Chapter 1. Introduction
Beyond Peanut Butter and Jelly

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I recently asked my first-year writing students to compose an analogy essay, explaining how writing is like something else. The analogies were revealing. Nearly all of my forty-five students across two sections chose to craft comparisons that highlighted the linear nature of the writing process: *Writing is like making a sandwich because first you have to set out your ingredients. Writing is like building a house because you have to begin with a blueprint. Writing is like tending a garden, and the first step is . . .* and so forth.

As we developed the essays in class, I prompted students to consider the limitations of analogies that highlighted only the linear steps in the writing process. What does one do with a sandwich, I asked them. What is a house for? Why do we plant gardens? It quickly became apparent that most of my students could not recall ever having been asked to articulate anything about writing beyond its formal qualities. Maybe in the best of times, my students seemed to believe, writing could be a means of expression (but not communication). But usually, school writing was merely a hoop to jump through: an exercise in understanding formal requirements, and too often just one more means of standardized assessment.

I don't believe that my students' views of school writing present an objective report on their previous writing classes, and I trust their high-school teachers continue to do good work in complicated and difficult circumstances. But I also suspect my students' views on school writing will not surprise any postsecondary teacher, and pervasiveness and persistence of those views underscores the need for writing teachers to be able to voice a vigorous and practical defense of why we teach writing. The essays in this first section attempt to do just that.

Whereas for most students (and some faculty, as well), the writing classroom is primarily a place to master the demands of school writing—a troublingly circular justification—the authors of these essays show that our writing courses have relevance for students' lives outside the classroom. Sarah Hardison O'Connor, for instance, points out how the rhetorical knowledge students develop in our classes can help them make sense of the informational chaos that surrounds them. As they do so, they develop an ability to comprehend and craft complex arguments, and consequently to act more critically and more powerfully as citizens. Karen Bishop Morris presents several ways that writing teachers might construct assignments to help students interact directly with the world outside the classroom. Such experiential learning, however, is valuable not only because of the bridge it builds from the classroom to the outside world, but also because of the academic

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benefits it fosters. As students participate in meaningful writing activities, Morris argues, they develop cultural capital essential to success at the university beyond the first-year writing course.

Of course, if the rhetorical training students get from us is to empower them to act in the real world, we as teachers should acknowledge that we share some responsibility for students' actions, however remote. Given the prevalence of violence in our local, national, and international communities, teachers can be understandably concerned when students write about violence. Nonetheless, drawing on FBI, US Secret Service, school threat assessment, and psychological research, Lori D. Brown suggests that violent texts are not to be feared or censored, but rather embraced, as they can offer opportunities for personal growth, improved student writing, and increased safety.

The final chapters of this section, essays by Rachel McCoppin and by Ruth A. Goldfine and Deborah Mixson-Brookshire, examine the effects that first-year writing assignments can have on students' values. One initial challenge for many students lies in recognizing that we each see the world from a particular point of view and that our audiences' perspectives may be quite different from our own. In her essay, McCoppin presents assignments that promote tolerance, empathy, and analysis of difference, and Goldfine and Mixson-Brookshire discuss how such assignments work—that is, the role that writing coursework plays in students' ethical development, and how argument analysis assignments can help students learn to formulate and articulate their individual perspectives.

Collectively, the essays in this section remind us why training in rhetoric was long considered indispensable to a meaningful education. It is true that writing classes train students in the skills they need to succeed in the short term, at the university. And it's also true that, like my students' analogical sandwich makers, writers need to have certain basic resources and abilities at our command in order to be successful, and given the competing demands on our time and our attention in writing classes, it might be that simple and safe is sometimes best. We could, in other words, get by on white bread and peanut butter and jelly, but without more ingredients than those at our fingertips, our creative options (not to mention our nutritional ones) remain limited. The ultimate value of our classes—the reason we write—lies in how they help our students make more creative and powerful use of the rhetorical resources available to them, and thus grow into more sophisticated, thoughtful, critical rhetorical agents.