

The New Frontier: Writing the First University Level Composition Paper
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It is the first day of Composition 101 and students find their way into class. One student, toward the front, has notebooks and books perfectly aligned and several pencils set out. Another student looks around nervously, measuring the level of confidence in their classmates' faces. One student lingers around the back, eyes glued to their schedule, "Is this even my class?" Regardless of where a student finds themselves on their first day of their first composition class, there is a pervading anxiety in the air—one that informs each of them that one day soon they will be composing their first composition paper at the university level. Truthfully, I was one of the students towards the front with pencils set out, notebooks aligned, and a strong hope that the wisdom I learned in this class would only work to increase what I already believed to be a perfected method of writing. I was wrong, of course, and found my writing experience instead to be like bending all the rules of writing I had learned before and turning them into a new process of writing I could not even imagine myself capable of.

This research focuses on the process of writing the first university level composition paper because it is a process unlike any other; this experience often shapes the way a student continues to grow as a writer throughout their post-secondary education. Since the experience of writing the first university composition paper is so broad, my research focuses in on what both teachers and students expect of the first university level paper, the limitations and opportunities explored in the first university paper, and the general process by which freshman students compose their first university paper. The first portion of my research is based off academic literature and case studies already performed regarding freshman students and their compositional processes. In the second portion of my research I perform my own case study based on observations and interviews with a group of freshman Composition 101 students at a small public liberal arts university in Alabama. An essential part of understanding the process of the first university paper is in understanding the environment in which these papers are composed. Through my research I came to understand that rarely does a student feel prepared for writing the first university level paper and even the most talented of writers can find themselves struggling. However, it also provides an understanding that despite the processes of first time writing being both tedious and complicated, the majority of students feel as though their writing is key in benefiting their education.

To understand the toil that is the first university level paper, one must first understand what composing is and why we ask students to compose. At the surface level, we can offer that we teach students to compose because we aim for them to develop critical thinking skills. However, composition only begins with critical thinking, the process within itself is something wholly different that demands much more from a student. Pedagogical theory hopes that through these demands students will gain intellectual insight, methods to formulate thought, and a unique voice that they will continually develop throughout their academic career. However, even when pedagogy urges these results students will continue to ask why they are expected to compose. In Sondra Perl's study "Understand Composing" she tells us that in the "process of writing we begin with what is inchoate and end with something that is tangible, in order to do so, we both discover and construct what we mean."¹ Participants were assigned to orally compose by the same standards they expected of their students, and then record themselves. By doing so, they hoped to learn more about their own composing skills, and in turn, delve into what really

¹ Perl, 367.

mattered to them in composing. They could then turn their own meaning into a lesson to answer their students' demands of why composing is important. When focusing on the process, the potential of a writer cannot only be discovered but also their own understanding of their intention can be developed. Composing not only demands that students apply critical thinking skills when regarding a work, but it also demands that from this students derive meaning. This meaning can then add value to their work and to their academic lives, for "in writing, meaning is craft and constructed...it involves us in a process of coming-into-being."² The answer that Anne and Perl developed was that composing matters simply because it is a growing process that is necessary for students, for it is in the students' own writing that first begins their own coming-into-being. Another aspect to grasp in understanding composing are the patterns or processes of first time university writers. In Janet Emig's *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Grade Writers* she states that "most pieces of research on the adolescent writer focuses on the product rather than upon the processes of their writing"³ A pattern that become apparent throughout my research was that too often the students are focused on just "getting a good grade" on the paper rather than thinking about the writing process by which they can achieve that grade. While the final product of a paper is significant, students and teachers should not base composition pedagogy off the notion of just achieving the final product. Composition classes for freshmen students should not only focus on building a final product but the process by which the final product is reached.

