Composition as a Write of Passage

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Nathalie Singh-Corcoran

Welcome to English 101, a course that is designed to introduce you to college-level reading and writing. This intensive class emphasizes composing–the entire process—from invention to revising for focus, development, organization, active style, and voice.

Most colleges and universities require first year composition (hereafter FYC).*

The overarching goal of FYC is to familiarize you with academic discourse (i.e. college level reading and writing) so that you can apply what you learn in future writing situations. While the goal is sound, you might be feeling a disconnect between the writing you are doing in FYC and the writing you believe you will do in your major and career. I remember feeling that same disconnect when I was a freshman at the University of Arizona. In my first few weeks of English 101, I was ambivalent about what I was learning. I wasn't sure of the purpose of assignments like the personal narrative or the rhetorical analysis, because I believed I would never write those two papers again. If I were never going to have to write papers like that again, why did I have to do them in the first place?

Now, almost twenty years later, I teach FYC courses at West Virginia University, and I direct the writing center. In the first few weeks

of the semester, I see the same look of uncertainty on my students' faces, and I hear students in other FYC courses voicing their frustrations in the writing center. They know that the writing that they do in FYC is very different from the writing that they will do (or are already doing) in biology, forestry, marketing, finance, or even writing careers. Many also believe that writing will not be a part of their academic or professional lives. Recently, I heard a young man at the writing center say, "I'll be so glad when my [English 102] class is over because then, I won't have to write anymore." However, this person was mistaken; in reality, after he passes the FYC requirement, his writing life will not be over. Other courses will require written communication as will most professions.

Given that you will continue writing in your academic and professional lives, the questions that you have about the relevance of FYC are valid. There is even some debate among compositionists (those who study and teach composition courses) about the relevancy of FYC. However, given the research on FYC, the syllabi and assignment sheets that I've gathered, studies from other disciplines I have read, the anecdotal evidence from students that I have collected, and my own experience as a former FYC student and a current FYC teacher, I can tell you the positive effects of the university writing requirement are far reaching.

While the writing tasks in one's chosen major or even in the world of work may not resemble FYC assignments, a thoughtfully crafted FYC course does prepare you for *college level reading and writing* and for the critical reading and writing that you will do every day in your career after college. As I reflect on my FYC experience, I believe that the things I learned as a student laid the groundwork for my future writing life. The individual essays—the personal narrative, the rhetorical analysis, the argumentative research paper, etc.—helped me understand

- how I could use writing to think through my newly forming ideas;
- how a piece of writing always has an audience;
- how to locate, evaluate, and incorporate sources;
- and how important it is to get meaningful feedback so that I could produce better writing *and* become a better writer.

It did, however, take me a long time to come to the conclusion that FYC had value beyond filling needed college credit.

Does Knowledge Transfer?

> *I used to be of the opinion that English 101 and 102 was a waste of time to students in the engineering discipline.*
>
> —*Godwin Erekaife*

Godwin Erekaife, a chemical engineering student who graduated in May 2010, is not alone in his early beliefs about FYC. His opinion about the requirement stemmed from his uncertainty about its practical application and his desire to reserve credit hours for his chosen field: engineering. Godwin's uncertainty is understandable. He wanted broad preparation for chemical engineering and to know how FYC would help him later on. His questions about FYC applicability speak to something called *knowledge transfer:* the degree to which we can use newly learned skills and abilities and apply them in other contexts. In short, Godwin didn't believe that what he learned in FYC would positively impact his engineering coursework.

Godwin's initial thoughts resonate with others. In her recent study—"Understanding Transfer From FYC: Preliminary Results from a Longitudinal Study"—Elizabeth Wardle discovered that after fulfilling their FYC requirements, her students didn't immediately see connections between FYC and other courses. Wardle also found that while they saw some value in what they learned—"new textual features (new ways of organizing material), how to manage large research projects (including use of peer review and planning, how to read and analyze research articles; and how to conduct serious, in-depth academic research" (72)—her students employed few of these new abilities in their first two years of college. In a similar study, "Disciplinarity and Transfer: Students' Perceptions of Learning to Write," Linda Bergmann and Janet Zepernick found that students at their schools saw FYC as a "distraction from the important work of professional socialization that occurs in the 'content area' courses" (138). In essence, their students, like Godwin (and maybe even like you), were eager to enter their fields of study and learn the discourses (ways of thinking, speaking, writing, interpreting, and generally making knowledge in a community) of those fields and would have preferred entering those discourse communities earlier rather than take FYC.

