use whatever tools they needed to do so (DePew, "The Body").

One last assumption that I kept in mind as I crafted the course is worth mentioning here: the experiences and attitudes that students brought with them to the online course. Based on the research in OWI and distance education in general, I suspected that many of my students would have some experience taking online courses, and many would be of the attitude that

this course would be easier because it was taught in an online format. These suspicions were confirmed in a mandatory anonymous survey administered at the end of the course, the full findings of which can be found in Appendix F. 85% of my students had taken other online classes prior to my course. I asked them specifically "Why did you choose to take English 1304 online?" with the following options, instructing them to check all that apply, the percentages indicated the percentage of students that selected each option:

- I thought it would be easier than taking it face-to-face or hybrid -- 45%
- I wanted the convenience of completing coursework whenever I had time to (versus showing up to a classroom at a set time) -- 80%
- I didn't think I really needed to take first-year writing classes, and I thought this would be the simplest way to take care of this requirement -- 30%
- It is inconvenient for me to get campus because I commute a significant distance -- 40%
- It is inconvenient for me to get to campus because parking is such a hassle -- 20%
- It is inconvenient for me to get to campus because of work and family obligations -- 15%
- I am an introverted person and/or quiet person; I thought I would be more successful in an online class for this reason -- 15%
- I am not confident in my English skills or my communication skills; I thought I would be more successful in an online class -- 5%

Though the most popular response pertained to the convenience[100] of the course, I was surprised by the number (45%, or 9 students) who readily admitted that they thought this would be an easier version of the course than other instructional methods despite my specific warnings that it would not be. I also did not expect so many students (30%) to admit, albeit anonymously, that they did not feel they needed this course and thought this would be the simplest way to fulfill this degree requirement, which is closely related to the notion that online courses are "easier." With this in mind, my goal was not necessarily to make this course harder than they expected, but to build it in such a way that they felt connected to me and their peers, found the material engaging and worthwhile, and felt the writing assignments they completed were "real" pieces of writing on topics that were genuinely of interest to them.

In the final three sections, I present three daily writing assignments completed in the first few weeks of the course that exemplify three of the key ideas emphasized throughout the course. The first, Journal 1, asked students to write a literacy autobiography, highlighting the value of reflection. The second, Discussion 2, asked students to rhetorically analyze a website that they frequented, teaching them that all writing is rhetorically bound. Lastly, I assigned students personal freewriting, drawing on expressivist pedagogies that value personal writing.

Reflecting on What Writing Has Been through Journal 1

Any liminal first-year writing class must privilege reflection; after all, Turner suggests that "[l]iminality may be partly described as a stage of reflection" (105). Similarly,

[100] This preference for "convenience" can be a barrier in itself, as instructors asking students to do the "inconvenient" and uncomfortable work of reconsidering their past assumptions of writing might confront resistance from students who took a course specifically for the convenience of the medium.

in *Reflective Practice*, Gillie Bolton points to reflection's ability to lead to a greater awareness of the "gaps" in our own knowledge or experience, and "[a]wareness of such gaps can lead to deep, thorough self-questioning" and a "willingness to tackle broader issues" (xv). Without reflection, first-year writing students may be unable to see what their current view of writing is, how it may be lacking or inconsistent[101], or the ways in which that view might grow or change. Further, reflection on different kinds of writing will help students recognize that all writing situations have their own set of constraints that ought to be minded. Because writing in high school and college are different rhetorical situations that require different kinds of writing, it is far more productive to encourage students to reflect on the differences (and similarities) between writing in these two different contexts than it is to tell them that everything they learned about writing in K-12 was wrong and that they must learn an entirely new approach to writing in college. Broader and more ambitious definitions of reflection -- those that extend beyond merely remembering one's past experiences -- are crucial in ensuring that reflection is indeed meaningful and productive. Bolton defines reflection as an "in-depth consideration of events or situations outside of oneself" that requires "looking at whole scenarios from as many angles as possible" (9). Qualley's concept of reflexivity is a helpful way to approach this. Drawing on the notion that writing and language is inherently social, Qualley's "pedagogy of reflexivity" encourages students to study how their ideas and assumptions are interacting with the ideas of others, from course readings to essays by other students to ideas presented by their instructor. This deeper consideration of past writing experiences, both those that occurred in our classroom and

[101] I am not suggesting that all first-year writing students have a conception of writing that is lacking. As I found in my interviews, even prior to college many had experience with self-sponsored writing, some of which was done for real audiences and purposes. Even these students can benefit from considering the ways in which this particular form of writing relates to other forms of writing they did and form a more unified understanding of writing from this reflection.

those that occurred prior to it, shows students both the complexity of the rhetorical situations in which we write and the ways our thinking about that writing is shaped.

Meaningful reflective practice stands in stark contrast to how much of our education system operates, and engaging in it signals an entrance into the liminal space where a different approach to learning is adopted. Our education system, at the K-12 level especially, pushes students toward acquiring knowledge and demonstrating competence without ever looking back to consider their development. Bolton calls this the “hey presto” model of education in which competencies and skills “are seen as products or commodities -- things like bricks or vitamin tablets” rather than signs of growth worth careful consideration and reflection, a notion that is reinforced by “[t]esting or checking up on students to see if they have acquired the required competencies” (81, 82). Because our education system encourages teaching toward conclusions and formulas, Qualley argues it is important for us and our students to be bidirectional learners who interact critically with our past work and are open to the process of unlearning, which she defines as “the gradual revision of previous understandings" (13). This difference between how education is framed in the “hey presto” model versus in the reflective model highlights both the importance and difficulty in teaching reflective practice; students may resist looking back because they are so prone to view education as a linear journey of skill acquisition, but writing is inherently more complex than this and requires reflective thinking. Reflection can train students to do the kind of inquiry necessary to succeed as writers. In *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice*, Hillocks lodges another critique at this “hey presto” model of education, criticizing the ways in which “writing is treated as something that can be accomplished with little or no inquiry” in writing classrooms when it is taught in this formulaic method centered on skill acquisition and

demonstration (15). Reflection helps students develop inquiry skills that will be invaluable when they begin to write in real environments by helping them recognize the whole scenarios in which they wrote and carefully consider what they understand writing to be.

Reflection was a key first step in making writing real in my course because it illuminated student's' own definitions of and experiences with writing and encouraged them to build and expand on those definitions for themselves. It also gave them patience for their own nonlinear development as writers, gave them practice in the important skill of performing inquiry, and empowered them to give me feedback that I used to shape the course to better suit their needs. I emphasized reflection and reflexivity in numerous ways throughout the course, including framing the course as an investigation of writing which began with an informal literacy autobiography in the first week of the course in Journal 1. I purposefully left the prompt fairly open in order to encourage students to reflect in whatever manner made the most sense for them and gently encouraged them to consider non-school literacies and reading and writing done in languages and dialects other than Edited American English:

> For this first journal entry, I'd like you to write a brief literacy autobiography sharing experiences and factors that contributed to your development as a reader and a writer. You're welcome to center this essay on whatever you'd like -- it can read as a narrative or story, it can include descriptions of particularly memorable reading/writing experiences, it can focus on a single incident that shaped you as a writer, or you can take a completely different approach. Here are some questions to get you started (though you aren't obligated to answer any of them):

- What is writing? What is a good metaphor for writing -- what is writing like for you?
- What is your writing history? How have your attitudes toward writing grown and changed?
- List important pieces of writing that you can remember -- it can be non-school writing or things from K-12 and college -- and briefly discuss why these pieces were important, whether they had a good or a bad influence on your attitude toward writing
- What is good or bad writing?
- What writing "counts" and "doesn't count"? Why?

I encourage you to think of writing for school and outside of school, as well as writing done in Edited American English and writing done in other languages and dialects.

I hoped that shaping the assignment in this way would tap into some of the most beneficial aspects of reflection and of the literacy autobiography more specifically, helping students recognize different forms of literacy and see that those experiences were welcome in this class, and get them to begin thinking about that central question for the course, "What is writing?" Beginning the course by asking students to write a literacy autobiography, one that calls for students to reflect on how their literacies (both academic and personal) have developed, is a practice that composition instructors have relied on for years as a tool for better knowing their students and, in turn, shaping their classes. The framework for the literacy autobiography was developed and has been supported by a diverse group of scholars in the field, including Janet Emig, Keith Gilyard, James Zebroski, Mike Rose, Morris Young,

and Mary Soliday. I see this assignment as benefitting both students and instructors in several key ways. First, for students, it begins the course with the kind of reflection and metacognition that is key to developing writing abilities and to growing in this important liminal space. In a writing course themed on writing, it helps students identify the sources of some of their existing attitudes about writing (Downs and Wardle). The literacy autobiography can also help students connect their private literacies with their academic literacies, seeing the two as compatible or complementary rather than competing (Emig; Haswell). Students who are asked to engage in academic literacies may feel pressured to undergo a personality shift in order to do so (Rose; Young); by allowing space for the personal in the first-year writing class, students are empowered to see their personal literacy experiences as compatible with writing taught in college. One of the key outcomes of the literacy autobiography is that it makes students (and instructors) more aware of the different kinds of literacy practices that they engage in daily. When students are able to connect the writing they do personally, for other classes, through their phones, and in their first-year writing classrooms, they are able to see writing as serving a practical role in their lives beyond simply proving their English language skills, which is an important initial step in encouraging students to conceive of writing more broadly than they currently might. The literacy autobiography also serves several key roles for composition instructors. Knowing our students better will always make us better teachers, and this begins with better knowing their past histories with writing[102]. In the first-year writing class that is always changing as student

[102] When seeking to understand the impact of a narrowed K-12 writing curriculum on how students approach writing, it's especially important that we collect these individualized reports of prior experiences and conceptions of writing rather than relying solely on data about the impact of high-stakes testing. Even in this era of high-stakes testing, "high school writing" much like "college writing" is not monolithic; even students who went to the same high schools and had the same teachers have different experiences with and conceptions of writing (Cobb).

literacy practices change, collecting literacy autobiographies from students makes those practices visible not only for the students themselves, but also for instructors. Doing so can get us out of the "deficit mindset" of viewing our first-year writing students as only lacking skills, instead giving us the opportunity to see the many different kinds of literacy practices they are engaged in.

By and large, students embraced the reflective practices encouraged by Journal 1 and presented clear pictures of what their prior conceptions of and experiences with writing were. While some students submitted a slightly disorganized piece of writing that answered each of these questions, most chose to answer one or two of these questions or tell a story with some analysis of what the incident they described meant, while a few took entirely unique approaches to reflecting on their literacy development. These reflective literacy autobiographies also confirmed my interview findings and provided richer detail for the practices that shaped how these specific students conceived of writing. Several wrote about timed writing tests in their literacy autobiographies, which was striking to me seeing as this or any form of standardized test writing was not a topic that had been introduced in the course in Week 1. Alicia wrote about the AP exam specifically in her literacy autobiography, pointing to the ways that time constraints made it difficult for her to write "timed writings" in those classes:

> My junior and senior year of high school I took AP English classes because I liked English, especially reading, and it kept me as a competitive contender for a high class ranking and weighted GPA. I did well overall in those classes, yet I found it difficult to write, especially timed writings because I think too much about how the words

> should be placed on the page instead of just writing as it comes. As a result, I would end up running out of time and with a short paper of not fully elaborated thoughts.

Beyond revealing details about why students might opt to take AP classes to boost their GPAs, Alicia's mention of getting caught up in "how the words should be placed on the page" and her inability to develop ideas in the timed writing environment confirms my findings from my interviewees. Other students wrote about frustrations with formulaic writing, specifically feeling stifled by needing to write in a specific way their teachers told them. Amy described feeling anxious about writing timed essays because of the time constraints placed on them, citing incidents as early as writing for the statewide standardized tests in fourth grade in the opening paragraph of her Journal 1 entry:

> I dreaded writing assignments because I knew that brainstorming for ideas on the topic would take me several minutes when I was given only forty minutes in total for the essay. I felt anxious every time I would open my booklet to see a prompt that I was be prepared for. Although the prompt given often would be about a general experience, I found it hard to relate the prompt with my personal life. When I finally decided on a mediocre topic about my life, I would start writing and thinking at the same time.

Amy voices frustration with how the time and narrowness of the prompt ("I found it hard to relate the prompt with my personal life") prevented her from being able to write successful essays in these circumstances, following this with a conclusion that her "creativity" and "writing skills" were somehow lacking. As I read this, I wondered if the limitations of the prompts and the testing environment were what caused Amy, who I saw as a fairly strong writer, to conclude that it was her writing skills that were what was limited rather than the

measure used for assessing them. This also confirmed my decision to make this course about how writing overlapped with students' lives in order to ensure that they do not feel that same kind of disinterest in their writing that they may have felt on these tests. Most importantly, though, this reflective assignment gave Amy, Alicia, and other students the opportunity to look back on their past experiences with writing and, when they did, see how they were shaped specifically by testing.

Another theme I saw develop in my students' Journal 1 entries was an interest in different forms of self-sponsored writing, especially personal writing or journal writing. Alicia followed her narration of her frustrations in AP English with a short paragraph about a type of writing she enjoys: "I like to free write or journal about my experiences on abnormal days, either for exciting or awful days. However it takes me a long time because I want to put a lot of detail into it as I want to be able to remember it well if I go back to read it." Morgan also mentioned using a personal journal she had to "write in when [she] need[s] to organize and let out [her] thoughts." Other students wrote about using journaling or personal writing as a way to cope with major crises in their lives. Others described more public kinds of self-sponsored writing, like Yujin, an international student from South Korea enrolled in a dual-degree program with our College of Hotel and Restaurant Management, who wrote about travel writing for a Korean blog in her Journal 1 entry. I was pleased that Yujin included this form of writing when reflecting on her relationship to literacy even though it was in a language other than English, especially given that she also said she did not enjoy this kind of non-academic writing in her first language. I learned from this entry that though Yujin has many anxieties about her writing ability, especially in English, she has experience writing for specific audiences and purposes through her self-sponsored writing. A couple other students

disclosed similar forms of self-sponsored writing or writing for real audiences and contexts, which this reflective assignment gave them the opportunity to recognize as a form of writing relevant to the kinds of writing they'd be doing in this class.

I was impressed with the level of engagement I saw from my students in Journal 1, but more importantly, with the reflective writing they produced. **Giving them space to reflect on how they defined writing in the years leading up to this first-year writing class gave them a baseline from which to begin the hard work of rethinking their conceptions of writing that I would ask them to do in this liminal first-year writing class**. It also **familiarized them with the practice of reflection** early in the course, preparing them to engage in reflective work in the weeks that followed. Further, these reflections **provided valuable confirmation of what I found from my interviews about students' past experience writing for tests in K-12**, and the mere fact that so many students wrote specifically about testing, which we had not discussed at this point in the semester, on their literacy autobiographies confirms that these exams have a major impact on how students learn to read and write.

Thinking about Writing Rhetorically through Discussion 2

One key way to get students to see writing more broadly is help them recognize that all writing occurs within a rhetorical situation, directed at a knowable audience in a specific context for a set purpose. This view makes writing more open and objective than the way that it is often presented in K-12, emphasizing correctness and adhering to set formulas as result of standardized test writing asking students to produce a formulaic text specifically for graders within the narrow context of an exam measuring their competence. Lloyd Bitzer, in

his article developing the concept of the rhetorical situation, defines it as "a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance" and argues that "so controlling is situation that we should consider it the very ground of rhetorical activity" (5). Though many have challenged the specifics of Bitzer's original ideas about the rhetorical situation, including Richard Vatz's response that labels Bitzer's concept of the rhetorical situation a "myth" as well as the valid critique of whether any writing produced in a classroom setting can be produced in a real rhetorical situation with true exigencies, I use the concept of the rhetorical situation in my class to help my students see that all writing is produced, as Bitzer says, for a specific issue, to a specific audience, and under a specific context or set of constraints[103]. This includes teaching students that they must possess a deep knowledge of the issues they write about and the current discussion surrounding them. For example, in English 1304 I position our second major paper of the course, which asks them to find and analyze sources voicing a variety of perspectives on a specific research question, as an important step in understanding the rhetorical situation in which my students write their third major paper, a researched argument about that research question. I also provide opportunities for them to identify and develop specific purposes for their writing and interact with their audience, their peers and myself, to gage how successfully they are meeting these writing goals.

The ultimate goal of the first unit was to write a rhetorical analysis of Mike Rose's "No Child Left Behind and the Spirit of Democratic Education," and I instructed students on the skills necessary to complete this kind of rhetorical analysis by assigning them the first

[103] Visually, I represented the rhetorical situation as a circle surrounding Aristotle's rhetorical triangle (which consists of the writer, text, and audience), highlighting that anything surrounding or impacting the relationship between these three elements could be considered as a part of the rhetorical situation.

two chapters of their textbook[104] and a 13-minute video in which I went through a "Thinking Rhetorically" presentation I made in the online presentation software Prezi, emphasizing what it meant to think about texts as produced in a unique context, for a specific purpose, and for an audience. I talked through examples of how to do this kind of analysis on visual and written texts in the video, as well as a brief discussion of genre. Rather than having students practice their rhetorical analysis skills by rhetorically analyzing a short text, in Discussion 2 I chose to have students analyze a website that they frequently visit, asking them to complete the following "steps" in order to form their analyses:

1) Choose a website. Tell us its name, and link to the URL of that website. In order to be able to successfully complete this analysis, you should choose a website that is regularly updated with posts that include text. I'd also recommend choosing a website or blog that you are familiar with, ideally one that you have read before.
2) Tell us what you think the purpose of the website or the writing on the website is, and tell us some more about the author (if there is only one) or editor/creators. (Hint: checking out an "About" page or some Googling might help here)
3) How would you describe the overall design of the website? What does this suggest about the intended audience or purpose of the website? Be sure to reference specific elements and design choices from the website in your analysis.
4) Choose one post to focus the rest of your analysis on. Include a brief excerpt (a paragraph or two) in your analysis, along with the title and author of the piece.

[104] I uploaded these chapters as PDFs to our course Blackboard page. I did this primarily for students who had not yet received their textbooks, but I also annotated these chapters to teach students how to read this particular textbook, to point students to the sections that I found most important, and to give them examples of how they might annotate texts for later assignments.

5) How would you describe the style of the writing? How do you think the target audience and purpose of the website shapes this style? Be sure to reference specific elements (like "short quotes" or "specific" word choices) from the post you're excerpting in justifying your analysis.

I asked that students title their discussion threads with the title of the website and include at least two screenshots from the website so that we could see the visual aspects of the website they were analyzing. My intention was that this assignment would help students hone both their ability to analyze visual and written texts, and to do so specifically in an online space, a skill that is becoming increasingly important[105]. I hoped that doing so in an online course would also help students to think about how they presented themselves and their work in this online course, both in terms of the writing style they adopted for different styles of writing and the ways in which they presented their ideas and themselves visually in our course. And finally, I hoped that this assignment would help students see that **all** texts are rhetorically shaped, including those they interact with daily but may never see studied in a classroom.

More than any other low-stakes assignment during the semester, my students connected with and went into great depth in their Discussion 2 posts. I set an overly short minimum word count of 200 words for this discussion board, but most students wrote posts of around 500 words that contained more in-depth analysis than I expected. Madeline submitted a beautifully formatted post analyzing *Bon Appetit* that clocked in at 900 words, and included in-depth analyses of both the unique visual style and the writing style used for the website:

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[105] As Selfe states in *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century*, "literacy alone is no longer our business. Literacy and technology are" (3). Though, as Selfe argues, we ought to be suspicious of claims that technology will automatically improve education (especially equality in education), we still have a responsibility to teach students to be literate in recent technologies, including communicating in an online space.

> Everywhere you turn on Bon Appétit there's countless delectable sights to behold. From juicy, crispy sausage to cozy, welcoming photos of French restaurants, Bon Appétit delivers in making the consumer feel right at home. Tempting photos of food only demonstrate the cusp of what Bon Appétit offers in terms of being rhetorically and visually satisfying. Their ongoing minimalistic design throughout the site theoretically co-exist with their motto of making food and cooking accessible and simple for everyone.

She goes on to analyze a specific post (titled "Make Healthy Pancakes for Breakfast; Win at Everything for the Rest of the Day") for the content, diction, and images included. I was impressed by the level of depth in Madeline's analysis, especially her ample support for the ways in which the conversational tone and minimalist design work together to meet their goal of "making food and cooking accessible," of a "text" that would not many not appear in a first-year writing class dedicated to teaching students academic discourse. Students made similar observations about websites from *Buzzfeed* to *Seventeen* to *BBC News*, and in their reflections and end-of-course surveys remarked on the value of analyzing this type of text and a text that they had some familiarity with before our class. In his Unit 1 reflection, Syed wrote: "Discussion 2 was my favorite because it allowed me to think critically about a website that I often visit. I never considered how much the design and color schemes of the website added to the experience." Another student wrote in her reflection, "Discussion 2 was interesting because I visited the food blog I wrote about often but, I never thought about analyzing the author's writing. This assignment made me realize there are many ways people can write to appeal to an audience (word choice, design etc.) or to just give life to food in words." **The assignment allowed students to see that all texts were shaped rhetorically,**

specifically those that they interacted with daily but never saw represented in their previous English classes.

But Discussion 2 had an added benefit that I had not anticipated. On the end-of-course survey, one student who selected Discussion 2 as her favorite of the semester wrote that she found it enjoyable because, "It allowed me talk about something that I love." Students analyzed websites for watch enthusiasts, for lovers of romance novels, and parody websites of sorority culture, and many students replied to express that they also read and enjoyed these websites, giving them something to connect on. Alejandra wrote about *The Silver Petticoat Review*, a website that reviews romance novels, movies, and TV shows, in Discussion 2, and she commented on the positive feedback she received from one student in particular in her Unit 1 reflection:

> When I first started writing my post for discussion 2 I was not sure of the reception I was going to get because (let's be honest) how girly my post was, also I wasn't very confident in my writing. However, Elaine's response took me by surprise because, to be honest, I was not expecting anybody to comment on it, but her comment was very positive and encouraging at the same time. Even when I was writing the assignment I wasn't sure I was doing it right, so seeing her response gave me confidence on my writing. Also, it's nice when you find people that like the same things as you.

This assignment allowed students to bring their own interests into the course and form bonds with other students who shared those same interests. While the primary posts analyzing the websites were dense and well thought-out, replies often devolved into discussions of the website itself, like Elaine's comment on Alejandra's post mentioned above which sparked a conversation about which movie adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* is the best. Allowing

these kinds of side discussions to take place is crucial for building community in the online course, just as in a face-to-face class students talk before class starts or occasionally wander off topic in small group discussion. These are "gaps" in our classes that allow students to know each other better, and they serve an important role in both online and face-to-face courses (Locke, Carter and Rickly). Further, **creating a more "open" course where students bring in texts and ideas they interact with in their own lives, rather than limiting them to assigned texts chosen by a professor, allows us to learn from our students and ensure they better connect with the course**[106].

Valuing Personal Writing through Freewrites

In my English 1304 course, I carved out spaces for students to engage in personal writing, both in the form of writing about their own lived experiences and in allowing them to write researched arguments on topics of personal interest to them. This valuing of personal experience is in line with expressivist approaches to teaching rhetoric and composition that value language as a tool of personal expression. In his chapter on expressivist pedagogy in *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies,* Christopher Hurst explains that out of the four elements of the rhetorical triangle -- writer, audience, message, and language -- expressivists place the most emphasis on the writer:

> Expressivism places the writer in the center, articulates its theory, and develops its pedagogical system by assigning highest value to the writer and her imaginative, psychological, social, or spiritual development and how the development influences

[106] Thomas Newkirk explains that "if we are to take culture seriously, if we are to learn about culture from our students, it follows that we need a space big enough for a diversity of forms of self-representation" (107). Though this was manifest in more noticeable ways in Units 2 and 3, allowing students to bring in their culture in the low-stakes writing assignments like Discussion 2 were an important first step in communicating to students that their interests were welcome in this course.

> individual consciousness and social behavior. Expressivist pedagogy employs freewriting, journal keeping, reflective writing, and small-group dialogic collaborative response to foster a writer's aesthetic, cognitive, and moral development. Expressivist pedagogy encourages, even insists upon, a sense of writer presence even in research-based writing. This presence -- "voice" or *ethos* -- whether explicit, implicit, or absent, functions as a key evaluation criteria when expressivists examine writing. (19)

Moderate expressivists like William E. Coles advocate for teaching writing much like one would teach art, with the teacher serving as a guide for the student's self-expression, whereas extreme expressivists promote completely writer-based, student-centered classes and pieces of writing, including Geoffrey Sirc who advocates for an avant garde approach to teaching composition that encourages students to submit experimental and unpolished pieces of writing in lieu of traditional "academic discourse." Even current strands of critical pedagogy can be viewed as inflected by expressivism, like the work of bell hooks, which upholds the passionate creation of socially and morally aware individual citizens as the responsibility of individual teachers. Historically, expressivism developed as a reaction to current-traditional rhetoric that dominated composition instruction at universities between World War II and the Vietnam War, which taught academic writing as adhering to specified forms and correct language, reinforcing cultural homogeneity and social stability. In response to these practices, Donald Murray, Ken Macrorie, Peter Elbow, Pat Belanoff and William Coles wrote anti-textbooks that critiqued the practices of current-traditional rhetoric, emphasizing the ways in which writing could function to make meaning and identity and highlighting the power of voice in writing (Hurst 22-23). Though expressivism grew out of a variety of

sources, many, including Hurst, point to James Britton's expressivist function as detailed in *Language and Learning* and later reinforced through research in *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)* as the "theoretical center" of expressivism. Based on close observations of how children learn language, Britton formed a developmental taxonomy of writing that Hurst identifies as "the only discourse theory that attends to the regulative function of language and includes a developmental matrix that considers both mature and immature uses of language" (25). In *Language and Learning*, Britton contends that the expressivist function of language, which makes language personal and idiosyncratic, serves as a mediator between poetic writing (writing serving an artistic purpose) and transactional writing (writing that achieves the basic business or the world). Expressive writing has the ability to connect abstract concepts with personal experience and negotiate between private and public; "in developmental terms, the expressive is a kind of matrix from which differentiated forms of mature writing are developed" (Britton et al. 83)[107].

The view many expressivists had of theory as a distraction from student writing and teaching led to many negative responses to expressivism. Expressivism has been criticized because of the romantic notion it is presumably bound to that there is a coherent "self" that can be revealed through this kind of personal writing. James Berlin pointed to the potential for expressivism to be co-opted by the capitalist forces that it claims to expose:

> After all this rhetoric can be used to reinforce the entrepreneurial virtues capitalism most values: individualism, private initiative, the confidence of risk taking, the right to be contentious with authority (especially the state). It is not too much to say that

[107] More discussion about Britton's expressivist function, specifically the ways in which it overlaps with Lev Vygotsky's views of language development as a dialectic between the social and the individual, can be found in Chapter 7.

> the ruling elites in business, industry, and government are most likely to not in assent to the ideological inscribed in expressionist rhetoric. ("Rhetoric" 487)

Historically, expressivism fell out of favor in the field of rhetoric and composition because it was seen as opposing leftist cultural studies, as Thomas Newkirk explains in *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*. Vocal proponents of liberatory cultural studies pedagogies, including Alan France, James Berlin, Pat Bizzell, and John Trimbur, criticized the privileging of individualism inherent in expressivism and instead advocated for making the "process of social construction the center of the course" in order to help students "see themselves as products of a culture and resist the ready-made definitions, discourses, and 'subject positions' that seem so 'natural,' so 'normalized,' so freely chosen" (88). Yet, as Newkirk points out, this cultural studies approach discounts the student's personal experience and thus "enacts a politics very similar to the traditional teacher-centered classroom" by positioning the teacher as the one with all the knowledge of these cultural constructs that they then enlighten the student of (89). Further, the warning that expressivist pedagogies might be co-opted by capitalist forces can very well be applied to this cultural studies approach to teaching composition; we might imagine "how corporations could profit from the critical skills students develop when the 'problematize' seemingly self-evident arguments and positions" that could then "produce a corps of troubleshooters who can penetrate the 'normal' way of doing business so as to generate alternative and more profitable procedures" (89). If we acknowledges, as Newkirk does, that this personal writing is, like all writing, a performance rather than a reflection of some imagined "true self," we can adopt a first-year writing pedagogy that makes space for personal writing that students enjoy and find powerful, encouraging them to claim their own voice and perspective as writers.

My own pedagogical approach to teaching this course was not "purely" expressivist[108]; I balanced opportunities for students to write semiformal personal writing in their own voices with discussions of audience, purpose, structure of argument, language conventions, etc. However, I did make space for students to write both on topics of interest to them from their own personal lives and in styles and voices that felt authentic to them. Much like expressivism grew largely as a response to current-traditional rhetoric, I see this move to make space for students to write on topics of personal importance to them as a counterpoint to test writing, where students are forced to write on topics that may not be of interest to them primarily to demonstrate their ability to reproduce a formula through writing that is grammatically correct. This type of writing often served, as Britton points out, to help students transition from personal to public, helping them connect personal experiences with abstract ideas[109]. For example, I opened the course with informal writing aimed at helping my students identify topics that were of personal importance to them that they might then explore through research and write about in Units 2 and 3 of this course. In Week 1 of the course, I assigned ten-minute focused freewrites for my students to complete over the first three weeks of the semester. After briefly explaining what I meant by "freewriting," I focused the assignment sheet around three questions:

> **What do I write about?** I'd like for you to write about something that provokes a need or desire for you to "wonder" about -- an "occasion for writing," if you will. It can be external (a moment, event, place, person, issue, conversation) or internal (a feeling, idea, gripe, concern, question). Ideally, you'll come across these moments in

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[108] Though I use this term here, I am not sure exactly what a "purely expressivist" pedagogy might look like -- perhaps a course taught only using journals, freewriting, and personal essays evaluated based on their authenticity.

[109] In Chapter 7, I discuss how one specific assignment, a public narrative of student experiences with testing, illustrates this role of expressive writing.

> your everyday life and be able to stop and write about them, or if the moment does not allow, make a note of it and write about it later that day.
>
> **What is a "focused freewrite"?** When you freewrite, you write without stopping to consider structure, language errors, or other minor concerns and instead focus on the ideas that you are writing. Think of it as a kind of writing that mirrors your thoughts going through your head.
>
> **How many do I need to do?** At least five, but really, as many as you would like. However, if you're exceeding 20, you're probably working a little too hard on this (and maybe you should consider starting a blog?).

I came across this concept of encouraging students to find an "occasion for writing" from Donna Qualley, who borrowed the idea for Donald Graves ("Using Reading" 105). In the assignment sheet, I included instructions on how to submit freewrites to our course Blackboard, explaining that students were welcome to type their freewrites, handwrite them and scan them or submit high-resolution photos of them, or do a mixture of both. This focus on occasions or ideas to "wonder" about would help them generate paper ideas that were of genuine interest to them, not simply ideas they thought would be easy to write about or would earn them a high grade.

I set aside time to carefully read my students' freewrites at the end of Unit 1 before meeting with them individually so that their writing there would be fresh in my mind as we discussed possible research questions for Paper 2. I'll let my own words from my teaching journal express my thoughts about this assignment and the writing that students submitted:

> These are some of the best pieces of writing that I've looked at from students in a long time. They're so GOOD! These ideas are so original! Even the ones who fully

> embraced the chaos of their own internal monologue came up with some really good, interesting stuff. I find myself wanting to savor them -- to not read them too quickly or without care in order to ensure that I'm paying them good attention.

My desire to take my time reading their freewrites stemmed from the fact that each was unique, in writing style, topic, and in the ideas it contained. Ethan fully embraced a stream-of-consciousness style writing, often wondering to himself whether I was reading these carefully and if so what I thought of them, while another student wrote all of his as poems, some short and carefully constructed and others long and rambling. Some students wrote on broad topics, like Madeline who titled each of her freewrites with titles like "beginnings, "acceptance," "the rat race," and "what it means to be human," while others wrote on very specific incidences in their lives that they connected to larger concerns, like Alicia who wrote on the Colin Kaepernick protest[110] and attending university football games. Almost all of my students included at least one freewrite voicing the kind of anxiety or tentativeness that you would expect young adults to have, often about majors, careers, or moving away from home after graduation, since many of them grew up in the Houston area. Two were particularly striking: one from a student who was studying in the library when a student was sexually assaulted in the stairwell, and the other from Yujin who wrote about the incredibly difficult balancing act she was pulling off as an international student. While undoubtedly some students did some "cramming" to write many of their freewrites shortly before they were

[110] Colin Kaepernick is a player in the National Football League (NFL) who plays the position of quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers. In the fall of 2016, he gained national attention by refusing to stand while the United States national anthem was played at the start of NFL games, explaining at a press conference, "I am not going to stand to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color." His actions sparked similar protests from other professional athletes and a larger discussion about whether protesting the national anthem was disrespectful to veterans. Angela's take: "I respect Kaepernick for his courage, knowing there would be a grave consequence for his actions, yet he decided to take a stand for the issues he sees. The next thing to look out for is his personal help to a victim's family who he publicly stood up for. To me that shows that he really meant his display, and it wasn't just for media attention (which was a good thing to get people talking)."

due, many handwrote some or all of their freewrites and cited specific incidences (in classrooms, sorority meetings, or Twitter) that sparked them to write.

