WRITING VALUES: BETWEEN COMPOSITION AND THE DISCIPLINES

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As a graduate student at The University of Akron, I often found myself questioning some of the values in the field of Composition studies. There seemed to be a disconnect between the disciplines and Composition which hindered my adherence to certain popular composition pedagogies and theories. I envisioned a composition program in which student identity, revision, and expression was valued, and I imagined undergraduates facing a harsh reality when delving into other subject areas that did not reflect the ideals of student-centered pedagogy. With that contradiction in mind, I designed a thesis project that explores what some of the ideals are in Composition and how they translate over into the disciplines. Throughout my research, I view Composition through the lens of its role as a service to general education requirements and investigate how those general education goals match up with the values of writing in some other disciplines.

Research Intent

To explore the differences and similarities in writing values between Composition instructors and instructors of other disciplines, I conducted in-depth interviews with three
Composition instructors and four instructors in other disciplines. I sought to answer some of the following questions:

1) Is there a disconnect between what Compositionists look for in writing and what aspects they value in other disciplines?

2) What do the teachers in this study value in writing? How do they communicate these values to students?

3) How do the styles of writing/purposes for writing align between Compositionists and instructors in other disciplines?

4) How does the student fit into the grading? How does the interpersonal relationship affect the student? Is it hard to distance the student from the grade?

5) How do instructors in this study view writing as a process? Are there differences between Composition instructors and instructors in other disciplines?

**Expectations**

Most of my expectations of how writing was perceived in other disciplines were rooted in my earlier experiences in undergraduate and graduate school. As I began learning some of the more prevalent beliefs in the Composition field, I couldn’t imagine concepts like revision and interpersonal relationships working the same way in other areas of study. As someone who had been through college, I had trouble recalling any course outside of English where revisions were accepted, and I tended to have less personal educational relationships with my professors outside of English. Was that
simply because I was an English major? How could these values operate outside of English, and how would that affect what instructors value in writing assessment?

To put it succinctly, I thought some of the values in composition could be damaging to undergraduate students. I chose to focus on the term “values” because it embodies something more practically grounded than “ideals.” Also, the concept of values indicates something more than theoretical notions. When I use the term values, I’m talking about how individual instructors and scholars view concepts that they think are important in their field or to writing.

If our field sometimes builds close interpersonal relationships, encourages revision, and often introduces the undergraduate to college writing through personal narrative, then how will these students operate with teachers who don’t focus as much on the student as a person, don’t encourage revision in their classroom, and hold different purposes of writing than some of the Compositionists at the same university? Furthermore, how do differences in how faculty value writing affect the student concretely in terms of grades?

Of course, some of these concerns were put to rest the more I came to understand the variety of theories and pedagogical approaches in the field of Composition. I slowly saw the connections between personal narrative and argumentation, and I realized that interpersonal relationships, while different in Composition, could exist in other disciplines as well. However, before I began my research, the gap I perceived between Composition and other disciplines before this study was a large gap indeed.

In Chapter I, Revision/Process, I will discuss writing as a process, particularly the concept of revision. I explain some of the ideals of revision/writing as a process in
Composition. Then, I uncover how the Compositionists in this study view revision as compared to the instructors in other disciplines.

Chapter II focuses on the Student as Person. This section takes a look at notions such as student identity and student-teacher interpersonal relationships within Composition and other disciplines and how the instructors in this study view those concepts. This section, using the instructors’ narratives, attempts to find how they are different in Composition as compared to other disciplines and why.

The Purpose of Writing is the centralized concept in Chapter III. I discuss how the instructors in other disciplines within this study see the purpose of writing. They use writing in their classrooms for critical thinking/analysis, to express understanding, to persuade, and to articulate meaning. I compare this to the Compositionists in this study and point out crossovers in these applications of writing in the classroom.

In Chapter IV, I focus on Writing Assessment and the grading ideals and methods of the instructors in this study. I’ll take a look at syllabi and rubrics that some instructors use and compare what they have to say about grading writing. In this section I discuss the differences in grading methods and outlooks under the umbrella concept of situational truth. Also, it’s important to note here that this chapter was originally the core focus of this thesis and, as such, the narratives throughout the project are focused specifically on grading.

Also, before each section in this thesis, I offer a brief Prelude – a personal teaching experience connected to the topic. These narratives attempt to work in conjunction with the narratives of the instructors to give real-life situations to the terminology and theory that I discuss in this thesis.
Methodology

I chose Compositionists who represent a small cross-section of the composition department at The University of Akron. One Compositionist, Dr. Wallace Thomas, is the director of the Composition Program. Dr. Janice Dean is an associate professor of English, and Ms. Amy Tane was, at the time, a teaching assistant while working on her Master’s Degree (and has since graduated from the department).