Both Emig's and Perl's research work as a cornerstone within the study of composition pedagogy, however, the studies can be quite dated. Both researchers found a similar set of patterns with first time writers and while many of these patterns are still present today, the changing writing processes and the role of technology in writing cannot be ignored. New methods of research methods, technology being used within the classroom setting, and even the advent of many different word programs have formed very different types of writers than the ones that Emig and Perl studied in the seventies and eighties. It is also easy to remain skeptical of Perl's system of measuring writing patterns, as well as remembering that Perl always demanded that writers orally compose. While oral composition does provide ample evidence for research, it likely alters the ways that writers compose as well. These attributes within the studies, however, are not faults but rather reminders that measuring the composing processes of first time university writers is not a solid science, instead it is made up an array of processes and pedagogies that are constantly altering to fit into the educational standards of the time. What is key to these studies, though, is this attention to detail within process. The most common pattern found in both studies, and a problem that is still apparent today, is the need to write simply to earn a certain grade. Composing practices could be improved if there was a call for greater attention to the process of writing, which may not be something that can be measured systemically but is something that could observe shared patterns and improve writing pedagogy.

The first university paper, however, not only revolves around the students' own processes but also the compositional level that the professors expect them to achieve. The idea of a composition class full of freshmen students with different methods and skills is an unnerving one. As much as writing pedagogy would benefit from instructors paying individual attention to students and their unique writing needs, it must not be forgotten that the professor is just one person, often one who students see as the guiding force of the classroom full of many. In David

² Perl, 367.

³ Emig, 19.

Perry and Kathleen Kennedy's "Teaching Grade 13" they say that the "faculty kvetching about the lack of student preparedness signals the beginning of fall" because professors are often set up with the "impossible task of simultaneously teaching radically different skill sets."⁴ They present the idea of "Year 13," a class of students who are often not prepared for writing at the university level. Sometimes, they suggest, the students are placed in remedial writing classes. These classes, however, only seem to be partially successful and often students do not even need to pass the remedial classes to be allowed in the Composition 101 classes. This leaves the teachers stranded in the same situation they were before, with students of all different writing skill, who must be taught the same basics of composition. What Kennedy and Parry insist is that this base level of compositional skills cannot be strong if it is built upon a set of different levels.

However, the article "What Do Professors Really Say about College Writing" notes that Composition 101 classes tend to "value a kind of complexity of thought that first year students, even the most well versed in writing, have not yet developed."⁵ Instead of admonishing the idea of "Year 13" as Kennedy and Perry did, the article works toward the idea that no student is prepared for university level writing, "that students do not arrive on campus as fully competent writers nor do they believe students will ever learn everything they need to know about writing in first year composition."⁶ Both articles take a negative approach regarding students; one insists that the students need an extra year of study and admonishes them when they learn very little from this study and the other consistently reminds the reader how ill prepared all students are for university level writing. There are valid points in both arguments, but neither seem to point out the difference between writing at the secondary education level versus the university level. This difference seems to be key in understanding why first time student composers face such challenges in Composition 101 classrooms.

The article "Bridging the Gap Between High School Writing Instruction and College Writing Expectations" addresses this issue directly. Through interviews with middle school, high school, and university teachers it explores the causes for systematic problems in writing instruction. The main problem, it says, is that "high school education is designed to be standardized and quantifiable whereas college education is designed to be theoretical."⁷ This observation works to bring evidence to the difference between freshmen skill sets—the expectations taught in high school, while presumably standardized, work in different ways. The article also observes that high schools are taught in such a way because high school presents itself like an end to education when in reality we have reached a point where higher education is thought of as crucial. They blame this system mostly on standardized testing; even offering that standardized testing is what prevents real, lifelong learning for composition students because students "enter Composition 101 classes with a clear and fixed understanding of writing as a defined and particular skill intended to produce a defined and particular product."⁸ All of these processes and pedagogical means are also taken into account without asking the students themselves how they feel about composition. However, student voice is the most important part of writing the first university level paper, because when the process is done, the paper does not belong to the professor or the university—it belongs to the student.

⁴ Kennedy and Perry, 2.

⁵ Brockman et.al, 76.

⁶ Brockman et.al, 79.

⁷ Bushrow et.al, 78.

⁸ Bushrow et.al, 81.