In their freewrites, I saw students embrace the opportunity to allow themselves to write on topics that were of importance to them that they either might not have recognized as topics worthy of writing about in an English class or as topics that they were qualified to write about. The ideas that they came up with in relation to these topics were impressive, though works in progress, and many provided the foundation for interesting research questions related to writing in Units 2 and 3. Further, the kinds of personal therapeutic writing that many students, including Yujin, did in their freewriting seemed beneficial and much needed for the young adults I taught[111]. This style of writing -- completely open to whatever topics the student wanted to explore -- helped me to better know my students more than the self-introductions they wrote in Discussion 1 or the literacy autobiographies they submitted in Journal 1. Student enjoyment of the freewrites gave me further justification for assigning them. Newkirk asserts that when we assign this kind of personal writing, "[t]he overwhelming and consistent comments we see are those of appreciation for the opportunity to write and reflect on lived experiences" (19). While enjoyment alone cannot be the basis for all assignments in a writing course, finding pleasure in this particular writing assignments did help students recognize that writing can be something they enjoy, an important realization for students who may have spent much of their time prior to this class writing in a way that replicated a formula and adhered to notions of "correctness." Hedonistic writing, or writing for no specific purpose other than to write, can lift the burden for students to assign meaning or make solid arguments out of their writing and allow them instead to see that writing can be

[111] As Newkirk argues, "Paradoxically, these writing situations can be therapeutic precisely because we don't act as therapists [...] the therapeutic power of such writing may be the experience of having it treated as 'normal'" (19).

a pleasurable activity. Further, **when the burden of significance of meaning-making is removed from writing, students are free to explore a broader range of topics** (Newkirk 73), which helped students brainstorm possible topics for their research questions. **This recognition that writing can be both enjoyable and on a range of topics beyond those they typically consider worthy of an English class is a helpful tool for engagement**[112], serving a crucial role of getting students to "buy in" to the course.

Conclusion: The Invisible (Work of) Scaffolding the Liminal Online Writing Class

My first step in creating a course that would make writing real for students was through carefully planning and building the course. I knew there were several themes and approaches to teaching writing that I wanted to adopt in order to achieve this goal, namely getting students to reflect on their writing, consider writing rhetorically, and engage in personal writing, and **I had to take the time to adapt those to the online space**. This act of translating pedagogical practices and approaches to the online space is not always easy[113]. While I have chosen to view this transfer of face-to-face pedagogical practices to the online writing classroom as a shift that is "exciting and productive, not just inevitable" (Gillam and Wooden 24), this still requires creativity and, perhaps most importantly, a willingness to engage in trial and error. I adapted many practices and approaches I had tried out in my previous two semesters teaching online and maintained a good degree of flexibility,

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[112] "Engagement" and allowing students to write about topics of interest to them will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

[113] As John Barber explains, "The online classroom is not an electronic duplication of the traditional classroom. It is an extension into new and challenging dimensions. Educators cannot simply transfer or transpose theory, techniques, and teaching from the traditional classroom into the online classroom and expect consistently positive results" (254).

designing the course week by week based on what I observed was working or not working and on the feedback I received from students.

Though I emphasized to students that the course was flexible and to some degree negotiable, there was still a need to create a structure and build scaffolding into the course. Without the weekly face-to-face meetings in a set time and place, the online class runs the risk of feeling scattered, disorganized, or forgotten about altogether by students who are taking four other courses and may not check their email regularly. This structure was achieved through bi-weekly due dates and discrete units leading up to major paper assignments written and shared with students ahead of time. I designed each unit using the questions for scaffolding online courses laid out by Helen M. Grady and Marjorie T. Davis in "Teaching Well Online with Instructional and Procedural Scaffolding":

1. Where are we going? (learner and task analysis);
2. How will we get there? (instructional strategy and medium); and
3. How will we know we have arrived? (assessment and evaluation) (104)

I explained my thinking about these questions to my students in our weekly emails, explaining what the goal for the week was and how it would help us work toward the paper students were working on in that particular unit. The second question pertaining to instructional strategy and medium took the form of a handful of instructional types (videos, handouts, presentations) or assignment types (discussions, journals, annotations, writing group discussions) that were repeated throughout the semester in order to help students develop a sense of comfort with the course and minimize feelings of disorientation or confusion. Finally, I set up our "classroom" before the course started, populating it with these introductory documents, unit folders, weekly folders, and a collection of resources, including

grammar handouts, handouts on how to introduce and embed, and links to MLA citation guides, so that I could point students to them when necessary.

Regardless of the medium in which writing instructors teach, thinking carefully about the overall design of the course, the practices that will be central to it, and the scaffolding contained within it is an important first step to creating a successful composition course. However, **for online writing instructors, this step is especially crucial and especially time consuming, requiring them to not only decide on approaches to teaching but to create materials and build the online space where the course will occur**. Instructors who wish to build a **responsive, student-centered course face even more time and effort expended** if forced to drastically redesign the course mid-semester because it is not meeting their students' needs. While some materials can be recycled from semester to semester, online writing instructors seeking to teach as effectively must expend a considerable amount of time and energy prior to the semester begins, labor that often goes ignored[114].

[114] The invisible labor of teaching an online course will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

Chapter 6

Teaching: Researching and Arguing about Real Writing

Unit 1 of the course served an important role of familiarizing students with some of the key approaches I took to the course, namely reflection, rhetorical awareness, and personal writing, while exploring a topic related to writing that was of personal interest and importance to me: standardized test writing. Rhetorical analysis was emphasized above all else in this unit as students worked to complete their first major paper[115], an analysis of Mike Rose's "*No Child Left Behind* and the Spirit of Democratic Education," though I made room for students to explore the personal through both Daily Writing assignments (including Discussion 1, a self-introduction, and Discussion 3, sharing their personal experiences with testing[116]) and by welcoming them to use their personal experiences with testing in their final drafts of Paper 1 to support their analyses. While I continued to emphasize the importance of thinking rhetorically about the texts they produced and the texts they read throughout Units 2 and 3, two important themes related to reflection and personal writing emerged in the latter half of the course: taking advantage of the social constructivist potential of online writing through reflection and using an "open course" structure that allowed students to explore their personal interests through writing as a means of ensuring student engagement.

The notion that students ought to be conscious of the specific audiences, communities, and social contexts in which they write is a familiar idea in composition pedagogy, and one that some scholars in online writing instruction have claimed is one of the greatest strengths of teaching online. In *Preparing Educators for Online Instruction*, Beth Hewett and Christa Ehmann identify this as the social constructivist assumption of OWI,

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[115] The assignment sheet for Paper 1 can be found in Appendix E.
[116] The assignment sheets for these and all other discussions can be found in Appendix F.

defining social constructivism as the theory that "knowledge is understood to be dynamic, provisional, and developed and mediated socially as people generate thoughts, test ideas, and determine what they believe to be true" (33). The assumption is that because students in online writing courses are constantly writing for an audience and often within collaborative groups (through the use of discussion boards and writing groups specifically), this diminishes the teacher's traditional authority as the sole audience member and judge of good writing. While many OWI scholars have provided evidence of ways in which the online writing classroom makes their students more aware of the role of audience in their writing, others have questioned whether students are truly aware of the audiences for whom they write in their online classes and if they value these peer interactions as much as we think they do. In this chapter, I examine the ways in which I provided students with numerous opportunities to write for and interact with audiences of their peers and the ways in which I used reflection to ensure students were cognizant of the ways in which writing is written to a specific, knowable audience.

One of the themes that came up continually in my interviews was the ways in which students did not feel connected to their English courses or the writing they completed for them, often because they were restricted to writing revised essays on literary works or timed practice essays on topics they either felt no connection to or were not given ample time to carefully consider. To combat this, I sought to ensure that students felt interested in the topics they wrote about and in the course in general. The Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA Council) collaboratively with the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the National Writing Project (NWP) term this "engagement," which

they identify as one of their eight habits of mind for success in college writing[117], defining it as "a sense of investment and involvement in learning." Engagement is different from enjoyment; students may not always enjoy the reading or writing they are assigned in the course, and focusing a course entirely around whether or not students are having "fun" is not a pedagogically sound approach to teaching writing. However, in this chapter, I explore the ways in which adopting an open course structure that allows students to explore how their own interests overlap with writing allows for greater engagement and enables students to see how the ideas about writing we explore in this course are manifested in their lived experiences. I also demonstrate how building community can be an important step for fostering a sense of engagement in an online course.

While the previous chapter focused the design of the course on some of the broad approaches to teaching it as manifested in daily writing assignments, this chapter will focus on the writing process that students went through in order to produce a researched argument related to writing by the end of Unit 3. The open nature of these low-stakes writing assignments continued throughout the semester, providing a space for students to formulate their own purposes and approaches for meeting those specific purposes while writing on topics of interest to them. While a few discussion assignments will be mentioned here, this chapter will focus on how students performed inquiry into how their own personal and professional interests overlapped with writing through Paper 2, a researched exploration of a research question, and Paper 3, a research argument on that research question, looking specifically at how students developed research questions, found and analyzed sources on

[117] These eight habits of mind are a piece of their "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing" developed by two- and four-year college and high school writing faculty to ensure student success in college writing. Their habits of mind are "ways of approaching learning that are both intellectual and practical and that will support students' success in a variety of fields and disciplines." The other seven habits are curiosity, openness, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition.

their research questions, learned how to build rhetorically effective researched arguments, and worked in writing groups to compose and revise their arguments. I begin the chapter by explaining the design of my unit reflection assignment, including how I sought to make the social nature of writing visible through it. I then provide further justification for my pedagogical practice of having students perform inquiry into a question related to writing (as a part of the broader course theme of "What is writing?" discussed in Chapter 5) and how this approach ensured student engagement in the course by following how one student, Alicia, went about performing inquiry into her specific research question about writing and the Black Lives Matter movement. I then move into Unit 3, demonstrating how I taught students to build rhetorically effective arguments and how I highlighted the social nature of writing through peer review and revision. I end the chapter by sharing where I see clear evidence of engagement in student feedback from this "writing about writing" approach to teaching the researched argument that I received on their end of course surveys.

Unit Reflections for Reflexivity and Engagement

One important way I incorporated reflection into daily writing assignments was through guided Unit Reflections at the end of each unit. This kind of reflective assignment takes advantage of one of the core benefits to using an online course: there is an easily accessible record of all of the writing a student has produced and interactions they have had with their peers and instructors over a unit or an entire semester. Susanmarie Harrington, Rebecca Rickly and Michael Day suggest that online writing instructors enact a "reflective, critical pedagogy" precisely because of this advantage in their introduction to the 2000 collection *The Online Writing Classroom* (9):

> In the metadiscursive realm, students should be able to look back at e-mail messages and logs of real-time written conversation to identify rhetorical strategies; to see who responded to whom, how, and why. In the metacognitive realm, writing classes might encourage students to go back through transcripts of online tutoring and peer-response sessions to identify the processes through which collaboration and revision take place. Only then, as students and teachers of writing and rhetoric, can we discuss, internalize, and practice those approaches that help us grow as writers. (9-10)

By asking students to reflect on interactions in discussion boards, feedback through peer review, and readings they interacted with throughout the unit in Unit Reflections, I encouraged them to engage in both metadiscursive and metacognitive reflection, helping them to see how writing works for them as individuals and how it functions in a community of writers. I centered the reflection on four questions about that unit:

- What new ideas did you encounter?
- How did your view of writing change?
- How did you interpret feedback from your audience?
- What do you want Liz to know about this unit?

On the Unit Reflection assignment sheet, each of these questions was accompanied by a fuller explanation of why I was asking it. For the first question about new ideas, I quoted Qualley, and asked to be specific and "point to a specific reading, source, or post from one of your peers and explain why this was new for you and how it shaped your thinking on this issue." This question was perhaps the easiest for students to answer, focusing on content rather than metacognition, but it also opens them up to what Qualley calls the "essayistic stance" in which they seriously consider new ideas and perspectives rather than reading to

reinforce their own viewpoints. This is an approach I wanted my students to adopt in order to ensure that they thought deeply about the writing they were doing, a stark departure from replicating a mindless formulaic essay in a timed environment.

The second question on how their view of writing changed draws reflection's potential for helping students see that literacy skills are always in flux and that writing development is nonlinear. As Haswell finds in *Gaining Ground in College Writing*, there is no single, unified process for writing development; instead, students jump around, progressing in some skills while regressing in others. Carroll similarly finds that for college students specifically, "complex literacy skills develop slowly, often idiosyncratically, over the course of their college years, as they choose or are coerced to take on new roles as writers" (xi). The secret is to help students gain awareness of their own development through "self-reflection that learns a new knowledge or skill by unlearning and revising old knowledge or skill" (131). Similarly, Qualley finds that her pedagogy of reflexivity honors the fact that reading and writing skills are always in flux: "Knowledge of my subject -- reading and writing -- is not an all or nothing knowledge. It accrues gradually through instruction, experience, and reflection on that experience. And like knowledge of people, knowledge of reading and writing is never final or complete" (29). Reflection, especially on their past assumptions about writing and the ways in which their new views of writing are developing, will demonstrate to students that their literacy development is not and should not be linear, as I emphasized repeatedly in Weekly Emails where I encouraged students to be patient with themselves as they develop as writers and to see the value in the first-year writing class as a space for taking note of that development. This question also served the practical purpose of having students think about the writing development throughout the

semester so that they would be better prepared to write on it in their Reflective Portfolio in the fourth unit of the course.

Asking students to consider the third question on the Unit Reflection, "How did you interpret feedback from your audience?", was the most direct way I addressed the social constructivist view of online writing instruction, which states that online spaces are inherently better suited for showing students the social nature of writing because students write to a knowable audience of their peers. The benefits of writing for an audience in online courses has been documented in many different pieces of OWI scholarship, including Laurie Olson-Horswill's case study of her online first-year writing classroom, which followed the process model of reading, discussion, writing, writing groups, and writing workshops. She finds that the writing groups used in her course were even more engaged than her face-to-face classes and were given the opportunity to write for real audiences more than any her other courses:

> After teaching online English 101 for ten semesters, I am convinced that teaching and learning in this setting can be even more interactive and personal than in a traditional classroom. Without the confinement of four walls or ticking of clocks, students write off the page and into one another's worlds. They create a classroom of written words that comes alive. (188)

She describes the ways in which her students were "pulled together by real thoughts and voices in writing," especially because her students' writing served as much of the text being read and studied in the course (188). The online writing classroom can be structured in such a way as to provide ample opportunity for students to write for real, knowable audiences in the form of their peers and enables greater potential for collaboration than the face-to-face

classroom, helping students see writing as an inherently social activity geared toward an audience.

However, there are some questions about the strength of the claim about the inherent ability of online writing classrooms to help students better understand writing for audiences. Hewett and Ehmann point out that evidence in support of the social constructivist assumptions of OWI is merely anecdotal, and more substantial studies are needed. In the years since their book was published in 2004, more research has been done with varying results. In their 2013 study of student success in two online first-year writing classes which included data from surveys, online discussions, course management statistics, and selected interviews, Merry Rendahl and Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch found that "students did not consider interaction with peers as significant as interactions with the instructor or with the course content." There are several possible explanations for this finding, but they emphasize that above all this points to a potential disconnect between how we think about online writing courses and how our students think about them:

> Students' low expectations of peer interaction through discussion as a means to learning raises questions about what social learning may look like in an OFYW course. The reactions to peer learning from this study may reflect a kind of surface learning (Entwistle, 1988) in regard to interaction with peers. That is, students may have treated the discussions and peer reviews as a rote exercise, doing only what was required without making critical connections. Or, it may be that students experienced learning through their peers, but did not recognize it as such or underestimate the value of those interactions. In any case, these responses hint at a possible disconnect between scholarship and student experience. Writing teachers and researchers talk

> about the importance of classroom interaction in learning to write and constructivist theories state that such interaction—and valuing of such interaction—is necessary, even critical for learning to write online. Yet, students in this study were not experiencing nor expecting that type of valuable peer interaction. It may be that students do not consider asynchronous discussions to be interactive. It may be that not all students need the same level of peer interaction when learning. This finding may prompt further investigation of social constructivist learning theories that focus on external activities, conversation, or environment as evidence of students' learning.

Thus, while some like Olson-Horswill have found great success teaching students that writing occurs within a community for specific audiences, others have found that students do not value or understand this kind of writing and still privilege the instruction and feedback they receive from their instructor over their interactions with their peers. Online writing instructors who seek to have their students develop audience awareness need to overcome the barriers identified by Rendahl and Breuch, taking steps to emphasize the value of these peer interactions to move them beyond "rote exercises" akin to "busywork" in the minds of their students. By having students analyze a piece of feedback they received from a peer in their Unit Reflections, I made visible to them that they were writing for real audiences who often gave them feedback on their writing, helping them make those "critical connections" between rhetorically analyzing how a text is shaped for an audience and recognizing how their own writing is shaped for and received by an audience.

Finally, the last question gave students the opportunity to shape the course by providing me with feedback about how this unit had worked for them. This fosters a sense of engagement by helping students feel more invested in their learning and enables their

instructor to shape the class in order to better suit them. Bolton explains that this use of reflection leads to students feeling "greater agency, responsibility, self-understanding and self-confidence" (85):

> Exposing the educational process (including the role of the tutor) to scrutiny can enable participants to take a degree of control: say what they want out of a teaching and learning situation, and attempt to redress anything which they feel is going wrong. The tutor can be enabled to adapt their methods or syllabus to the needs and wants of their student(s). (71)

This was an important practical consideration for my course, and I was careful to frame reflection as both a valuable activity for students in cementing their learning and a tool for me to shape the course going forward to best suit their needs. Students aware that they are involved in a teacher research project produce better work and are more engaged in the course (perhaps **because** they know they are involved in a research project), and reflection with the added purpose of helping me shape the course helped reinforce to them why meaningful, authentic reflection was worth their time and effort. In other words, even if students did not readily see the personal benefits of reflection, they recognized that their reflection would help me better tailor the course to their needs, preferences, and interests.

I often learned more about how to shape the course going forward from how students answered the first three questions than the final question about what they liked or would change about the course. For example, one theme that arose from their Unit 1 reflections was that they valued learning from each other's experiences; most students answered the first question about what they'd learned this unit by discussing something not from Rose's chapter but that their peers shared on the discussion board. Though I'd anticipated students

might write about what they learned from each other in Units 2 and 3 where they explored their own research questions, I was surprised to find that they appreciated learning from their peers' interactions in this unit that was focused on one specific topic. For example, in Discussion 3, students shared their personal response to Rose's chapter, drawing largely on their own experiences with standardized testing in K-12. It was clear through my students' reflections that being able to read nineteen different people's experiences and thoughts on testing helped highlight the fact that we ought to be open to ideas and viewpoints that are counter to our own. Yujin, a multilingual exchange student from South Korea, met with me face-to-face to discussion Rose's chapter and more background about the U.S. education system and relied heavily on Discussion 3 to understand the complaints that people had with the role of testing in our education system, as she explains in her Unit 1 reflection:

> I read all the posts since I was struggling to understand America's education system. Every single person had different but somewhat similar experiences. However, they felt differently and thought differently and related to Rose's chapter in different ways. By this unit, I have learned that I should not only focus on my own idea, but try to meet, read and listen to other people's idea since it can be better than mine. I should be humble on my idea and should not think this is the only right thing.

Though I was concerned that I had put Yujin and other students who did not have as much experience with the U.S. education system at a disadvantage by assigning a rhetorical analysis of a reading on the U.S. education system as the first major paper of the course, I was surprised by the level of nuance and depth in their writing on Rose's piece. Through this careful study of each student's experience with standardized testing, Yujin understood perhaps better than any other student that even those with seemingly similar experiences can

have different impressions of those experiences, and this understanding made her more open to the kind of reflexive reading and thinking about the topic of standardized testing. An online writing course centered on students' experiences and interests where students are given the opportunity to read and reflect on the experiences of dozens of their peers can make students think more deeply about the topics on which they are writing, and perhaps even teach them to think more deeply about the writing assignments they approach outside of this course as well. One student, Anna, even asked specifically for "more personal discussions that are either very open or challenging." This feedback from my students on their reflection reinforced to me that **students valued the opportunity to not only share their own experiences through personal writing, but enjoyed reading and learning from the personal writing of their peers, which helped them adopt the essayistic stance of being open to new ideas and rethinking their own assumptions**.

I had a loose Unit 2 design in mind from teaching this course the previous semester, but at the beginning of Unit 2 I chose to tweak or even scrap some of the assignments from the previous semester altogether in order to include more of the types of assignments and instructional materials that resonated with my students, the most notable of which was making more room for freewritten journal assignments and including more videos explaining key concepts and assignments. Certainly writing teachers in face-to-face classes adapt their courses according to the feedback they receive from their students, whether these adaptations are minor, like going back during an in-class meeting to explain a concept that students clearly are not understanding, or major, like changing paper assignments or unit designs. Feedback in a face-to-face class is often instant and as simple as a student asking for further clarification on an assignment or idea. Feedback is less easy to solicit and interpret in an

online class, both because of the grading load and because the feedback you receive online is often less clear. Occasionally students would email me to ask for clarification on assignments or ideas, prompting me to rethink them or to post videos or instructions explaining them further, but often confusion would manifest itself subtly in the ways that students approached assignments. In order to know how to adapt a course, online teachers must keep up with their grading and carefully reflect on the work that students are producing in order to identify changes that need to be made in a timely fashion, in addition to directly asking for student feedback in reflective assignments or surveys. Adapting the course is also more time-consuming for online instructors; they must rewrite materials and assignments, create new presentations, record new videos, or respond more thoroughly to students' individual writing assignments, and then wait to see if these alterations or additional feedback are understood. This is yet another example of why online teaching, or at least good online teaching, demands more time and effort than face-to-face teaching, and one I felt acutely when rethinking Unit 2 of the course in the midst of grading final drafts of Paper 1, Unit 1 reflections, and reflective journal assignments.

Researching How Writing Overlaps with Personal Interests

Units 2 and 3 were linked; students explored the same research question in both major papers for these two units. I began the Paper 2 assignment sheet[118] by explaining the relationship between these two papers:

> For your second major paper, you will form a research question related to writing, conduct research to gather a multitude of perspectives on that research question, then

[118] The Paper 2 assignment sheet can be found in its entirety in Appendix E.

> present your findings, analysis and reflections in a three-part paper. This paper should give you the opportunity to find and engage with quality sources that you can then use to write Paper 3, your own original researched argument about your selected research question.

I couched these points about how writing Paper 2 would prepare students to write Paper 3 in discussions of ethos, explaining how finding sources that said different things about their research question would give them a fuller understanding of the topic they were going to form an original argument about. I described Paper 2 as a "research document" composed of three basic parts: an exploratory narrative explaining their interest in the research question and their process exploring it (minimum 500 words), annotations of at least six sources that voice different perspectives on the issue question (minimum 150 words of annotations each), and a conclusion that ends with a tentative thesis for Paper 3 (minimum 200 words).

This choice to require students to form a research question exploring how writing overlapped with their personal and professional interests fit well within the broader theme of the course, "What is writing?" It takes an approach similar to the one that Downs and Wardle advocate for in their "Introduction to Writing Studies" first-year course in which they have "students conduct primary research, however limited, on issues of interest to both themselves and the field of writing studies"; as a result of this, "the course about writing becomes a *writing* course in which students study writing to learn more about it and potentially improve their own" (562). I similarly hoped that having students perform inquiry into the ways writing worked in a specific context that they were interested in would offer a new perspective on the question of what writing is. I chose to have my students focus on issues that were of interest them and related to writing, not to "the field of writing studies" as

Downs and Wardle suggest, in order to keep my students' personal interests at the center of the course. Downs and Wardle's examples of research questions from their course include some career-related questions and others specifically oriented toward composing strategies and other topics of interest to the field of writing studies:

- Do college freshmen and seniors use rhetorical strategies at all or in similar ways?
- How useful is Microsoft Word's grammar checker?
- What makes an effective business plan?
- How does music (or lighting, or other environmental factors) affect writing and revision?

Conversely, the examples I provided in the "Research Questions about Writing" presentation I made for students to understand the proper scope of a research question and what I meant by asking them to write a research question somehow related to writing were more focused on what I perceived might be of interest to them based on their freewrites:

- What are the hallmarks of investigative writing about food production, and how has this writing shaped the food industry?
- What kinds of voices and genre conventions do bloggers (lifestyle, food, fashion, etc.) adopt in their writing? How and why?
- How do advertising account executives maintain a positive relationship between their clients and the advertising agency through carefully written communication?
- How can personal writing serve as therapeutic?
- In what ways is hip-hop seen as poetry? In what ways is it denied that label? What are the ramifications of that classification?

I thought providing these sorts of examples would highlight to students the ways in which writing was used in real-world contexts rather than focusing on how writing is produced in the first-year writing classroom, which does not mirror most writing situations. I also allowed my students to perform primary research on their issue question but did not make this a requirement, as Downs and Wardle did, simply because this was not feasible for all topics. A few students in this course did elect to do interviews[119], and others chose to analyze their own writing from previous classes and scenarios in this unit[120].

This decision to shape the course around students performing inquiry into how writing functioned in relation to one of their interests also served the role of deepening student engagement in the course, making it an "open course" in which students are free to bring in their own experiences and thoughts about them. Thomas Newkirk criticizes the ways in which well-meaning composition courses themed on readings, even those "dealing with issues of race or cultural difference," run the risk of crowding out student writing (105). Indeed the difficulty that teachers often face when trying to enact a critical or liberatory pedagogy have been well-documented (Smith; Durst; Wallace and Rothschild; Beech; Trainor; Lindquist). While it is certainly a balancing act, whenever compositionists wholly impose their goals for a course onto students instead of supporting students' goals as well, students may shut down or produce papers that parrot back what they think their professor wants to hear. Instead, Newkirk advocates for "mak[ing] room for the presentation and discussion of diversity" by making "the invitation to write [...] an open one" (105). He

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[119] Most notably, one student investigating whether or not first-year writing courses benefitted engineering students chose to interview two senior engineering students, who said they did not help them on their coursework, and two fairly recent graduates who were now professional engineers, who said the courses did help prepare them for the writing they did in their careers.

[120] This included students who were writing about the power of personal or therapeutic writing citing examples of their own personal writing in Paper 3.

describes abandoning a set curriculum of a composition course he taught at the University of Texas in favor of creating room for students to write about their own lives:

> I jettisoned the syllabus for the last assignment. I cleared the apparatus from the floor and asked them to write about something that mattered to them, meeting with each to talk about topics. I remember in particular an African American student from Sherman, Texas, who mentioned that he was one of twenty-eight brothers and sisters. In fourteen weeks of teaching I had managed *not* to learn this piece of information. He said he would have no trouble coming up with something to write about -- and indeed, his paper on the shooting death of one of his brothers was powerful and heartbreaking. [...] I remember another student in that Texas class, silent and invisible until the end, when she wrote passionately about how Mexican American students were tracked in Brownsville schools (she was one of them). She was teaching me something about culture, and without the open space I had created I don't think I would have had the chance to learn it. (106)

Through these two powerful examples, Newkirk demonstrates the value of opening up a course to allow students to write about experiences that were powerful and personal. These courses are not less rigorous than courses themed on race, gender, or power, and they often empower students to write on these topics in a way that is accessible to them and unique to their own experiences. In my course, students still did research, read and analyzed sources, and formed arguments somehow related to writing, but they did so on a variety of topics, from video games to police brutality, that they were personally invested in.

The most important tool for shaping research questions came in the form of one-on-one, face-to-face conferencing with each of my students. In the first week of Unit 2, students

signed up for ten-minute conferences with me to discuss potential research questions. I held these in an on-campus coffee shop; I also told students that if they could not meet during one of the timeslots I created or if they could not get to campus, I'd be happy to video chat with them over Skype or Google Hangouts, but all twenty of my students signed up and showed up for face-to-face conferences. The decision to have conferences in an online course grew out of online teaching lore[121] that I'd heard in my own department. An online instructor I admired mentioned using conferences, either face-to-face or over video chat, as a way to feel like she truly knew her students and was teaching actual people rather than usernames and email addresses. From the two prior semesters that I'd taught online, one of which I did without ever conferencing with students and another where I required this same kind of conference to discuss research questions, I had also found that conferences helped me get a better sense of my students and, frankly, gave me a better attitude about teaching the course by reminding me that I was teaching "real" people. I chose to conference on research questions for a few reasons, the first of which was that forming a research question can be tricky, especially when students were free to choose any topic that related to writing[122]. Even though I called out several pitfalls to avoid in my presentation on research questions that I assigned to students prior to our meeting, students often fall into the trap of choosing a question that can be answered objectively through research, writing a question that is too broad, or choosing a question that will be difficult to find sources on. These are issues that can be better addressed in a face-to-face meeting than in email correspondence or comments

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[121] I use the term "lore" as Stephen North uses it in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition,* defining it as "the accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs in terms of which Practitioners [composition instructors] understand how writing is done, learned, and taught" (22). North explains that this lore is disseminated informally, often through talk between instructors, as was the case with this bit of composition lore I am referring to.

[122] As Newkirk points out, when creating an open class where students determine their own topics, it is important to meet with students to discuss the viability of the topics they are choosing to write about.

on assignments. Second, conferencing on research questions, instead of conferencing on a draft of a major paper for example, helped me keep these conferences short, which was important for me from a labor perspective because of the workload associated with teaching an online course. And finally, these kinds of conferences tend to be more conversational than conferences about a paper; I'm able to talk with students about why they are interested in each of their proposed research questions and get a better sense of them as people than if we were focused on a piece of text. As an instructor, I found these meetings massively helpful in both knowing my students better and giving me the opportunity to aid them in shaping their research questions. In each meeting, we would chat informally before delving into their proposed research questions, and I ended each conference by asking how the course was going for them. Students talked informally with me about their majors, their courses, music recommendations that I had made in my weekly emails, and my experience at UH thus far. Discussing research questions gave me an opportunity to clarify the assignment, including the relationship between Papers 2 and 3 and the spirit behind those assignments, and have a back-and-forth with students about the benefits of the different options for research questions that they had brought with them and how to best shape the research question they chose, something much more easily achieved in-person than online. I was also able to point them to possible sources for many of their topics, lending them my expertise as someone who researches and thinks a lot about writing[123]. Finally, this last bit of discussion about how the course was working for each student served as a yet another source of feedback to use to shape the course going forward. I talked with many students about freewriting specifically

[123] Downs and Wardle identify this as one of the core benefits of teaching first-year writing course as a course that performs inquiry into writing: "When the course content is writing studies, writing instructors are concretely enabled to fill that expert reader role. This change directly contravenes the typical assumption that first-year writing can be about any-thing, that somehow the content is irrelevant to an instructor's ability to respond to the writing." (559)

and what they enjoyed about it, noting in my teaching journal that most cited the freedom found in that genre as the reason why wanted more of it. Overall, these conferences were helpful for both shaping students' research projects and getting them better engaged in the course by expressing to them that I was interested in their topics and their findings on them.

Researching How "Real Writing" Works: Alicia's Exploration of the Black Lives Matter Movement

Unit 2 marked a shift toward the course being focused on students' interests and the texts they were studying, as opposed to my interests and texts that I selected. Because of this, the course became more personalized, with much of the work being done individually by students or in their writing groups, as I explained this to my students in my Week 7 email:

> As you can see, Paper 2 is largely procedural and narrative; it's about you telling me about how you went about coming up with, researching, and making sense of your particular research question. So I'm going to try my best not to waste your time and to let you focus on reading and writing for that paper this unit (in other words, there won't be a lot of unrelated discussion boards or any additional reading beyond the textbook this unit).

I hoped that reducing the workload in terms of outside readings and discussion, and, perhaps more importantly, being transparent with my students about my thought process behind doing so, would encourage students to really dig into and carefully analyze the six sources they were working with for Paper 2. Because of this unit signaled a turn toward individual student projects, I've chosen to present and analyze the experience of one student, Alicia, as she formed her research question, looked for sources, drafted her annotations, and assembled

her final draft of Paper 2. This case study method of writing about a single student's experience will show how these research projects took shape and demonstrate the role that the student, the peers in her writing group, and I as her instructor played in helping her approach this project.

When Alicia and I met for conferencing, her preferred research question was on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, specifically how the movement has been portrayed through writing in the media. She was interested in how certain branches of the media portrayed BLM protests in the most negative light possible, focusing on the few participants who did not protest peacefully or labeling the protests "riots," and how writing about the movement got spread on social media. I suggested she might also look into how the movement itself used writing, specifically the role that Twitter and the extremely short form writing of the 160-character tweet played into spreading the message of the movement. She received further guidance from her writing group on how to shape her research question and research this topic in Discussion 4. The purpose of the discussion was for students to share their research questions and thoughts about them -- specifically, I said on the assignment sheet that students might share their rationale for choosing this research question, their interest in the topic, their personal thoughts on the research question -- and to receive feedback from the peers in their writing groups about how to go about researching this topic. Alicia explained her personal ties to the topic in her post and the various places she might find sources on this topic:

> I choose this topic because it is of interest to me, as I am a black woman who is indirectly affected by the movement. You see all the news coverage about it, yet I had not thought about how writing played a role. Writing affects how information is

> portrayed to the public and people inside the movement itself. I want to find out more about the movement's organization structure and how it ties into how information is relayed. My personal opinion is that national news coverage has influenced the perception of the movement in a negative light at times- which is to be expected. I'm not saying that the crazy riots are appropriate, but they portray an image that is written about. As I research, I think I will find various views about the movement, supporting and opposing it. Also there will be many forms of writing, like articles, interviews, songs, etc. I want to find sources from inside the movement and learn about it from the inside out. However this research might take me many places I had not thought about, which makes it exciting.

I was struck by how Alicia and other students were interested in not only finding sources **about** writing but studying sources as **examples** of writing -- in this case, studying writing related to the BLM movement in order to see how writing is being used within the movement. I voiced this in my response to her, where I suggested there were two unique parts of the research question she was investigating, echoing the comments I'd made in our face-to-face meeting:

> I'm so excited to see where this research question takes you, Alicia. I think you're definitely right about it providing you with an opportunity to investigate both how others write about the movement (often using coded language, deeming certain gatherings "riots" and others "protests") but also how the movement has used writing. If you haven't already, I'd definitely check out how the women who started the movement write about it and others use of it (some good, some bad) here. I also think you can probably find some interesting pieces about how a social-media-driven

> movement that involves writing has certain advantages and disadvantages, if that's something you're interested in.

I linked specifically to a page on *BlackLivesMatter.com* that told the "Herstory" of the movement from the perspective of its three founders, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors. Another student commented on how she was researching BLM and social media specifically, sharing that she was interested in how writers' backgrounds influenced how they wrote their posts and whether Alicia would be looking into this, too. Ethan also replied and suggested that she look into mainstream media, including morning news shows and AM talk radio, to see instances of clearly biased reporting on BLM, if needed. Alicia responded to both their suggestions saying she would keep them in mind going forward.