However, both studies also suggest that FYC can be a powerful tool in helping us all learn new discourses. Wardle found that people developed a "meta-awareness about writing, language, and rhetorical strategies" (82) when they took FYC. It helped them "think about writing in the university" (82), how it works, why it works differently in different contexts, and how to use it. Similarly, Bergmann and Zepernick's findings suggest that FYC is a requirement that can teach you "*how to learn to write*" (142). Bergmann and Zepernick provide a really useful metaphor to help you think through both the idea of *meta-awareness* and *learning how to learn to write.* They ask you to consider,

> [The] specific skills athletes learn in one sport (such as how to dribble a basketball) may not be directly transferable to another sport (such as soccer), but what athletes are able to transfer from one sport to another is what they know about how to learn a new sport. Everything about getting one's head into the game is transferable, as are training habits, on-field attitudes, and a generally competitive outlook on the whole procedure. 142

If you think about the FYC requirement in terms of the above sports metaphor, then each discreet writing assignment does not transfer to other courses (just as dribbling a basketball down the court will not help us learn how to dribble a soccer ball downfield). You may write a personal narrative in a FYC course, but you will probably never write another one in any other course. Because of this reality, you might be tempted to think that the FYC requirement is, a waste of time. However, if you think about the course as a whole or the totality of our FYC writing experiences, you can begin to see how FYC is designed to help writers develop critical tools that they can apply to any writing situation (just like learning one sport can help us understand how to learn other sports).

Learning How to Learn to Write: The Purpose and Goals of FYC

As I began to write reports of a more technical nature, I realized the skills I acquired in my 101 and 102 classes could only serve to my advantage in areas of research, organization, and even citations.

—Godwin Erekaife

Godwin's perspective changed from 101 and 102 as a waste of time to an experience that gave him an advantage because he developed a meta-awareness of writing. This awareness could not have occurred if his FYC course did not have well articulated goals that were applicable to wider writing situations, that is, applicable to writing assignments or projects outside of FYC. At West Virginia University, all FYC share common goals. These goals come from the *Council of Writing Program Administrator's, Outcomes Statement for First Year Composition* (hereafter the "Outcomes Statement")–a document that paints writing in a broad context. The authors of the "Outcomes Statement" wanted to identify the "knowledge and common skills" that characterized FYC (1). In addition, the authors wanted the statement to emphasize that FYC was a jumping off point for college writing, and that "learning to write is a lifelong process" (1). Many FYC programs at colleges and universities across the country share these same goals. According to the "Outcomes Statement" by the end of FYC, writers should have an awareness of

- Rhetorical Knowledge
- Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing
- Process
- Conventions
- Composing in Electronic Environments

Each assignment—be it a rhetorical analysis, an argumentative research paper, an interview essay, a personal narrative, etc—is designed to get at the above goals. Below, I include a fairly standard assignment that I've used in my English 101 class. We can use it to turn a critical eye toward the course and examine how such an assignment touches on the WPA goals.

Essay I: Analyzing Arguments

Overview of Essay

We have read and analyzed essays pertaining to the university community (e.g. articles about the value of a university education, students as consumers, and the effects of binge drinking). We have examined these written texts in terms of their purposes, their audiences, their persuasive strategies, and their effectiveness. Your task for this first

major essay is to find an article that addresses the issue you have chosen to focus on this semester, and analyze the strategies the author uses in order to argue/persuade and appeal to her/his audience. You will also need to speak to the effectiveness of the article: In your opinion do you think the article is a successful piece of persuasion*?* You will need to guide your readers (your peers and your professor) through your analysis so that they too recognize the persuasive strategies the writer has used.

