CHAPTER 17.

THE READINESS IS *NOT* ALL: STRENGTHENING THE BRIDGE FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE READING AND WRITING

Christine Farris
Indiana University

Anne Gere's distinguished career, devoted to cross-disciplinary and K-16 initiatives, is rooted in a sanguine view of "literacy as a capacious space where reading and writing could support and nurture each other" ("Presidential Address" 451). In this chapter I will situate that relationship in the space between high school and college, where teachers of reading and writing can also "support and nurture each other" through collaborations across the secondary/postsecondary divide.

Looking back, I realize my work connecting reading and writing began early. In the early 1970s, before I knew there was a field we now call writing studies, I ran an alternative school and taught children to read by writing down words that mattered to them. I learned about Sylvia Ashton-Warner's "organic literacy" method from a description of her book *Teacher* in the *Whole Earth Catalog*.

Before I knew there was a field, I had a job in the late 1970s measuring syntactic complexity in children's written narratives. I assisted two psychologists studying the impact of a creative writers-in-the-schools program on the literacy of New York City schoolchildren. Scores on the Metropolitan Reading Achievement Test were one correlational measure. The psychologists recommended a book they had just read: Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*. At the time, Shaughnessy was unique in shifting focus from deficiency to possibility in the work of "basic writers" and those who teach them. Others would shift further from deficiency to differences contingent on history and identity. In the same year Geneva Smitherman published *Talkin' and Testifyin': The Language of Black America*.

In 1980, I took my first graduate course with Anne Gere in the English department at the University of Washington (UW). Could I connect my disparate teaching and research experiences, I asked, and study writing development in a department devoted primarily to literary studies? Although Gere directed

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2025.2456.2.17

the Puget Sound branch of the National Writing Project, the focus in the UW English department was on college-level, not K–12, literacy. From Anne Gere I learned there was indeed a field, rhetoric and composition, with a history of theories and practices. Shaughnessy was one voice in an expanding conversation about writing development. Anne demonstrated how one might, methodologically and respectfully, enter that conversation.

Early in Gere's career, the field was building a disciplinary identity in part through research codifying the strategies of successful writers, such that novices might adopt them in courses considered preparation for writing yet to come. That ambitious aim has been modified, and rebranded, as many of us justify writing courses to administrators and policymakers focused on workforce preparation and streamlined general education requirements.

Over the decades, Anne Gere has encouraged a healthy skepticism regarding claims for any universal theory of composing, fixed definition of "good writing," or guaranteed transfer of skills. Specialists, in her view, always have more to learn about how individual writers—in and out of school—develop what she terms "rhetorical flexibility" ("Writing" 284).

The University of Michigan Sweetland Center for Writing, long under her direction, exemplifies how ongoing research informs curriculum and faculty development, with the understanding that first-year writing is not a simple correction to or an extension of writing that comes before or an all-purpose inoculation for writing that follows.

Building on prior longitudinal research (Sternglass; Beaufort; Sommers and Saltz), the Center's Writing Development Study (WDS), led by Gere, was a multi-methodological investigation of students' experiences before, during, and after four years of college. The study examined the impact on writing development of practices students encountered in various disciplines, including secondary and post-secondary English. Edited by Gere with chapters by other members of the research team, the study was published as *Developing Writers in Higher Education*.

Taking up Anne Gere's call in her MLA presidential address to "re-vision the reading-writing dichotomy" (452), I will outline ways to revise that dichotomy in professional collaborations between high school and college teachers. In doing so I will highlight several issues that came to light in the WDS regarding the transfer of writing skills, with a focus on students' perceptions of their high school preparation.

THE MICHIGAN WRITING DEVELOPMENT STUDY

As Gere indicates in *Developing Writers in Higher Education*, the WDS findings show that high school teachers influence expectations about writing that students

bring to college. Those expectations are often shaped by the demands of state standards and testing as well as by Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Teachers are often pressured to introduce accessible formats for writing-on-demand as part of the assessment of student progress and school performance. High test scores are a major feature of "college and career readiness." AP testing and preparation courses, in particular, form expectations of what college writing will be like and can foster the notion that mastery of writing has been achieved—over and done.

Initial interviews with students who participated in the WDS revealed beliefs rooted in high school experiences with test-driven genres and teacher feedback. Later interviews indicated willingness and ability to pivot, or not, when faced with new writing tasks. Marie, one of the study's interviewees, was content with high school mastery of "grammar and formatting," which, though useful, may have obscured the need to develop ideas (Swofford 263). Another student, Natalie, had acquired writerly confidence in her high school and community and was able to find similar supportive networks in college (268).