The next assignment asked her to identify the six sources she would include in Paper 2 and submit MLA citations of them to me in Blackboard. This assignment served first to ensure that students weren't having trouble locating sources for their research question or citing sources in MLA format, but it also gave me the opportunity to see the types of sources they were choosing, guaranteeing that they had sources that voiced a variety of perspectives on the research question they were investigating, and give them some pointers on what to pay attention to in their summative and analytical annotations on these sources. Specifically, on the Paper 2 assignment sheet, I asked that students "make at least 150 words worth of annotations on **each** source, including a summative annotation at the **top or beginning** of each source that summarizes the source and evaluates it (specifically by assessing its credibility, authority, or bias)." Much of the feedback I gave to students on their sources was with these specific requirements in mind, giving them suggestions on how to approach these annotations in light of the sources they selected. Alicia turned in a Works Cited page with

sources from *BlackLivesMatter.com*, *The New York Times*, *Slate*, and *The Huffington Post*, as well as a YouTube video from a spoken word poet responding to the death of Trayvon Martin. I was impressed with the range of sources, both in terms of source types and the different facets of the Black Lives Matter movement and the writing surrounding it that they touched on. I praised Alicia for this in my comment on her sources and gave her a fairly standard reminder to analyze these sources carefully:

> These sources look great, Alicia -- these should give you some good first-hand examples of how the movement uses writing for you to analyze and some thoughtful commentary on how the movement uses writing. In your evaluations, I'd be sure to spend some time explaining the background of these writers, especially those who are writing more personal or opinion-based pieces. What are their credentials? Why do you find them qualified to write on this topic? What are the reputations of these websites?

My intent was to give her questions to consider these questions when writing her annotations, and I was impressed with Alicia's draft of her annotations and the final annotations she turned in, both of which indicated that this kind of individual-level feedback was helpful in pushing her to do the depth of analysis I was looking for in those annotations.

For peer review for this unit, I had students submit an annotation[124] of one of their six sources to their writing group, where they would receive feedback from one of their group members on how well their annotations were meeting the guidelines I set in the assignment sheet. Alicia uploaded an annotated copy of a piece from *BlackLivesMatter.com* titled "11

[124] Students annotated PDFs of their sources using PDF annotation programs like Kami or Adobe Acrobat. I had students do this with Rose's "*No Child Left Behind* and the Spirit of Democratic Education" in Unit 1, making videos to walk them through the process of annotating PDFs and using this low-stakes assignment as an opportunity to address any issues with the technology or process of annotating.

Misconceptions About the Black Lives Matter Movement," a fairly lengthy piece that came out to about 7 pages when saved in PDF format. In her annotations, Alicia included many different types of in-text comments commenting on both the content and the approach that the writers took to laying out these misconceptions, including: "interesting stance on politics. distancing from one political party. carefully worded to not be overly critical of the DNC." and "Movement is different from Civil Rights, evolving." She included this brief annotation at the top as a start to those summative and analytical comments that I wanted to see at the beginning of each source:

> Common myths about BLM are addressed and corrected to give a clear vision of what BLM stands for. The bias is that it come directly from the BLM website so of course they are trying to represent the organization well.
>
> Areas addressed include #alllivesmatter, police brutality, and the direction of the movement.

I asked that peers provide feedback that would help students ensure that their annotations, especially that primary summative and analytical annotation I asked for at the top of each text, met the requirements of the assignment sheet to both summarize the source and evaluate it "by assessing its credibility, authority, or bias." I included questions that students might answer in their reviews, which Alicia's reviewer, Alejandra, did remarkably well:

> Hi Alicia!
>
> I am going to be honest, before reading your article I didn't know much about the Black Lives Matter movement, I knew it existed and I knew it was a problem within our society; however I wasn't well informed on the details of the movement. Your

> article has opened my eyes to a different side of the reality behind the BLM movement.
>
> As for your annotations, they are straight to the point and I like that. However, I think you could have expanded a little bit more on the summary, as well as, the author, I know you got it from the BLM website but did it have a specific author you could talk about? Also, I was wondering how are you going to use this information towards your paper? Finally, I liked the fact that you pointed out the logos aspect of the article and your reflection over the word 'reject' and how they used it in the article.
>
> Great job!

Many students expressed that they had learned something from the peers' annotations or sources, like Alejandra does here, highlighting the ways in which making student research projects the center of the course creates the opportunity for students to learn from one another's work. I was pleased to see that Alejandra asked that Alicia include who the specific author is (in this case, one of the three founders of the Black Lives Matter movement) and called for her to explain the credibility of the author in more depth in her annotations, which Alicia agreed to do in her reply to Alejandra's feedback. This information would be helpful for Alicia going forward writing Paper 3, especially given that she answered Alejandra's first question about how she would use this source by explaining, "I will use this information as a counter to the media's view of BLM. I think it will be most useful in Paper 3 where I can contrast what the average watcher gets from the news and what BLM actually is." Based on her plans to use this source in that way, it would be more impactful for her and her readers to understand that this source not only comes from BlackLivesMatter.com, but from one of the co-founders of the movement, someone uniquely qualified to write about the intentions and

reception of the movement. Alicia did include more information about the author in her revised annotation that she submitted as a part of her final draft of Paper 2, adding, "The author of this piece is Alicia Garza, who wrote the backstory of BLM on the same website. Garza is one of the founders of #BlackLivesMatter and is an editorial writer that has been published by *The Guardian* and *Rolling Stone*." She also covered more of Garza's background and the background of the other founders of the movement in her annotation on the "Herstory" page of *BlackLivesMatter.com*.

Alicia's final draft of Paper 2 starts with a narrative of her interest in the topic, specifically her desire to learn more about a movement she felt was often unfairly portrayed in the media, and her process exploring it through research:

> I was very interested in this topic because I knew I was ignorant to what the movement was really about. All I ever heard about Black Lives Matter (BLM) was the protests and what the national news portrayed it to be. I wanted to form my own opinion of the movement. I began my research with a suggested source from Liz about the founders of #BlackLivesMatter (*A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement*). Right away I realized just how ignorant I was. I did not know BLM was created by three women, or its agenda to liberate black queer, transgender people and women and black undocumented immigrants. Nor did I know the movement is a collection of multiple already established organizations coming together. With this new information I searched the BLM website to get an understanding of all the principles it movement stood for. It stands for all black people; old and young, ranges of sexual orientation, and diversity of the black diaspora.

Initially I wanted to include spoken word and poetry into it because of the writing element and the fact that spoken word is a culturally black expression. I got sucked into the rabbit hole of YouTube videos and found some awesome pieces. One piece by Lady Caress called "*Rapid Death of Blacks*," focused on the surroundings of the black community that resulted in Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown being killed. However, it did not give me information about the organizational strategy of BLM. In the end I decided not to use it.

My search turned to what the movement will turn into, from protest to policy. One prominent figure of BLM is running for mayor of Baltimore to be a voice for the oppressed in politics, where change can actually happen. A proposed law is Campaign Zero, which would have stricter police laws, including the demilitarization of the force (*Black Lives Matter Publishes 'Campaign Zero' Plan To Reduce Police Violence*).

Trying to find out how the organization is run was difficult, impossible really. I came to realize it was intentional. The organization doesn't have a physical location or one highly known leader. The reason being, so it cannot be shut down. People who want to see the movement end will have a hard time destroying it if they can't pinpoint its leader or location. Being spread out makes it stronger. Individual groups are coming together under one cause.

It was also difficult to find articles defending All Lives Matter. Most opposed it because it ignored the concern of the Black community. I found the article, *Demonizing 'Black Lives Matter'* that explain the context behind All Lives Matter, but aligned with BLM, which was evident by its tone.

> While I was searching for the administrative part of BLM, I bumped into an article about the word choice of Black Lives Matter, and how the slogans allow for dialogue in society (*How Did "All Lives Matter" Come to Oppose "Black Lives Matter"? A Philosopher of Language Weighs In*). It also breaks down what the slogan means for all people.
>
> I then thought NPR (National Public Radio) would surely have and pieces about the movement that served multiple viewpoints. I found a really good source that created a timeline of BLM through Twitter (*Combing Through 41 Million Tweets To Show How #BlackLivesMatter Exploded*). Central themes were found, including young people being engaged, and mainstream media contributing to it.
>
> The Black Lives Matter Movement is a vast sea sources over a short period of time. It was easy to get distracted reading an article that was informational but didn't pertain to the route I wanted to take my research question in. I also found after a while, sources were repeating themselves because multiple news outlets wanted to cover the information to generate views.

Alicia clearly learned about many different facets of the BLM movement through her research, including many things that did not fit the scope of her specific research question. This explains the messiness or jumpiness of her narrative; unlike students who narrowly approach their research questions from a pro-con stance (perhaps "Black Lives Matter" versus "All Lives Matter" in this case), Alicia has done a deep dive into a purposefully decentralized and deregulated organization. Looking specifically at the role of writing in Black Lives Matter helped her to keep her project more focused, though she does point to the pain of having to abandon sources that were of interest to her because they did not relate to

the other sources and ideas she was exploring. I also saw that she found interesting openings to explore through her research process, which I articulated in my feedback to Part I, where I asked, "Why do you think police brutality has become the focus of so much of the movement and this broader intended goal of #BlackLivesMatter are ignored?" and "Why do you think that it's difficult to find a defense of #AllLivesMatter? That phrase is fairly common, so why can't we find a long-form written defense of it like we can with #BlackLivesMatter?" These were places where Alicia could take a stance on the issue of how writing has influenced the Black Lives Matter movement in her researched argument in Paper 3, if she chose to take either approach.

Alicia's annotations of her sources in Part 2 of the paper showed her becoming both more knowledgeable about her research question, thinking carefully about the use of writing within it, and beginning to form her own personal viewpoint on it based on that knowledge base. In past semesters, I'd included a straightforward annotated bibliography in Part 2 of the paper, asking students to include MLA citations followed by a couple short paragraphs that summarized and evaluated the source. I opted to do annotations instead in hopes that this would encourage students to interact more deeply with the texts, as they had done in their annotations of Mike Rose's chapter in Unit 1, and create a record of those thoughts and interactions for them to return to as they wrote Paper 3. For example, Alicia began her annotation of a piece from *Slate* titled "How did 'All Lives Matter' Come to Oppose 'Black Lives Matter'? A Philosopher of Language Weighs In" with that summative and analytical paragraph that I'd expect to see in a traditional annotated bibliography:

> Ian Olasov is a graduate student at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His focus is moral theory and philosophy of language. He has taught at

> multiple colleges and founded the forum, Brooklyn Public Philosophers, for local philosophers to share their work with general audiences. This article looks at the words that divide the two movements. Olasov previously read other philosophers' thoughts and wrote his own take away using his research on moral slogans.

Though this is somewhat brief and shallow, her in-text annotations explain exactly how he does this, both summarizing and analyzing the moves that Olasov makes. She writes besides a paragraph explaining what "matter" means that Olasov "displays his language knowledge here" to build ethos, and that he uses logos by citing a specific study that found that only 53% of discrimination against whites is a significant problem in our country. This points to another important function of these in-text annotations for students writing **about** writing. Since Alicia intended to look at how sources were using specific moves within their writing to achieve the goals of Black Lives Matter, it was worthwhile for her to point out how the text is operating at the paragraph- and sentence-levels. Other students had projects focused even more explicitly on the rhetorical strategies used in specific pieces of writing, and submitting annotations allowed them to do this kind of close reading without having to think about how to translate that work into an annotated bibliography format.

Alicia's annotations also include notes to herself about how to understand the construction of the piece, what to remember about it when she returned to it to write Paper 3, and her personal reactions to specific ideas. For example, next to the 53% figure in the Olasov piece, she wrote, "unbelievable. Have those 53% ever heard of white privilege." At other points she speaks back to some of his sources, like Rudy Giuliani's claim that BLM is "inherently racist," to which she writes, "BLM isn't saying others' lives don't matter, they are saying black lives need to be addressed at this time." In her annotations, I see both that

she comprehends the source, has smart things to say about it from an analytical perspective, and is forming her own personal viewpoint and thoughts about the topic in the forefront of her mind. This continues in her other annotations, including those she did on the *NPR* article "Combing through 41 Million Tweets to Show How #BlackLivesMatter Exploded" which she begins by a paragraph summarizing the source and offering more detail on the writer:

> This article focuses on how BLM became mainstream and a recurring political topic. Since a majority of its growth came from Twitter, researchers dissected the social media platform to understand the driving focus behind it. This included young black people, black celebrities, those who opposed, and activists. The author, Gene Demby, is the lead blogger for Code Switch, a program on NPR. He has had a variety of experience writing in media, from *The Huffington Post* to *The New York Times*. While at the *Times*, he created a blog about race and politics, which won the Black Weblog Award for Best News/ Politics Site.

Her in-text annotations both show her analysis of the source, like pointing out where the writer explains the rigor and value of tracing trends on Twitter as a means of understanding a movement, and also her own knowledge of the topic, like where she includes a note about the hashtag taking off after Darren Wilson not being indicted by noting, "Darren Wilson is the cop who killed Michael Brown," or noting in a paragraph talking about how men are more often attached to the hashtag than women, "It seems is not widely known that BLM was founded by women. They are overshadowed." In her summative and analytical annotations, I see Alicia understanding the purpose and context of the sources she's reading, but in her in-text comments, I see her beginning to make connections and form her own point of view as a researcher. Many of these moves, specifically forming opinions and making connections,

would be obscured in a traditional annotated bibliography but are easy for me to both see and comment on as an instructor and for Alicia to see when revisiting this project to begin writing Paper 3. Furthermore, the traditional annotated bibliography carries with it a sense of objectivity -- a suggestion that researchers should ignore their own thoughts or reactions to the pieces they're reading and focus solely on summarizing and providing the credentials for the sources they're working with. **Annotations like these create space for students to interact with these texts personally and form their own viewpoints and opinions on them.**

Alicia ended her paper with a narrative where she began to gather the many strands she'd followed related to writing in the BLM movement in Part 2 and consider what exactly she wanted to say about the movement:

> The Black Lives Matter Movement is an important influence in the new era of civil rights. Focusing on the liberation of all black people, BLM wants to create attention about the injustice so change can happen. It is doing so in a way that is inventive and reflects the age of social media. Twitter has become a powerful outlet for the movement, as supporters and protesters can have dialogue that brings attention to the platforms BLM stand for. Since many independent organizations are a part of the movement, it is diverse in its scope of power. Political change is the most effective because laws govern society. Laws are the reason BLM exist; too many black people have been killed at the hands of the law. The fate of political initiatives are still left to be considered because bills and plans take a long time to process and be implemented into the system. The effectiveness of the plans are even further down the road from

> manifesting themselves. However BLM is taking a step in the right direction to address an epidemic of unequal treatment of Black people.
>
> Thesis: The strategic plans of BLM including political initiatives, collective administration and responsive slogan, allow for an unstoppable movement.

Like with her opening narrative, there are many different ideas here because of the deep dive Alicia did into this topic here in Paper 2. I found it interesting that Alicia chose to focus specifically on political action (one of her sources discussed specific organizing action being taken to pass legislation in the future) in much of her conclusion narrative, and that her thesis focused specifically on the success of the movement, due only in part to writing. This can be one of the most difficult moves for students performing research to make -- transitioning from absorbing information about sources to forming unique arguments about them -- and it was the focus of much of my instruction over the coming weeks. I tried to steer her toward something more specific and original in my comments on Part 3 specifically while also praising the conclusions she came to here:

> Great thoughts here, Alicia. I particularly like that you point out: "Political change is the most effective because laws govern society. Laws are the reason BLM exist; too many black people have been killed at the hands of the law." There's so much that could be said about that -- it's more than raising awareness (though it has undeniably done that). Laws can change culture (think about historical examples that may seem less important, like interracial marriage), and there is a need for well-reasoned, well-written proposals for changing those laws, well-written pieces to help sway public opinion about the laws, and well-organized means of galvanizing support. I'm interested to see more specifics about how you think the role of writing in the

> movement works, doesn't work, or could work differently (or likely some combination of the three) in order to change those laws -- I'd think about focusing your thesis and your paper specifically on the role of writing **on** the law. I'm looking forward to what you'll come up with in Paper 3.

I tried to suggest a focus that I thought could tie in with all of the sources Alicia brought in here -- organizing on Twitter, for instance, sent a clear message to lawmakers that police need to be held to higher standards, and the obscuring the history and foundation of the movement may make the agenda of Black Lives Matter seem more singular than it truly is. **Though Alicia is not to the point of having a clear, compelling argument for Paper 3, I see in her final draft that Paper 2 has set her up to write a compelling, original, well-researched argument on the relationship between writing and the Black Lives Matter movement**. She embraced the opportunity I created for students in Paper 2 to wallow in the complexity[125] of how writing operates in a real context, which by its nature should not lead to a clear map of an issue or a easy-to-argue thesis statement.

In their Unit 2 reflections, I saw clear evidence that Paper 2 had worked to both familiarize students with the complexity of the research process and help them see that writing occurs in real contexts outside of the writing classroom. It was clear from their reflections that **students benefitted from being able to explore how writing overlapped with their own personal and professional interests because this approach showed them how writing was of personal importance to them**. Alicia explained how specific sources taught her more about Black Lives Matter, bringing her attention to an issue that was of deep

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[125] I am borrowing this term, "wallowing in complexity," from the *Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing*, the textbook we use for English 1303. It is a term I often use with students because of their familiarity with the term, using it to indicate the deep thinking (often facilitated by prewriting activities like mapping, freewriting, etc.) necessary to build a complex argument.

importance to her personally **and** demonstrating to her that writing plays a role in contexts other than those explored in a typical English classroom:

> The idea that I encountered was how deep the mistreatment of blacks goes. Being Black myself, I realized it existed and know people affected by it, but I never paid too much attention to it because it wasn't happening directly to me. Doing this paper allowed me to focus on the issue at hand and be fully aware of the unjust society African Americans face. And though it may not be happening to all Blacks, one is too many [...] I really enjoyed this unit because it made me more socially and politically aware. I was able to explore deeply into a topic I was interested in, which made the writing easier. I also became aware of how writing affects more than literature, with the research questions of my peers. Normally we don't consciously see the effects of writing in our everyday lives, but it's in art, law, science, everywhere.

This notion that "writing affects more than literature" may seem obvious, but many students spend the majority (if not all) of their K-12 careers writing specifically on literature, often in preparation for standardized tests that focus on literature. To demonstrate to students that writing extends beyond that context and applies to issues that are of importance to them personally instills in them a deeper appreciation for writing and helps them recognize why considering the audience, purpose, and context for an piece of writing is so important. Further, Alicia's reflection reminds me of Newkirk's description of his students at the University of Texas bringing the real issues they faced in their day-to-day lives into the composition course. Alicia was appreciative of the opportunity to explore this topic through Paper 2, as were her writing group members who got to read and comment on her work.

Though I've chosen to focus on Alicia's project, it's important to note that students who wrote on topics that were not as "high-stakes" as Black Lives Matter also benefitted from this realization that writing plays a real role in the world outside of the role it played in their K-12 English classrooms. Daniel, an avid gamer, explored the research question, "Does gaming writing improve writing in other contexts?" For Paper 2, he studied gaming blogs as well as many articles from *Computers and Composition* on the relationship between writing and gaming in gaining a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between gaming and writing. In the section of his unit reflection on the new ideas he encountered this unit, he wrote about the idea of "civic literacy" that he learned about from Matthew S. S. Johnson's article "Public Writing in Gaming Spaces," one of his sources for Paper 2:

> He mentions that writing literacy is civic participation from a good citizen to contribute to society [and] states that the gaming community is not so different from real society since the gaming community writes and help out the gaming industry with game guides, detailed reviews, and even articles. This made me realize how awesome the gaming community is and I realize how special my group of online friends is since we do read plenty of articles and write reviews for the games we play.

Johnson's article helped Daniel realize the ways in which he was engaged in literacy practices for a specific community through one of his hobbies and, more powerfully, how literacy helped construct that community. This ability to explore writing through the lens of a specific personal interest broadened my students' views of writing by showing them exactly how writing impacts their lives outside of the writing classroom.

Building Rhetorically Effective Arguments: Discussion 6 and Discussion 7

After gaining this deeper understanding of how writing functions in real environments in Unit 2, I transitioned toward considering how to shape an effective written argument in Unit 3. The assignment sheet for Paper 3[126] was the simplest of the major papers for the semester, asking students to "argue a contestable claim using solid points of argumentation and appropriate sources to argue your claim" and explaining that students were "welcome to take whatever approach will best suit your aims." I did include four elements that a successful researched argument would do: be centered on a contestable claim related to the research question you researched in Paper 2, support the claim with strong, fully developed reasons, utilize appropriate rhetorical appeals to reach your audience, and use sources appropriately as support. I started Unit 3 with instructional materials geared toward shaping a researched argument that achieved these measures, assigning chapters from the textbook, handouts on genres of argument, and presentations about using ethos and pathos specifically in researched arguments. Students also completed Daily Writing activities related to drafting their papers, including sharing their thesis statements (revised from the end of Paper 2 based on my feedback and video commentary) and receiving feedback on them from their writing group members. Among my favorite Daily Writing assignments of the semester was a journal assignment in which I asked students to either freewrite or visually represent their intended structure for Paper 3; students who opted for the second option included a student who drew a detailed, color-coded flow chart of her different reasons and sources in support of her claim and Alejandra who created a PowerPoint presentation composed of texts and GIFs, animated photos often depicting emotion or ideas, explaining first her journey

[126] The Paper 3 assignment sheet can be found in its entirety in Appendix E.

approaching the paper and then the journey she wanted to take her readers on through her paper.

As recommended by several students in their Unit 2 reflections, I also chose to include two Daily Writing activities that did not directly relate to drafting Paper 3 or the topic of their research question in Unit 3. One was Discussion 6, in which I asked students to write a rhetorically effective argument on a topic of their choosing, and another was Discussion 7, in which I asked students to read and comment on some of John Trimble's tips for making prose "readable" from his stylebook *Writing with Style*. My instructions for Discussion 6, an original sample argument, were straightforward and very open, designed to give students the opportunity to apply some of my pointers on how to incorporate rhetorical appeals into arguments in a low-stakes way:

> Now that you've viewed the rhetorically effective arguments prezi, I want you to try out incorporating some of these strategies in a sample argument of your choosing. Write an argument (not related to the argument you're writing for Paper 3 -- any topic that you're interested in that you can form an argument about is welcome) and use at least one pathos appeal and one ethos appeal (and a kairos appeal, if applicable) in your argument. I'd also encourage you to think about how you can use tone, voice, writing style -- whatever you'd like to call it -- to make your argument interesting and engaging for your reader.

Students were also required to reply to the arguments of at least two other students, and I gave them the option to use those replies to either respond "to the ideas of the argument (offering a counterargument, additional support for that argument, etc.)" or to "analyze the argument to explain what was rhetorically effective about it."

In the past I would have shied away from this type of assignment in the online space for fear of assigning "busywork" to students. While I may have taken time in a face-to-face class to have students work in groups to create and present arguments on topics not related to their major papers, I avoided doing so in the online space for fear that students would prefer to complete assignments directly related to their major papers. Yet this was an assignment that students embraced enthusiastically, writing on a range of topics, including not blaming rape victims, the importance of art in society, the American media's coverage of the crisis in Syria, and why physical books are better than eBooks. Creating an assignment where students were able to explore any topic of interest to them again highlights the broad applicability of thinking rhetorically; all of these arguments, even the seemingly frivolous ones, were inflected with rhetorical appeals aimed at achieving a specific purpose and the specific audience of their peers. Further, being able to see the range of topics and the approaches that best suited them throughout the discussion board helped students to see the broad range of approaches they could take not only to structuring an argument but to incorporating these kinds of appeals into their arguments for Paper 3. And lastly, many of the replies were at least in part about the topic, evenly split between those lodging counterarguments and those offering additional support, which points to these being a useful tool for community-building. This final reason is perhaps the best explanation for why this discussion was the second most favorite of the semester, with 20% of my students identifying it as the most enjoyable and helpful of the ten discussions they completed through the course of the semester, is because students were excited about getting to write about anything they chose to write about. This reinforced to me the importance of allowing for these kinds of "gaps" to wander away from their research projects in the online course. Much like I might

take a day late in the semester in a face-to-face course to discuss logical fallacies or rhetorically analyze a recent editorial from the student paper, assigning this free-for-all discussion created a much-needed break at this point in the semester.

As a part of building a rhetorically effective argument in Paper 3, I wanted students to consider what writing style would be most effective for their specific topic. For Discussion 7, I had them read excerpts from the "Readability" chapter in John Trimble's *Writing with Style,* which begins with an explanation of what he wants from the writing he's reading -- specifically that the writer not waste time saying what he wants to say and that he say it in a way that is fresh and interesting -- before ending with specific guidelines writers should follow to keep their prose readable (from "Use semicolons to reduce choppiness" to "Ask yourself, 'How would I say this to a friend?'"). I introduced this reading in the Week 12 email by connecting it to a concise-writing review of their writing I had them do in Unit 1:

> If you remember way back in Unit 1, you did a couple concise writing activities that were very prescriptive -- cut this, avoid these structures, don't use these words, etc. This week, you'll be reading an excerpt from John Trimble's *Writing with Style* that begins with a broader overview of why we ought to try to write concisely before moving into some of his prescribed rules for writing, well, with style.
>
> But. I don't want you to blindly accept these rules. You guys are readers and writers -- you know what good style is just as much as Mr. Trimble does. And thus, for Discussion 7, you'll talk about which rules you agree with and which you disagree with and why.

Specifically, in Discussion 7 I created a thread for each of Trimble's twenty-five rules and asked students to reply to at least one rule that they agreed with, explaining why they found

that this rule made for more readable prose, and one rule they disagreed with, explaining why they did not think this rule necessarily led to stronger writing. While I made it clear to students that I valued concise writing and Trimble's tips for improving readability, I also stressed that all writing depended on context and that individual writing style was important, and this assignment gave students to think about the moves they made in their writing that were strengths and those that detracted from the overall effectiveness of their writing.

One rule that sparked a lot of discussion was "Use the simplest and fewest words possible." Some students agreed with this, explaining that it made writing easier to read, while others thought that using complex words was often necessary or more impressive-sounding. Ethan explained that he found using the simplest and fewest words in a sentence challenging but had heard before that shorter sentences were more compelling:

> My general writing habit is to write a lot of sentences that have many words so that I can get my thoughts out. But then I run in to the issue of "pruning" my paragraphs so that they can flow into one another. I used to watch a lot of Vlogbrothers videos online, and John Green would sometimes give advice on writing. He said that most of the recent books that have won Nobel Prizes and Pulitzer Awards have the least complicated sentences out there. So every time I write unnecessarily long sentences after hearing that, I see how pretentious my paper is and try to simplify it. It also feels a bit more liberating to write simply, kind of like how Trimble describes "fancy" writing strays people away from their true feelings.

In their posts on this discussion board, students connect these rules to not only previous writing advice they have been given, but to their personal writing preferences and habits, as Ethan does above. They also became a space for dismantling rules they had been given for

"good writing" in K-12. For example, both students who replied to Trimble's suggestion to "use occasional contractions" did not agree with this rule specifically because they had been told that contractions were "informal," as Morgan explained in her reply:

> All throughout middle school and high school, I learned to never use contractions in my papers. Texting friends and writing for a specific audience that is looking for quality/informational content are two different types of writing. I like to keep those two separate. Of course, speaking with your own voice and tone is important in writing a quality paper, but I think there are other better ways to accomplish that without using contractions.

I dialogued with Morgan a bit in this thread, and we reached a consensus that there are not two distinct forms of writing, but rather a continuum of styles and perhaps a continuum of contraction usage to go along with them. Two other students tried to identify what exactly it was about contractions that made them informal, teasing out interesting ideas about the purity of language. **This discussion served as an important place to talk through seemingly set "rules" about language, led students to consider the ways in which their writing might be made more readable, and encourage students to develop and embrace their own personal writing styles.** One student who selected Discussion 7 as his favorite of the semester explained that it was "[i]nteresting and helped break [his] stereotypes" about writing.

Taking Advantage of the Social Nature of OWI through Peer Review

In Units 1 and 3, I had students participate in peer review in four-person writing groups for the first draft of their major papers. My procedure for conducting peer review

online was adapted from group conferencing I'd done with students in my face-to-face and hybrid classes in which I had them exchange drafts in a group discussion board on Blackboard, write response letters to each others' drafts, post them as replies to that discussion board, then come to a meeting with me and their group members to discuss each person's draft. This practice of adapting face-to-face peer review to the online space is detailed by Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch in "Enhancing Online Collaboration: Virtual Peer Review in the Writing Classroom" in the 2005 collection *Online Education: Global Questions, Local Answers*, in which she argues that though "virtual peer review shares pedagogical assumptions with traditional peer review, [...] its practice differs in terms of time, space, and interaction" (142). Peer review in both face-to-face and online spaces reinforces one of the core ideas about writing that I wanted students to gain from my class -- that real writing is social, directed toward an audience that will read and respond to it rather than a grader that will evaluate it for correctness. Yet peer review in the face-to-face classroom is often speech-based, asking students to read other others' drafts and then verbally discuss their feedback with their peers. In the online space, students typically respond through writing[127] that is in itself social, facilitating communication between two or more individuals, which "reinforces rhetorical concepts such as audience and purpose because students are often writing to and interacting with their specific group members, rather than an abstract audience of 'teacher' or 'reader'" (Breuch 148). Students can see both the text they produce in their drafts and the text they produce when responding to the drafts of their peers as being aimed at a specific audience for a specific purpose.

[127] Some online instructors do have their students respond to each others' writing by either recording videos, voice memos, or through live video chat, which mimics the speech-based approach to peer review often used in face-to-face classes.

As is the case with many pedagogical practices translated from face-to-face writing classes to the virtual classroom, instructors must sufficiently prepare students to conduct online peer review by making the procedures and expectations as clear as possible. In my class, this included a brief video from me explaining the process, a clear assignment sheet for peer response letters, a presentation outlining the procedure and providing examples of strong and weak response letters, and carefully worded instructions in the group discussion boards, all of which can be found in Appendix H. On the assignment sheet for the Peer Review Response Letters, I offered the following explanation for why I had students do peer reviews in this course: "The reason we do peer review is not only so that you can get feedback from your audience on your draft, though that's certainly a valuable part of it. We also do peer review so that you can think critically about the goals of this particular assignment and how to go about meeting those goals." Beyond directly telling students why I thought this was a valuable assignment, I made it worth a large portion of their grade to further incentivize them to take it seriously. Ten points of their final draft of each major paper was based on "peer feedback" based on whether they participated fully in peer review and how they took their peers' suggestions into consideration when revising their paper, which they outlined in a 150-word minimum cover letter describing their revision process. Students were to respond to each of their group members' drafts by writing a 150-word minimum response letter; students would write three response letters per unit, and each one would be given its own Daily Writing grade. Thus, if students chose to not take this assignment seriously, it would have a serious consequence on their Daily Writing average, which was worth 40% of their final grade in the course, as well as on their final grades on the major papers. In the assignment sheet for the Peer Review Response Letters, I asked for both

positive feedback and constructive criticism in their responses, warning them not to "point out misspellings, typos, or other isolated language errors," further explaining, "You are also not allowed to be overly vague or non-constructive. For instance, 'Your draft is short' is unacceptable; 'Your draft is short. I'd suggest expanding on X, Y, and Z' is acceptable." I also asked students to attend to the concerns that their group members identified when uploading their drafts and revisit the assignment sheet for the major paper they were working on. Students were given a clearer idea of what counted as sufficient and insufficient feedback in the sample letters I included in the presentation on peer review, copying and pasting student responses from past semesters and commenting on what made them sufficient or insufficient.

Most students embraced peer review, especially by Paper 3. I put them in writing groups early in the semester based on their interests, and while I gave them the option to switch groups in Unit 2, few did, and all remained in the same writing groups for Units 2 and 3. Among most groups, there was a good level of familiarity and trust built between the four group members by the end of the semester when it came time to do peer review for this final major paper. Madeline and Anna were in the same group[128] throughout the semester, one that consistently offered quality feedback to one another that went above and beyond the requirements of peer review. Madeline was taking a risk with her approach to Paper 3, an argument about the role of writing, specifically literature, in improving one's character, and expressed some anxiety about that when she posted her first draft:

> Hey everyone! So, let me honest for a second, and say that, my draft isn't 100% complete - I've finished the introduction, and first and second body paragraphs. I've

[128] The two other students in their group did not turn in consent forms allowing their writing to be included in my research.

> been having a pretty intense bout of 'writer's block' lately and was feeling a bit "off my game" this whole week so I was a bit hesitant about finishing this whole thing and having it be really unorganized. So, just an fyi when you read through and see that there's no last paragraph or conclusion - I'm still working on it, but I'd love to get your honest opinion on what I currently have. I also have yet to think of a good title for my essay, too (thanks writer's block).
>
> First off, I really wanted to take a risk here and make this essay more 'personal' sounding; but honestly, i'm finding it a bit difficult to do - so if you have any advice on how I could achieve that while still keeping it organized that would be great! My main areas of concern:
>
> (a) introduction/thesis sentence
>
> (b) overall "personal/lax" tone, what can i do to improve that
>
> (c) any advice for heading forward in my essay and what I can currently fix or make more clear within my essay - maybe there are things you think aren't necessary? if so, please let me know! you're advice would seriously be a huge help.
>
> (d) organization is a huge one. i feel like whenever i take a more "lax" approach to writing, my organization tends to get pretty fuzzy.
>
> thats about it! i hope you guys like what you see and i can't wait to hear some feedback.