The instructors across the disciplines were chosen in conjunction with my Thesis Director. It is important to note that the instructors were chosen because of their connections with composition and as such represent educators in those disciplines who emphasize the practice of writing. I interviewed Compositionists including Janice Dean, Amy Tane, and Wallace Thomas. I interviewed Dr. Roland Seth in Economics, Ms. Joanne Stratford in Sociology, Dr. Taylor Beaucedine in History, and Dr. Ben Laken in Political Science. The instructors were purposefully chosen because of their appreciation for the importance of writing as it relates to their discipline so that they could contribute to this study in a meaningful way, and the disciplines were chosen to represent the social sciences (Sociology, History, Political Science, and Economics).

I prepared a series of questions to ask the instructors and, after IRB approval, interviewed each instructor. The questions were designed to explore the questions I had in mind while leaving the door open to explore notions I had not anticipated. Other questions were asked based on the instructor’s input. The interviews were recorded at the instructor’s consent, and I transcribed the conversations into document format.

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1 The names of all participants or students mentioned in this study have been changed to pseudonyms.
This narrative research is the largest basis of this study. I chose narrative research so that I could get a real perception of The University of Akron while hearing individual testimony from actual instructors. Why narrative research?

Wendy Bishop says that “interviews are woven into the fabric of life; they are ubiquitous” (94). Though her arena of research is ethnographic, this study connects to her perception of interviews through the common ground of “a researcher in search of a narrative thread” (92). Bishop mentions that sometimes interviewees delve into long narratives or “ten minute monologues” (100) when prompted, and those lengthy narratives are exactly what I sought out in this study. I needed “key informants” to help me “verify impressions” (84).

I sought out this narrative thread to gain a better philosophical and pedagogical view of the instructors and their practices. I composed interview questions, but allowed myself to venture outside that structure based on the instructors’ responses. I acknowledge that a large part of what occurs following their narratives and at the onset of my analysis is leaving their data to my biases and impressions. As Bishop says, “The metaphor of a frame – what is included and what is excluded by framing – allows us to see what is involved at every step of the textualization process. As we transcribe and textualize interviews, we become ever more involved in issues of representation” (108). While I then become an arranger of narratives, picking and choosing what to display and how to display it, I ground these decisions in the impressions that I have and how the narratives support or contradict my suspicions. I try to display both effects equally, while refraining from showing the narrative largely unconnected or repetitive.
Also, narrative research helps focus my view of Composition as a discourse community, or as Patricia Bizzell (1994) would phrase it, “a group of people who share certain language-using practices” (222). We label things, categorize concepts, use theory, prescribe pedagogy, and insert our consistently phrased theory whenever possible. It creates the community of Composition, and that community thrives because of our shared knowledge. The challenge with that knowledge is that it isn’t universal, and the “shared knowledge” isn’t quite as homogenous as the term implies. Discourse communities don’t share a consistent set of beliefs; they share the central or most established set of beliefs within the field (Bizzell, 1994, 222-223). And, to further complicate Composition as a discourse community, the field could be conceived as a collection of smaller discourse communities with shared ideals within the field.

Narrative research takes the concept of a discourse community, which shares language use and places it in a specific location. In other words, the instructors within this thesis are representing their fields of study, but within their specific context allows. They’re grounded in the situational discourse of The University of Akron and distinguished by personal beliefs. Their views on writing are applied specifically to their course, and the comparison is then made not to an entire field of study, but to similar entities from other fields within similar contexts.

Using this narrative research I endeavored to answer some of the questions previously mentioned (see Research Intent) through the instructors’ experiences as well as my own (Preludes). Aligning these narratives with some of the research in the field will give an insight to the disconnects I had imagined between English Composition and social sciences.
CHAPTER II

REVISION PRELUDE

My teaching course load moved from grammar-based basic writing courses to research writing, and that change in my teaching prompted a new element: revision. My students offered me several challenges when dealing with writing as a process. One student, Jack, revised as he went along, in his own head. At conferences and in class inquiries into his progress, Jack was an explosion of papers. Every week he had a new topic to write about, and papers covered in scratches of whatever idea he was attached to that week seemed to swirl about behind him. He revised in conversations with me, explaining what he thought, then self-editing the unreadable drafts sprawled about before him. When I asked him the focus of his paper, he’d reply with something like, “Well, I started with this, and then I decided that might not work, so I did this, but that didn’t work either. I might do this, but that might complicate this.” He worked out the content in his mind during the process, and he used me as a conversational outlet for his revisions.