A number of students initially viewed writing in "bifurcated terms, divided into two domains": "academic," often viewed as received ideas, as opposed to "creative," original ideas distinct from those of instructors (Gere, "Writing" 282). Swofford notes Marie's uncertainty about whether "analysis" falls under "creative" (277–278). Over time, some students, especially those minoring in writing, were able to integrate the two domains.

Instructor feedback on written work was one point of difference between high school and college. Particularly troubling to one student, Adrienne, was the absence of assignment "checklists" she felt had permitted high school teachers to be more "objective" than college instructors, whose evaluations she felt restricted writing and lowered her confidence (Wilson and Post 46). Other students, like Natalie, had an easier transition and came to appreciate instructors' in-depth content-specific feedback (Swofford 267). Grace, who had trouble reconciling the academic with the creative, changed her major from English to German and then was able to engage critically with feedback in a new language and discipline (Knutson 213–214). Kris, a microbiologist, was able to meld her ideas with disciplinary conventions and envision ways of writing about science for nonacademic audiences (Gere, "Writing" 297). Some students constructed their own categories for kinds of writing and met their goals by making connections across concepts and practices in more than one area of study (Gere, "Conclusion" 313).

While not always a smooth transfer of skills from high school and first-year writing, in various and complex ways, a fair number of students in the study seemed able to adapt to college discourse—repurposing and expanding their writing repertoire, achieving greater flexibility and control of genres and

conventions as they tied them to content knowledge, purposes, and audiences that were now apparent in their chosen fields.

DEVELOPING RHETORICAL FLEXIBILITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

The WDS findings published by Gere in *Developing Writers in Higher Education* raise the question whether it is possible to expand students' writing repertoire sooner and accelerate the development of rhetorical flexibility in the regular high school curriculum. Can we ease the transition to college by making more visible to high school teachers and students the discursive moves academics and professionals make? To that end, Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, in their textbook *They Say / I Say,* introduce "templates," guiding structures for writing that "demystify" the moves of academia (xv; xiii). In his textbook, *Rewriting*, Joseph Harris breaks down in a series of steps the ways in which writers don't just argue but rather draw from, comment on, and add to the work of others. His aim, he assures students, is "to help you make interesting use of the texts you read in the essays you write" (1).

Not many students in the WDS directly mentioned the role of the texts they read for the college essays they wrote or the role of reading in their high school preparation for college writing. However, some appeared to struggle locating their ideas in relation to those of others, labeling what might have required analysis as "creative" or one's "own idea," seemingly in contrast to "what the teacher thinks" or wants (see Gere, "Writing"; Swofford). After high school, with fewer textbooks that synthesize the results of scholarship, undergraduates are often thrown in the deep end of inquiry in their courses, asked to write as if they know the stakes of an argument or even what would be interesting in the texts they encounter (Bartholomae 4).

Of late, more scholars (Sullivan, et al.; Carillo; Jolliffe and Harl; Horning and Kraemer) are joining those who have long argued for the interconnectedness of reading and writing (Bartholomae and Petrosky; Hutton, this volume; Scholes; Salvatori), claiming that how closely and critically students read is key to their readiness and success with college writing tasks.

INFLUENCE OF THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS ON READING AND WRITING

In the last fifteen years, the assessment of "college and career readiness," particularly by way of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts, has contributed to a reshaping of the K–12 curriculum. The standards for

reading comprehension place new emphasis on "informational" texts, considered more conducive than literature to the development of cross-disciplinary and workforce skills ("English Language Arts"). The CCSS for writing emphasize the conventional features of narrative, argument, and explanatory essays, with little attention to analysis or cross references to the CCSS for reading.

Originally adopted by 46 states in 2010, a number of states subsequently withdrew from the CCSS, due variously to the complexity and cost of implementation and resistance to federal overreach. Though modified, English Language Arts standards, like those in my state, Indiana, may still resemble the CCSS, retaining many of the test preparation recommendations. Students may practice evidence-based "cold readings" of suggested "exemplar" texts, answering text-dependent questions and identifying the main claim and sentences that support it. Personal connections and context background are often de-emphasized—the scaffolding one would think necessary for working with documents such as the Gettysburg Address.