Much of what Madeline is looking for here is reassurance about the risks that she is taking in this draft and whether they are being well-received by her readers or leading to confusion. I am also impressed with the level of self-awareness that Madeline shows here in regards to her own writing process; she recognizes her hesitance as being potentially related to writer's’

block or being “off her game” rather than undercutting the approach she’s chosen to take. Anna’s response to Madeline responded to many of these concerns directly:

> I understand that your paper is not close to being finished, but I think you are off to a good start!
>
> Concerning your first paragraph, I think it runs on a bit long. I like your different approaches to literature, but I think you would be better off sticking with one approach by expanding on it and then stating your thesis. I actually get more into your essay starting at the middle of your first paragraph, so maybe that will help you reevaluate that paragraph. Your last sentence that I think is your thesis is a bit long because it has a lot of stuff that isn't your thesis. I think it is cute to include that part but try to incorporate it before you state the thesis so that the thesis can stand by itself clearly.
>
> I like your personal/lax tone. I think you should offer your personal experience and revelation right after the first paragraph so that it establishes why you are using this more personal tone. Because right now, it seems that the support and tone do not match. But after you establish your personal connection with this topic and then express your points in other paragraphs in a lax tone like you've been doing will work much better.
>
> I think you may want to reconsider the parts where you talk to the reader like they might not be buying your argument. I think that lessens your argument. It's very nice to talk with your reader in that conversational way but maybe find another way to do it. Because if a reader is not feeling skeptical, then you talking to them about their skepticism does not really fit. If the reader is feeling skepticism, then you might not

> want to remind them of it so that you can just convince them through your compelling writing.
>
> You may also want to clarify the Currie rebuttal you do because Currie says "usually", so technically just because you have found one instance where one was affected long-term does not disprove his point. I mean, maybe it depends on the reader whether they will even subconsciously allow for the opportunity to affect them long-term. I'm sure you understand it better than me, so maybe just revisit that wording to make yourself completely clear.
>
> Lastly, for organization I think it would be best for you to have one point per paragraph. For instance, your second paragraph could be split up into two paragraphs. At first you talk about the significance of Albrecht's quote and then you talk about a counter view point of skepticism. It would be just as effective, if not more, to have it split into two different paragraphs.
>
> You have got a lot of usable content and your paper is very entertaining. I wish you luck on your revisions, and if you need any further explanations about my comments, just ask.

I am impressed with the detailed, specific, helpful feedback that Anna gives here in her response in addition to the tone that she takes to reassure Madeline without being overly complimentary. When addressing tone, she explains exactly why this tone would work better with more personal examples and without the constant suggestion that her reader may doubt her claims. This is the kind of feedback -- written feedback that describes **why** the reviewer is making the suggestions that they are making -- will both help Madeline in revising her draft and help Anna think critically about what makes writing effective. It’s also well beyond

the type of response I tend to see in peer review in my face-to-face classes, and well over the minimum length requirement for this assignment, which I chalk up to this group having built a good repertoire with one another over the course of the semester and to Madeline having a deep enough awareness of her own writing to ask for specific feedback from her peers. **In addition to giving students the opportunity to think about how to fulfill the purpose of a particular piece of writing by considering how their peers do so in their papers, this practice of engaging in peer review in the online space reinforces the fact that writing is done for an audience that will respond to their writing in a variety of ways,** as is especially evident when students receive varied feedback from three different readers. I often saw students contending with the challenge of writing for a real audience in their cover letters where they explained how they synthesized the comments they received in peer review, a process that challenged students who were far too often used to producing writing that adhered to a specific formula.

Conclusion: Making Writing Real through Writing about Writing

Students submitted their final drafts of Paper 3 to me through Blackboard, but I also had them **share their drafts on a discussion board to showcase their individual research projects and give their peers the opportunity to learn from the many ways that writing functioned in different communities, issues, and professions**. The range of my students' unique ideas about the different purposes, challenges, and contexts for writing can be seen from the titles of their threads alone: "Democracy's Enemy: Media Bias," "Solving the Education Crisis," "All Poetry is Meaningful," "Are You There, Literature? It's Me, A Reader," "Your Story Matters," "The Immorality of False Reviews," and "Understanding

Both Sides to Police Brutality." To ensure that students took advantage of the opportunity to read about a wide variety of approaches to answering our course's central question, "What is writing?", I made the reply portion of Discussion 8 fairly in-depth, asking them to respond to two students (one who posted above them and another of their choosing) "as a formal piece of writing," not as a draft, asking them to engage with the ideas of the argument, how their own experiences relate to it, or commenting on how the writer constructed his argument. **I wanted students to treat their writing and the writing of their peers as "real writing" rather than "student writing,"** and they rose to the challenge. Morgan's paper on the powers of expressive writing garnered responses from many students, including Ethan, which I found surprising given that his own research question about the role of writing in distinguishing between humans and machines differed greatly from the question that Morgan explored. I was impressed by how his response pinpointed the specific ways that Morgan's writing resonated with him as a reader, from her inclusion of personal experiences throughout, down to one of the unique lines she includes in her essay. This reflects both Ethan's ability to think about all texts rhetorically, including those produced by his peers, and hopefully inspired confidence in Morgan to view herself as an effective researcher and writer. Amy, who wrote about the power of written online reviews, was also among the students who responded to Morgan's paper, writing, "I have never realized how significant expressive writing can be for people to find out more about themselves. This may be because I am a huge math and science nerd, so I haven't entertained the thought of expressive writing [...] Change is inevitable, so in order to better cope with these uncomfortable feelings, expressive writing may be a solution I should look into." Her commenters not only pointed out the ways in which her text was rhetorically effective, but described being so affected by

her argument that they might take up expressive writing themselves. Discussion 8 served an important role of demonstrating to students both how writing functioned in a variety of contexts and how their peers made sense of those topics through their own writing.

On our end-of-course survey[129], I posed the following question to students: "The focus of the course was for you to develop a research question related to writing, conduct research on that topic, and then form an argument about that topic. What did you like about this approach? What did you not like about it?" The first theme I noted from my students' responses to this question was that they valued having the ability to choose their own topics. Students wrote, "I really loved it because we can pick what we would like to research which motivated me a lot," and "I liked that I could come up with my own topic and be invested in it because I wanted to know about it." Another connected the decision to write about writing specifically to helping him value the course more: "I enjoyed this approach because it (in terms of the writing topic) [...] helped me end up more passionate/personally connected to this class. Having a topic focused on writing and English helped me to understand the purpose and impact of ENGL 1304." **Writing about a topic of interest to them, and one related to writing specifically, helped students feel invested in the writing they were doing on two levels: they were engaged in their learning because they were interested in investigating the topic they had chosen, and that investigation made them more aware of the role writing played in their lives, making them more invested in this course on writing.** This is supported by Angela's comments from her Unit 2 reflection where she wrote, "I also became aware of how writing affects more than literature, with the research questions of my peers. Normally we don't consciously see the effects of writing in our

[129] Full data from the End of Course Survey can be found in Appendix F.

everyday lives, but it's in art, law, science, everywhere." Students were able to see writing more broadly, not only by investigating one specific topic related to writing but by being involved in the projects of their writing group members and the entire class.

In response to this question, one student who wrote about **the advantage of having an instructor engaged in her own inquiry project on writing**: "I liked how the professor was also including her own research within the class which served as a role model during the course." As a part of continuing to craft an approachable persona in my weekly emails and informal correspondence with students, I was open about my own research questions and process exploring them in my dissertation project. **This approach** had two distinct benefits for my students. First, it c**ommunicated to them that I took our course seriously and was genuinely interested in shaping it in a way that was beneficial for them as writers**. Second, **they saw that the research process they were engaged in was very much "real,"** mirroring my own approach to researching and writing my dissertation, and, in turn, the frustrations and challenges they faced in doing so mirrored my own and could be overcome. Because these units focused on writing about writing, having an instructor who was not only active in the field of writing studies but engaged in an inquiry project related to writing instilled a sense of confidence in my approach to the course and helped them see that their participation in it was worthwhile.

Chapter 7

Teaching: Exploring the Interplay between the Social and Individual in Real Writing

Over the past two chapters, I have discussed aims I took to help students see writing as connected with their individual interests and as an inherently social activity. These two impulses could be tied back to two competing theories that thought and language emerge from either an individual child's mind or from a drive to interact with the society that he is born into. However, Soviet psychologist and language theorist Lev Vygotsky viewed the social and individual not as two competing theories of thought development, but instead saw a dialectical relationship between them; for Vygotsky, thought and language are developed as a continual movement between the individual and society. James Thomas Zebroski explains the complexities of this relationship between the social and individual in more depth in "New Perspectives on the Social in Composition: Lev Vygotsky's Theory of Process":

> Vygotsky does not see the social as simply being something added on to the individual. Nor does he see the individual as simply the imprint of the social contexts s/he is a part of. Instead Vygotsky views thinking as always entailing both social and individual processes. Rather than trying to separate these processes out and see them in isolation, or as necessarily in conflict, Vygotsky is most interested in studying the points at which the social turns into the individual and the individual transforms the social. (4)

Zebroski goes on to explain that the inseparability of the social and the individual in thought illustrates "why most of the individualistic testing being mandated by the states is inaccurate and downright harmful" (5); while many people need social interaction to be able to write

well, the testing environment prevents such interaction, suggesting writing is or ought to be a purely individualistic endeavor.

Vygotsky's concept of inner speech is especially relevant for composition instructors, particularly those interested in having students engage in freewriting or other less structured forms of personal writing. He studied inner speech, his term for the silent internal thinking that occurs whenever we try to write or talk, as the roots of verbal and written communication, and found that it functioned as a result of internalized social relations[130]. This inner speech leads to verbal speech and to written speech, and the differences Vygotsky notes between the three explain why writing can be so challenging for students:

> Inner speech is condensed, abbreviated speech. Written speech is deployed to its fullest extent, more complete than oral speech. Inner speech is almost entirely predictive because the situation, the subject of thought, is always known to the thinker. Written speech, on the contrary, must explain the situation fully in order to be intelligible. The change from maximally compact inner speech to maximally detailed written speech requires what might be called deliberate semantics -- deliberate structuring of the web of meaning. (182)

Writing is often challenging for students because it is an effort to depict the flow of inner speech, which Vygotsky says is "fluttering between word and thought" (249), into concrete language. Freewriting may then be a valuable tool for easing this transition from inner speech to written speech because it encourages students to spend less time stopping to think about fitting inner speech into proper linguistic forms. To that end, Vygotsky's insights on inner

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[130] Vygotsky writes, "Thought development is determined by language, i.e., by the linguistic tools of thought and by the sociocultural experience of the child. Essentially, the development of inner speech depends on outside factors; the development of logic in the child, as Piaget's studies have shown, is a direct function of his socialized speech" (94).

speech echo Britton's findings about the expressivist function bridging the private and the public. Britton describes expressive writing as the often unstructured language close to the individual that shares his consciousness. Expressive writing is frequently used by young children learning language, but it continues to serve a function for more mature writers in mediating between poetic and transactional writing. In other words, Britton's taxonomy helps us understand the process from which personal writing can be transformed into publicly accessible writing, by which Vygotsky's inner speech becomes written speech. Expressivist discourse, too, has both an individual and social function that are inseparable.

This chapter will focus on the wrap-up of my first-year writing course, including assignments from the final brief unit of the course and reflections on the course from me and my students. I cover two prominent assignments from Unit 4, a testing narrative and a reflective portfolio, and the assignment sequence leading up to each. Both of these assignments honor Vygotskian notions of thought and language development; the testing narrative had students construct personal writing for a public audience and political purpose and the reflective portfolio had students reflect on their personal writing development, both highlight the interplay between the social and the individual in language. For the testing narrative, I partnered with a non-profit that works to shape assessment policy in Texas that was very enthusiastic about the prospect of using my students' narratives detailing their experiences with standardized testing as evidence of why current testing policy ought to be changed. I had my students brainstorm the best way to shape their narratives given their audience and goal in a discussion board before they wrote and submitted their narratives to a public blog. This assignment allowed students to use what Britton pinpoints as the power of expressive writing to share their own personal experiences to connection with abstract

concepts related to testing; it also gave demonstrated the social nature of writing by allowing them to write for a broader audience than their classmates. The final assignment of the course was a reflective portfolio in which students first compiled and annotated samples of writing and then wrote an essay reflecting on their writing development throughout the semester and offering their own definition for writing. As Zebroski highlights in *Thinking Through Theory*, Vygotsky sees "development as a dialectic process" that is "both continuous and discontinuous" (161); reflection over a longer period of time, like an entire semester, can be a valuable tool for making that development visible to students. Further, this final reflective assignment echoes approaches taken by expressivists by asking students to form their own view of writing. Finally, I conclude the chapter with some final thoughts on the course as a whole, drawing on some of the findings from the end-of-course survey students completed.

Shaping and Sharing Testing Narratives

One of the central ideas guiding this dissertation project is that student narratives of testing have power[131], illuminating what effect education policy has on the lived experience of students. In my interviews with former students and in my students' writing about their experiences with standardized testing, both those that arose organically in their literacy autobiographies and those found in their responses to Mike Rose's "*No Child Left Behind* and the Spirit of Democratic Education," I found individual student accounts of how they encountered our test-centric education system to be a powerful argument against unfair writing assessment. Though the data on the impact of testing is striking, individual student experiences are largely ignored, and as a researcher and instructor I strove to first understand

[131] I acknowledge that quantitative studies of assessment are also powerful, and, taken together with qualitative research on assessment (including student narratives of their experiences with testing), help paint a more complete picture of the damages of unfair high-stakes assessment.

those experiences and then craft a pedagogical practice based on what students described in them. But I also wondered if there was a way to make these narratives public and serve an even more overtly political aim. This move to make student stories of testing public was not something I considered when designing the course[132]. I first thought about potentially taking these narratives public after reading students' final drafts of Paper 1, wondering in my teaching journal if I should ask students to "polish their narratives and submit them to an organization that would be interested in those narratives" as a part of the final reflective unit of the course. I thought the deeper knowledge of high-stakes assessment students gained through reading Rose and writing Paper 1 could be combined with their own unique perspectives and experiences they shared in Discussion 3[133], which asked students to reflect on their experiences with testing after reading Rose, into powerful narratives of student experience with testing that could shape assessment policy and illustrate the devastating effects of our test-centric education system. In this final unit of the course, this kind of writing assignment also gives students the opportunity to experience the interplay between the individual -- their own experiences with testing -- and the social -- the deeper knowledge of assessment policy gained from Rose and others. This reflects the dialectical relationship between the social and individual that Vygotsky points to. Further, the predecessor to this assignment, Discussion 3, took advantage of expressivist writing's ability to help students understand abstract concepts through personal experiences. This sequence of assignments

[132] If I had shaped Discussion 3, where students had first shared their experiences with testing, by asking them to compose narratives that could be used specifically to speak against unfair assessment practices, this would have pushed students to reflect on their experiences in a certain way. Throughout Unit 1, I was careful to acknowledge the good intentions behind high-stakes testing and calls for "accountability," acknowledging the fact that the timed writing is an important skill to have in college and beyond and welcoming students to defend them. In past semesters, even after reading Rose's chapter, some students have chosen to defend testing and speak about the ways in which it benefitted them.

[133] The full assignment sheet for Discussion 3 can be found in Appendix G.

helped demonstrate to students the social impact of personal writing, and then bring that writing to an audience outside of their classmates and myself.

I was told about organization called Texans Advocating for Meaningful Student Assessment or TAMSA by a friend who worked at the Texas capitol, and I reached out to their board in an email, explaining both my dissertation projects and the writing that my students had done this semester related to testing and pointing out that the majority of them were from the state of Texas and had experience with the statewide STAAR or TAKS exams. I pitched an idea of having students publish narratives on their experiences with testing in a public blog that organizations like TAMSA could then use freely as evidence of the negative effects of testing. I ended the email by asking specifically for ways that these narratives could be of help to TAMSA:

> [W]hat would be of use for you to hear about: the amount of testing and test instruction, how students were taught to write specifically for exams, how their view of writing has changed now that they're in college, something else? Also, what would be an appropriate length for each of their narratives? My plan is to take your suggestions into consideration as I shape this assignment for my students, and to share that blog with you and other organizations after it's been put together.

A TAMSA board member replied enthusiastically to the email, explaining that descriptions of how formulaic the writing process for test prep is in K-12 and how that narrow approach to writing has been harmful to how students think about writing at the college level would be especially poignant to include. She wanted to collect and share these narratives with Texas legislators with a particular goal in mind: preventing the sunsetting of Senate Bill 149, which allows an Individual Graduation Committee to grant students who have failed their STAAR

end-of-course exams permission to graduate by reviewing their entire academic performance in high school holistically. She ended her email by confirming my thoughts that legislators respond best to individual stories.

This chance to write narratives for TAMSA had two distinct advantages: it gave my students the ability to compose public pieces of writing geared toward a specific aim, and given the nature of that aim, it created the opportunity for them to compose writing that could serve a real purpose. I was particularly excited to give students the opportunity to write for a real, public audience -- in this case, legislators and others concerned with assessment policy in the state of Texas. While I took several measures to make students aware of the ways in which they wrote for their peers in this online course, most notably through guiding them to reflect on the feedback they got from their peers on major papers and discussion board assignments, the writing they had done this semester had remained confined to our classroom. It was especially important that I give my students the opportunity to write for audiences outside of our own class because of the increased emphasis on test writing, and thus writing for audiences who will only judge and assess their work, in K-12. This phenomenon is not new; when studying writer's awareness of audience in their foundational work on composition research, *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)*, James Britton et. al. found that less that only 0.3% of the writing students did was directed toward a "wider audience" (128). Contrast this with the 49% of writing that students did specifically for "teacher as examiner" as a "demonstration of material mastered [...] with the expectation of assessment rather than response" (122). Giving students the opportunity to write about the impact of that 49% of writing written to an examiner, which I contend is even higher today

based on my interviews, in writing aimed at a wider audience was an invaluable opportunity to help them see how writing operates outside of the classroom environment.

This particular project highlights the unique advantages of having students engage in service-learning, which can broadly be defined as a form of experiential learning that integrates community service or community partnerships into the educational environment. As Linda Adler-Kassner, Robert Crooks, and Ann Watters explain in *Writing in the Community: Concepts and Models for Service Learning in Composition*, the first collection on service-learning published in the field of rhetoric and composition, "service-learning makes communication -- the heart of composition -- matter, in all its manifestations" precisely because students are given the opportunity to write for real audiences and real purposes (2). This particular type of service-learning allows students to participate in writing that would "have tangible results in the lives of others" (2) by partnering with an organization aimed at taking specific political action -- in this case, by changing assessment policy in the state of Texas in order to give high school students who struggled with these unfair tests an alternate path to graduation. Further, there is both anecdotal and empirical evidence that engaging with service learning in the composition classroom improves students' quality of writing, presumably because their writing is purposeful and occurs within a real rhetorical environment outside of the classroom environment. For example, in "Text-Based Measures of Service-Learning Writing Ability," Adrian Wurr assesses student writing from a service-learning course, scoring students' persuasive writing both holistically and using the following criteria: rhetorical appeals, logic, coherence, and mechanics, and then comparing those scores to a course that did not engage in service learning[134]. He finds

[134] Wurr's study compared two groups of students in service-learning courses, specifically those who read and wrote about issues related to the Southwest and lead small group discussions at local elementary schools, with

"empirical support for including service-learning in college composition curricula" specifically because "incorporating service-learning in college composition improves student writing" (432). Though my course did not engage in service-learning throughout the semester, students read and discussed the impact of assessment, often specifically in the state of Texas, in Unit 1, and giving students the opportunity to share both their thinking on this topic and their experiences with testing was a valuable taste of service learning.

I decided to slow down this process of having students consider how to best shape their projects for TAMSA by having them first participate in a brainstorming session about the best approach to writing testing narratives given this specific audience and purpose in a discussion board. I first introduced the idea of writing these testing narratives in partnership with TAMSA in a weekly email, linking to a brief video where I explained my desire to share their experiences with testing that they had described in Unit 1 because of how impactful I thought they were and the specifics of my correspondence with the board member from TAMSA. In the weekly email, I wrote an explanation of Discussion 9:

> This week, I'm asking for you all to think about how we should shape these narratives -- that's the focus for Discussion 9. Remember back to Unit 1 where we talked about building rhetorically effective texts based on your audience and purpose. I want you to channel those skills in thinking about how to best shape our narratives based on the information that the TAMSA has given us about the audience and purpose of these narratives. Based on your suggestions, I'll form an official assignment sheet, and we'll compile these narratives for next Thursday, December 1st.

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two groups who were not in service-learning courses. He used holistic and analytic writing assessment by a team of independent evaluators who assessed student writing on a five-point scale. Many attest to the positive effects of integrating service-learning in composition courses, citing evidence of student engagement and improved writing quality, but more systematic and quantitative studies like Wurr's are needed to confirm these effects of service learning.

In the assignment sheet for Discussion 9[135], I included the email I received from the TAMSA board member so that students could determine the purpose and audience for this piece of writing themselves, before explaining how the discussion would work. I created threads in the discussion board with questions about what approach we ought to take in order to reach this audience and fulfill this purpose, including, "How long should these narratives be?", "What should these narratives contain?", "What writing style should we use?", and "Where should we publish these?". I asked students to post at least 100 words across Discussion 9, explaining that they could provide one lengthy answer to one question, several short answers to shorter questions, or create their own threads with other questions they thought we should answer.

The result was a thoughtful discussion about how to best shape these narratives in order to convince Texas legislators that the current assessment practices in the state of Texas are unfair and that alternate paths to graduation ought to remain. One of the most easily resolved questions was about length; students quickly agreed that the narratives should be shorter to maximize their impact because, as Alicia explained, as first-year writing students are prone to do, writers can "pack a lot of punch into 100 words, instead of fluff or filler in 400." Her original word count suggestion was a bit short, though, and received some pushback from students like Amy, who wrote, "The word count should be between 100 and 500. I believe that the range should be wide enough for the writer's flexibility. They should not be constrained with a word count that is too low or too high. With this range, it is much shorter than a standard essay, so it should be able to keep the reader's interest. At the same time, it is longer than just a few sentences, so that the writer can effectively convey their

[135] The assignment sheet for Discussion 9 can be found in its entirety in Appendix G.

experiences." Flexibility also became a theme in the thread about what these pieces of writing should contain. Alicia first suggested that citing Rose might be a valuable way to build credibility, but other students thought that this should be optional because, as the TAMSA board member pointed out, personal experiences would be more impactful for our legislators to see than the opinions of national education experts. Another student raised the issue that not everyone had experience with testing in Texas[136], and Morgan answered with a thoughtful response about how favoring personal experience but welcoming a diversity of approaches might be the best way to go:

> I think focusing on our own experiences will give a more diverse response to the issue. Even though most of us have had the Texas education to look back on and report about, we've all gone to different schools and therefore have different experiences to talk about. Talking about personal experiences, I feel, is something we can go into detail and be confident writing about. Of course, if any of us feel like citing Rose will be beneficial to the activity, they should have the option to do that. Even for people who haven't had the Texas K-12 education to comment on, maybe they can comment on the education writing system they had in their own state/country/environment. I believe this will be helpful also.

A couple students seconded this approach, another suggesting that pointing out how these experiences have differed from college, especially for those who had been in college longer than a semester, might be especially impactful because of the focus on "college readiness."

The points of disagreement were some of the most productive discussions we had in this discussion board. The question of what writing style to use sparked some of the most

[136] From my end-of-course survey, I confirmed that 75% (or 15 out of 20) of my students had gone to school in Texas.

lively discussion, with two distinct positions captured by Madeline and Anna that students continued to discuss following their first two posts. Madeline did side with a flexible approach first, but forwarded an argument for a more personal approach if possible:

> I think working with different approaches for different writers would be best. If we stuck with only personal narratives or argumentative narratives some students may not feel taking that/those approaches would be ideal to express their thoughts.
>
> But, if we had to stick with a single approach; I think personal narratives would work best. During our first discussions about rhetorics within testing, I found that the more personal the discussion, the more I empathized with it. And since these are going to possibly be shown to legislators, I think writing in the personal would be the most effective if we had to stick to one style/approach.

This perspective was countered most strongly by Anna, who described the potential limitations of limiting writing to only sharing personal experience:

> I think that informational arguments would be useful. A lot of the time with personal narratives, the person's understanding is limited to what they experienced. So maybe if someone who went through a negative or mediocre experience could do research to see all the factors that resulted in that experience. This way, it shows the legislators that the person is understanding of all the different factors that come to play. The person will highlight the negative and positive factors so that the legislators are sure to become aware of it (hopefully they would have already been aware of it). Most importantly, it might better establish the credibility of the person's understanding of their experience and the issue at hand so that they are taken even more seriously by a legislator.

Anna's perspective here reminds me of one that many first-year writing students have, one that has arisen in countless in-class and online discussions of editorials or blog posts that did not cite any statistics or quote any sources over my years of teaching: opinions or personal experiences are invalid unless supported by other sources. This is the classic subjective versus objective binary that we'd danced around throughout the semester in many discussion boards where students would comment sharing how their own personal experiences countered the one the writer was describing, or citing some statistic or fact in hopes of rendering the original post's argument invalid, but here we were able to confront it directly in discussing whether "experience" or "research" would be more rhetorically effective. Anna's position is more nuanced than this -- though she does reference the need for students who had a bad experience to do research to see how common this experience is, she also mentions highlighting both "the negative and positive factors" specifically as an ethos-building move, something I emphasized throughout Unit 2. Further, when one student replied to her to explain that she thought personal would be best, Anna clarified her suggestions: "This would be intertwined with a personal narrative response. And I do agree that personal narratives just by themselves will be very useful. I am just trying to come up another possible option." In these more contentious discussions, students were pushed to justify their suggestions with real reasons why this would make for more rhetorically effective writing in this context rather than relying on what they had previously told was "good writing" and often ultimately settled on a more flexible style that allowed writers with different strengths and lived experiences to choose an approach that worked best for them.

Madeline created a thread in Discussion 9 suggesting that students take another discussion board to do a quick free-write about testing before going to draft testing

narratives. In her post suggesting this, she explained what exactly she found helpful about freewriting as a prewriting exercise:

> I'm a huge fan of free-writes because they help me to get my thoughts down without worrying about them being 'perfect'. During free-writes, I tend to learn a lot about the subject I'm writing about and end up with a clearer head and better ideas going forward. That being said, how about we take five-minutes (you're more than welcome to take ten!) to post free-writes about testing/narratives.
>
> You can discuss how you feel about testing, reflect over your testing experiences, maybe your thoughts about the formulaic approaches taken in K-12 testing, etc. I think seeing everyones' thoughts here would be really eye opening and help us to maybe even come up with different ideas we couldn't think of on our own.

Her suggestion was well-received by a few students who replied to second her suggestion, including one who said freewrites also helped him clarify his thoughts about a topic. In my teaching journal, I lamented the fact that there simply was not enough time in the semester to squeeze in another two-part discussion here in the final two weeks of the course. Instead, I made an optional one-day discussion assignment that students could complete for bonus points, asking them to do a five-to-ten-minute freewrite on their testing experiences and respond to the posting of at least one other student. Seven of my 20 students participated in this optional discussion board, which I said would replace their lowest daily writing grade. Some wrote versions of internal monologues about their plans for their testing narratives and the apprehensions they had about those plans, while others freewrote the content that would go into their narratives, describing their experiences with testing. Replies differed according to the type of post; some commented on content and asked for certain detail or context to

make the basic ideas more understandable for a reader, while others soothed the writer's fears about the potential pitfalls of their chosen approach. These optional discussion posts thus either served as a planning form of prewriting or an opportunity to present purely writer-based prose that they could then translate to reader-based prose.

I followed up on their suggestions in Discussion 9 in my Week 15 email, praising my students for their lively[137] discussion and explaining how I used those to shape Discussion 10, where they would submit their final drafts of their testing narratives. This was the most direct way in which I allowed student input of the course to shape how I formed an assignment, which I thought was appropriate given this was at the end of the semester, when students had had lots of practice thinking about what made writing effective, and because they contributed many ideas and weighed in on many points of the assignment in Discussion 9. I did make the final say on the requirements for Discussion 10[138], though. I also explained that these narratives were going to be published on a blog, as recommended by one of my students in Discussion 9, and thus, if students did not want their writing to be shared publicly or wanted to use a pseudonym, they should indicate that at their post in Discussion 10 or in a private email to me. I began the assignment sheet for that discussion by identifying the purpose and audience, as described by the board member at TAMSA, for the piece. I broadened the audience to include "parents and others concerned about testing," since we were going to publish these narratives on the web. I asked that students write narratives between 150 and 500 words long and that they include a brief descriptive title that was 120

[137] This may seem like a strange term to use to describe an online discussion. I deem Discussion 9 "lively" based on the number of responses and threads each student posted in, indicating that they wanted to have their opinions on all facets of the assignment (length, tone, style, etc.), and the frequency with which they read and replied to each other, both of which were (for most students) beyond the minimum requirements and far more than I tend to see in the penultimate week of the semester.

[138] The assignment sheet for Discussion 10 can be found in Appendix G.

characters or less, which would ensure that these titles could be easily shared along with the URL of the post on Twitter. I summarized that our main takeaway from Discussion 9 was that everyone should feel comfortable to shape their narratives in a way that made sense for them, including a bulleted list of ways that students could potentially approach the assignment and specific instructions for students who did not take tests in the state of Texas to "consider drawing more heavily on Rose, or discussing your experiences with tests in general (including writing sections on AP, IB, SAT and ACT exams)." I reiterated in my Week 15 emails that students should "try to think of short, impactful examples of how testing impacted you (rather than trying to cover your experience with testing through all of K-12)" in order to ensure that their narratives were focused, especially given how brief they were.

The narratives my students produced for Discussion 10 were written in a variety of styles and represented the various ways they were taught to write specifically for standardized tests in K-12. Many of these were strategies I had heard of from my interviews and previous students' writing, while some were unique. One student[139] crafted a narrative that began by detailing her own experience being taught to write seemingly unhelpful reading strategies:

> The most annoying things about TAKS testing were the tedious strategies and its rigidity. I remember distinctly in the 3rd grade and 7th grade that my reading teachers were adamant about these "important strategies." I had to underline, circle, look for the location and characters, etc. My daily grades in those classes depended on whether I circled, underlined, squared all the right things. I found it confusing

[139] Because the majority of my students allowed me to include their narratives and their real names in our publicly available blog, I cannot use their pseudonyms here. Doing so would make it possible to identify all students throughout my dissertation, which would be a violation of the terms I had approved by the Internal Review Board at the University of Houston.

> because it seemed unnecessary and unhelpful. I could answer the questions without filling out all these required strategies.

She highlights here the issue with becoming obsessed with teaching to a test, in this case teaching test strategies that students do not even necessarily find helpful, rather than teaching actual reading comprehension, and she later writes that she now "wonder[s] what skills [she] could have attained had [her teachers] not been so preoccupied with TAKS and its strategies." Many of my students wrote about how test preparation narrowed writing instruction, too, specifically in the ways they were taught to write formulaic essays specifically for these exams rather than for real writing situations. One student wrote about the use of sample essays, a focus of my interviews with former students, and how "mimicry" does not prepare students to write:

> I remember in my English classes, a large chunk of a semester was given to preparing for the section on the TAKS. We would receive examples of good responses to prompts (based on a numerical scale) and then bad responses to prompts (based on a numerical scale). Then, we were essentially told to mimic the style of the good responses in order to get a good score on the test. To me, this is not what a big part of our education should be focusing on. Although mimicking "good responses" might indeed improve some of our writing skills, this leaves no room for creativity and expression in our writing. Then, once we go on into college and are expected to know how to effectively express our thoughts, all we have in our arsenal is this formulaic writing that we have become accustomed to all of our lives. We then have to adjust our writing style, sometimes significantly, to be able to write in college. Instead of putting this responsibility on students when they get to college, I think that we need to

get away from this formulaic writing on standardized tests and allow for more freedom in writing, because ultimately, writing should not follow a rigid pattern.

While his complaint that this approach to teaching writing limits room for "creativity and expression" seems slightly idealistic -- certainly not all writing that students do in college and in their careers can be creative and expressive -- his observation that being taught mimicry did not prepare him to write in college makes sense and illuminates a key issue with test writing. These kinds of narratives that spoke specifically to the difference between writing for exams and writing in college reinforce not only the need to change assessment policy to teach students real forms of writing rather than unhelpful formulas to write test essays but also to teach a liminal first-year writing class aimed at helping students rethink their current views of writing through the use of reflection and inquiry into what writing is.

For the sake of ease, I created a blog and transferred my students' narratives that they had posted in Discussion 10 onto it. The week after students uploaded their narratives to Blackboard, I set up a WordPress[140] site titled *Tales of Testing*[141] and created individual posts for each student who agreed to allow their narratives to be published online. I copied and pasted their narratives and signed their names or chosen pseudonyms at the bottom of the post, and I titled each post with the tweetable title supplied by that student. As I uploaded each post, I read and tagged[142] the post, using the following tags: anxiety, AP classes, college writing, correctness, formulaic, high-stakes, inequality, legislative action, narrowing curriculum, non-test writing, outsider perspective, private school, repetition, sample papers, STAAR, TAKS, testing, and test writing. I set up the WordPress website so that these tags

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[140]WordPress is a free, online website creation tool often used to create personal blogs.

[141] The URL for our course blog is https://talesoftesting.wordpress.com

[142]A "tag" refers to a metadata tag, specifically a keyword or term that is used to label or categorize a piece of information (in this case, a blog post on a website). Tags help sort information when browsing or searching, as explained later in this paragraph.

were displayed on the left-hand sidebar, with the most-used tags (which included "college writing," "formulaic," "narrowing curriculum," "STAAR," "TAKS," and "test writing") appearing in a larger font than the lesser-used tags. Visitors to the website could click the tag they were interested in, and all posts that featured that tag would be displayed. I also included an instructor's note providing more context for these narratives specifically by explaining my background and experience with testing, my scholarly interest in testing, and the context of the class that these narratives were produced in. I shared this website with TAMSA to use as they saw fit. Once the 85th Texas Legislative Session began in January 2017, I began tweeting out links to individual students' posts, including the title they wrote for their post, the URL for that post, and hashtags[143] for the Texas legislature (#txlege) and for testing policy. This kind of social media sharing was also recommended by one of my students in our Discussion 9 conversations about how to disseminate these narratives to a broader audience, and these tweets did receive some attention and interaction on Twitter and on WordPress. Twitter users often replied to my tweets or retweeted them, which passes the tweet along to their followers, and my students' posts also earned a handful of likes and comments on WordPress[144].