Another student, Jennifer, revised more concretely within the writing process. With each conference, I marked her paper and discussed some of the writing concepts (focus, flow, transition, analysis) that, when fine-tuned, could tighten up her paper. She
nodded, taking notes. Taking notes? This was exciting. In class my students jot down things they don’t think they’ll remember; some would even underline passages abstractly, but Janice was the only one who took notes during the conference. She literally composed prose about the points I made.

My writing-lab background (I was a tutor before I was a teacher) was rekindled, and I found myself falling in love with the process-aspect of writing again. I strived to find a way to incorporate the natural process of writing into my grammar course. I had my students write short papers that had to be grammatically and punctuationally, but the process involved was minimal. Most of them hammered out one to two pages the night before and spell/grammar checked them, leaving to fate all of the homonyms and “there,” “their,” “they’re” glitches. To bring process farther into my realm as a basic writing teacher, I implemented a portfolio. At the beginning of every class, I had my students do short freewritings (5-10 minutes) and then repair those freewritings based on the grammar lesson of that class. Each freewriting would be looked out through the lens of that particular lesson, but they were also graded on how they went back and fixed different freewritings in between lessons.

It was a struggle to ground these portfolios in a grammar-based course, especially one in a curriculum designed to be a series of basic writing courses. I teach Sentence Writing, and the next course in the series is Paragraph Writing. Because my course was, by design, supposed to be a non-contextual course of picking out clauses, identifying parts of speech, and correcting grammar in a list of disconnected sentences that they didn’t write in the first place, I could only go so far into more contextual-based writing courses. Since the paragraph writing would focus on elements such as structure, form,
and transitions, I had to find a place in the course to put revision/process while maintaining the technical spirit of the course and not overstepping the course bounds.

Revision was difficult for me to fit into my basic writing course even when in the same field of study. While my conceptualization of assessment of the portfolio develops, I minimize the percentage of the portfolio on the final course grade until I can come closer to perfecting my methods. However, it’s a good guide for how well the students learned the concepts and care about practicing their methods. Implementing revision in the disciplines must be even more difficult.
CHAPTER III

REVISION/PROCESS

Nancy Sommers captures the beautiful, freeing idea of revision: “It is deeply satisfying to believe that we are not locked into our original statements, that we might start and stop, erase, use the delete key in life, and be saved from the roughness of our early drafts” (1999, 315). The reasons for stopping, erasing, and deleting are rooted more precisely in the idea of process (see Murray 1972). In other words, to examine revision is to examine writing as an ongoing process.

Rebecca Rule (1993) acknowledges the awkwardness that writers feel when they treat writing as a process. However, that discomfort brings forth within the writer “how to elicit criticism, how to use it, and, eventually, how to be their own best critics” (43). Revision was a vague notion to me, as an undergraduate student. I understood the ideas of editing, and as a reader I had some conception of what worked and what didn’t. Entering graduate school gave me a stronger notion of how Composition scholars viewed the process of writing and how deeply process was rooted in the field. As an undergraduate, many courses I took focused on product with absolutely no writing instruction or revision possibility. Because the concept of writing as a process was only made apparent to me in my graduate-level Composition courses, the notion that writing in
all of its forms is a process was awkward to me at first. Rule’s sentiment of the awkwardness of revision hits home with me because of the disconnect I envisioned between the English courses that prepare students for writing and the disciplines.

The Situation

I thought that the different perceptions of revision held by various instructors in the disciplines created a gap between Composition and the Social Sciences. My English professors trained me to overwrite and revise. “Process not product” is the war cry that echoes throughout the Composition program, and I never imagined that the sentiment would actually carry over into other disciplines. As I resubmitted drafts in graduate school of papers which I was fine-tuning for the second or third time, I imagined the students I was being trained to instruct carefully practicing the art of revision and refining the reader within them to gain better judgment on how to revise to make the best choices in order to get their message across. I then imagined those same students crushed in other classrooms when other professors who didn’t have the same kind of time as the Composition Program does to devote to the craft of writing. I imagined them staring at “B’s” “C’s” and *gasp* even “D’s” thinking about what they could have done to make it all just a little bit better, but not having the same opportunities.