In the Harvard study, “The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year,” Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz performed the massive feat of following a group of freshmen from their first to final year of university, observing their developing writing habits along the way. They state that the key element in their study was to “get the big picture of the undergraduate spectrum of writing practices...to learn from each student what might be idiosyncratic and what might be generalizable.”⁹ Throughout their study, they developed the idea that academic writing should be thought of as a genre because in that way more maneuverability and observation is encouraged. This academic genre of writing is important to the study they say, because “writing is a mirror that helps [students] reflect who they are as students.”¹⁰ With academic writing students are allowed to find their voice and form their own opinions, it is a unique space where they are given the invitation for critical thought that they had perhaps thought they lacked in before. This is challenging, though, because they are working through the limited processes and expectations that have shaped their knowledge until then. One note made was that students felt as if there was a “secret code to academic writing or that college is a kind of game of rules—what the teacher wants—are kept from them, only glimpsed through cryptic comments they receive on their papers.”¹¹ For most students, writing at the university level is much like navigating their way through a series of challenges and trying to find their own voice while doing so. However, most students noted that when they found that voice is when they found how writing could work as a powerful tool, one student even said “there is a greater purpose in writing than completing an assignment, trying to get something and give something when you write.”¹² This connects

⁹ Saltz and Sommers, 127.

¹⁰ Saltz and Sommers, 129.

¹¹ Saltz and Sommers, 134.

¹² Saltz and Sommers, 139.

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back the idea of discovery of meaning that Perl noted in the process of writing. Without writing many students would not be given the opportunity to voice their opinions; they would not be allowed to explore their own thoughts. This is what, in turn, adds value to their writing and hopefully guides them throughout their own academic career.

To observe the processes of the first paper university level composition paper, I mimicked the Harvard study on a much smaller scale. For the first half of the Fall 2015 semester I observed a freshmen Composition 101 classroom as they were introduced to university level writing and began to compose their first paper, in this case, their midterm paper. After students had composed, turned in, and received their grade for their midterm I handed out a consent form and survey for them to fill out. The consent form informed what the research was trying to achieve and that their participation was voluntary. They then were given a survey to take home, complete, and turn in during a following class period. The survey consisted of nine questions regarding their composition class and their own compositional processes. The first question is an optional question, asking the students what their major if, for student interest can greatly alter how they feel about writing. Four of the questions ask how the students feel about their composition 101 class in particular: what were their expectations, did the class go against or meet those expectations, what their favorite and least favorite aspects of the class are, and whether they believe the lessons they learned in this class would benefit their academic career. Three questions ask about their own writing process in composing their first university level composition paper: what process they went through, what tools or resources they used for guidance, and if their confidence as a writer post writing process had increased or decreased. A final question asks them what differences they noticed between high school and university level writing and to describe them.

Overall I passed out and collected eighteen consent forms from the twenty-five student class. Of those eighteen I only received thirteen surveys back. Despite having a small sample size, I do not think my research was thoroughly hindered. The small sample size was able to present a more precise view of this single classroom's take on writing. Had I extended the survey to every freshman composition class in the university, I would have perhaps had much more evidence to call upon. For the purposes of my study, though, I was searching much more for depth rather than breadth. With my observations and surveys I attempted to gather how it feels to

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write the first university level composition paper, from the environment it was written in to the processes the students went through. I did not do this to find a precise and concrete view of what writing the first university level paper is, for I do not believe a precise view could ever be extracted, but instead to find a concise view of one classroom. In turn, I gained a better understanding of compositional processes of freshman year students and perhaps offered some insight into greater writing pedagogy.