In an age of misinformation, we might agree with policymakers that success in college and venues beyond should include the ability to extract and communicate facts from texts. However, as Gere's WDS findings show, success is also a matter of how well students become accustomed to writing in terms of ideas within cultural and disciplinary contexts (*Developing Writing*), which test-driven pedagogy barely permits. College instructors expect students to engage critically with not one but multiple print and visual texts in conversation, hopefully becoming comfortable with a more complex worldview.

ALTERNATIVES TO TEST-DRIVEN CURRICULA

I am not the only one to lament the bifurcation of reading and writing and of literature and informational texts in the CCSS English Language Arts standards (Applebee 28). My lamentations are the result of my having represented my state at a series of national meetings on the implementation of the already fixed standards (Farris, "Reclaiming"). When Indiana withdrew from the CCSS and streamlined its standards, I suggested alternatives to test-driven curricula that might incorporate informational texts in the teaching of literature and writing, both of which are the responsibility of secondary teachers. At that point, I had been both the Indiana University (IU) director of composition and the dual enrollment (DE) faculty liaison for over two decades, preparing qualified high school instructors to teach a college-level writing course featuring analysis of multi-disciplinary readings (Farris, "Minding the Gap").

The number of DE partnerships has grown by leaps and bounds in the last decade, tied increasingly to college readiness initiatives along with shortcuts in

time-to-degree. With that growth has come attention from the field of writing studies, focused primarily on rigor but also on access and equity (Denecker and Moreland; Taylor, et al.). Not all states or institutions, secondary and postsecondary, buy in. Not all students have access to DE courses, but they still must develop reading and writing skills that keep them on track for college admission, retention, and success. Distinct from DE, AP, and test preparation, I sought to work on deeper connections across the high school/college English divide and the 9th–12th grade curriculum, aimed at sustaining students for the long game. Over several years, I developed clusters of summer courses, connecting graduate seminars for returning high school teachers to on-campus sections of first-year composition, advanced composition for preservice teachers, and the tutorial center, making possible group meetings to discuss use of readings, assignment design, and student papers.

WRITING AND READING ALIGNMENT PROJECT

In another model, with funding from the IU Center for P–16 Research and Collaboration, my colleague Ray Smith and I designed the Writing and Reading Alignment Project (WRAP), seminars in collaboration with librarians and 9th–12th grade English and history teachers from schools with low college enrollment numbers (Farris and Smith). Keeping in mind the English Language Arts CCSS for reading and writing, in tandem with the Indiana postsecondary outcomes for written communication, we developed new strategies for critical reading and evidence-based writing. Week-long seminars included the construction of text sets (fiction, non-fiction, photographs, films, government documents) as the basis for short, low-stakes writing assignments that could stand alone or progress to longer essays (Bean). While a sequence of assignments might begin with a "says/does" outline and summary, tasks can build in complexity toward the explication of a puzzling passage and the use of one text as a lens to understand or question another text—moves that can get at something more interesting than a formulaic compare/contrast of two authors' claims or themes. Graded or not, low-stakes writing can be used to jump-start class discussions. Particularly useful in designing low-stakes assignments are strategies outlined in David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen's *Writing Analytically*. They suggest identifying binaries, repetitions, and anomalies in print and visual texts, asking not just "what?" but "*so what?*" and the extent to which something might be about X, but also (or really) about Y (16–23; 82–84).

College teachers typically create text sets in their courses, often centered on a key reading that introduces a concept that can be applied to (or challenged by) another text, situation, or subsequent research. In an English or political science

course, Rousseau's concept of a "social contract" can shed light on (but not fully account for) the attempt at self-government depicted in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Psychologist Stanley Milgram's findings on obedience to authority factor into psychologist Phillip Zimbardo's report on his Stanford prison experiment, but both texts can also be lenses for analyzing something else, a "test object," such as the Hollywood film about extrajudicial punishment at Guantanamo, *A Few Good Men.*

In the seminar we modeled sample text-sets centered on works the teachers had assigned in the past. For instance, the juxtaposition of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) with excerpts from her prior draft, published as *Go Set a Watchman* (2015), and accounts of Emmett Till's 1955 lynching can provide background and lenses that invite new questions, e.g., Why was six-year-old Scout's perspective on injustice more acceptable to publishers and some readers in 1960 than that of grown-up Scout, who, in the first draft, *Watchman*, sees the contradictions in Atticus Finch's racial politics? Similarly, pairing Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help* with the 1964 Civil Rights Act, coverage of Medgar Evers' murder, or civil rights activist Anne Moody's autobiography *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, can provide context that raises new questions, e.g., *if* and *why* a white ally is necessary to tell the domestic workers' stories.