This sequence of assignments was valuable both as a tool for providing students with an opportunity to think about and discuss how to shape a text based on an audience and purpose outside of our classroom. One of the students who identified this as

[143]A hashtag is a specific kind of metadata tag used on Twitter to sort tweets. To form a hashtag, one puts the pound symbol (#) before a word or series of words, omitting the space between those words. Hashtags are often abbreviated to allow Twitter users to make the most of the maximum allowed 160-characters in any one tweet; for instance, the hashtag for the Texas Legislative Session is #txlege, for brevity. Twitter users can search for hashtags or click on hashtags to be shown other tweets that use the same hashtag.

[144] On both of these platforms, I suspect that the use of tags and hashtags helped direct traffic here. One major issue is that there is no singular hashtag for groups trying to mobilize against unfair assessment practices, due in part to the fact that each state has different standardized testing practices.

his favorite discussion of the semester on his end-of-course survey explained that he valued this discussion both because it gave him the opportunity to write about a topic he felt strongly about even prior to this course and to do so in a way he thought mattered: “This discussion allowed me to voice problems I had throughout my entire education with standardized testing, and it felt good that the narratives were going to someone who would make a difference.” This attests to the importance of giving students the opportunity to see writing as both individual and social by sharing their personal experiences publicly as a part of a broader conversation about assessment, especially given that the timed essays that appear on these tests position writing as a purely individual exercise. It also made sense to include this assignment in the final brief unit of the course focused on reflection, as another student who selected Discussion 10 as her favorite explained in her end-of-course survey: “I think Discussion 10 did a good job at connecting our personal take on English courses and the effects of standardized tests from previous years, which was discussed in Discussion 3, and our semester's worth of assignments and learning in a way that brought more insight on the impacts of standardized tests on English courses.” Returning to the thoughts and experiences they wrote out early in the semester at the end of the semester, especially as they were reflecting on their writing development throughout the semester and how they would define writing for themselves, allowed them to bring a semester’s worth of insights to this assignment. Because students were given the opportunity in Units 2 and 3 through their inquiry projects on writing to see the ways in which “real” writing operates and to view their prior experiences writing for tests through that lens, equipping them to better critique testing practices than they first had in Journal 1 or Discussion 3. **It thus accomplished the reflective aim of having them re-examine their past assumptions and a core aim of the**

liminal classroom of helping them to see how their views of writing before this class and after this class differed. Lastly, though this was a single assignment, it gave students some exposure to service learning and the experience of writing for real purposes and audiences, including audience members that engaged with their ideas on social media.

Reflective Portfolios: Making Writing Development Visible

Revisiting, rethinking, and rewriting their testing narratives was an appropriate precursor to the reflective work I asked them to do in their reflective portfolios, an assignment I introduced students to in the first week of the course and reminded them of throughout the semester. To get my students into the mindset of reflecting on their development throughout the semester, I created Journal 5, a private journal assignment that asked them to look back on their literacy autobiographies in Journal 1 and reflect on how their view of writing "did or did not change" since then. Amy was a student who wrote extensively about writing for the "TAKS, STAAR, SAT, and AP exams" in Journal 1, and in her Journal 5 entry she reflected on the differences between this course and previous English courses she had taken:

> Reading other essays about writing from my peers have also broadened my understanding of writing because it evoked me to formulate my own opinions on topics which I had not considered previously. Having discussions helped me interact with my peers and communicate our ideas, which was much different from just having a teacher read and grade your assignments. Also, by evaluating the effects of standardized tests in Unit 1, I have also been able to assess my previous experiences

> of strict test-driven classes and compared it with this course. The difference between these two types of courses have helped me explore writing in different ways.

Amy touches on many of the facets of this course that helped her view of writing evolve this semester in just a few sentences here, from writing for an audience of her peers rather than primarily an audience of her teacher[145], to challenging her to think critically about the ways testing works, to giving her the opportunity to explore for herself and read her peers' explorations of the different ways that writing operates. While she does not explain how each of these changed her view of writing in much depth, these were ideas she picked up and investigated in more depth in her reflective portfolio, making this an important first step in that process. But her final sentence here about the "differences" in these two kinds of courses -- test-centric English courses she took in K-12 and our English 1304 course -- is also significant. While there is always a risk of students using these kinds of reflective assignments as an opportunity to try to flatter instructors by explaining the many ways in which this course changed them, I tried to communicate to students that a "conversion narrative" is not what I was after. Further, this description of this English course as "different" than her others (and not necessarily "better") is in line with how we approached the topic of test writing in the course; the formula they were taught to write a test essay was appropriate for the constraints of the assignment, but would not work when writing for different purposes, audiences, and contexts.

I chose to assign a reflective portfolio in order to help students chart their own writing development and see how they began to answer the central question of our course -- "What is writing?" -- for themselves through their work this semester. Though my approach was

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[145] As previously discussed, this is in line with what Britton et al. found about the majority of writing school children produce being done specifically for teachers.

focused more on writing than on development of the self[146], this approach is not unlike those advocated by expressivists like William Coles, who asks for a formal reflection at the end of his course where students answer questions like, "Where did you start this term? Where did you seem to come out? [...] Who were you? Who are you now?" (258). On the reflective portfolio assignment sheet[147], I divided the assignment into two key parts: a portfolio, where students selected and annotated pieces they wrote throughout the semester, and a short essay, where students analyzed their writing development across the semester[148]. I gave students flexibility in how they approached both elements, explaining that they should feel free to format and arrange their portfolios however they saw fit and that they approach the essay however they wanted, suggesting they might create a central metaphor for writing or their writing development and support it with examples from their writing across the semester. I emphasized, as I had throughout the semester, that "writing development is not linear and varies for all of us," and students "should consider not only where [they saw] growth, but also where [they] may grow next in [their] writing abilities." This complements what Vygotsky says about writing development, as a higher mental function, being both continuous and discontinuous, and I reiterated in my weekly emails that there likely would not be one coherent narrative of progress to sum up their semester. In one, I included a step-by-step process of how students might approach the process of writing their reflective portfolios, breaking it down into three stages -- compiling, annotating, and reflecting -- with

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[146] I feared that asking students how they changed as people might further incentivize the conversion narratives that I hoped to avoid in their reflective essays. However, according to Vygotsky and expressivists, language development plays more of a role in the development of the self than we tend to recognize.

[147] The Reflective Portfolio assignment sheet can be found in its entirety in Appendix E.

[148] I have based my reflective portfolio assignment on the one that Zebroski presents in *Thinking Through Theory*, requiring "selected and varied pieces of writing carefully arranged in a thought-out order" that "give the reader some sense of the variety of writing you have done and the wide range of writing you are now capable of," "brief annotations attached to each text" telling "what the text is and why it is important as evidence of writing development," and "a short paper [...] that analyzes your writing development by citing the texts included" (56).

in-depth instructions for each. When detailing how they might approach the reflective essay, I reiterated that I was more interested in reading their own take on their writing development than what they thought I wanted to hear from them. I also posted a video where I showed student portfolios formatted in different ways from past semesters and talked about what I thought was successful about them in order to give them ideas of the ways in which they could approach both the formatting of the portfolio and the content of the essay. Students took varied approaches to their portfolios; for example, some included only a few writing samples with in-depth annotations explaining the significance of each, while others included dozens of writing samples with shorter annotations explaining the links between each, and their approaches to the reflective essay differed greatly. In the remainder of this section, I discuss a few themes that emerged from these reflective portfolios as a whole, as recorded in my teaching journal after reading and grading all of them, and brief excerpts from reflective portfolios on these themes. I end this section with two student reflective essays that took vastly different approaches in terms of style and content but both provided substantial reflections on their views of writing.

One theme that arose in many of my students' portfolios was **the neutral or even negative attitudes about writing and English classes that they brought to the course**. Some students described being unsure of what exactly they would get from this course before enrolling, while others admitted outright to feeling like they should not be required to take the course, either because they had taken an AP English course, they felt the previous course (English 1303) had provided them with enough instruction on writing, or they did not feel they should have to take any English courses because of their major. Syed saw a mildly resistant attitude in reflecting on his literacy autobiography from Week 1 of the course,

where he wrote, “Personally, I don’t really enjoy writing simply because of how difficult it is to begin. It takes me a relatively large amount of time to think about what I want to say in my writing, how I want to present the information, and how to organize the information.” He commented on this entry and these sentences specifically, which he bolded in his portfolio, in his annotation of Journal 1:

> After going back and reading what I wrote, I am surprised at just how negative my thoughts were on writing. Before this assignment, I had never really thought about writing at all, and simply saw it as something that I had to get done to fulfill requirements for a class. I thought that I was pretty neutral in my opinion of writing. However, when I had to write down my thoughts, as we have to do so often in this class, I saw what my opinions really were.

It’s likely that a similar phenomena happened with my students when writing their reflective portfolios; they saw how negative, neutral, or limited their views of writing were prior to this course when forced to reflect on their development throughout the entire semester. Those who were neutral about the course and those who were resistant to it explained that they viewed this class as checking off a necessary degree requirement, which made it even more imperative for me to demonstrate to them why and how the course could be of value. The literacy autobiography also allowed students to begin negotiating their own view of writing, as Morgan explained in her annotation of Journal 1:

> I feel like this was an important first step to starting out this semester. This assignment allowed me to really think about what I’ve gained throughout all my years learning English, but more importantly, it gave me a chance to think about what English means to me. Before this class, I never really thought about it; English was

> just there…it was just one of the core subjects. Knowing what exactly this class will mean for me definitely helped my growth.

Whether neutral, pessimistic, or enthusiastic about English courses, these early assignments helped students take stock of their attitude about writing and reading and gave them permission to begin defining literacy for themselves. This is key, especially in the era of high-stakes testing, where students are told exactly what writing ought to be.

The majority of my students wrote about **freewrites as a tool for teaching them that writing could be enjoyable, that writing could help them think through ideas, or that they could write in a way to that made sense to them as writers as opposed to writing according to an approved formula.** Anna identified freewrites as one of her favorite activities in the course both because they "prepared [her] to write deeper arguments" and "to practice her analytical skills":

> It did not feel like actual work to write it, but after finishing it I would reread it. Then I would see how my writing abilities actually do shine through in this simple assignment. In this way, I even got a little excited about writing in a way that I have not gotten for a long time. At that first free-write, I demonstrated a certain level of writing ability and as I kept writing more, I saw my writing ability improve. Not only was the writing getting better, I felt alleviated by writing the free-writes. It was like my own little personal diary. These free-writes along with one of my classmates' researched argument about writing therapy have increased my positive attitude about writing.

Anna describes two phenomena that students often associated with freewriting in their reflective portfolios. First, freewrites showed students that writing could be easy and

productive; they could produce original ideas and even interesting turns of phrase in writing that they did not constantly stop to second-guess what they were writing or to write it in a style or organization they were taught was appropriate. Second, freewrites showed students the ability of writing to serve as therapeutic, as a means for recording and reflecting on one's personal thoughts and feelings. Syed, for example, wrote,

> Before this [five-minute freewriting] assignment, I never really put thoughts to paper and instead, just kept everything in my mind. However, after doing these free writes, I saw that they helped me more effectively reflect on my thoughts. Now, when I use them, I even find myself making more logical decisions when it comes to certain things [...] I am glad I got to experience free writing, because I think I will definitely continue to do it.

This kind of personal therapeutic writing that Syed explained here was also described by other students in their reflective portfolios, including some who pointed to freewriting as a helpful tool in helping them sort out their anxieties. Madeline wrote about how freewriting helped her gain confidence in herself that spilled over into her writing style: "My writing went from the quiet, timid soft-spoken, analytical words that soaked themselves into the first paper, to more fluid, frazzled, 'painterly' style i have now and that i so endearingly re-united with during these free-writes." Freewriting was a means for students not only clarifying and gaining confidence for themselves as writers, but also as people. This showed them yet another way in which writing could operate outside of the testing environment.

Students also wrote about **the role that considerations of audience played in helping their view of writing to evolve, both in terms of actually thinking of writing as aimed toward an audience and in the feedback they received from their peers on drafts**

of their work. Though the portfolios and reflective essays were personal, these moves to include and comment on interactions with their peers and myself highlights how writing functions as the interplay between the social and individual[149]; students understood their writing as not an individual exercise, as it so often is depicted on tests, but as a social activity. In both their annotations and their reflective essays, students described how considering audience for both sources they read (especially the sources they annotated for Paper 2) and writing they composed led them to think of writing differently, as a social act aimed at effectively communicating with real people and not merely an exercise in adhering to arbitrary rules for "good writing" outlined by a teacher who was assessing their writing. For example, Anna annotated Paper 3, a researched argument about media bias, with a description of her thought process behind using visuals in her essay in order to aid the reader:

> Before this class, I never included visuals because I was not sure whether I could do it while still maintaining professionalism [...] In my essay, these pictures helped the reader understand specific elements that I was referring to. The fact that CNN has a special red and black format kind of shows a scarier element to the fact the Trump was named the winner of the election. After successfully using visuals, I now see how much the visuals can aid the essay especially during an analysis.

This move to include screenshots of the websites she was describing ran counter to her previous instruction that English essays should not include visuals in order to maintain professionalism, but, as she points out here, her decision to include images ultimately led to a

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[149] In *Thinking Through Theory*, Zebroski points to Vygotsky's theories of language as justification for writing students needing "to experience his or her own development and to make use of these experiences through reflection and metawriting as well as through group processing. In this way, reflection contributes to overall writing development" (166). Though students are not processing their writing with a group of other students (and, admittedly, one of the downfalls of an online class may be the seemingly impossibility of this), reflecting on their writing development as it relates to how their audience members responded to it does help them see the social function of writing.

more effective essay for her readers. Anna reflected on the role of audience more in her final essay, explaining how in prior English classes she did not "think like a writer" because it was simpler to follow an approved formula for writing a "routine" essay:

> For a while, I had kind of forgotten how to think like a writer. I did not really think about the audience or what style of writing I should choose. It seemed like too much work to think too much for an essay, and the experience is nothing but stressful. Most of my assignments were routine, so this idea to be more creative in my writing just never came up. However, after completing this course, I realize that more thinking and creativity in my essays will help the effectiveness of my essays and make writing essays more pleasurable.

Here she highlights how thinking about audience -- for example, by asking whether her readers might be able to better understand her argument if she included the visuals she was analyzing -- is more work than the "uncreative" approach to writing a formulaic essay she engaged in prior to this course, but thinking made her writing more creative and the process of writing more enjoyable. Other students echoed this sentiment, many pointing specifically to Discussion 2, where they rhetorically analyzed the writing and design of a website they visited, as a major turning point for them viewing all writing as social.

In regards to audience, many students wrote about the role that peer feedback on both minor and major assignments played in showing them how to revise the content and style of their writing. Syed wrote extensively about the role of peer feedback in his reflective portfolio, beginning with his annotation on his Discussion 3 post which detailed his experience with testing and called for tests that did not demand such formulaic writing:

> I thought this was a pretty reasonable statement, but I found a pretty big hole in my writing from Madeline's comment. She asked how I would go about making this change to a less formulaic testing. After reading her comment, I realized that I hadn't really thought through the difficulties that would come in making this change. I was just thinking ideally that if we try to make it less formulaic, it would happen. This really changed my writing, because now, I really try to look at all of the pros and cons of something before making an argument about it [...] This has helped me avoid making overly idealistic arguments in my writing, which I think helped me out very much in the final paper, where we had to make a contestable claim about something.

Madeline's comment on his initial post was phrased in such a way that it did not attack Syed's suggestion but merely asked how this might be accomplished, which not only led him to the broader conclusion that creating a writing test that would not demand formulaic writing might not be possible but also pushed him to do more of this kind of thinking in his writing process. Other students described similar phenomena of peers raising questions about or challenging their claims in their writing and the ways in which this caused them to think more about the claims they were making and how they presented them[150]. Syed also described how peer feedback impacted his writing style, detailing a comment from Amy on his first draft of Paper 3 that led him to think more about the organization of his paper:

> She commented that, by including the negatives of email in patient-doctor relationships first, I might make my audience more biased towards the negatives, and that I should include in the introduction that I will bring up solutions to these

[150] This is perhaps one benefit to the online writing course -- students are perhaps more likely to call out logical inconsistencies or raise counterarguments to their peers' ideas because they are easier to spot when written out (as opposed to when spoken in an in-class discussion) and because doing so feels less confrontational when separated by a computer screen.

> negatives. After reading this, I realized that I didn't really consider the audience when I wrote my papers for this class. I just wrote them based on what I would think about them when reading. I didn't even consider how talking about negatives without saying that there will be solutions could impact a reader. This helped me in the short-term because I added a part to the introduction mentioning that I have solutions. In the long run, it has helped my writing because it has shown me that I have to consider the audience more when I write, and have to make sure not to confuse them.

Here Syed connects peer feedback with broader considerations of audience and describes how a specific, straightforward piece of feedback from a peer reading his draft helped him begin the process of going from writer-based prose to reader-based prose, impacting both this specific paper and his process for his writing projects going forward. By receiving peer feedback on both minor daily writing assignments and drafts of major papers, students were able to see that writing truly is social and to shape their specific writing projects in a way that made them more rhetorically effective. Guiding students through reflection on the peer feedback they received, specifically through unit reflections and the cover letters for major papers, helped illuminate and solidify the idea that writing was a social act by calling attention to the many pieces of writing that were read and commented on by an audience in this online class and the ways in which these comments refined their writing, confirming the social epistemic theories of online writing instruction.

One indication of writing development came from the variety of approaches students chose to take to their reflective portfolios. Some pulled out a few core themes from their writing development over the semester and wrote focused essays explaining these themes. Others created metaphors for writing or their development over the semester, like Elaine,

who compared her growth over the semester to Peter Parker becoming Spider Man, or Alicia, who compared immersing herself in a research project as complex as her Black Lives Matter project to jumping into water unsure if she might learn to swim or drown. Syed's essay took the former approach of focusing on a few core ways that his view of writing changed over the semester based on ideas he'd picked up on in his detailed annotations, centering on the idea of learning to have fun with writing:

> When I came into this class, I already considered myself a pretty good writer, especially because of all of the writing-intensive classes I had taken during my first three years at this university. However, I never really had any fun writing. I always saw writing as a chore, and as something that just needed to be done as quickly as possible so I could move on to other enjoyable things. I don't even think this was because I was writing for graded work. There were many class assignments that I enjoyed, especially reading articles or books I would be tested on. As I said in my very first journal, writing just wasn't enjoyable for me. I really think this view on writing changed because of this class throughout the semester. I don't necessarily think I progressed overwhelmingly as a writer, although I did improve on things such as having effective argumentation in writing (Discussion 3) and better organization in writing (Peer Review). However, I did begin to appreciate writing.
>
> This transformation started early on, with the discussion where we had to analyze the design of one of our favorite websites. For the first time, I had fun writing because I got a chance to write about something that I used very often, but in a context I had never thought about before. Because the website had a practical application to me, I was willing to put more effort into writing about it, and along the

way, learned something new about the importance of design and aesthetics in building a website. As far as major assignments go, this theme of having fun while writing continued in paper 3, again because I got to write about something I had strong opinions on and was interested in. I decided to pursue a career in the medical field, and by being able to write about patient-doctor interactions, I was able to research things I was genuinely interested in. I would also say that because I was interested in this topic, I took suggestions for improvement in my writing more seriously. More specifically, I took my peer-review comments seriously and incorporated better and clearer organization into my introduction because of the comments. If I was writing about something that I didn't care about, I think this would have shown on my paper. I doubt I would have taken the peer review comments as seriously and would have left my paper largely as it was. Therefore, at least for major assignments, having fun writing about these topics also led me to care more about my writing and to become a better writer.

Finally, the biggest reason that I started to enjoy writing more was the free-writes. These put a whole new spin on writing for me, because I no longer had to worry as much about grammar or sounding formal. I could just put my thoughts to paper, which really helped me reflect on my thoughts. For example, in the first free-write in my portfolio, I talked about my thoughts on living outside of Houston for the first time. I had always kept thoughts about that suppressed, but now, after having been accepted to medical schools outside of Houston, I found it really helpful to look back at that free write and reflect on my thoughts. I see this as an indication of my

> growth in writing because I am now more willing to write free-writes such as these on my own time, when before, I would never write anything if I didn't have to.
>
> Despite the above growth and enjoyment in my writing, there are things I will have to work on to further my growth. I definitely think I need to figure out how to make some of my other writing assignments as enjoyable as the ones in this class. I think that if I can force myself somehow to enjoy the assignments, I will be able to write for those assignments better as well. Although this might be difficult, I think the foundation has been laid for me with this class. I will definitely try to apply the free-writes and journals that were so enjoyable as preparation for such assignments, and hopefully, I will continue to enjoy writing more and more, rather than revert to my feelings I had before taking this class.

Syed points to writing on topics of interest to him, writing for real audiences, and writing personal freewrites as key facets of the course that led him to develop his writing skills this semester specifically by making writing more enjoyable. Making writing "fun" was not a goal I had set for this class or any other first-year writing class that I had taught, knowing that just because student had fun writing did not mean that they were producing good writing, but I was pleasantly surprised to see a student from a STEM background focused on getting to medical school who came into the course as a strong writer was able to see writing as something personally beneficial and even enjoyable for him by the end of the semester[151]. Though forcing himself "somehow to enjoy the assignments" in his final semester of his college career and the years ahead of him in medical school might be a difficult task to always achieve, I hope that Syed will continue to find more joy in writing and greater

[151] Rebecca Hallman Martini also found this to be true of STEM majors in Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) courses at the University of Houston in her dissertation, *Listening to Stories about Writing (Centers): Sites of Innovation in (Online) Writing Instruction*.

purpose in writing now through his approach to thinking about writing rhetorically as a social activity aimed at reaching an audience rather than exercise in replicating formulas and proving competence. Lastly, I see his commitment to pursue freewriting in his own time as an indication of writing development, as this was a form of self-sponsored writing he hadn't engaged in prior to the course but that he found enjoyable and helpful to the point of wanting to continue it after the course has ended.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Madeline compared her experience learning to love writing in our course this semester to growing so addicted to reading and writing that she had to attend a "Writer's Anonymous" meeting. In her 1500-word reflective essay, she narrates her attending the meeting, hearing others detail the experiences that led them to love reading and writing before stepping up to the front of the room to describe her own experience learning to love writing, as described in the following excerpt from that essay:

> "honestly.. i always enjoyed writing. i mean, it's always been in the back of my mind. but once i started ENGL 1304, it all changed."
>
> i heard gasps echo amongst everyone in the room, and then i remembered. ENGL 1304 is basically the hard drug. Worse than ENGL 1301. Think of ENGL 1301 as purgatory and ENGL 1304 as the dreaded depths of hell. It's the place where the ones that are too far gone start at, and where most 'literature-aholic's' end up.
>
> "my writing used to be mainly analytical, you know? i mean, writing was personal to me, but not as personal as it is now. i used to only dabble with it once or twice, but once I started ENGL 1304, it became a weekly, if not daily occurrence," i started shuffling in my head for the right words, not noticing the once bored eyes now looking at me with empathy and interest, "when i first started at ENGL 1304, my

writing started out rather impersonal and shy. not letting it's true colors out, you know? with the first essay - which was about testing and it's affects on schools - my writing exemplified that impersonal, analytical side. maybe it was because of the topic, maybe not. i usually compare my experience with that first essay to an experience you had as a kid, like show-and-tell - timid, shy, and all that. that's the way my writing felt. it didn't feel comfortable. as the semester progressed and we went on through different assignments that attempted to pull us out of our comfort zones my writing began to change."

i worried i was rambling on too much, but as i looked up, even the director looked enthralled. so, with that, i continued.

"one of our weekly discussion posts focused on our second paper. we had to discuss our purpose for the paper - but little did i know it was around this time that my writing began to take flight. literature was no longer a nuisance, but more of an itch that couldn't be satisfied. my writing became more lax, personal, myself. i took more care into what i was saying and how i was saying it. i became more inquisitive, which lead to the beginning of the obsession. i know that some of the symptoms of binge-writing are lack of sleep, and maybe too much coffee; but little did i know that it would lead to a fire that couldn't be stopped. And then," i sighed, "came the free writes."

"oh my god, not the free writes," i heard a voice mutter. I looked up to see the director's eye's widen, he leaned in more intently with the rest of them, eager to listen.

> "yeah. free writes? don't get me started. They were the catalyst to this downward spiral that made me end up here. They are what tore my writing from it's comfort zone and so vehemently pushed me to use writing as a tool of expression, see it as a form of art. By this point, i was a lost cause. My writing had changed from something putrid to something beautiful. ENGL 1304 had it's hold on me. From the beginning of the semester to the end, my literature problem had been pulled out of it's depths only to be shown off like eye-candy. From something stagnant and logical to something moveable, fluid, expressive and free; my writing evolved tremendously and culminated all at once in my last paper, paper three. paper three was different than paper one. it's like looking at two paintings by one artist and wondering how in the world they're made by the same creator. paper one was simple, lifeless, and concrete. paper three was emotive, purposeful, and passionate. by the end of paper three, i realized i had a problem. that's when my mom started begging me to go to writer's anonymous. it wasn't until i finished paper three and i felt my mind rushing for more words and my hands itching to continue typing that i realized i needed help. i know words are power, but who knew they could be so addictive? so influential? i mean, maybe i am too far gone, but who said that was a bad thing..?"
>
> everyone stayed silent. their expressions cold. some pale. - maybe i said too much? that weird man - John was it? - slowly got up and began clapping. Soon enough, the church echoed with claps that rung about and bounced throughout the dusty, old walls of this cramped church that not even the cries of angels could cease.

Through this narrative of attending a meeting for others addicted to reading and writing, Madeline expresses the ways in which her attitude toward writing changed drastically during

the semester. While comparing one's love of literacy to an "addiction" would seem heavy-handed coming from other students, for Madeline, it was accurate; the difference between her final drafts of Paper 1 and Paper 3 were so drastic they read as though they were written by different students, one with a view of writing as adhering to strict rules for "good writing" and another who viewed writing as a way to take risks to determine the best means for expressing one's unique ideas. Madeline's writing throughout the course was exceptional, and I was especially impressed with the narrative she came up with for her reflective essay, particularly the way that it captures the way that writing functioned as a seductive distraction for her this semester, from the "beginning of the obsession" to the "downward spiral" that led her to where she is now. This creative approach to the reflective essay captures both her new approach to writing and some of the aspects of this class that led her to adopt this new style.

Conclusion: Personalization and Connection in the Online Writing Classroom

The end-of-course survey was an important tool for making sense of what was most successful or impactful about the course from the students' perspective and why. In terms of assignment types and instructional materials, I asked students to rank the different types used throughout the semester (specifically journals, discussions, freewrites, unit reflections, major papers, the Reflective Portfolio, weekly emails, and conferencing with me for Paper 2) on a likert scale from 1 to 7, with 7 being extremely beneficial or enjoyable and 1 being not at all beneficial or enjoyable. The majority of these categories had responses clustered in the upper half of the likert scale, some with extremely favorable ratings, like freewriting, which all but one student rated as a 6 or 7, and journals and discussions which received ratings of 5, 6, or 7

from all students[152]. The less popular assignments were those that led students through reflection, namely the unit reflections and reflective portfolio; though their ratings skewed toward the higher end of the scale, a handful of students ranked both assignments as less beneficial or enjoyable. Students often view reflection as "busywork" or unproductive, and it can be a challenge to help them see the benefits of reflection, even if those benefits are discussed with them, which I tried to do through videos and weekly emails. Given this barrier, I consider the fact that 90% of students ranked unit reflections as a 5, 6, or 7 and 70% ranked the reflective portfolio as a 5, 6, or 7 as a victory and hope that students who did not see the immediate benefit of the assignment might have benefitted from it nevertheless. Further, my goal for the course was not for it to be enjoyable but for it to make them better writers, and I was confident that these reflective assignments would help achieve that goal. Engagement was important to me, but wanting students to feel engaged in the course content did not lead me to shy away from assignments that students expressed less enthusiasm for or found less enjoyable or to adopt every suggestion they put forth for the kinds of assignments they wanted to write.

In a separate question, I asked students which of the following daily writing assignments they enjoyed or found most beneficial out of four types of daily writing assignments; 40% chose freewrites, 25% chose discussions, 20% chose journals, and 15% chose peer review. The fact that almost half of students chose freewrites aligned with what I'd heard from individual students about the benefits of this particular assignment. One student who identified freewrites as her favorite assignment wrote, "I liked being able to write about whatever I wanted without having any restrictions or stressing about staying 'on

[152] The full results of the end-of-course survey including the distribution of each type of assignment or instructional material can be found in Appendix F.

topic,'" while another wrote, "I could put my random thoughts on paper and come to a conclusion about what I thought of them." **Freewrites were important for allowing students to form unique ideas and write without restriction, a stark contrast to the ways they were often taught to approach writing before this class.** In addition to becoming a way to generate a research question for Unit 2, I used freewrites for prewriting in Units 3 and 4, and I noted in my teaching journal that students used these opportunities to try out big ideas and sort through their thinking, much like students described doing in their reflective portfolios and on this end of course survey. The same applies to journals, many of which were also freewritten and focused on a student's' personal experiences with writing in general or in relation to the specific major paper we were working on that unit. Students who chose discussions as their favorite daily writing assignment cited "connect[ing] with peers" and "read[ing] all the different comments and ideas" as something that was genuinely "fun." One student wrote, "Discussions were most enjoyable because I was able to communicate with a larger audience. Through discussions, I received feedback from my peers or extended my discussion through comments." **This ability to communicate with a real audience through the discussion both for its ability to give them feedback on their ideas and to read a variety of perspectives from others made discussions a beneficial and enjoyable activity for my students**.

Toward the end of the survey, I asked students what they enjoyed or appreciated about the course, and what they would change about the course. In response to the second question, few students identified tangible things that could be changed about the course, and those who did often requested "an online textbook" or reducing the workload, which a few complained was on the heavy side. I attribute this to students underestimating the amount of

effort that goes into an online course, but it's also worth noting that some students may have had to expend more time to learn the technologies necessary for the course. Furthermore, students cannot "check out" of the online class, even for a week, without it having a major impact on their grade; contrast this to a face-to-face class where a student might get behind on the reading but still come to class and not participate in discussion. One student asked for "a bit more 'freedom' in certain aspects of assignments," which I found encouraging given I was concerned that the amount of freedom I gave them on many of their daily writing assignments was too much and would lead them to feel overwhelmed or unsure of how to approach them. In regards to the first question about what they appreciated about the course, I was surprised at how many students fixated on my role in the course as their instructor, perhaps because this was one thing I did not ask specific questions about in the survey. Different students appreciated "how personal it was between the student and professor," "how available" I was, "the connection that we all had with each other and the instructor," and the "professor being connected to us and conducting a personal meeting with us." Several students described feeling grateful for being given the opportunity to explore topics that were of interest to them, and "the flexibility and ease" of the course including how well-organized it was also came up a few times. These responses confirmed to me that my design and execution of the course, including the ways in which I presented myself to my students through weekly emails, videos, comments, and one-on-one conferences, worked to help them feel engaged in the course and its goal to explore what writing was.

Finally, I asked students to identify whether they found this statement to be true or false: "I felt connected with my classmates and instructor in this online course." All 20 of my students selected "true," and several elaborated on their reasons for feeling this way in an

optional follow-up question about why they felt or did not feel this way. Several pointed to specific elements of the course, namely weekly emails, discussions, and peer review, while others pointed to the fact that "replies and comments" in general helped foster that sense of connection. One student wrote, "Our instructor and classmates both played a huge role in promoting a positive community within our classroom effortlessly" through "weekly discussion posts, positive feedback on our projects, etc." This feeling of **community** and connection was a large part of what made this online course successful. **If students did not feel like they were writing to real people who cared about their points of view and original arguments, or if they felt like I as their instructor was not invested in their development as writers, many of the techniques I used to teach this course would not have been successful**.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

One of my assertions throughout this project is that student stories have power, specifically student stories of assessment. I'd like to begin this conclusion by briefly sharing my own experience with writing specifically for standardized tests throughout my K-12 career, illuminating my personal connection to this topic and why I felt compelled to focus my dissertation project on testing. I have lived in the state of Texas my entire life, and I first took the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) in the third grade. I remember spending days learning multiple choice strategies (like how to identify the "worm" -- the "almost right" answer -- and eliminate it) and structuring a TAAS essay (using a "hamburger" structure with outer buns of "introduction" and "conclusion" and two or three "meat" paragraphs with the "main ideas"). I remember practicing essays in class, my teacher instructing me in the margins to "write smaller!" so that I could fit more writing within the lined box. When I was in fifth grade, our principal came over the PA system to announce that we'd received our TAAS scores for that year, and our campus had been named "exemplary" in all grades. She read them off one by one -- "Third grade… exemplary… Fourth grade… exemplary…" -- her voice growing more teary until she was openly sobbing over the PA system. My brother and I did a repeat performance of it in the backseat of the family minivan on the way home from school that day, much to the horror of my mother. Though in my mind I can still see the wallchart of the "Writing Process" from my fifth grade classroom (each "step" -- brainstorming, prewriting, outlining, writing, revising, editing -- represented by a different colored scoop of ice cream in an oversized cone), I have a hard time remembering any kind of writing we did that wasn't for tests in elementary school with two exceptions: a

book that our second grade class put together where we each wrote one page about a different species of dinosaur, and a self-paced journal that we kept in third grade where we were free to write about whatever we wanted.