- As you brainstorm for this essay, look back at your notes. Recall the key questions from pp. 42–3 of *Everything's an Argument* like, Who is the audience for this argument? How does the audience connect with its audience? What shape does the argument take? How are the arguments presented or arranged? What media does the argument use? Take a look at the full list of questions, and answer as many as you can. I'm not expecting that your paper address all of them, but use questions that are generative—that is, the questions that inspire fruitful, interesting, and complex responses.
- Think about the conversations that we've had in class. We've identified arguments of the heart, arguments based on character, on value, and on logic. Where do you see these arguments in the text you've chosen? Consider how they work in the text to inform, to move the audience to action, to think differently, to consider other perspectives, etc.
- Remember, you are also creating an argument to persuade your reader to accept your point of view. Pay attention to your own persuasive strategies.

Assessment Criteria

I will be assessing your papers based on the following:

- How well you provide context for your readers (peers and professors). We will not have read the article you are analyzing, so you will need to provide a vivid and descriptive summary.
- How clearly and effectively you make your argument. Remember, you too are creating an argument to persuade your reader to accept your point of view. Pay attention to your own rhetorical choices.

- How thoughtfully you have analyzed the choices and strategies the author uses to argue/persuade her or his audience.
- How thoroughly you have provided your readers with relevant and specific examples/details.
- How cohesively and coherently your essay flows. Is it choppy or repetitive?
- How free your paper is of grammatical/punctuation/spelling errors.

Requirements and Due Dates

- Your paper should be between 5 and 6 pages (double-spaced and typed, 12 pt. font)
- You will need to include a works cited page using MLA format
- See syllabus for rough and final draft due dates

My "Analyzing Arguments Assignment" makes both explicit and implicit nods to the "Outcomes Statement." For example, the assignment asks writers to exercise their *rhetorical knowledge.* According to the "Outcomes Statement," rhetorical knowledge consists of an awareness of purpose, audience, rhetorical situation (a concept that refers to: the speaker/writer, audience, the necessity to speak/write, the occasion for speaking/writing, what has already been said on the subject, and the general context for speaking/writing), and an understanding of genre conventions (what kind of text—written, verbal, visual—is appropriate for a given rhetorical situation).

The underlined portion in the first paragraph identifies the purpose of the assignment and asks that writers be mindful of their own audiences (professor and peers) as they compose their essays:

> Your task for this first major essay is to find an article that addresses the issue you have chosen to focus on this semester, and **analyze the strategies the author uses in order to argue/persuade and appeal to her/his audience**. You will also need to speak to the effectiveness of the article: **In your opinion, do you think the article is a successful piece of persuasion?** You will need to guide your readers (your peers and your professor) through your analysis so that they too recognize the persuasive strategies the writer has used.

The assignment also asks writers to pay attention to an author's rhetorical situation: who he/she is writing to, the degree to which he/she is attentive to audience needs and concerns, what compelled him/her to write, why is there a need to write, and what has already been written on the subject.

Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing is the degree to which we understand and use writing and reading as modes for thinking through ideas, for learning, for synthesizing material, and for conveying information. When writers respond to the prompt, they also exercise their *critical thinking, reading, and writing* skills. I ask my students to examine their chosen text and ask probing questions of them. I try prompting them to engage their critical thinking skills at several points:

> Think about the conversations that we've had in class. We've identified arguments of the heart, arguments based on character, on value, and on logic. Where do you see these arguments in the text you've chosen? Consider how they work in the text to inform, to move the audience to action, to think differently, to consider other perspectives, etc.

The above are examples of heuristics: questions posed to help writers think more deeply about the articles they are analyzing.