In constructing their own portfolios of multi-genre text sets and sequences of writing tasks (later shared in an online forum), teachers came up with units that featured more questions than answers. And not just what is the theme, but how is a text related to its historical situation? Is it factual? Why tell the story *this* way, at this time?

CURRENT SITES OF CONFLICT AS SPACES FOR COLLABORATIVE RESPONSE

Alas, our WRAP seminars were some years ago. Could we still hold such seminars today? Schools are increasingly under attack by some lawmakers as sites of "indoctrination." The book most often on my syllabi for 30 years, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, was removed and then, after pushback, reviewed and returned to libraries in the Florida county where I graduated from high school and college and where I taught reading and writing for the first time. Other states have also enacted legislation that undermines academic freedom, restricting what students can read and what they can do in their writing with what they read. The ability to question, analyze, and synthesize ideas is *not* indoctrination. *Prohibiting* students to question, analyze, and synthesize ideas *is* indoctrination. Jumpstarting rhetorical flexibility in high school depends on not restricting engagement with new concepts, diverse perspectives, and complex issues.

Both K–12 and higher education continue to face new challenges, not just political censorship but also artificial intelligence (AI) with the potential to enhance or restrict students' capacity for original and critical thought. Textbook publishers are both partnering and competing with us as arbiters of curricula as they morph into digital providers of assessment and courses for both students and teachers. Ultimately, we do not know what future we are "getting students ready" for, but more local, face-to-face communication in the real world among educators is important if we are to share the thinking, reading, and writing habits we believe constitute a successful transition to college, career, and civic life. It is my hope that more funding for "readiness" and "success" initiatives from state governments, private foundations, and our professional organizations can be directed toward high school/college curricular partnerships and not just toward on-campus programs for college students after admission. Not everyone can hold the kind of institution-bridging roles Anne Gere has taken on through her longstanding active leadership in CCCC, NCTE, and MLA, but we can still play an active role in strengthening the connection between secondary and post-secondary literacy for all students in regular English Language Arts courses, not just AP and DE. It is crucial that college faculty not only demonstrate solidarity with teachers under siege but also learn more about the restrictions and the best practices that have shaped the writing of our undergraduate students. Even in the current moment such collaborations can make possible a more capacious understanding of our discipline and its responsibility to students as they engage with texts and ideas in order to communicate in an increasingly complex and contentious world.

WORKS CITED

Applebee, Arthur N. "Common Core State Standards: The Promise and the Peril in a Natural Palimpsest." *English Journal,* vol. 103, no. 1, 2013, pp. 25–33, https://doi.org/10.58680/ej201324241.

Ashton-Warner, Sylvia. *Teacher*. Simon and Schuster, 1963.

Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *When a Writer Can't Write: Studies in Writer's Block and Other Composing Process Problems*, edited by Mike Rose, Guilford P, 1985, pp. 134–65.

Bartholomae, David, and Anthony Petrosky. *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*. 8th ed., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008.

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. 2nd ed., Jossey-Bass, 2011.

Beaufort, Anne. *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction*. Utah State UP, 2007.

Carillo, Ellen C. *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition: The Importance of Teaching for Transfer.* Utah State UP, 2014.

Denecker, Christine, and Casie Moreland, editors. *The Dual Enrollment Kaleidoscope: Reconfiguring Conceptions of First-Year Writing and Composition Studies*. Utah State UP, 2022.

"English Language Arts Standards." Informational Website about the Common Core State Standards, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, www.thecorestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/.

Farris, Christine R. "Minding the Gap and Learning the Game: Differences that Matter between High School and College Writing." *College Credit for Writing in High School: The "Taking Care of" Business*, edited by Kristine Hansen and Christine R. Farris, National Council of Teachers of English, 2010, pp. 272–82.

---. "Reclaiming English's Disciplinary Responsibility in the Transition from High School to College." *Improving Outcomes: Disciplinary Writing, Local Assessment, and the Aim of Fairness*, edited by Diane Kelly-Riley and Norbert Elliot, Modern Language Association, 2020, pp. 121–32.

Farris, Christine, and Raymond Smith. *Writing and Reading Alignment Project (WRAP): Final Report*. Indiana University Center for P–16 Research and Collaboration/ Indiana Commission for Higher Education, 2015.