By the time I started high school in College Station, Texas, a conservative college town whose high school was full of professors' kids and thus highly competitive, timed essays had become central in my education, largely because I was considered an advanced student. I earned myself the label of an"AP kid" by taking ten AP classes and the ten corresponding AP exams in high school. Because seven of these exams had timed essay components (human geography, English language and composition, English literature and composition, microeconomics, psychology, U.S. history, and Spanish language and culture), timed writings practicing these essay sections were a central part of my AP courses, and I learned the proper formula for writing an essay for each exam in a time period as short as 30 minutes. My extracurricular activities were also heavily focused on writing. I competed in UIL academics in ready writing, news writing, and headline writing, placing at the state championship for my ability to write a coherent piece of writing in a set amount of space and time. I also wrote for the newspaper, which I found terrifying and electrifying. Interviewing real people and being unsure of what they might say in response to my questions was a variable unlike any I faced in a timed writing environment, and writing draft after draft of stories until my editor and faculty supervisor approved them was a level of revision I had never encountered. I completed timed writing sections of the TAKS and the SAT in high school, too, and when I was accepted at the University of Texas at Austin, UT offered students credit for the first semester first-year writing for scoring a 600 or higher on the SAT-W. I was deeply annoyed that, while I worked hard to pass an AP exam to earn credit for the

course, one of my friends earned credit for it for earning exactly a 600 on that essay section. His parents could afford to send him to an expensive test prep center in Houston where he learned a perfect formula for an SAT essay, including ending every introductory paragraph with, "Throughout society and life, my view on this issue is pervasive." My friend did not know what "pervasive" meant.

In college, the rules of writing suddenly changed. I took a "banned books" English class taught by a PhD student where I struggled to compose analyses of David Lynch films, Bob Dylan song lyrics, and episodes of *The Wire* (I'm not sure where the "books" were in this course). I earned a C on a history paper, and I went to my TAs office hours to discuss this injustice, knowing that I had replicated the historical facts in flawless Edited American English. She patiently explained that I had not fulfilled the requirements of the assignment; I had not synthesized the topics of that week's lecture with current events. I gawked at her because I had never viewed academic writing, especially writing for a history course, as needing to achieve anything other than demonstrating subject knowledge and basic writing ability.

After struggling through my "banned books" course, I switched my major from English to Rhetoric and Writing, and my first rhetoric course, Principles of Rhetoric, was a turning point for me. Learning that writing was rhetorical, shaped for a specific audience and purpose within a set context, while scary, made much more sense to me than the five-paragraph essay or, worse yet, the eight-sentence paragraph I learned in ninth grade. I was then given the opportunity to practice this "real writing" in my coursework in Rhetoric and Writing in classes like Advanced Composition, where we wrote personal essays on topics of our choosing that we workshopped and disseminated to our classmates, and Writing for

Nonprofits, where we engaged in service-learning for a handful of nonprofits in Austin. These courses solidified that what I had been taught about writing and rhetoric was indeed true. Writing was something outside of proving writing ability in a timed environment. It was something new and unknown, but it was exciting.

This project grew out of that personal experience and out of a desire to better understanding how writing in testing environments in K-12 is shaping how first-year writing students think about writing. Through my work here, I wanted to move beyond an intellectual critique of testing and see how testing impacted the lived experience of students, then consider how we might create and teach first-year writing classes that help students grasp that writing is something other than replicating a formula for unknown judges of good writing in order to prove writing competence. In this chapter, I will briefly present some of the conclusions of this project and suggest areas for future research.

On exams, students are taught exactly what writing should be; as a result, in our first-year writing classes, students should determine for themselves what writing is. These were the core findings of this project. To the first point, I found through my interviews that students were taught that writing -- or at least "good writing" -- adhered to a certain formula and standards for correctness, was directed to a teacher or grader who served as an ultimate authority on writing, and was written primarily to prove competence. Students are taught to view writing this way primarily because of the amount of writing instruction they receive specifically for standardized tests that feature a timed essay based on a narrow prompt, and the amount of instruction dedicated to writing this specific genre is determined by the high-stakes nature of these exams (specifically the ways in which they secure funding for students' schools or benefits for individual students in the form of college credit,

acceptance, or scholarships). Students are thus well-versed in how to write a test essay by the time they get to first-year writing, but they often struggle to understand how to write for different contexts, purposes, and audiences. This move to facilitate students' determining for themselves what writing is can happen in many ways, including creating a more open course (or "embracing disorientation" in assignments and development), guiding students through reflection on their past writing experiences, directing students to form their own theories about writing, having students form research questions related specifically to writing, leading students in writing for purposes other than proving competence (like freewriting or communicating with peers on a discussion board), and engaging in service learning for real audiences and purposes.

We need to spend more time learning how students are taught to write in K-12 (especially high school) today, both through research and by learning more about our individual students' experiences. Much has changed since *The Testing Trap,* George Hillocks's 2006 book studying the impact of standardized writing tests on writing instruction, and the field is lacking in student perspectives of what is was like to be taught to write primarily for tests. Because of the liminal nature of the first-year writing class, we must better understand what students are learning about writing in high school in order to prepare them to write in college and beyond. First-year writing teachers should also seek to understand how their students were taught to write in K-12 and especially in high school, perhaps through reflective assignments that help students contextualize the strategies for writing that they were taught for those environments. Understanding both broader trends and individual student experiences with writing instruction in the age of standardized testing will make us better writing teachers.

We need to critique the ways in which "advanced" courses focus heavily on preparing students to write timed essays. Through my interviews, I learned that my students who spent the most time practicing timed essays on narrow prompts were those in AP English courses preparing for the essay sections on AP English tests. More systematic study of writing instruction in advanced English courses in high schools is needed to confirm that this is indeed a trend. This narrow focus on writing timed essays rather than planned, peer reviewed, revised essays makes it difficult for students to see the social nature of writing and may make them resistant to practices common in first-year writing courses, particularly when students take AP courses with the intention of earning college credit for first-year writing. We need to speak out against the ways in which these exams and courses preparing students primarily for these exams limit student writing ability, especially when these programs purport to promote "rigor."

We need more research into best practices for online writing instruction (OWI) and on student experience with OWI. While the body of OWI scholarship is continually growing, more systematic study is needed into whether OWI is as effective as face-to-face instruction, and, if so, under which conditions (for which kinds of students, in what course design, using what kinds of instructional materials) it is effective. Effective practices should be the focus, rather than the impulse that underlies much of the push to move courses into the online space: efficiency. More research is needed into student experience with OWI, including what students hope to get out of OWI, the amount of time and the ways in which they are engaging with the course, and how they engage with different pedagogical approaches to the online space. Specifically, little research has been done on how students experience more open format online classes like the one I taught. The focus of this research

on student experience should not be on student enjoyment but on student writing development.

To teach effectively online requires much more time and effort from instructors than teaching face-to-face courses. Online courses require more effort from students, too, and not always to their benefit. To return briefly to the results of my end-of-course survey, my students reported that one of the strengths of the course was receiving personal attention from me, their instructor, on their individual writing projects. Providing this kind of individualized attention in the online space requires much more time and mental energy from teachers, who must "keep up" with the individual projects of each other students. In addition, while some assignments can be recycled from semester to semester, the act of loading these assignments into the course management software takes up time, and, as previously discussed, the instructor may need to adjust the course and those assignments based on the students they teach that particular semester. Students in online courses may also be asked to put forth more time and effort because of this course medium. While some of this effort is arguably well-spent -- writing out discussion posts (as opposed to talking in a face-to-face class discussion) gives students further practice with writing, for example -- other efforts, like becoming familiar with all the technology necessary for the course or emailing their instructor over a logistical question, are less helpful in helping students develop their writing abilities.

We must remain vigilant in critiquing new pushes in K-12 education policy that may serve to further harm student learning and thus writing, especially students from vulnerable populations. This dissertation has focused on the impact of standardized testing on student writing ability, specifically testing in the era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act

of 2001 which required states to develop and test their own educational standards in order to receive federal school funding. NCLB is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, a historic act of civil rights legislation first issued in 1965 as a part of Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty" that allocated federal funding for poor schools. As a part of President Donald Trump and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos's support for "school choice" or voucher programs, a bill titled "Choices in Education Act of 2017" has been introduced in the House of Representatives by Republican Representative Steve King of Iowa. This bill "repeals the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and limits the authority of the Department of Education (ED) such that ED is authorized only to award block grants to qualified states," defining "qualified states" as those that set up voucher programs ("Summary H.R.610"). While limiting the federal government's power in matters of education in this specific way could bring an end to required nation-wide testing, decisions on testing would ultimately be left up to the states, and states like Texas that fancy themselves pioneers of standardized testing are likely to continue the practice of high-stakes testing despite the evidence of the ways in which it narrows the curriculum and deepens inequality in educational. Worse yet, this would come at the cost of dismantling a piece of legislation that has helped fund poor schools for decades and instead fund voucher programs, whose historic roots are in white conservative parents of the 1960s wanting money to send their children to private Christian schools in the wake of the Supreme Court's decisions to ban school prayer and require integration through busing, and whose ideological roots are in the neoliberal idea that the "free market" will improve schools by leading to greater competition for the "best students," which there is little support for based on existing voucher programs, like the one in Louisiana. Though the connection between the "school choice"

movement and first-year writing may not be as immediately clear as the connection between high-stakes timed writing tests and first-year writing, we have a responsibility to pay attention to K-12 education policy and speak out against practices that lead to greater inequality in our schools, which repealing the ESEA in favor of "school choice" undoubtedly does.

Appendix A
Questions/Prompts for Semi-structured, Audio Recorded Interview with Former First-Year Writing Students on Experiences Writing for Standardized Testing

1. Tell me about your experiences writing for and preparing to write for standardized tests from kindergarten to 12th grade.

2. Tell me about the writing that you did in your high school English classes.

3. How much of the writing that you did in high school was geared toward writing for standardized testing?

4. How did the writing that you did for or in preparation for standardized tests differ from other writing you did (including both writing for school and personal writing outside of school)?

5. How were you taught to write specifically for standardized tests?

6. What was the context of writing for or in preparation for standardized testing? (In other words, who were you writing to? why were you writing?)

7. How has or hasn't your view of writing changed now that you are in college?

Appendix B
Writing Prompt from Fall 2014 Class

Name: _____

Understanding a Rhetorical Situation: Standardized Test Writing

> *"Writing takes place in an open system: as constantly evolving, contextually mediated, and contextually determined practices, influenced by social and institutional histories, conventions, and expectations."*
> -Chris Anson

This quote from relates on our discussion from Thursday about the rhetorical situation of different arguments. Whenever we write, we write in a context: as a writer, to an audience, for a certain purpose, within a specific rhetorical situation. Today I'd like us to talk about a specific kind of writing: writing for standardized tests.

All of us are familiar with writing on demand, often for standardized testing. Standardized test writing asks you to produce a coherent final draft of a piece of writing within a set time frame based on a prompt that you haven't seen before. Based on this writing sample, these tests claim to gauge your writing ability. Some examples include the SAT writing section, the AP Language and Literature exam, the STAAR/TAKS/TAAS tests (or other state-wide exams in states other than Texas), or writing done for an exam in a language class.

Today I'd like you to spend 20 minutes freewriting here about your experiences with and the rhetorical situation of standardized test writing. What is your experience with standardized test writing? How often did you write final drafts on demand (versus writing and revising) prior to this course? What do you think is the rhetorical situation of standardized testing? In other words, who is your audience? What is your purpose? What is the greater context of this testing?
(Note: This is freewriting, meant to help you work through some of your own ideas before we have a class discussion about them. You will receive a grade of 100 so long as you create a thoughtful response – there is no right or wrong answer, and we all have different experiences)

Appendix C
Student Writing on Prompt from Appendix B

Juan

Standardized test writing for me is not gruesome, yet it still holds a certain degree of annoyance. I like to write from time to time, but the fact that I will be timed and graded on what I convey seems like a hindrance. I wished I had the chance to write to my heart's content on whatever subject I wished to write about at the time. Such a controlled environment in my opinion restrains creativity, which is the main basis of extraordinary writing. I remember all the tedious hours I spent writing for a test my hand would ache and my mind would fall asleep. I also spent a lot of time writing one to two drafts for my essays, which just added to the length of my misery. When I write a piece of writing for an exam I try to be formal, academic and smart about my writing since I know the people who will read my writing will be teachers and educators that expect much. I also try to entertain the sore and tired eyes of the graders when I can. I actually believe that standardized test writing does help with time management and efficiency at least, forcing oneself to intelligently come up with an argument that he or she is able to prove.

Caroline

Typically, when someone writes in standardized testing they are given a block of time in which they are to complete an entire essay. Almost every standardized test has a writing portion and is important for many reasons. Whenever I have to go through standardized test writing, different feelings go through me. A lot of the times I am nervous that my paper won't meet the expectations of whoever is grading it. I am also stressed and under pressure to finish in the allotted time. On average even with feeling nervous and stressed, I usually score fairly well on that type of writing. I usually wrote 1 standardized writing test per month whether it was in English class, taking the SAT, or taking the TAKS test. Whenever I write an essay for standardized test writing, I think of my audience to be whoever is grading the paper. The purpose is to convince whoever is reading the essay, most likely the grader, that what you are saying is true and makes a compelling story or argument that is fully answering the prompt. In my opinion, they make standardized tests, in this case writing, to compare you to the rest of the class, the rest of the state, or the rest of the nation. They make them to ensure you are keeping up with your grade level and it gives the school an idea where on specific student is in regards to the rest of the nation. If you don't meet the requirements then you are not fit to move on to the next level or maybe you aren't good enough to get into college. These tests help create a baseline for the country for testing.

Victor

I believe my first experience with standardized testing was in 9th grade. It may have been earlier, but that was some time ago. Personally, I found it to be irritating more than anything else. I am already a person who lacks creativity and imagination so asking me to do this sort of writing was difficult. However, I always managed to pass the TAKS and was exempt my senior year (that was great). I am not sure if that is a good thing, because the TAKS was relatively simple -- just annoying. I did not like writing final drafts on demand because with the time limit I felt my paper was always incomplete, weak, or structurally built in a confusing manner. Also, I always managed to tie the topic to history in some fashion

(WWII, MLK) which were always bland and over-used. Before TAKS, in some English classes, we would practice this form so this wasn't a new concept. The only time it was fun, was when I took creative writing. The final drafts were still terrible, but at least being yourself can help significantly when writing. If this truly can gauge an individual's writing ability, then keep it going I'd say. It's funny that you would ask who our audience is, because I still don't know that at this point in my life. Teachers would tell us the "TAKS people" -- but who is that?! If we had an idea, I think that could help with top choices instead of always rewriting the same crap every year. Standardized testing is not all bad news. I do think the concept of being able to think of the spot in a valuable trait. To me, this is what it really gauges. After working the brain on all those English questions, coming up with a coherent piece of work is important -- considering we as a society are falling apart intellectually.

Amanda

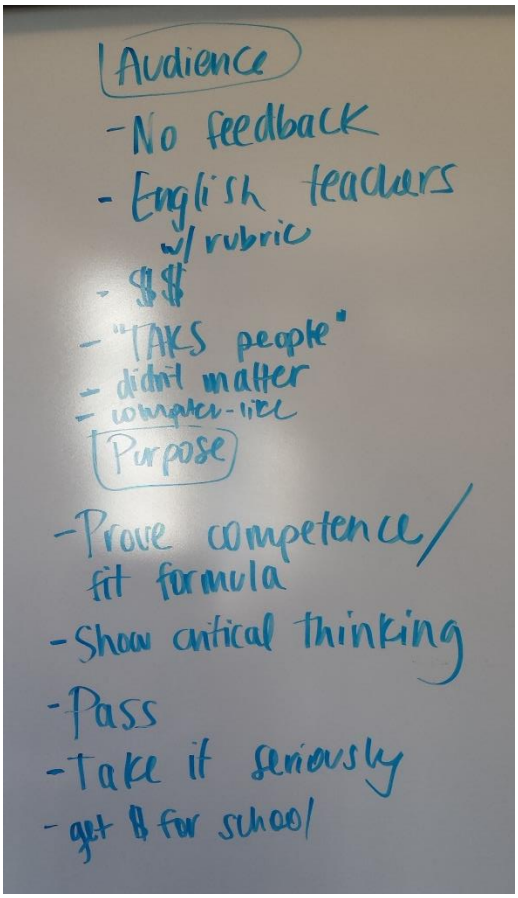
My high school never had enough funding from local taxes, due to a poorly chosen location. Since they needed the funding, they stressed two things above anything else: attendance and standardized testing. The more people who went to class, the higher scores people received on the TAKS, the more money the school got. So in high school, I took "benchmark exams" every other week. Instead of teaching us material, they taught us tests.

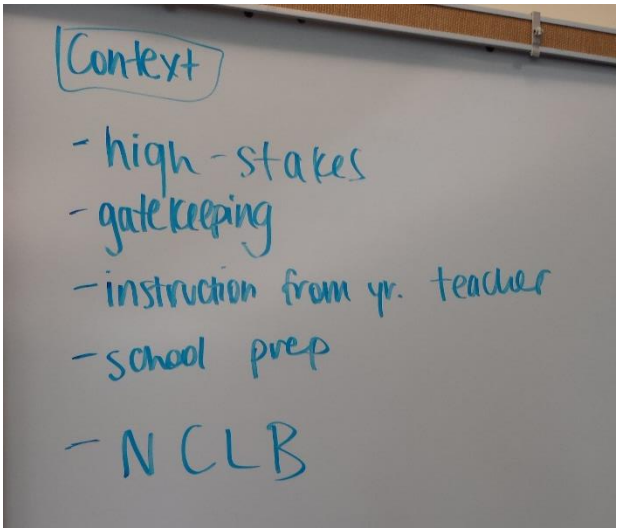
Because of the stress on scores, I was introduced to what I dub as "dumb writing." We had to make a "professional" piece that held the reader's attention for at least 2 minutes, and vaguely answer a prompt that never had relevance or argument. My school taught us grammar rules, how to spell, to double check our 15-minute paragraphs, but because we wrote for TAKS and not ourselves, they never taught us how to argue. Standardize testing never cared for argument either; all you had to write about was an experience, and if you ever had to defend an opinion, the school gave you the easy information that any student could regurgitate. Standardized tests were nothing more than cycles that funded schools.

SAT and AP were no different at my school. They wanted the best results quick, so instead of focusing on students who wanted and needed to get 5s on the AP tests, they pushed as many people as possible into AP classes and taught them how to get 3s.

The audience we wrote for didn't care if we showed intelligence, only if we could follow a simple order: answer this question with these rules on language. This kind of testing doesn't hold a purpose outside of a manufactured English, with everyone staying, writing, and thinking just enough to get work done. These tests don't measure intelligence, they determine if you are read to be a removable part of an industrial work force.

Appendix D
Whiteboard Images from Fall 2014 Class Discussion on Writing Prompt from Appendix B





Images from fall 2014 course discussion on writing prompt found in Appendix B. The class identified the audience as being readers who provided no feedback, English teachers, people grading for money, "TAKS people," computer-like, and some teachers saying that the audience "didn't matter." They identified their purpose as proving competence or fitting a formula, showing critical thinking, passing the exam, taking the exam seriously, and earning money for their school. They identified the context as including high-stakes testing, gatekeeping, instruction from teachers on what exactly the context was, preparing for future education, and occurring within the context of No Child Left Behind.

Appendix E
Introductory Course Materials and Major Assignments

Welcome Letter

Hi all,

Welcome to English 1304! I can't wait to get to know each of you and to work with you on developing view of writing this semester. In fact, that's our focus for the semester -- answering the question, "What is writing?" I know that might sound a little cheesy, but it makes the most sense to me to focus this writing course on you determining what writing is for you, personally and professionally.

That's something I want you to know right off the bat: this course is focused on y'all (or "you guys" -- sorry not sorry, I'm from Texas). I want you to feel like you can bring your own interests to this course, especially as you explore a research question related to writing in Units 2 and 3. Those interests can be personal, academic, or professional. I'm also seeking feedback from you and adapting the course as necessary throughout the semester. True, this is a required course with some set objectives, but I want it to be as helpful for you as possible. The online course offers lots of room for customization, and we should take advantage of that.

Another thing that I think is important: learning isn't linear, especially not for something as complex as reading and writing. Reflection is going to be key this semester. You'll start the course by reflecting on your past writing experiences, you'll end each unit by completing an extensive written reflection on that unit, and you'll end the course with a reflective portfolio that asks you to look back on your writing development this semester. There will also be lots of responding, rereading, revisiting, and, yes, revising.

That's my big vision for the course this semester. Now, a few things about this all-online format. What exactly does it mean that this is an online composition class?

- You do not meet with me or your classmates weekly in a classroom on campus. I am requiring you to meet with me once during Unit 2, either face-to-face on campus or virtually over video chat, but more about that later.
- Our readings, assignments, the videos we watch, lectures, group work, etc., will all be available online through Blackboard.
- We will speak mostly through email and discussion boards on Blackboard. My office hours will also be online, but I am happy to meet with you face-to-face or over video chat as well.
- **This is not a self-paced class**. You will be turning in assignments often, with regular due dates twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The majority of the class will be asynchronous, which means we won't all be in the online classroom space at the same time, but you do need to keep up with your work.
- **This is not easier than a face-to-face or hybrid English 1304 class.** There are certainly benefits and conveniences to taking an online class, but expect to do a lot of writing and to spend substantial time reading texts carefully, constructing thoughtful

discussion posts and journal entries, writing and revising substantial major papers, and reflecting on your learning this semester.

So with that in mind, here are some tips for succeeding:

- Figure out really soon if this all-online course is a good fit for you. You can take a quiz online that may help you evaluate this decision. If you want to talk about your results, email me.
- Find a way to have regular access to a computer and the Internet. You can't take this class on your phone, because Blackboard Learn is not mobile-compatible.
    - If your computer stops working, have a plan for how you will find computer access (like the UH library or borrowing a friend's computer)
    - I highly recommend you use a program that will automatically backup your files should your computer crash suddenly. I like SpiderOak's free option, which should provide plenty of space for your school files.
    - Bookmark this website **now**: http://www.uh.edu/blackboard/support/ . If Blackboard stops working for you for any reason, you should contact Blackboard Support first, preferably via phone or in-person if possible.
- Let me know (email me) if you have any learning differences or accommodations that you need or prefer to help you learn best. I'll do my best to help you succeed in this course.
- Complete your assignments on time. Find a way to help you stay on top of your due dates, whether that's a physical, paper planner or a digital calendar like iCal or Google Calendar (I swear by Google Calendar and calendar reminders).
- Commit to checking your email and Blackboard Learn announcements at least once a day, Monday through Friday (set a calendar reminder for this, too, if you need to).
- Hey, be nice. Be a "good citizen" of our course, just like you would if this class was meeting face-to-face. That means being polite and generous in your interactions with your classmates and myself.
- Plan to save files you submit as .doc, .docx or .rtf files, using the following format for the title: **LastnameAssignment_v1.doc**
    - So my second draft of Paper 1 would be saved as: **KeatingPaper1_v2.doc** . Be sure you save drafts as different files.

One last thing you should know about this course: I'll be including parts of it in my dissertation. I'm a PhD candidate in Rhetoric, Composition, and Pedagogy here at UH, and my dissertation deals in part with the most effective ways to teach this first-year writing class. I'm looking for your help in helping me determine what the most effective practices for this course are, and if you'd like to, you'll have the option once the semester is over and final grades are submitted to turn in a consent form that will let me include the writing you've done in this course in my dissertation (and there's a $5 Amazon credit in it for you if you'd like to participate). There is no pressure to do so, and if you do not turn in that form, none of your writing will be included in my dissertation. The decision to participate or not participate will have no impact on your grade (since grades will already be submitted at that time), and you don't need to decide whether you will or not until after the semester is over.

I'm sending this welcome letter and the course syllabus to you before the semester starts in hopes that we can discuss the majority of your questions and concerns before the course actually starts on August 22nd. Also, if you feel that you'd be more successful in a face-to-face or hybrid course, no hard feelings! There's still plenty of time to switch into one of those courses. If you've read both documents thoroughly and you have remaining questions, feel free to email me (lizblom@gmail.com).

Best,
Liz Blomstedt Keating

Syllabus

English 1304: First Year Writing II, Fall 2016, #23286

Elizabeth Blomstedt Keating
Office: Roy Cullen Building, Room 101B
Office Hours: Wednesdays from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. virtually on Gmail, Google Chat and Google Hangouts; also by appointment, virtually or face-to-face
Email: lizblom@gmail.com
Blackboard Site: Available through AccessUH or www.uh.edu/blackboard

Prerequisites: Passing grade in English 1303 or equivalent. Students who do not meet this prerequisite may not remain in the course.

Course Goals and Methods

English 1304 satisfies 3 of 6 hours of the communication component area of UH Core Curriculum requirements. The catalog describes this course as a "detailed study of the principles of rhetoric as applied to analyzing and writing argumentative and persuasive essays; principles and methods of research, culminating in writing a substantial research paper."

Our focus for this semester will be on answering the question, "What is writing?" I anticipate that the answer to this question will be slightly different for each of you, and I hope that through this semester you will discover and better understand the many functions that writing serves in your personal and professional lives. We will begin the course by developing a fuller understanding of your past experiences with writing, and we will conclude the course with a reflective portfolio where you will consider your writing development over the semester. Through these and other reflective assignments, we will embrace the important role that thinking and reflecting plays in developing writing ability. We will also recognize the important social and purposeful nature of writing through our assignments in the course. Expect to spend lots of time reading and responding to your peers' writing in this course, in daily writing assignments and in first drafts of major papers. We will use our drafts to discover what we want to say and how we want to say it; we will use our revisions to develop our thoughts further and to make sure they are working for our intended audiences.

The core of the course will be a research project centered on a question related to writing that you will explore through research. We will work together to develop a research question that is of interest to you, but these can be focused on your major ("How should mechanical engineering students be prepared to write for their future careers?"), intended career ("What kinds of writing do accountants do?"), or personal interests ("How does the anonymous nature of the writing on Reddit impact the discussions had there?" or "What role does personal writing play in feminist social activism?"). Through this research project, you will learn how to find, evaluate, and carefully read sources, as well as how to incorporate them into a rhetorically effective argument.

This course will be conducted in a fully online format. This means that we will not meet face-to-face as a whole class at one designated time, although there may be some options for online meetings in real time (using the group conferencing/video function, meeting for office hours, etc.). Instead, our class will primarily function asynchronously, which means that I will set assignment deadlines for you to complete by a certain time, but we will not have scheduled meetings or discussions. This will allow you more flexibility in terms of schedule and time management. That being said, this is not an entirely self-paced course where you can complete work anytime throughout the semester. For example, you will still be asked to complete major assignments according to due dates, in addition to participating weekly in class discussions (via the Discussion Board in Blackboard), writing regular journal entries (using the Journal function in Blackboard), participating in peer review group meetings (via the Group function in Blackboard), and completing quizzes, surveys, and other assignments.

Core Objectives

- **Critical Thinking Skills—**to include creative thinking, innovation, inquiry, and analysis, evaluation and synthesis of information
- **Communication Skills—**to include effective development, interpretation and expression of ideas through written, oral and visual communication
- **Personal Responsibility—**to include the ability to connect choices, actions and consequences to ethical decision-making
- **Team Work—**to include the ability to consider different points of view and to work effectively with others to support a shared purpose or goal

Student Learning Outcomes

- Students will understand and demonstrate writing processes including invention, organization, drafting, revision, editing, and presentation, developing teamwork through such classroom techniques as peer review and class discussion.
- Students will understand the importance of specifying audience and purpose, and make appropriate written, oral, and visual communication choices in such areas as voice, tone, level of formality, etc.
- Students will develop the ability to use critical thinking, writing, and reading for inquiry and research; i.e., find, evaluate, and analyze appropriate primary and secondary sources; integrate one's own ideas with the ideas of others; and write a research paper that conforms to the standards of the discipline, using a consistent documentation style (e.g., MLA, APA).
- Students will explore issues of personal responsibility in class and in their writing.

Required Text

Seyler, Dorothy U. *Read, Reason, Write: An Argument Text and Reader*. 11th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill,
2015. (*Note: you must have access to the 11th edition, copyright 2015)*

Grading

Your final grade will be calculated using the following formula. An up-to-date record of your grades can be found in the Gradebook tool in Blackboard.

15% Paper 1: Analysis of a Source (due 9/22)

15%	Paper 2: Research Process and Annotated Bibliography (due 10/18)
20%	Paper 3: Researched Argument (due 11/17)
10%	Reflective Portfolio (due 12/8)
40%	Daily Writing

Note that "Daily Writing" comprises of all assignments that are not final drafts of major papers or your portfolio. These grades include discussions, journals, participation in peer review, first drafts, quizzes, and any other submitted assignments. Full descriptions of the major paper and portfolio assignments, along with guidelines for daily writing assignments, can be found on Blackboard.

Final letter grade calculation: (note that numeric grades are not rounded)

A	93-100	A-	90-92
B+	87-89	B	83-86
B-	80-82	C+	77-79
C	73-76	C-	70-72
D+	67-69	D	63-66
D-	60-62	F	0-59

What I expect from you:

In addition to the expectations outlined here, please see the expectations outlined in the Welcome Letter, Guidelines for Discussion, and Guidelines for Email, linked in the "Resources & Guidelines" folder of Blackboard.

Be present. Because this is an online course, I will not be taking attendance in the traditional sense. However, you are expected to consistently participate in the course and submit your work when it is due (Tuesdays and Thursdays at 11:59 p.m.). Neglecting to do so will have a significant impact on your Daily Writing average, which is worth a large portion (40%) of your grade in the course. Additionally, if you "no show" (or fail to turn in any work) for six deadlines (the equivalent of three weeks of the course), you may be dropped from the course. As per university policy, absences due to religious holidays may be excused if the student submits a notice to the instructor stating his or her intention in advance of the absence. If you are unable to submit work by deadline because you are observing a religious holiday, please email me ahead of that deadline to notify me, and we will make other arrangements for you to submit your work without penalty.

Turn your work in on time. All major papers must be turned in to pass the course. Major assignments must be submitted by 11:59 p.m. on the day that they are due. Late papers will be penalized one letter grade for each day overdue; that means that after a paper is ten days late, you will receive no credit for it.

You are also expected to complete all "daily writing" assignments on time; they will not be accepted late. Due dates for weekly work will always be Tuesdays and Thursdays at 11:59 p.m. Each assignment prompt and all unit schedules will clearly indicate the due date and time, and you will have something due almost every Tuesday and Thursday night.

Submit your work following the provided guidelines. You will submit all work via Blackboard Learn. All major projects should be uploaded as .doc, .docx or .rtf files. Please follow this format when saving your file for the titles: **LastnameAssignment_v1.doc.** So my second draft of Paper 1 would be saved as: **KeatingPaper1_v2.doc.** Saving drafts of your

work under different file names will be particularly helpful when you're compiling your reflective portfolio at the end of the semester.
Check your email and Blackboard daily during the workweek. This will ensure that you are kept up to date with the going-ons in the course. See the Guidelines for Email for more details.
Read all required material carefully. This includes the Weekly Emails I'll send out at the start of each week as well as the
Respond thoughtfully and respectfully to your peers. You can expect to both give and receive feedback from your peers on all major assignments. Additionally, you will be responding to one another semi-formally on a regular basis via discussion board posts. I expect you to participate respectfully, thoughtfully, and honestly. If you have a concern about class conduct (either your own or someone else's), please contact me.
Be aware that technology failure is not an acceptable excuse for missing deadlines. Technological failure of any kind is no excuse for submitting assignments late or failing to submit assignments. I urge you to consider submitting work early to avoid any missed deadlines due to technology failure. Also, have backup plans should your internet or computer stop working. Should Blackboard stop working for you, contact Blackboard support: http://www.uh.edu/blackboard/support/

What you can expect from me:
Feedback on your writing. I provide timely, detailed written feedback on drafts of major papers submitted on time. If you have questions or want additional feedback at any time, please feel free to send me an email, and we can set up a time to meet to discuss your writing in more detail. I'm always happy to discuss your writing with you in more detail. I will also occasionally provide feedback on your daily writing, especially early in the semester.
Timely response to email. Email is by far the best way to communicate with me, and I am happy to answer any questions you have. Please use my Gmail account (lizblom@gmail.com). I'll plan to check email at least a couple times a day (once in the morning and once in the afternoon), and I will often answer your email within a couple hours (always within 24 hours). See the full Guidelines for Email for more detail. From 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. on Wednesdays, I'll hold virtual office hours and will respond immediately to your emails. I will also be available through Google Chat and Hangouts at that time. I'm also happy to set up a phone call, blackboard chat, or face-to-face meeting with you at another time.
Commitment to meeting your learning needs. I am more than happy to meet with you (virtually or face-to-face) to work more on your writing or to discuss any concerns you have about the class. Send me an email to let me know when and how you'd like to meet, or to notify me of any issues you are having with the course.

Academic Honesty
The University of Houston Academic Policies define and prohibit academic dishonesty as follows: "'Academic dishonesty' means employing a method or technique or engaging in conduct in an academic endeavor that the student knows or should know is not permitted by the university or a course instructor to fulfill academic requirements" (Article 3.02; see *Student Handbook*, www.uh.edu/dos/hdbk, for further details). The primary concern in this course is plagiarism, again defined in the Academic Honesty Policy: "Representing as one's

own work the work of another without acknowledging the source."

Academic Support

The Center for Students with DisABILITIES (CDS). In compliance with the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Center for Students with DisABILITIES (CSD) provides "reasonable and necessary" testing accommodations for qualified students with health impairments, physical limitations, psychiatric disorders, and learning disabilities. Students who want to know more about these services should consult the Student Handbook, or should contact CSD in Room 110 of the Justin Dart, Jr. Center for Students with DisABILITIES (Building #568), 713-743-5400 (voice) or 713-749-1527 (TTY)

Learning Support Services. For help on the mechanics of papers (grammar, punctuation, etc.), students should visit Learning Support Services (LSS) now located in Cougar Village, Room N109.

The Writing Center. The University of Houston Writing Center provides individual consultations for students working on all types of writing. Whether it's your first semester or your last, meeting with an expert student writer can provide another perspective on your paper or project that aids you in navigating the writing process from brainstorming to perfecting a final draft and any stage in between. You can make an appointment by visiting uh.edu/writingcenter <http://www.uh.edu/writingcenter> or by calling (713) 743-3016.