Perhaps the most surprising result on the surveys are the answers to the question regarding the difference between high school and university level writing. More than half of the students say there were no real differences between high school and university level writing. Only five students agreed that high school and university level writing is different, but most of them stated that it is different only in that it requires more individual assignments and reading than high school writing—so, in short, a larger workload. Only one of the five students who agreed that high school writing is different than university level writing gave extensive details on how the two are different. They responded that they feel as though everything was a step by step process and each part was given a lot of attention, whereas in high school the writing process focused more on the creating the paper as a whole and the final product it would become. This relates back to Bushrow, DeWeese, and Fenetti, when they said that high school writing worked to be more quantifiable and college writing worked more in the theoretical. By focusing on each step of process, the writing became a much more theoretical process, for each thought was given its own attention. This is different than the high school writing that focused on a final product that was simply there to get a grade. Despite the insight with this one student, it is still surprising to see that many students do not feel there is significant difference between high school and university level writing. The literature, and myself in turn, assumed that there is a definitive gap between high school and university level writing. This could perhaps mean that the gap is not as defined as it is assumed to be, just as it can also be said that students, in still being in the early processes of transition, do not yet recognized the distinctive gap between high school and university level writing. As with most of the answers on this survey however, there is the disclaimer of the small sample, for these are just the thoughts of a portion of one freshman composition class at one university.

After finding this surprising anomaly, I then focused on what student expectations were and how they were either met or not met in the class. In general most students expect to expand upon their high school knowledge in this class, and note many things, such as: expanding grammar and research methods, paper construction, new writing techniques, and a consensus that everyone was on the same page in writing skill. For most students the class met their expectations and many note that the class went beyond expectations, redefining their writing process and giving them an opportunity for in-class discussion that they felt they had not had before. Again, the extensive workload was noted as something that many students did not expect. Only one student expressed disappointment in regard to the class not meeting expectations. They responded that they feel as if they were back in eighth grade, for everything that was being taught in the class was too simple and they felt as though they were not being intellectually challenged. What this student feels is the dysphoria of having a classroom made up of largely different skill sets. This relates back to Kennedy and Perry and their arguments on the difficulty of teaching radically different skill sets. This student's opinion shows that this difficulty is not only present for teachers but for students as well, and that it is the collective teaching of these radically different skill sets that presents many challenges within a Composition 101 classroom.

Despite only having one differing opinion within student replies, the answers were quite varied—only saying the same general idea. For most it felt as if they learned something, hopefully improving their writing skills, and others seem to demonstrate that they felt trapped in the allusive “Year 13” with no sense that anyone was on the same page as them. It is good to know, though, that the expectations and meeting of expectations from the class was a mostly positive experience. Overall, each student came into the class with a different set of expectations and each got something different from the class. Their answers demonstrate the varying levels of writing skill that they entered the class with. The class was also a largely positive force for all thirteen survey respondents agreed that the writing skills they learned in this class would help them in their academic career. Most of them cited their majors in this question as well, saying how writing would benefit them in the field. Even the students with majors that are assumed to be exempt from writing agreed that the writing skills they learned in this composition class would be vital to their remaining four years at university. One student even jokingly said that even if half of what they heard was true in regards to the amount of papers they would write in college, then they would be thankful for this class every day.

When it came to what the students like and disliked about the class, almost all students agree that the ample workload was something they do not like. Nearly half of the students also report that they did not like the amount of outside research and information they are expected to know to be able to function intellectually inside the classroom. However, for most of the students, what they enjoy most are the in class discussions. Many say they were able to discuss things they have not been able to talk about before and feel as if what they have to say is important. They also say they enjoy that the class focuses on real issues rather reading than what one student refers to as recycled literature. Many students also note that the environment of the classroom helped them, for they felt like they could speak without sounding biased or have a biased opinion given to them. Overall, I find it significant that what students love most about the class was that it gave them the opportunity to find their own voice. It seems that both the class discussion and the open forum without bias was vital in finding and forming their voice. Both Perl and the Harvard study urged the importance of student voice, because it is this finding of one’s own voice that is largely the goal of composition classes. This goal lends to meaning and what could become a positive view for students and any future writing, inside or outside of the classroom. Of the thirteen surveys eleven of the students reported that they feel more confident in their writing, many of them citing specific areas of writing that improved for them. Of the two that do not feel as though their confidence increased, one said they would only say no because they know all professors hold different expectations and they cannot base their confidence on just one class and one paper. This, of course, is a fair enough answer. However, an ample amount of students did feel as though their writing confidence increased, and this demonstrates the “coming-into-being” that Perl hoped students would get in composition classrooms.