There are other goals that are more implicit in the assignment. For instance, I require at least two complete drafts of an essay (rough and final). The drafts are one way that I build writing as a *Process* into each assignment. The "Outcomes Statement" emphasizes that writing is recursive, that good writing requires multiple drafts, that we benefit from feedback, and that it is also useful to give feedback to others. I want my students to get feedback from each other and also other people such as the WVU Writing Center peer tutors, so that when they do hand in their final drafts, their papers represent their best effort. In the assignment, I also ask that writers follow a particular format (MLA) and that the paper be "error free," a nod to *Knowledge of Conventions.* The only goal that isn't immediately apparent is *Technology,* unless we can count that the paper be double-spaced and typed (12 pt font). While *Technology* isn't obvious in the assignment, in my classes we make ample use of message boards, email, and Google Docs as we compose. For example, students share and respond to drafts using

Microsoft Word's Track Changes feature, Blackboard and/or Google Docs.

Even though I've identified the goals for FYC and discussed those goals in relation to an assignment, it might not yet be clear how I can claim that the course teaches us how to learn to write. To further illustrate my point, it might be useful to return to Godwin and his experience. Above, he states that FYC *served to his advantage* later in his academic career. He went on to tell me that in a senior-level, chemical engineering courses, he and his classmates "were required to design an ethanol plant and write up a description of [their] model" (Erekiafe). When it came time to write up their plans and their research, they had to take into account their audience and the audience needs, concerns, and expectations. Godwin identified the professor as the primary audience because the prof was evaluating the collaborative project, but there was a secondary audience as well: chemical engineers. Because Godwin was writing a formal plan, his assignment had to conform to conventions specific to the chemical engineering profession. Godwin was also composing his ethanol plant plan with others. They composed their pieces separately but then had to find ways to bring their individual sections together. According to Godwin, this portion of the project required "drafting and redrafting on multiple occasions."

Learning How to Learn to Write: Outside of FYC

Because of his experience with assignments like the one I shared earlier, Godwin (and his co-authors) had the tools to identify how to write his ethanol plant plan. He understood the things he needed to pay attention to—purpose, audience, and process—in order to successfully write his plan. But Godwin's experience is not unique.

> *In my Psychology 202 Research Methods class, our last major assignment for the semester was a research proposal. We were asked to pick a topic of interest, develop a research question, and create a hypothetical experience . . . Developing a research question and the experiment required a lot of critical thinking. We had to do research on a broad topic . . . and then think of an original experiment based on the research. This meant we had to have an understanding of the way a successful experiment was done and be creative enough to do something no one else had thought of.*
>
> *—Amanda King*

Amanda, a Psychology major slated to graduate in May 2011, talks about an assignment that all Psych majors eventually complete. In her Psych 202 class, she had to identify an appropriate research question, seek out relevant research material, describe a feasible mock experiment, and present her information in a way that was appropriate in her discipline. She asserts that she employed her critical thinking skills—skills that are very discipline-specific. She was practicing discipline-specific problem solving. According to John Bean, a professor of English, Writing Program Administrator at Seattle University, and author of a resource book on the importance of writing across the disciplines, critical-thinking is "discipline-specific since each discipline poses its own kinds of problems and conducts inquiries, uses data, and makes arguments in its own characteristic fashion" (3). However, he goes on to say that critical thinking is "also generic across disciplines" (4) because all critical thinking involves identifying or exploring a problem, challenge, or question and formulating a response. That response might come in the form of concrete answers or even new questions that need to be asked.

Amanda obtained early experiences in critical thinking when she took FYC and composed essays like the "Argument Analysis." FYC at WVU also includes a persuasive research paper, an essay that required her to identify a research question on a topic of her choosing and to convince her audience to accept her answer/response to that question. Assignments like these are early training, designed to teach writers critical thinking, reading, and writing skills: an understanding of genre conventions and research skills.