Course Expectations for Behavior and Preparation. The University of Houston spells out its "Expectations of Students for a Conducive Learning Environment" in the *UH Student Handbook.* The English Department endorses these policies and expects you to abide by them. The handbook is available online at http://publications.uh.edu/index.php?catoid=17http://www.uh.edu/dos/studenthandbook/universitypolicy/sp_codeofconduct.html

Course Schedule

Note that chapters and page numbers indicate pages in the required text, the 11th edition of *Read, Reason, Write*. Other readings will be linked in the weekly folder associated with them, as well as linked here and in the assignment they are associated with.
This course schedule is subject to change, and you will be notified of any changes through announcements on Blackboard which will also be sent to your UH email addresses. Later units will be developed and filled in here based on your feedback on your end-of-unit reflections.
Specific assignment for Units 2, 3 and 4 will be made available later in the semester. For now, I've given you an idea of what kinds of topics we'll be covering in those weeks in *italics*.

J# = Journal #
D# = Discussion #

Unit 1: Analysis of a Source		
	Due Tuesday by 11:59 p.m.	**Due Thursday by 11:59 p.m.**
Week 1 (8/25)	*This week, everything will be due on Thursday, August 25th*	READ/WATCH all materials in the "Start the course here" folder WRITE Discussion 1 (D1), a brief bio WRITE Journal 1 (J1), a brief literacy autobiography COMPLETE Quiz 1 (Q1) over introductory materials
Week 2 (8/30 & 9/1)	WRITE D1 replies READ excerpts from Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 (see PDFs in Week 2 folder) VIEW thinking about sources rhetorically presentation video (note: last day to add a course is M 8/29)	WRITE D2, a rhetorical analysis of a website (*don't forget to be working on your ten-minute freewrites this week)*
Week 3 (9/6 & 9/8)	WRITE D2 replies READ and annotate Mike Rose's "*No Child Left Behind* and the Spirit of Democratic Education" SUBMIT annotations of Rose's chapter (READ and WATCH relevant handouts and instructional videos for annotating PDFs linked in the Week 3 folder)	SUBMIT ten-minute freewrites WRITE D3, sharing your own experience with standardized test writing READ Paper 1 assignment sheet VIEW Paper 1 presentation
Week 4 (9/13 &	WRITE D3 reply READ relevant handouts from	**First Draft Paper 1 Due** READ peer review response letter

9/15)	"Research and Citing Guide," including "Works Cited" and "Parenthetical Documentation" READ (or reread) your writing group members' D1 bios	handout VIEW peer review presentation SUBMIT your first draft to your peer review group discussion board
Week 5 (9/20 & 9/22)	WRITE response letters to each of your peers in your peer review group VIEW concise writing presentation (and/or concise writing handout) REVISE your own draft based on feedback, concise writing presentation	**FINAL DRAFT PAPER 1 DUE** SUBMIT your final draft to the Turn It In dropbox under the "Unit 1" folder SUBMIT Paper 1 cover letter under the "Unit 1" folder
Unit 2: Research Process and Annotated Bibliography		
Week 6 (9/27 & 9/29)	ATTEND conferences for Paper 2 (sign-up here) READ Paper 2 assignment sheet VIEW Research Question about Writing presentation	SUBMIT Unit 1 reflection to the Week 6 folder READ "Chapter 12: Locating, Evaluating, and Preparing to Use Sources," entire chapter
Week 7 (10/4 & 10/6)	WRITE D4, sharing your research question and your interest in it VIEW the Paper 2 process presentation FIND and read sources for Paper 2	WRITE replies for D4 FIND and read sources for Paper 2 COMPLETE Evaluating Sources library module (see instructions in the Week 7 folder) SUBMIT optional Google form about writing group for Paper 2
Week 8 (10/11 & 10/13)	**SUBMIT sources for Paper 2 cited in MLA format** SUBMIT one annotation from Part II to group discussion board READ sample Paper 2 elements in the Unit 2 folder *Optional: SUBMIT any questions you may have to Paper 2 discussion board*	REPLY to one group member's annotation DRAFT Paper 2 *Optional: SUBMIT any questions you may have to Paper 2 discussion board*
Week 9 (10/18 & 10/20)	**FINAL DRAFT PAPER 2 DUE** SUBMIT your final draft to the "Paper 2" assignment link in the Unit 2	SUBMIT Unit 2 reflection to the Week 9 folder WRITE J2, a low-key freewrite
Unit 3: Researched Argument		
Week 10	READ Paper 3 assignment sheet READ "Chapter 13: Writing the	WRITE D5, sharing your thesis statement, reasons, and type of argument

(10/25 & 10/27)	Researched Essay," entire chapter READ genres of argument handout; skim any chapters related to the type of argument you might make in Paper 3 COMPLETE Quiz 2 (Q2) over the above materials	for Paper 3 WRITE J3, a visual representation OR freewritten reflection *(note: last day to drop a course with a W is F 10/28)*
Week 11 (11/1 & 11/3)	WRITE D5 replies VIEW rhetorically effective arguments prezi WRITE D6, a mini-argument incorporating rhetorical devices	WRITE D6 replies READ pages 10, 18-21, and 25-28 in "Chapter 1: Writers and Their Sources" READ quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing handout in "Research and Citing Guide" WRITE J4, another freewrite
Week 12 (11/8 & 11/10)	READ "Readability" by John Trimble from *Writing with Style* WRITE post for D7, a discussion of Trimble's rules REVISIT relevant handouts from "Research and Citing Guide," including "Works Cited" and "Parenthetical Documentation"	**First draft Paper 3 Due** REVIEW peer review response letter handout REVIEW peer review presentation SUBMIT your first draft to your peer review group discussion board SUBMIT first draft to Turn It In link in the Week 12 folder (for Liz to comment on)
Week 13 (11/15 & 11/17)	WRITE response letters to each of your peers in your peer review group	**FINAL DRAFT PAPER 3 DUE** SUBMIT your final draft to the Turn It In dropbox under the "Unit 3" folder in Blackboard SUBMIT Paper 3 cover letter under the "Unit 3" folder POST D8, sharing your final draft of Paper 3
Unit 4: Reflective Portfolio		
Week 14 (11/22)	WRITE D8 replies WRITE D9 post(s)	THANKSGIVING -- no work due
Week 15 (11/29 & 12/1)	WRITE J5, responding to your J1 post Bonus Discussion: Freewriting for Testing Narratives (optional -- will replace lowest daily writing grade)	WRITE D10, a narrative of testing
Week	*This week is the week after classes*	**Portfolio Due**

16 (12/8)	*officially end, so your only assignment for this week is to finish your portfolio and submit your survey completion*	SUBMIT your final draft to the assignment link in the Unit 4 folder SUBMIT proof of survey completion (and complete two surveys to do so)

Guidelines for Daily Writing

A big part of our course (and 40% of your final grade) is "daily writing" grades, including discussion boards, journals, peer review responses, and other assignments you'll submit on Tuesdays and Thursdays. This document gives you the basic guidelines of what I'm looking for and the way that I'll grade these "low-stakes" writing assignments.

Daily writing assignments should be:

- **Semiformal.** Your posts should contain some degree of formality: spell-checked, organized, and proofread so that your audience (your classmates and myself) can understand what you're saying. However, they will also be part of a dialogue, so in that regard they will be less formal than, say, a researched argument. Think of discussion board posts and journal entries as the online equivalent of the conversations that would occur between your peers and myself in our weekly meetings in a face-to-face class. They should be written in your voice.
- **Detailed**. Each assignment will have a word count. Be sure that you're meeting that word count and doing so by adding real, substantive ideas and evidence (as opposed filler). Again, think about a face-to-face class -- these daily writing assignments will take time and effort, just like preparing for and attending a face-to-face class meeting would.
- **Formatted carefully.** Undoubtedly, the content of your posts is more important than the aesthetics of your post. That being said, in this all-online course, you have the opportunity to practice presenting your work a way that is rhetorically effective from both a content and a visual standpoint. Blackboard offers you a whole host of tools for editing your posts, including embedding images and changing text effects, and you should take advantage of these when appropriate.
- **Referenced.** While you won't always need citations in your posts, you should look for opportunities to build your argument by referencing our readings, other sources, or your peers' comments.
- **Submitted on time.** As it says in the syllabus, I award no credit for a daily writing assignment that is submitted late. Accruing too many zeros can have a big impact on your grade, since your daily writing average is worth 40% of your final grade in the course.
- **For Journals and Discussion Boards, submit your writing in the <u>textbox</u>, not as an attachment.** You're welcome to compose your posts in a word processing program (in case your browser suddenly crashes), but please copy and paste your response into the text box in Blackboard -- that prevents a whole bunch of extra clicking.

A few other rules for discussion boards specifically:

- **Read all posts**. Part of your responsibility as a participant in this course is to read everything on the Discussions. <u>Really</u>. You should have no bold-faced, unread posts for any discussion boards. Reading all posts also ensures that you're saying something original.

- **Check the Discussion boards regularly**, especially after you post -- don't "post and run." Once you post, you're obligated to see and follow up on what people say. If someone responds to you, you should follow up with a response, however brief.
- **Sign your name at the bottom of each post**. We want to know how to respond back to you. Just a simple "-Liz" is enough.
- **Post directly to the discussion board.** Please compose your posts and post them directly to the discussion. Do not submit them as attachments.
- **Build a conversation**. You will often be asked to write "secondary" posts responding to your peers. These should be thoughtful and substantive, raising new points or asking questions that extend the conversation. Make sure that these posts are just as substantive as your primary posts.

So, how will these be graded? All of these "Daily Writing" assignments will compose 40% of your final grade for this course. I will enter one grade for each discussion assignment based on the quality of your primary and secondary posts, or whatever the specific requirements of that assignment are. The same applies to journals and other assignments. Please see the full rubric (on the last page of this document) for a full explanation of how your daily writing grades will be graded, but here are some general pointers:

- If you complete the assignment or participate in the discussion in an adequate manner, you will receive a B
- If you go above and beyond the basic requirements of the assignment, you will receive an A

Assignments will receive a C or below if they:

- are too short.
- show little thought (especially if they respond in the same way others have responded)
- are excessively sloppy in terms of grammar, spelling, and mechanics, especially to the point that they are difficult to understand
- engage in personal attacks or other breaches of common online etiquette
- are late (they will receive a 0)

A note about **required reading**: many daily writing assignments require that you complete a reading before you write your post. I trust that everyone will do the required reading for each assignment, and if people do not complete the reading, discussion will suffer. The readings I've selected are also designed to help you with your major papers, so your final grade for major papers will suffer if you have not done the assigned reading (especially that from the textbook). If it becomes clear that you are not doing the reading, I will assign reading quizzes to the entire class in addition to these daily writing assignments. I'd prefer not to write those quizzes, and I'm sure you'd prefer not to take them, so let's just do the reading and write high-quality daily writing assignments.

Grading Criteria for Daily Writing Assignments					
Post grade	A	B	C	D	F
Purpose/Main idea/Focus	Clear main idea that raises an excellent, focused point	Clear main idea that raises an interesting point	Loses focus; main idea is questionable	Main idea seems uninteresting and perhaps even unreasonable	Main idea is unfocused and unclear; off topic
Organization	Excellent organization; clear topic sentences; transitions between ideas are handled well	Organized effectively but could be refined/ tightened a bit (better topic sentences, transitions, etc.)	Adequately organized; needs better division between ideas	Disorganized; little coherent structure; confusing	Completely disorganized
Evidence	Relevant, correctly cited evidence; quotes from posts	Relevant evidence; some citing issues	Adequate evidence; citations are wrong	Evidence not used or used incorrectly	No evidence
Audience and context	Clearly connected to other posts and conversations	Relevant to other posts and conversations	Not clearly connected to other posts; unclear if writer read other posts; repetitive; does not build the conversation much	Highly repetitive; not connected to other posts and conversations; may attack other posters; does not build the conversation	Irrelevant to conversation; makes no effort to connect with audience; flaming
Style	Highly engaging, distinct	Solid writing style; writer could have	Some of the writing is awkward and	Writing is awkward, repetitive,	Writing style is inadequate for a

	writing style; solid sentences and word choice; may take productive risks	written more clearly/more concisely	clumsy; weak word choice or unsophisticated sentence structure	and/or wordy; the writing was not engaging	college-level assignment
Grammar and mechanics	Few errors, if any; writer shows considerable mastery of the language	Some grammatical /mechanical errors, but they do not interfere with the reader's understanding of post	Numerous errors that interfered with the reader's understanding of the post	Many errors that made the post difficult to understand; reader questions writer's credibility and skill	Post is filled with errors; reader doubts writer's competency
Originality/ creativity	Highly original or creative; may take a productive writing risk	Some originality or creativity, but doesn't push the limits	No real originality	Repeats other ideas or posts' reader may not have read other posts	Blatantly copies other posts
Understanding of course material	Clearly demonstrates understanding of course material	Good understanding of course material	Some of the course material details are incorrect	Low understanding of course material	Poor understanding of course material; some errors

Assignment Sheet for Paper 1

Paper 1: Analysis of a Source

For your first major paper, you will write a thesis-driven rhetorical analysis of Mike Rose's "*No Child Left Behind* and the Spirit of Democratic Education" examining one of the central ethical issues in education that has impacted how writing is taught in kindergarten through twelfth grade.

This paper is worth 15% of your final grade in the course. The first draft is due by **Thursday, September 15th** and the final draft is due by **Thursday, September 22nd.**

Assignment

For this paper, you will first read Mike Rose's "*No Child Left Behind* and the Spirit of Democratic Education" (you can find a PDF of this reading in the Week 3 folder) from his book, *Why School?: Reclaiming Education for All Of Us*. You will then write a thesis-driven analysis of Rose's argument in this chapter, drawing on the skills for reading and responding outlined in Chapters 1 and 2 of *Read, Reason, Write*. A successful essay will:

- Bring readers into the context of the reading. In what larger conversation is the author participating? What ethical problems or questions appear in this text? Why are they important? What's at stake? Introduce the text to the reader, briefly summarize its main idea, and make a claim (thesis) for the author's rhetorical strategies. A strong claim is both contestable – reasonable people might disagree – and predictive – it will set up expectations for your reader.
- Develop your main points around specific rhetorical strategies. Consider how the author constructs the argument. Remember that rhetoric encompasses any tools available for persuasion. For example, would it be useful to talk about the argument in terms of ethos, logos, and/or pathos? Or on purpose, audience, and/or genre?
- Support your main points with concrete examples (evidence) from the text. To develop and support your own points, you will need to include specific examples in the form of paraphrase or short direct quotations. See Chapter 1 as well as the handouts in the "Research & Citing" folder for more guidance on how to do this.
- *Optional*: You might consider drawing on your own personal experiences (like those that you wrote about in Journal 1 or Discussion 3), anecdotes, or examples in order to strengthen and deepen your analysis. You may also include relevant images or visuals in your paper; these should serve to strengthen your analysis or enhance your paper (in other words, don't include clip art).

Your paper must be at least 600 words and should not exceed 1000. Your paper should be double-spaced, typed in 12-point Times New Roman font. You should include a Works Cited page within the same document citing the chapter from *Why School?*, and you should also use in-text citations when drawing on ideas from Rose (see the relevant handouts in the "Research & Citing" folder. Your final draft will be submitted through Turn It In, under the "Major Papers" folder on our course Blackboard site.

Drafting and Grading

Your peers will provide comments on your first draft, so I highly recommend that you devote sufficient time to crafting a complete draft draft in order to receive the most helpful feedback from your peer review group. First drafts will not be accepted late due to the tight timeline

for peer review; submit whatever you have to your group by the due date. I will grade your final draft using a rubric, which can be found here. Note that your participation in peer review is worth three daily writing grades. If you do not submit a first draft, your paper will be docked ten points.

Late Papers and Extension

If you need an extension for the final draft of this major paper, you must notify me via email at least 48 hours before the final draft is due. You may receive an extension of no longer than 1 week. If you do not ask for an extension, your paper will be docked one letter grade (10 points) for each day it is late, including weekends. Of course, if there are extenuating circumstances, please let me know of these as soon as possible.

Assignment Sheet for Paper 2

Paper 2: Research Process and Annotated Bibliography

For your second major paper, you will form a research question related to writing, conduct research to gather a multitude of perspectives on that research question, then present your findings, analysis and reflections in a three-part paper. This paper should give you the opportunity to find and engage with quality sources that you can then use to write Paper 3, your own original researched argument about your selected research question.
This paper is worth 15% of your final grade in the course. The final draft is due by **Tuesday, October 18th.** Because this is a procedural paper, there will be no complete first draft due, though you will submit and receive feedback on parts of this paper for daily writing grades throughout Unit 2.

Assignment
In this paper, you'll communicate your exploration, research, and reflection as you listen to, evaluate, and record the conversation on a research question related to writing. Think of this paper as a narrative of your research -- this paper should prepare you to make an argument in Paper 3, but Paper 2 is not an argument and should explore multiple perspectives on your issue question.
This assignment is not a traditional essay but rather a document that demonstrates your engagement in the research process. You need to devote significant time to completing each of these steps in the research process; in other words, this paper cannot be completed in one sitting. Your paper should consist of three parts, described below, each of which will record the steps you've taken in investigating your research question, understanding your sources, and evaluating the direction you plan on taking in your research argument paper. In this paper, you'll move from a research question to a (tentative) claim.

Part I: Exploratory Narrative (500+ words) (30 points)
For this section, you will write a first-person narrative describing your intellectual journey, beginning with your research question (which you should use as the title of the document). Here, I'd like for you to describe the chronological path of your process: where you began, what the sources you found said, where that led you, etc. It might be helpful to draft this section as you go through the process (or at least take notes as you go). Remember to try to find sources that voice a variety of perspectives. Also consider that books, articles, database materials, and websites might not be the only relevant sources for you -- interviews, questionnaires, documentaries, and other less traditional sources might be helpful.

Part II: Annotated Bibliography (minimum 6 sources, 150+ words of annotations on each) (60 points)
For this section, you will find, read, and annotate six sources related to your research question. After you find each of your six sources, you will save that source as a .pdf file and use a .pdf annotation software to annotate the text. You should make at least 150 words worth of annotations on **each** source, including a summative annotation at the **top or beginning** of each source that summarizes the source and evaluates it (specifically by assessing its credibility, authority, or bias). You should also make in-text comments that are both summative (restating the writer's meaning) and responsive (speaking back to the text,

explaining how it interacts with other sources or how it engages with your specific research question). I also expect that you will take advantage of the tools provided by your chosen PDF annotator to highlight and mark the text.
For more guidance on how to annotate .pdf files, see this handout on Annotating PDFs, as well as these videos I made on Annotating PDFs in Kami or Adobe. Also see the sample annotated pieces in the Unit 2 folder.
Note: If you are working with a source that is not text-based (like a video, audio interview, or an interview that you conducted), create a file in a word processing program that has the MLA citation for the source (and a hyperlink to the source if it is a websource) and a 200-word annotation at the top or beginning of each source that summarizes the source and evaluates it (specifically by assessing its credibility, authority, or bias). See the sample in the Unit 2 folder.

Part III: Conclusion and Tentative Thesis (200+ words) (10 points)
This final section is again a first-person narrative that detailing what the research you've done shows, what's left to be considered, and what conclusions you've drawn. Conclude this section with your tentative thesis. What do you think you'll argue in your researched argument in Paper 3? How do you think you'll approach that type of argument? Again, this can be changed as you write Paper 3.

Submitting Paper 2
Since this paper is procedural, you will not submit a single file to Turn It In and will instead upload the different parts of your paper to a Blackboard Assessment in the Unit 2 folder. Specifically, you will upload .doc, .docx, or .rtf files for Part I and Part II, and you will upload PDFs of your annotations for all six of your sources for Part II. Again, for more guidance on saving and uploading those PDF files, see this handout on Annotating PDFs, as well as these videos I made on Annotating PDFs in Kami or Adobe.

Resources for Paper 2
For resources in completing this assignment, see Chapter 12 on "Locating, Evaluating, and Preparing to Use Sources," Chapter 14 on "Formal Documentation: MLA Style," and sections in Chapter 1 on summary, paraphrasing, and embedding direct quotes. You should also rely on the library module on Evaluating Sources that you'll complete this unit for guidance on evaluating sources. Because this paper is procedural, there is no rubric; all three parts will be graded holistically, and the weights for each can be seen above.

Conferencing
For this paper, you will be required to meet with me early on in the process to discuss your research question and your plan for finding sources. These conferences will take no longer than 10 minutes, and we can meet face-to-face on campus, over video chat (Skype or Google Hangouts), or over the phone -- it's entirely up to you. If you do not show up to conferencing, your paper will be docked ten points.
These conferences will replace my comments on your first drafts, but I am happy to meet with you (virtually or face-to-face) to discuss a draft of your paper.

Late Papers and Extension

If you need an extension for the final draft of this major paper, you must notify me via email at least 48 hours before the final draft is due. You may receive an extension of no longer than 1 week. If you do not ask for an extension, your paper will be docked one letter grade (10 points) for each day it is late, including weekends. Of course, if there are extenuating circumstances, please let me know of these as soon as possible.

Assignment Sheet for Paper 3

Paper 3: Researched Argument

For your final paper in the course, you'll continue the process you began in Paper 2, moving from a researched exploration of a research question to a thesis-driven researched argument about writing. You ended your second paper by creating a tentative theses; now you'll refine that thesis, revise your research as necessary, and develop an argumentative essay supported by research. You will also share your paper with the entire class on a discussion board. Note that though Paper 2 set you up to write this paper, some of the research from that paper may not fit into your final draft.

This paper is worth 20% of your final grade in the course. The first draft is due by **Thursday, November 10th** and the final draft is due by **Thursday, November 17th**. Note that you cannot request an extension for this paper because we will be reading and responding to everyone's final drafts on the discussion board.

Assignment

In this paper, you will argue a contestable claim using solid points of argumentation and appropriate sources to argue your claim, which should be related to the research question you chose for Paper 2. You should closely follow Chapter 13 "Writing the Researched Essay" in creating this assignment, following the directives in that chapter for organizing, drafting and revising your researched argument.

You can build your argument around any type of claim (definition, cause, proposal, position paper, evaluation), and different examples of claims can be found in your textbook. You are also welcome to bring your own experience into this paper, as evidence, counterclaims, or to ground your interest in this topic. Though you are welcome to take whatever approach will best suit your aims, your paper should at the very least:

- Be centered on a contestable claim related to the research question you researched in Paper 2
- Support the claim with strong, fully developed reasons
- Utilize appropriate rhetorical appeals to reach your audience
- Use sources appropriately as support

Your paper must be at least 1200 words and should not exceed 1800. Your paper should be double-spaced and typed in 12-point Times New Roman font. You need to utilize at least 3 sources and cite them within the text as well as on a Works Cited page within the same document. Note that this paper does not need a title page or outline. Your final draft will be submitted to both the Turn It In link in the Unit 3 folder and to the discussion board.

Drafting and Grading

Your peers and I will provide comments on your first draft, so I highly recommend that you devote sufficient time to crafting a complete draft draft in order to receive the most helpful feedback from your peer review group and myself. First drafts will not be accepted late due to the tight timeline for peer review; submit whatever you have to your group by the due date. I will grade your final draft using a rubric, which can be found here. Note that your participation in peer review is worth three daily writing grades. If you do not submit a first draft, your paper will be docked ten points.

Late Papers and Extension

There are **no extensions** available for this paper because we will be sharing, reading, and responding to each others' work the discussion board. If you submit your paper after 11:59 p.m. on Thursday, November 17th, your paper will be docked one letter grade (10 points) for each day it is late, including weekends. Of course, if there are extenuating circumstances, please let me know of these as soon as possible. There are no extensions for first drafts of major papers -- they must be submitted on time.

Assignment Sheet for Reflective Portfolio

Reflective Portfolio Assignment

For your final major project this semester, you will reflect on your learning throughout this semester. Specifically, this assignment asks you to compile samples of writing, comment on them, and write a short reflective essay examining how your ideas about writing have shifted over this semester.

Assignment

This assignment consists of two basic parts: an annotated portfolio of writing from the semester, and an essay that reflects on and analyzes your writing development throughout the course.

Portfolio. To compile the portfolio, you should:

1) Select pieces of writing from the semester that you wish to analyze for your writing development. These should be **varied** and include not only final drafts of major papers (and please do not feel that you need to include all or any of your final drafts for this course), but first drafts, prewriting, and other forms of writing that you turned in for this course, including discussion board posts, journal assignments, learning journal entries, peer review comments -- anything that you wrote this semester, for this course, another course, or in another context, that you wish to analyze and comment on in regards to the development of your writing ability. These texts should give the reader some sense of the variety of writing you have done and the wide range of writing that you are capable of. You should include at least **two** pieces of writing that you received feedback from your peers on (either discussion boards or feedback from peer review), and you should include these as screenshots of Blackboard that are inserted as images into your portfolio. The other writing you include can be inserted as a screenshot image or text.
2) Thoughtfully arrange these pieces in a way that makes sense to you. Please copy and paste them into a single .doc, .docx, or .gdoc file.
3) Include brief annotations of each text. These annotations should tell what the text is and why it is important as evidence of your writing development.

Please note that the arrangement and formatting of this digital portfolio is entirely up to you. You should feel free to utilize different font colors, highlighting, tools like “Comments” or tables, page breaks, dividers, screencaps of Blackboard, etc. as you see fit. More instruction on how you may format your portfolio will be included in Unit 4’s weekly emails, but the most important thing for this portfolio is that you have chosen a variety of texts and thought carefully about how they demonstrate your writing development.

Essay. This short essay (minimum 500 words) should analyze your writing development by citing the texts that you’ve included in your portfolio. You might consider centering this essay on a central metaphor for writing or your writing development: what is writing like? what is writing development like for you? how does your portfolio support this view?

This paper should not merely be a narration of the semester, but rather should interpret the texts, analyzing their rhetoric, and giving the reader other information not included in the texts that is important to how you evaluate your own writing development over time. Remember that writing development is not linear and varies for all of us. You should

consider not only where you see growth, but also where you may grow next in your writing abilities.

Submission and Grading

Note that you need to compile all of these texts (the portfolio AND the essay) into **a single .doc, .docx or .gdoc file** and submit it to the assignment link in the Unit 4 folder. Save your file as a **.pdf** before submitting it to ensure that your formatting is preserved.

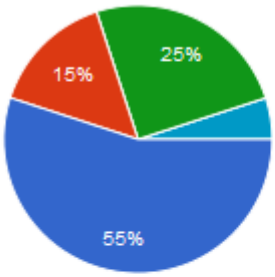
I will evaluate your portfolio based on how well it shows:

1) Insight into your own writing process(es) rather than just a summary of what you did
2) Evidence of **varied** kinds of writing
3) **Lots** of examples that show this variety (though you should not simply compile everything that you've written in the last four months -- remember to annotate each piece and explain its significance)
4) An authentic and focused essay on your writing development

In summation, I am not evaluating you on how much you've learned this semester. Rather, I am evaluating you based on how thoroughly and honestly you have analyzed your own writing development. If you spend a good amount of time reflecting carefully on your writing developing this semester and carefully coming up with a coherent and clever essay about your development, this final assignment can be a good boost to your grade.

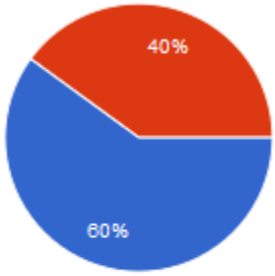
Appendix F
Results of End of Course Survey

How did you get credit for English 1303?



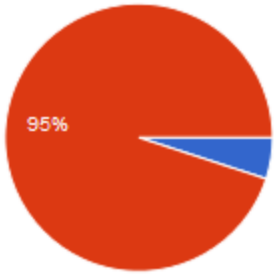
I took English 1303 at UH	**11**	55%
I took English 1303 at a community college or another institution	**3**	15%
I took a dual credit English class in high school	**0**	0%
I got credit for English 1303 from my scores on an AP English exam	**5**	25%
Not sure	**0**	0%
Other	**1**	5%

Did you take any AP English classes in high school?



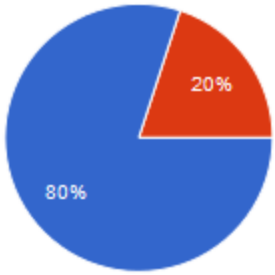
Yes	**12**	60%
No	**8**	40%

Did you take any dual credit English classes in high school?



Yes	**1**	5%
No	**19**	95%

Did you go to high school in Texas?



Yes	**16**	80%
No	**4**	20%
Other	**0**	0%

Online Instruction Method

Why did you choose to take English 1304 online? Check all that apply.

Response	**Number**	**Percentage**
I thought it would be easier than taking it face-to-face or hybrid	**9**	**45%**
I wanted the convenience of completing coursework whenever I had time to (versus showing up to a classroom at a set time)	16	80%
I didn't think I really needed to take first-year writing classes, and I thought this would be the simplest way to take care of this requirement	6	30%
It is inconvenient for me to get campus because I commute a significant distance	8	40%

It is inconvenient for me to get to campus because parking is such a hassle	4	20%
It is inconvenient for me to get to campus because of work and family obligations	3	15%
I am an introverted person and/or quiet person; I thought I would be more successful in an online class for this reason	3	15%
I am not confident in my English skills or my communication skills; I thought I would be more successful in an online class	1	5%
Other	1	5%

Have you taken other online classes?

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	17	85%
No	3	15%

True or False: I felt connected with my classmates and instructor in this online course.

Response	Number	Percentage
True	20	100%
False	0	0%

Optional: Explain why you did or did not feel connected to your classmates and instructor in this course.

Even though we didn't meet face to face, we still had group discussions weekly and review sessions for essays.

Various writing activities with replies and comments really helped to get to know classmates. All the discussions we got to share made me feel connected to the other classmates as i got to read their thoughts. I also felt connected with my writing groups as we helped give insight and ideas to the major papers.

The discussion boards from peers and weekly emails from the professor made my feel connected

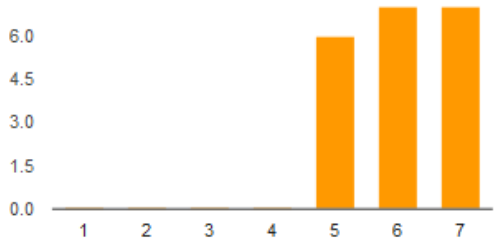
I felt connected to my classmates and instructor in this course because we would comment and reply to each other

our instructor and classmates both played a huge deal in promoting a positive community within the classroom effortlessly. with the weekly discussion posts, positive feedback on our projects, etc. - overall, because of our class/instructor the connection in our class was easy and effortless.

The weekly announcements you make are really layed back and I like that the instructor kept us up to date on what she was doing. It allows us to connect with her and know her better. Students peer reviewed each other's work and that allowed for us to connect.