Gere, Anne Ruggles. "Conclusion." Gere, *Developing Writers*, pp. 313–28. *University of Michigan Press Ebook Collection*, https://tinyurl.com/2s3yezpa.

---, editor. *Developing Writers in Higher Education*: *A Longitudinal Study*. U of Michigan P, 2019. *University of Michigan Press Ebook Collection*, https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10079890.

---. "Presidential Address 2019–Re-visioning Language, Texts, and Theories." *PMLA,* vol. 134, no. 3, 2019, pp. 450–58. *Cambridge Core*, https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.3.450.

---. "Writing Beyond the University." Gere, *Developing Writers,* pp. 281–311. *University of Michigan Press Ebook Collection*, https://tinyurl.com/f28e9ezp.

Golding, William. *Lord of the Flies*. Putnam, 1954.

Graff, Gerald, and Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say / I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. 4th ed., W. W. Norton and Company, 2018.

Harris, Joseph. *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*. Utah State UP, 2006.

Horning, Alice S., and Elizabeth W. Kraemer, editors. *Reconnecting Reading and Writing.* Parlor Press / The WAC Clearinghouse, 2013, wac.colostate.edu/books/referenceguides/reconnecting/.

Jolliffe, David A., and Allison Harl. "Texts of Our Institutional Lives: Studying the 'Reading Transition' from High School to College: What Are Our Students Reading and Why?" *College English*, vol. 70, no. 6, 2008, pp. 599–617, https://doi.org/10.58680/ce20086370.

Knutson, Anna V. "Grace: A Case Study of Resourcefulness and Resilience." Gere, *Developing Writers*, pp. 193–216. *University of Michigan Press Ebook Collection*, https://tinyurl.com/y5fmwjhy.

Lee, Harper. *Go Set a Watchman*. Harper Collins, 2015.

---. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Lippincott, 1960.

Milgram, Stanley. *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View.* Harper & Row, 1974.

Moody, Anne. *Coming of Age in Mississippi.* Dell, 1968.
Rosenwasser, David, and Jill Stephen. *Writing Analytically*. 9th ed., Cengage, 2024.
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract and Discourses*. Dent, 1983.
Salvatori, Mariolina. "Conversations with Texts: Reading in the Teaching of Composition." *College English*, vol. 58, no. 4, 1996, pp. 440–54, https://doi.org/10.58680/ce19969048.
Scholes, Robert. "The Transition to College Reading." *Pedagogy*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2002, pp. 165–72, https://doi.org/10.1215/15314200-2-2-165.
Shaughnessy, Mina P. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. Oxford UP, 1977.
Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin' and Testifyin': The Language of Black America*. Houghton Mifflin, 1977.
Sommers, Nancy, and Laura Saltz. "The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year." *College Composition and Communication*. Vol. 56, no. 1, 2004, pp. 124–49, https://doi.org/10.58680/ccc20043993.
Sternglass, Marilyn S. *Time to Know Them: A Longitudinal Study of Writing and Learning at the College Level*. Routledge, 1997. *Taylor and Francis eBooks*, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203810835.
Stockett, Kathryn. *The Help.* Penguin, 2009.
Sullivan, Patrick, et al., editors. *Deep Reading: Teaching Reading in the Writing Classroom*. National Council of Teachers of English, 2017.
Swofford, Sarah. "Reaching Back to Move beyond the 'Typical' Student Profile: The Influence of High School in Undergraduate Writing Development." Gere, *Developing Writers,* pp. 255–80. *University of Michigan Press Ebook Collection*, https://tinyurl.com/mr2y5dxw.
Taylor, Jason L., et al. "Research Priorities for Advancing Equitable Dual Enrollment Policy and Practice." *Collaborative for Higher Education Research and Policy*, University of Utah, July, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/33xan4eu.
Wilson, Emily and Justine Post. "Toward Critical Engagement: Affect and Action in Student Interactions with Instructor Feedback." Gere, *Developing Writers*, pp. 29–55. *University of Michigan Press Ebook Collection*, https://tinyurl.com/bpas9vjv.
Zimbardo, Phillip G. "The Mind is a Formidable Jailer" [The Stanford Prison Experiment]. *Writing and Reading for ACP Composition*, edited Thomas E. Leahey and Christine R. Farris, Pearson, 2009, pp. 240-52. Originally published in *The New York Times*, 8 Apr. 1973, p. 38, *https://tinyurl.com/3jtstavb*.