Learning How to Learn to Write: The World of Work

> *When I first began my job, I had a hard time adapting the way I wrote to the tone of the business. I was used to writing 20 page papers for school.*
>
> *—Lauren O'Connor*

I make a claim very early in this essay that FYC's efficacy extends into the world of work. However, as Lauren O'Connor points out above, school writing is very different from workplace writing. After Lauren graduated from WVU in May 2008, she took a position as

a Global Marketing Communications Manager for Hewlett-Packard (HP). Lauren's job required that she write all the time: emails to her co-workers, memos regarding deliverables, press-releases, and corporate announcements for new product launches. She didn't immediately know how to compose these documents, so she had to learn the way the HP community spoke and wrote. She "researched and read hundreds of marketing materials, white papers [reports that offer solutions to business problems], and web pages," before she could begin drafting any of these documents (O'Connor).

She also didn't have anyone guiding her as she was learning the discourse of HP. At the university, you are fortunate to have instructors, peers, and writing center tutors to coach you on how to compose FYC essays and discipline-specific texts. Lauren was on her own. However, because she had been in the habit of writing at the university, had so much experience learning how to write in school, and because of the coaches who modeled good writing for her, she knew what she needed to do when she got to HP—get her hands on as many texts as she could in order to learn the various genres—white papers, memos, web pages, press releases—that she would eventually have a hand in authoring.

Lauren also found that she never authored anything alone (aside from emails or memos). She collaborated on a team where each member would draft sections or portions of a text, circulate drafts among the other team members, comment on drafts, re-draft, and re-circulate. Depending on the size or impact of the project, the process could take weeks (O'Connor). While you might not yet enjoy or fully appreciate the writing process (brainstorming, drafting, receiving feedback, and re-drafting) in your FYC class, Lauren shows you that process extends beyond your college years.

Conclusion

So far, I have spent a lot of time talking about how FYC goals have wide applicability and how they are designed to get you to think about writing in a broader sense—what writing looks like across varying contexts. I have not, however, discussed, to any large extent, the impact of technology on writing in college or in the world of work. Perhaps that's because technology is so embedded in composing, it seems invisible. Few writers draft using anything but Microsoft Word anymore.

Writers also make a habit of emailing drafts to one another. I use the comment feature in Microsoft Word in order to give my student's feedback and I encourage them to do the same when they give feedback to each other. Writers in FYC also don't just draft traditional essays anymore—even though all of the examples that I include are more traditional. Your FYC courses might require that you compose blogs, audio essays, or digital stories in lieu of the more traditional texts. I believe the initial goals that I discuss still apply to these texts, but it will be interesting to see how they influence how you learn how to write.

Given what you have learned thus far from Lauren, Amanda, and Godwin—that you will indeed write beyond your FYC courses, that writing becomes increasingly specialized (within our majors and within our workplaces)—you should see how the fundamentals of FYC apply to most writing situations. The more you write and the more aware you are of how, why, when, and where you use writing, the better you will be at writing. It pays to be a good writer. The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges (NCWAFSC) calls writing a "threshold skill [. . .] a ticket to professional opportunity" (qtd in National Writing Project Staff: Web). Their studies show that students who write well are more likely to be hired. This makes sense when you consider that employers get to know an applicant first through her employment documents (i.e. resumes and cover letters), in essence, the writing. By the time you put together resumes and cover letters, you will have consciously employed the multiple goals first established in FYC and then reaffirmed in other coursework. Again according to the NCWAFSC, "Writing is [. . .] a 'marker' of high-skill, high-wage, professional work" (qtd in National Writing Project Staff: Web).

When you are a new first-year student, a senior poised for the job market, or are in the world of work, writing will always be important. First year composition isn't just the beginning of a new writing awareness; *it's a write of passage.*

Discussion

1. What kind of writing do you do on a day to day basis? Take a few minutes to jot down your list. Record everything you wrote today from morning until night (e.g., to do list, email, text message, Facebook status update, journal, etc.). How does

your purpose and audience inform how you compose each of these texts?

2. How do your school writing assignments compare to Godwin's Ethanol Plant Plan, Amanda's Research Proposal, or the assignment sheet (Analyzing Arguments)?
3. Can you think of any additional goals that your writing assignments touch on? What would you add to the WPA goals?
4. What kind of writing do you think you'll do in your future profession (e.g. business proposals, emails to colleagues, interoffice memos, patient plans of care, etc.)?

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