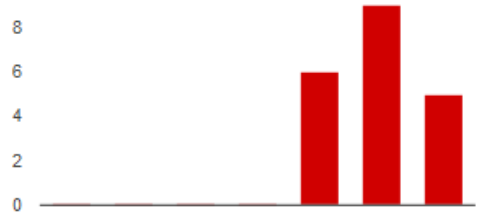
Course Assignments

Journals



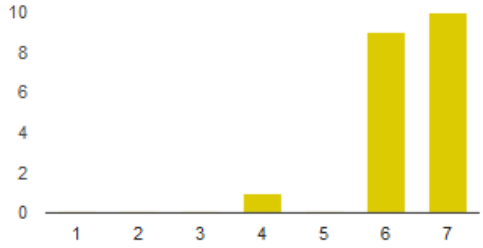
Not at all beneficial or enjoyable: 1	**0**	0%
2	**0**	0%
3	**0**	0%
4	**0**	0%
5	**6**	30%
6	**7**	35%
Extremely beneficial or enjoyable: 7	**7**	35%

Discussions



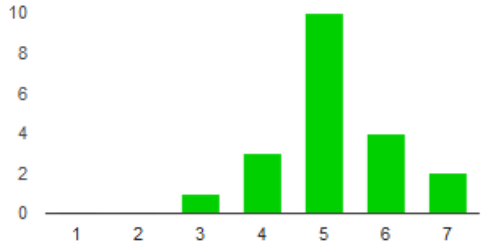
Not at all beneficial or enjoyable: 1	**0**	0%
2	**0**	0%
3	**0**	0%
4	**0**	0%
5	**6**	30%
6	**9**	45%
Extremely beneficial or enjoyable: 7	**5**	25%

Freewrites



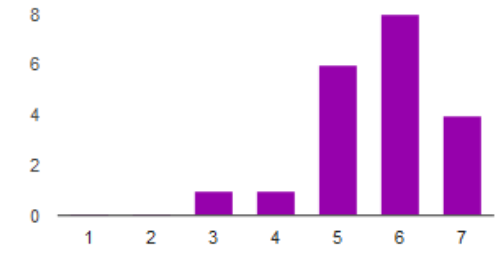
Not at all beneficial or enjoyable: 1	**0**	0%
2	**0**	0%
3	**0**	0%
4	**1**	5%
5	**0**	0%
6	**9**	45%
Extremely beneficial or enjoyable: 7	**10**	50%

Unit Reflections



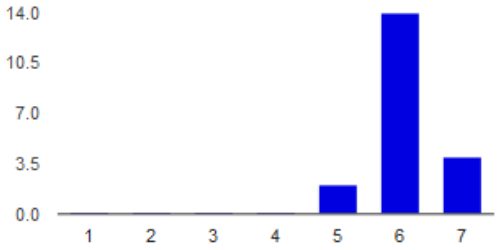
Not at all beneficial or enjoyable: 1	**0**	0%
2	**0**	0%
3	**1**	5%
4	**3**	15%
5	**10**	50%
6	**4**	20%
Extremely beneficial or enjoyable: 7	**2**	10%

Peer Review



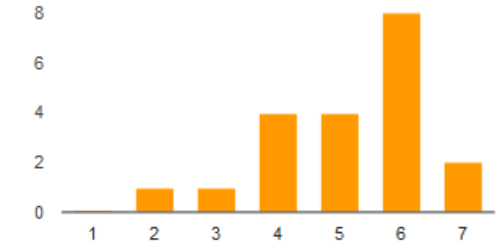
Not at all beneficial or enjoyable: 1	**0**	0%
2	**0**	0%
3	**1**	5%
4	**1**	5%
5	**6**	30%
6	**8**	40%
Extremely beneficial or enjoyable: 7	**4**	20%

Major Papers



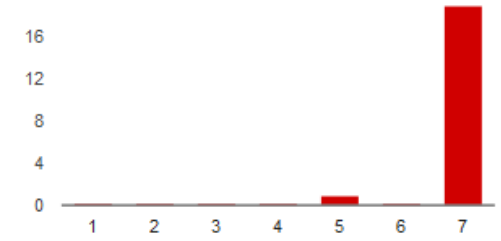
Not at all beneficial or enjoyable: 1	**0**	0%
2	**0**	0%
3	**0**	0%
4	**0**	0%
5	**2**	10%
6	**14**	70%
Extremely beneficial or enjoyable: 7	**4**	20%

Reflective Portfolio



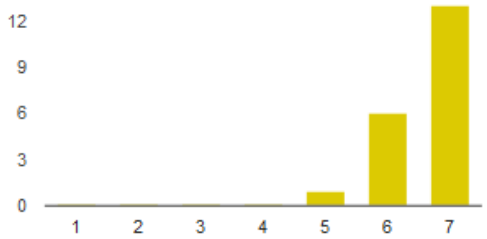
Not at all beneficial or enjoyable: 1	**0**	0%
2	**1**	5%
3	**1**	5%
4	**4**	20%
5	**4**	20%
6	**8**	40%
Extremely beneficial or enjoyable: 7	**2**	10%

Weekly Emails



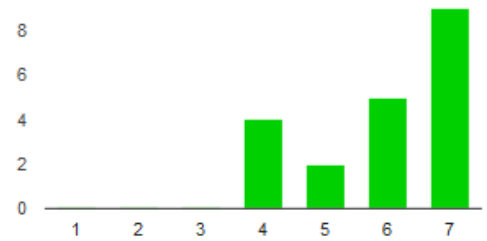
Not at all beneficial or enjoyable: 1	**0**	0%
2	**0**	0%
3	**0**	0%
4	**0**	0%
5	**1**	5%
6	**0**	0%
Extremely beneficial or enjoyable: 7	**19**	95%

Videos and Presentations



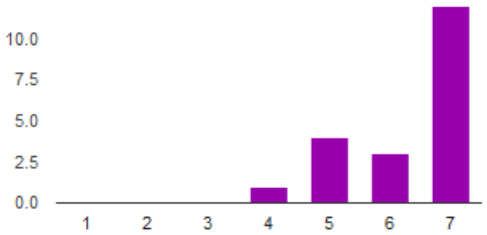
Not at all beneficial or enjoyable: 1	**0**	0%
2	**0**	0%
3	**0**	0%
4	**0**	0%
5	**1**	5%
6	**6**	30%
Extremely beneficial or enjoyable: 7	**13**	65%

Handouts



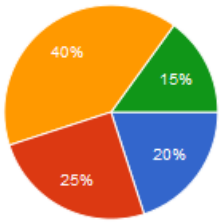
Not at all beneficial or enjoyable: 1	**0**	0%
2	**0**	0%
3	**0**	0%
4	**4**	20%
5	**2**	10%
6	**5**	25%
Extremely beneficial or enjoyable: 7	**9**	45%

Conferencing with Liz for Paper 2



Not at all beneficial or enjoyable: 1	**0**	0%
2	**0**	0%
3	**0**	0%
4	**1**	5%
5	**4**	20%
6	**3**	15%
Extremely beneficial or enjoyable: 7	**12**	60%

Which type of Daily Writing assignment did you enjoy or find most beneficial?



Journals	**4**	20%
Discussions	**5**	25%
Freewrites	**8**	40%
Peer Review	**3**	15%

Why?
Let me write without worrying about grammar/format.
It relaxed me.
It was unique which no other professors ask for. Plus, helpful

It was unique which no other professors ask for but very helpful
Discussions were most enjoyable because I was able to communicate with a larger audience. Through discussions, I received feedback from my peers or extended my discussion through comments.
It was nice to see and read all the different comments and ideas.
They allowed me to relax and focus more about my feelings or thoughts rather than writing itself.
It was nice to focus on one aspect and expand on it. I especially liked the personal journals about writing or our experiences.
In a more beneficial aspect, i believe the peer review discussions were just much more helpful because i got to read some pointers that would compliment my major papers.
I could put my random thoughts on paper and come to a conclusion about why I thought of them or what they mean in my life.
it was a way for us to connect with our peers and see different perspectives on topics
the freewrites *really* helped promote self-discovery and helped tremendously in helping me (and hopefully everyone else) in finding their voice when writing.
I enjoyed getting feedback from multiple/different peers.
Allows us to gain insight from other people's thoughts. Also helps us see what we can do better
I liked being able to write about whatever I wanted without having any restrictions or stressing about staying "on topic"
It was the most interesting and fun to discuss.

Which discussion did you enjoy or find most enjoyable?

Response	Number	Percentage
Discussion 1: Introductions	6	30%
Discussion 2: Rhetorical analysis of a website	3	15%
Discussion 3: Personal take on Rose's chapter	0	0%
Discussion 4: Sharing your research question for Paper 2	1	5%
Discussion 5: Sharing your thesis and plans for Paper 3	0	0%
Discussion 6: Creating a rhetorically effective sample argument	4	20%
Discussion 7: Critiquing Trimble's rules for "Readability"	2	10%
Discussion 8: Final draft of Paper 3	2	10%
Discussion 9: Shaping our narratives for TAMSA	0	0%
Discussion 10: Testing narrative	2	10%

Why?

This discussion allowed me to voice problems I had throughout my entire education with standardized testing, and it felt good that the narratives were going to someone who would make a difference.
I had never considered how big of a part design plays on our view of a website.
We got to know our classmates more.
Interesting and helped to break my stereotype
I think Discussion 10 did a good job at connecting our personal take on English courses and the effects of standardized tests from previous years, which was discussed in Discussion 3,

and our semester's worth of assignments and learning in a way that brought more insight on the impacts of standardized tests on English courses.
It was interesting to see different takes on such diverse range of writing styles.
It was both fun and helpful because it allowed us to be creative while demonstrating that we are capable of making that specific type of argument.
It was really fun reading and getting to know one another. I found a lot of people who shared the same hobbies and values which was interesting and fun to talk about.
I could try to persuade someone to read a book.
It really set off the course for us to be comfortable with each other
because we could write about a topic/idea that we are passionate about.
I had fun reading what others were writing about.
Since this is an online class, introductions were very important.
It was great getting to know everyone.
I got to write about how I really felt without having to reference anything beside myself
It allowed me talk about something that I love.

Thoughts on the course

The focus of the course was for you to develop a research question related to writing (in most cases), conduct research on that topic, and then form an argument about that topic. What did you like about this approach? What did you not like about it?

That I got to choose the topic
It was very structured and led to the writing process to be easier.
I like that we emphasized each process separately. Usually a course would ask us to write an argument, and there is not a lot of time or incentive to spend your time working on each process in-depth.
I really loved it because we can pick what we would like to research which motivated me a lot.
I liked that professor was very connected with us
I liked this approach because I had to formulate an argument and present it to my peers via the Discussion Board. I enjoy interacting with my classmates and explaining my reasoning. One thing I disliked is that many of the topics on the Discussion Board are not very controversial. If the topics were more controversial, it would be more interesting to read and argue for or against it.
It further developed my analyzing skills and helped me better find techniques writers use in their style of writing. It was just a bit challenging finding your own topic to stick with for addressing "writing" itself. Overall it was very simulating and made you think in depth.
Since this was like a step by step approach, it wasn't as overwhelming to write papers.
I like how different sections were separated. I think it would even be nicer to be more split up that way it feels less stressful. I like that we were able to choose our own argument, but the project seemed to be a lot at some times. Maybe it is necessary, but shorter projects that teach different abilities would be more beneficial to me.
I dint like that the question was related to writing
I liked that at first i was at complete confusion about how to approach finding my own research topic. But through the journey of assignments, i was very content with the results and the effort put into the final paper.

I liked that I could come up with my own topic and be invested in it because I wanted to know about it.
I liked that everything was broken down with enough time to work on each piece
I enjoyed this approach because it (in terms of the writing topic), it helped me end up more passionate/personally connected to this class. Having a topic focused on writing and english helped me to understand the purpose and impact of ENGL 1304. What did I not like? Maybe the fact that we weren't advised - to choose a topic outside of writing. I feel that the more passionate someone is about a certain topic, the more excited they would be. The more excited they would be, then the more likely they would be in giving out better quality of writing in their essay.
I liked how the professor was also including her own research within the class which served as a role model during the course.
I liked that we could tailor our paper to our own preferences and interests. I had a hard time with it at first because of the fact that it was so broad.
I liked that everything flowed and each paper helped us to the next paper. Not much that I did not dislike.
I liked that we got to go in any direction that we chose, I felt that it got boring after a while
I liked that we were allowed to choose our own topics and research what we thought was important or relevant to us. It could get a little boring at times, but genrally it was interesting.
I liked being able to learn how to make a good argument and use persuasive techniques to aid with it.

What did you enjoy or appreciate about this course?
Honestly just how organized the entire course was.
The interesting topics we got to write about, as well as the interaction with classmates.
It was a very convenient course, and I really enjoyed the professionalism and realism of the professor, who was comfortable to talk to, and very fair.
I enjoyed professor being connected to us and conducting a personal meeting with us.
I have got to express my interest and self better
It has quite a bit of work but it was all pretty resonable and doable.
I liked how the course led me to consider the writing elements of my interested area which I would never have thought deeply about.
I enjoyed the weekly emails because they were very informative while still upbeat. I also loved the freewrites because it was fun to do and see where my mind took me. I would have loved more of those. I appreciate how you were always available to meet up, and that you replied to any email pretty quickly. Generally, I really like your approach to this class. I also enjoyed the discussions very much. It was interesting to see what others had to say and what they thought of my posts.
The emails. They are incredibly helpful and detailed
I appreciated the amount of work we were required to do. It was stressful because it was mostly time consuming, but i could keep up with most assignments because i knew the due dates were always T&TH's. Every assignment helped me develop my writing skill and i think i'm most satisfied with that.
I enjoyed the flexibility and easy of the course

I appreciated the way that everything was so organized making it easy to stay on task and how the assignments built up on each other like how the journals and discussions helped me in writing my major papers.
Everything. From the discussions that involved us more than any course I've ever been enrolled in (even against my in-person classes), to the essays, etc. This class greatly prepared me to be a better and more critical writer, person, and student.
The freewrites
I enjoyed how personal it was between the student and professor. It was easy to talk to her and not intimidating at all.
I appreciated that you allowed us to peer review.
I enjoyed how available you were when we needed it
I enjoyed the connection that we all had with each other and the instructor. Even though it was an online course, it still felt like an actual class with other students.
I loved learning how to become a more effective writer.

What would you change about this course?
Did not enjoy the discussions because I felt that some of them were not necessary.
Nothing.
Having an online textbook available to students for free (haha).
The amount of assignments, it has a work load on the heavier side.
The only things I am not sure about are cover letters and unit reflections.
Other than the things I have already mentioned, nothing!
reflection over standardized exam
Oh nothing. This class is above and beyond for sure.
I would not change a thing. I loved this course !
The only thing I would change about this course is adding a bit more 'freedom' in certain aspects of assignments during the semester.
N/A
My overall experience was great so I cannot give an answer.
The due dates on homework.
I did not enjoy that assignments were never really just one assignment, they were usually accompanied by a reflection or something and all of that was due at once so if we were running behind or in a bind we lost tons of points instead of just a few
Nothing, it's all designed to help you get to where you need to be. Nothing we did was not for a purpose.

Appendix G
Discussion Board Assignments

Discussion 1: Bio

If we were in a traditional face-to-face class, we would probably spend the first day doing some kind of getting-to-know-you exercise. Instead, in this fully online class, I'd like you to introduce yourself to the class in mini-bios. You can refer back to these bios as you work more closely with different people throughout the semester.

Bio (due Thursday 8/25 by 11:59pm) (at least 200 words):
Introduce yourself! You're welcome to do this in whatever style you'd like (a paragraph, a bulleted list, etc.), and you can include whatever information you'd like.

If you're at a loss for what to include, here are some questions you could answer: Where are you from? If it's the Houston area, what part? Where do you live now? How did you end up at UH? Do you have a major or future/current profession about which you're passionate? What do you like to do for fun? What's your family like? What are some of your favorite TV shows, podcasts, sports teams, and why? What's an interesting fact about you?

Please title your thread with the name that you go by. Also, please insert a photo of yourself into your post. Don't forget this!

Replies (due Tuesday, 8/30 by 11:59pm):
Respond to at least two other classmates' posts (approximately 50 words each). You should post one reply to the person who posted directly above you, and your other replies can be to a person of your choosing.

Remember that as it says in the Guidelines for Daily Writing, you should read all posts in our discussions -- this is a good habit to get into now, and reading through these bios will also give you a good sense of everyone in the class. Also, remember that in order to earn an A on these assignments you need to go beyond the minimum.

Discussion 2: Website Analysis

This discussion assignment will allow you to share one of your favorite websites and perform a rhetorical, critical analysis of it using the skills from Chapters 1 and 2 as well as the thinking rhetorically presentation.

Your analysis (due Thursday 9/1) (at least 200 words of your own writing [not excerpts], plus excerpts and images):

For this assignment, you will choose a website or blog and write up a rhetorical analysis of that website answering the following questions:

1. Choose a website. Tell us its name, and link to the URL of that website. In order to be able to successfully complete this analysis, you should choose a website that is regularly updated with posts that include text. I'd also recommend choosing a website or blog that you are familiar with, ideally one that you have read before.
2. Tell us what you think the purpose of the website or the writing on the website is, and tell us some more about the author (if there is only one) or editor/creators. (Hint: checking out an "About" page or some Googling might help here)
3. How would you describe the overall design of the website? What does this suggest about the intended audience or purpose of the website? Be sure to reference specific elements and design choices from the website in your analysis.
4. Choose one post to focus the rest of your analysis on. Include a brief excerpt (a paragraph or two) in your analysis, along with the title and author of the piece.
5. How would you describe the style of the writing? How do you think the target audience and purpose of the website shapes this style? Be sure to reference specific elements (like "short quotes" or "specific" word choices) from the post you're excerpting in justifying your analysis.

In regards to formatting your analysis, put the title of the website you're analyzing as the title of your post. You should write up your analysis however you think is most effective. You can compose it in a coherent paragraph, two paragraphs (one for design and one for writing), short paragraphs, bullet points, as table, as images with captions, etc. Also, be sure to include at least one visual from the website you're analyzing; this can be a screenshot of the front page of the website, a screenshot of the specific post you're analyzing, the header, or other images from posts on the website. Please insert that image into the actual text of your post and size it appropriately so that your reader can see the image when they read your post (if you're not sure how to do that, see this tutorial).

Note: you will not be able to see anyone else's analyses until you post your own primary post.

Response (due Tuesday 9/6) (one response, at least 75 words long)

Respond to the analysis of at least one of your classmates. Ideally, you should choose a website that you're somewhat familiar with, so that you can substantively speak back to the writer's analysis or extend the discussion in a productive way. If you're not sure what to say, you might consider pulling another excerpt from another post on the website, and explaining how it complicates, confirms, or contradicts the original author's analysis.

Be sure to follow up to any responses that people post about your analysis.

Discussion 3: Personal Response to Rose's "*No Child Left Behind* and the Spirit of Democratic Education"

Personal response to Rose (due Thursday 9/8 by 11:59pm, 200 word minimum):
Now that you have carefully read and thought about Mike Rose's "*No Child Left Behind* and the Spirit of Democratic Education," construct a response that incorporates your own experience writing for standardized tests in K-12. You are welcome to structure your own responses however you see fit -- the only requirement is that you put your own experience writing for standardized tests in K-12 in conversation with Rose's chapter. Some questions you might consider if you're not sure where to begin:

- What is Rose's central argument? Based on your personal experiences, do you agree or disagree with this stance?
- What concrete examples that Rose brings in ring true to you? Which differ from your own experiences?
- What is your experience with standardized test writing? How often did you write final drafts on demand (versus writing and revising) prior to this course? What were you taught about how to write for these tests? How did these tests shape your view of writing?
- What do you think is the rhetorical situation of standardized testing? In other words, who is your audience? What is your purpose? What is the greater context of this testing? Why do we test students like we do? Should we test students' writing ability like we do? Is that fair?

Note that you will not be able to see others' primary posts until you post.

Reply (due Tuesday, 9/13 by 11:59pm, 75 word minimum):
Respond to the posting of at least one other student. Remember, as it says in the Online Writing Guidelines, try to extend the discussion.

Discussion 4: Sharing your Research Question

Sharing your research question and writing about it (due Tuesday, 10/4 by 11:59 p.m., 150 word minimum)
First, write out your research question for Paper 2, and put it as the title of your thread. Then, write a brief explanation of your research question. You're welcome to include whatever you'd like in your explanation, including:

- Why you are interested in this question
- What your personal experience with this particular topic or question is
- What your personal opinion on this research question is
- What you think you'll find as you begin to conduct your research
- Any questions or concerns you have about researching this particular question

Again, you do not have to include all or any of these. Also, think of this as focused-freewriting-style writing. Obviously people are going to read it, so you'll want to proofread it quickly, but feel to follow your train of thought wherever it leads you and write on whatever is of interest to you.

Replies (due Thursday, 10/6 by 11:59 p.m., 50 word minimum)
Respond to the posting of at least two other students. If you have suggestions for sources, current areas, or related areas for the student to keep in mind, those are especially appreciated.

Discussion 5: Sharing your Thesis and Plan for Paper 3

Sharing your thesis and plan (due Thursday, 10/27 by 11:59 p.m., 200 word minimum)
On Discussion 5, you'll find a thread with your name and the name of two other people there. This is the group that you'll be sharing your thesis and basic plan for Paper 3 with. Post your main post within that thread.

Begin your post with your proposed thesis for Paper 3. Then, include some of the major "moves" you'll make in the paper, or the reasons you'll use to support that thesis. You can structure this as an outline, or you can describe the moves you intend to make in the paper. You might also write about what types of argument (of the five covered on the genres of argument handout) you're drawing on in structuring your paper in this particular way (though you are not required to do so).

Replies (due Tuesday, 11/1 by 11:59 p.m., 75 word minimum each)
Reply to the two other people in your group. Try to give them feedback that will help them move forward with their argument. Some questions you might answer:

- Is their thesis specific enough? Is it contestable?
- What do you think of their type of argument? Would it be helpful to bring in another type?
- Are there any "moves" that you think the writer needs to make in the paper that aren't described here in order for it to be a compelling argument?
- How could someone argue against this argument? In other words, write a counterargument to the claim and reasons described here. (That might sound mean, yes, but it is really helpful for the writer to see and anticipate potential counterarguments)

Discussion 6: Writing a Sample Argument using Rhetorical Strategies

An Original Sample Argument (due Tuesday, 11/1 by 11:59 p.m., 200 word minimum)
Now that you've viewed the rhetorically effective arguments prezi, I want you to try out incorporating some of these strategies in a sample argument of your choosing. Write an argument (not related to the argument you're writing for Paper 3 -- any topic that you're interested in that you can form an argument about is welcome) and use at least one pathos appeal and one ethos appeal (and a kairos appeal, if applicable) in your argument. I'd also encourage you to think about how you can use tone, voice, writing style -- whatever you'd like to call it -- to make your argument interesting and engaging for your reader.

Title your thread with a descriptive (and creative, if you can manage it) title that will help readers know what you've written about.

Replies (due Thursday, 11/3 by 11:59 p.m., 50 word minimum each)
Reply to the two other people's arguments. You can reply to the ideas of the argument (offering a counterargument, additional support for that argument, etc.) or you can analyze the argument to explain what was rhetorically effective about it.

Discussion 7: Responding to Trimble's "Readability"
(200 word minimum, due 11:59 p.m. on Tuesday, 11/8)

First, read the chapter on "Readability" from John Trimble's *Writing with Style*. As Trimble communicates in this chapter, writing style is a personal choice, and you should not feel compelled to follow lists of "rules" about what "good writing" or "bad writing" is -- writing is "good" as much as it fits the purpose and audience that you're writing for. So, as you're reading, consider which of his rules you agree with and might adopt in your own writing, and which of his rules you disagree with and why.

In Discussion 7, I've created a thread for each of his rules. Post **two replies** to **two different threads**. First, post a reply (at least 100 words) to the thread of a rule you liked and may adopt in your own writing, explaining why you thought it was a particularly useful rule. You can post your own response, or reply to someone else who has posted a response to that rule (in favor or opposed to it). Then, post another reply (at least 100 words) to the thread of a rule that you did not like or agree with, explaining why you do not agree with it. Again, you can post your own initial reply, or reply to another person who did or did not like the rule.

Discussion 8: Sharing our researched arguments

You've all worked really hard this semester to create coherent, engaging, and unique researched arguments for your final draft of Paper 3. Because of the effort you have all put in and because these papers are on topics relevant to all of us, it's important that we take time to read and appreciate each other's work.

Primary Post (due Thursday 11/17 by 11:59pm):

After you have submitted your final draft to the Turn It In link in the Unit 3 folder, post your draft to Discussion 8 using these guidelines:

1) Create a thread, and title the thread with the title of your paper and your name (for example, a thread title might read "The Elitism of a Liberal Arts Education by Liz Keating")
2) Copy and paste the text of your paper into your post. Be sure that you preserve any paragraph breaks and indentations when you copy and paste your paper. You do not need to double-space your paper or copy any images that you may have included, unless you want to. If you did include visual aids (or even if you didn't), you can also attach your paper, but I do want you to copy and paste the text of your paper into the thread so that we can easily read everyone's papers.

Secondary Post (due Tuesday 11/22 by 11:59pm, two posts of at least 100 words each):

By Thursday, April 21st, post responses to two different posters; one of these replies should be to the person who posted their thread directly above yours, and the other can be to any paper you'd like to reply to, so long as they were not in your peer review group for Paper 3. The content of these responses are entirely up to you, but they should respond to the piece as a formal written argument (in other words, you aren't giving peer review critiques or suggestions for revision).

You can write about points you disagree with and why. You can write about points you agree with and why. You can write about how your own experience maps onto the argument the writer is making. You can write about ideas or research that surprised you. You can write about the approach (tone, voice, structure, source use, etc.) the writer took and what you thought about it.

Discussion 9: What should we write for TAMSA, guys?
(100 words minimum, due by 11:59 p.m. on Tuesday, 11/22)

As I explained in this video from the Week 14 email, we have a cool opportunity to shape testing narratives for the nonprofit TAMSA. I've copied the email from the TAMSA representative I've talked to in my weekly email. This discussion is intended as a brainstorming session for us to talk about how we want those narratives to look. How long should they be? What should they contain? What writing style should we use? Should we focus on our own experiences with testing broadly, or with writing for tests specifically (or can we each do our own thing)? Can they incorporate argument? Should we cite Rose or other sources, or focus on our own perspectives? Where should we publish it?

I've created a few threads that touch on some of these sub-topics for discussion, but you're also welcome to create your own threads if there are other things for us to talk about that I haven't raised -- just be sure to give them descriptive titles so that people know which discussion happens in each thread. I'm asking you to post 100 words minimum, spread out over as many threads as you'd like; in other words, you can make as many or as few posts as you'd like.

Once this discussion has closed (I'll close it by 11:59 p.m. on Wednesday, even though you're required to post something by 11:59 p.m. on Tuesday, so that you can respond to some of those last-minute posts), I'll write an official assignment sheet for these narratives as well as my own narrative about testing so that you can see what this might look like.

Discussion 10: Testing Narratives
(between 150 and 500 words, due by 11:59 p.m. on Thursday, December 1st)

For this final discussion board, you'll write a narrative about your experience with testing that we will share with TAMSA.

Purpose: Tell a story related to testing that shows why test scores alone are not sufficient grounds for determining whether a student in the state of Texas should be allowed to graduate from high school

Audience: Legislators making decisions about testing in public schools in the state of Texas; potentially parents and other Texas citizens concerned about testing

Details: Beyond the word count, the one other requirement is to include a brief (120 characters or less) descriptive title for your thread. Our best takeaway from Discussion 9 where we discussed how to approach these narratives was that you should do whatever makes the most sense for you based on your experience. That means you could:

- Share your experience writing (and preparing to write) for standardized tests specifically
- Share your experience preparing to take all standardized tests (not just test of writing)
- Explain how you were taught to write specifically for tests in high school is different from how you approach writing in college
- Make an argument against testing using Rose, your own experiences, and other evidence for support
- Incorporate visuals or video that you have permission to use; a photo of yourself might be particularly impactful, or a video of you telling your story
- Draw on what you wrote in Discussion 3 or in Paper 1
- Note at the bottom of your post if you would like to use a pseudonym, which you can provide
- Revisit the email from TAMSA included in the Discussion 9 assignment sheet to remind yourself of what exactly they're looking for
- Revisit the discussion on Discussion 9 -- yall had some really great ideas there

If you did not take statewide tests (like the STAAR, TAKS, TAAS, etc.) in Texas, you might consider drawing more heavily on Rose, or discussing your experiences with tests in general (including writing sections on AP, IB, SAT and ACT exams). TAMSA pointed out that personal stories have the most impact, but if you can't provide that kind of personal story, you're welcome to make a more logic-based argument.

Appendix H
Peer Review Materials

Peer Review Response Letter Assignment Sheet

Uploading your draft

To upload your draft, click "Writing Groups" on the sidebar and select your group. Select the "Group Discussion Board," then click the appropriate forum.

- Create a new thread, and label the new thread with "Your First Name - Paper Title" (please, come up with a more interesting title than the title of the assignment)
- Give your reader directions about how to read your draft. Name at least two areas of concern. These can be: (a) parts of the draft, like the introduction or third paragraph; (b) elements of the assignment; or (c) basic areas of writing, like organization, style, detail, etc.. You need to name at last two things/areas/concerns you have about the draft that you want your reader to give you feedback on. Write these in the message textbox.
- Upload your document as an **attachment**. Please submit your file as a .doc, .docx, .pdf or .rtf file. Also remember to save it properly: **LastnameAssignment_v1.doc**. If you're worried about people being able to open your file type, you can copy and paste your paper into the textbox, but make sure you also attach it.

Responding to your group members' drafts

Why: The reason we do peer review is not only so that you can get feedback from your audience on your draft, though that's certainly a valuable part of it. We also do peer review so that you can think critically about the goals of this particular assignment and how to go about meeting those goals. Also, note that 10 points of your final grade on each paper is dependent on you submitting a first draft and taking feedback from your peers into consideration. If you do not submit a first draft, your paper will be docked ten points.

What: You will write a 150-word response letter to each of your group member's drafts that are posted on your group discussion board, and your response letters will be worth three daily writing grades. I expect that you will need at least 20 minutes to respond to <u>each</u> of your group members' drafts.

In each response, I'd like you to identify some strengths and some suggestions for improvement for the draft. At least 100 words of the response should be devoted to constructive criticism. In these responses, <u>you are not allowed to point out misspellings, typos, or other isolated language errors</u>. You are also not allowed to be overly vague or non-constructive. For instance, "Your draft is short" is unacceptable; "Your draft is short. I'd suggest expanding on X, Y, and Z" is acceptable.

Pay attention to the concerns that your group members listed when they uploaded their draft and try to address those if you have thoughts about them (especially if others haven't). Also, see the assignment sheets and consider the goals and particulars of the assignment listed there.

How: I recommend that you compose your response letters in a separate word processing program (just to be safe, in case Blackboard malfunctions and deletes your post), but please copy and paste your response directly into a textbox on the thread of the group member you're writing a response letter to (please do not submit them as attachments).

When: Post your responses by the date listed on the course schedule. You are free to ask follow-up questions or additional feedback before or after the due date -- like the class discussions, these should emulate an actual conversation.

Peer Review Presentation – Information from Slides

How Online Peer Review Works

You've probably done peer review in a face-to-face English class before -- you get in a group, exchange papers, read them, and share comments about them.
We'll be doing peer review in our class for all major papers through group discussion boards (click the "Writing Groups" link on the left-hand sidebar, and you'll find them). You'll share your draft and your thoughts about it, read other your peers' drafts, and respond to them.

What This Presentation is about

You should read the Peer Review Response Letter handout before you go through this presentation. Go ahead. I'll wait.
This presentation is meant to hit some high points of that handout and to give you some examples of "good" and "bad" peer review response letters.

Grading Reminders

Note that I will grade **all three** of your response letters, and each will count as **its own daily writing grade**.*
*There are three daily writing grades for each peer review. If you have four group members, I'll average your four responses and enter that average for three grades. If you only have two group members because someone did not post their draft, I will also average your responses and enter that average for three grades. You will not be penalized for absentee group members.
If you do not submit your own draft or submit it late, that may also have an impact on your three response letter grades.
Also, **ten points** of your final grade for each major paper is for participating in peer review (posting your draft and considering others feedback). I will base my decision about how many points you'll earn out of 10 based on the cover letter that you submit along with each major paper. Note that you do not have to incorporate **all** suggestions from your group members, but you should take them into consideration.
In other words, **peer review is worth a large portion of your grade in this class**, because it is a lot of work and it's helpful for your development as a writer. Don't skip it!

First Draft Reminders

Like it says on your assignment sheet, **please submit a fairly complete draft.** Set aside some time to work on getting a complete draft done before your first draft is due. The more complete your draft is, the more helpful our feedback will be for you.
Also, note that you may not be able to see any other threads in your Peer Review Discussion Board until you post your own.

Pitfalls to Avoid on Response Letters

Make sure you:

- Understand the assignment (revisit the assignment sheet and rubric)

- Read the draft **and** the writer's directions on how to read it
- Write at least 150 words per response letter
- Make concrete suggestions for improvement
- Paste your response into the textbox
- Follow Guidelines for Daily Writing (sign your name, please; feel free to respond to others' suggestions)

Here's a good response letter from a real student (different assignment):
The introduction to your essay was good; you provided a suitable balance of background information and current thoughts on the topic so that the reader was fully enlightened on your subject. I was originally skeptical about whether or not I should include any sources in my introduction, but I think you did a wonderful job of not overwhelming the reader with too much information at once. Your paper as a whole was thorough and included what seem to be good, reliable sources. A majority of your paper flowed nicely and read easily. However, there were parts toward the end of your paper that could be elaborated on more. You could think about incorporating pathos in the last couple of paragraphs, maybe bringing up how the child would feel about having everything about who they were handpicked by their parents. You could consider touching more on the psychological effect eugenics would have to the children, and the effect that would have on our society as a whole. That would strengthen your argument by adding more evidence. As someone not knowing a lot on the topic, I think you did a great job of dumbing it down for your audience while still sounding professional and well informed. You mentioned that you were worried that you thought your counterarguments stood-out, but in my opinion I think they were perfectly placed and didn't stick out like a sore thumb (235 words)

Here's another good example:
Introduction should have a more clear direction. Your content is about how it is corrupt for the NCAA to capitalize on the marketing of their athletes while not allowing the athletes to retain any royalties, but this is not clearly introduced in the introduction. Though there is an introduction to some of the content, but not the overall direction of the argument. I like the direction you took outlining Pryor and Manziel, and I especially like the comparison of Clowney and Hal. The fact that these players jeopardize their whole lives based on the promise of a professional football career is staggering. I did struggle with the concept that you introduced with Clarett outlining that he comes from a disadvantaged family. Although it is true, it feels to me that it is more fluff than arguable content. Though it does assist in the point you are making, I feel that it takes away more credibility than it gives. Getting back to the rest, I like the comment you made about a player riding in Saban's Mercedes. The comment paints a clear picture of how the policies and regulations of the NCAA can be extremely overbearing. Though I agree a school should not bribe a student to come to their campus, I feel that letting someone ride with the coach should not be a violation. It made me wonder how many other regulations fit in this context. Overall, I really enjoyed the paper. (242 words)
Note: It's fine to move chronologically through the paper (instead of starting with positives then moving to places for improvement) like this student did.

Here's what not to do – an unsuccessful peer response letter:

When reading through your paper I see that you use a lot of pathos. You really show the audience what it would be like to have an abortion. You also show what effect are drawn to woman that take the choice of aborting a child. One thing that popped out the most was that you mentioned that women who are raped which is about 14000 believe they should abort, then go on to say that those women who end up making that choice have post-traumatic stress disorder. There was also a lot of emotion in the first paragraph, you talked about the heartbeat of the women and how it makes almost 78% of women not take the decision. You also had good credible information and it was presented in a well proper manner. You used statistics that could be pulled up and looked at thoroughly.
(145 words)
Why isn't this successful? I can tell that the student read the paper, but there are no concrete suggestions for improvement or even explanations as to why some of the "good" things are actually helping make the paper more effective.

Here's another unsuccessful peer response letter:
I really really enjoyed your paper! I come from a high school that put a huge emphasis on sports, specifically football, and the fine arts programs got the least of the any attention and funding from our district. I really like how you start off your paper, it immediately has a strong tie to pathos and really grabs the attention of the reader. From the first sentence to the last, I feel like your introduction is really well written. The rest of your paper is also a good read! The only gripe I have is that a lot of it feels really source heavy, not that it is a issue, but maybe throw your own voice around a bit more. You really rely on your sources, which is great, but I personally feel like you should fight your claim alongside. It may just be the way I'm reading it or a personal preference thing, so don't take that too seriously. Other that than, your paper flows really well and it is a good read throughout.
(175 words)
Why isn't this successful? There's a lot of repetition here -- especially in how "good" the paper and introduction are. Also, the one suggestion for improvement needs specific examples -- what sections were too "source heavy"? Which paragraphs? What needs to be taken away and what needs to be added?

Good Luck and Have Fun!
You'll be in this peer review group for the rest of the semester, so get comfortable with your group members! Go back to D1 to get to know them a little if you like.
Due dates for Peer Review can be found on the Course Schedule. If you have any questions, I'm happy to answer them over email (lizblom@gmail.com), and I'll gladly meet with you virtually or in person to answer any questions as well.

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