Finally, I looked at the processes by which these students composed their first papers. Many of the students say their process involves following the steps outlined for them in class. They moved through composing their first essay by first composing a thesis sentence and introductory paragraph, and then building from that to their paper throughout multiple drafts. In class, peer reviews were done for every draft of their work. Most students noted that the peer reviews were the most vital part of their writing process, for it was a second set of eyes looking through every draft of their paper. There were many students who said that the peer reviews are what made their papers as good as they were and that without them, they would felt as though

what they turned in was not as good as it could have been. While it is good that these peer reviews were so helpful, it is also important to note that these peer reviews were in class required assignments. Without the requirement of peer reviews, many students, it seemed, would not have looked for ways to better improve their papers. Only three students noted outside help beyond the peer reviews, with two of them saying they attended office hours and another saying they visited the university's writing center. What the students lacked in this class, then, was not the process of writing, but the initiative to revise.

Revision was happening actively, but it seems that it was only happening within the classroom environment. If in class peer reviews were not required it is likely that students may have looked for revision help in more ways but it also just as possible that they would not have. It seems then, that these peer reviews have both advantages and disadvantages. The survey results show that they actively helped students, and it is easy to imagine that this revision process was less stressful on the students because they were having their paper revised by a peer in a classroom environment they are used to rather than with a consultant at the writing center or a tutor at the learning enrichment center. This too, would help cultivate the student voice, for peer reviews are just a different form of oral discussion, only instead of discussing literature and ideas, students are directly discussing their own compositional processes. This is a powerful tool to help with revision and by making these in class required assignments, the teachers assures that the students have access to this tool. However, the peer review process could have just as many adverse effects as it does positive ones. For many students, consulting with a peer about their own compositional processes is a great way to build students voice; however, there is a possibility that a student's voice may be overshadowed by the voice of the peer doing the review. It also makes students highly dependent upon one another for writing, which is not bad as composition can often be a sharing process, but in the end it is the individual students who will have to write the paper. By making the peer reviews in class assignments, it also makes the student feel as if all the revision work they need done can happen within these in class sessions. While for some students this may be the case, it may not be true of all papers and many students would benefit from using sources outside of just in class peer reviews. Overall I find the process of peer reviews very beneficial for students, I do not however, think they should be the only methods of revision that students pursue. Once again, this was also a small sample size of surveys and if other freshman classrooms, which did not offer in class peer reviews, were looked at then there may have been different results.

If there is anything I ultimately learned from my research it is that the processes, pedagogical methods, and the environments surrounding the first university level composition paper are too broad to be covered with such limited means. Instead it worked more like a scratch on the surface of this collective experience all university freshmen share. My research worked to give an in depth view of this collective experience, focusing in on a singular classroom. This was done in attempt to observe patterns on a small scale that related to patterns on a larger scale, and in turn, the nature of compositional studies could be better understood. In my own study I found patterns that both surprised me and ones that had long been established in compositional research. Overall the results were both surprising and much more in depth than I expected, and it gave the concise view of the composing processes of this classroom that I was seeking. I conclude in saying that student voice is not only critical in helping students compose but also critical in understanding how students compose and shaping the pedagogy in turn. However, there is still much to be asked of compositional research. What I have decided is that the first

university level composition paper is not something that can merely be coined as “the first paper you write in university” but instead is layer upon layer of pedagogical means and student processes. When regarding all of these layers, the first university paper becomes perhaps the most complicated paper a student will compose in university, and one that will continually shape how they view composition throughout their post-secondary education. A student’s first university level composition paper is guided by the instruction they were given in high school and limited by the gap they have to jump to reach that new level of writing. It is led by the obstacles they face in the class environment, the expectations of the professors, and their own understanding of the process. It is a tangled web and if a student, along with help from their teacher, peers, and previous studies, can find their way through it and find a place where they are able to compose, a place where they can examine their own process and means, then they can produce something to be proud of.

Notes