The Composition Field

The sentiment of “process not product” is instilled quite directly into the pedagogy and theory of many writing instructors. In Joseph Harris’s (1997) *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*, he discusses the field in terms of four concepts, one of which is process. He states that process had “quickly become the marker of an informed, or progressive stance toward teaching writing” (55). It’s as though Harris sees process as
the foundation of teaching writing in Composition, or at least that the acknowledgement of process made the subject of teaching writing possible or more advanced.

In Victor Villanueva’s (2003) *Cross-Talk In Comp Theory*, he includes an essay by Donald Murray under the section “The ‘Given’ In Our Conversations.” This 1972 essay, “Teaching Writing as a Process Not Product,” urges the reader to think of writing conceptually as a process rather than product. When a student hands in a paper, Murray suggests, we need to think of the draft as a work in progress – part of the process of writing – rather than a finished copy of work. By considering writing complete when a teacher receives it, we subject a piece of the process to scrutiny deserving of literature. Since writing is a process, considering it a product has ramifications. Working merely on the product with the student won't enable the student to enter the stages of writing more easily or pass through them with more finesse. Instead, a teacher will judge based on a single product and blame the student if their process did not produce an adequate product.

Murray also originally discussed the three stages of writing. He claims that prewriting takes up 85% of the writer's time, which is a figure I think writing instructors are optimistic to believe. With stories of students beginning papers the night before they're due, having broad topics too difficult to take on, and turning in first drafts, it's difficult for me to believe that 85% of their time is spent on prewriting. This attention to prewriting connects to Murray's main argument, that writing is a process. Because teachers focus on the finished product, students focus on that as well, creating a need for major revision after the paper is handed in (which wouldn’t take place due to the disregard of process) and creating a disregard for the initial process. This simply places the process as taking place largely after the deadline rather than before as teachers.
sometimes envision it. Murray later recognizes process taking place in revision more so than in prewriting. Murray’s ideas of process illustrate how the process of writing is a flexible, changeable entity which can shift based on the instructor’s expectations and allowances of revision placed upon the student.

The Compositionists

To get a better vision of how revision is really seen by those who teach Composition, I turn now to the instructors in the study. Their sentiment gives a contextual grounding for how Composition instructors at The University of Akron view Composition.2

Janice Dean has a PhD in Composition from The University of Southern Florida, and she is an Associate Professor of English at The University of Akron. She teaches writing, film, and cultural studies, and her research interests include cultural studies, contemporary discourse theory, rhetoric and public policy, and the politics of education. Dr. Dean talks directly about the importance of emphasizing process. She explains:

First I think that progress is an integral part of grading anyone’s writing, otherwise all you’re doing is looking at product, and process is a huge part of that. This is about improvement rather than mastery, particularly at the freshman level. I try to structure my assignments in such a way that students are continually getting feedback and reworking, revising, adding to, or building up what has come before, so the entire semester is seen as a trajectory of improvement and acquisition. I try to grade accordingly, and I use an end of the semester portfolio in order to sort of make good on that . . . So they do turn in their work throughout

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2 All biographical information regarding the participants in the study is taken from The University of Akron website.
the semester. I look at countless versions, including just simple proposals, and they get feedback. There are grades that are built in for classroom participation, doing workshops, things like that. And then the portfolio is the sort of necessary looking at earlier revisions all the way up to the final product and then focusing somewhat on product in the end.

The emphasis on process that Dr. Dean refers to is something which, in my experience, is widely accepted in the field. In fact, you might call her progress-oriented grading method of a portfolio a standard way of grading in the field. The teachers in the program at The University of Akron use portfolios, which are a requirement in the English program. Portfolios place emphasis on process and progress, while eventually focusing on a product. The eventual focus on product seems to be a necessary aspect in the traditional classroom setting with deadlines and assessment. Dr. Dean’s remark that “Process is a huge part of [writing]” is one of the major ideas taught in composition to those teaching writing. It’s the sort of notion born from the beginnings of the composition field (Murray’s essay dates back to 1972) that is so widely accepted that it’s rarely a point of debate within the field.

While there is a “post-process” group of Compositionists who focus on the more social aspects of writing, they are still post-process, not anti-process. In fact, Dr. Dean teaches cultural studies and is interested in social and cultural implications on writing. The idea of process is so ingrained in our conception of writing assessment that there is no debate regarding the validity of process in the field, but instead process is discussed amongst other concepts such as the cognitive, social, creative, and other such connected aspects.
For example, Amy Tane is still exploring ways to best deal with writing as a process in terms of grading. Ms. Tane was a teaching assistant in The Department of English at The University of Akron. Since this study, she has graduated with her Masters in English in Composition from The University of Akron. During her studies, she taught English 111. She says “I know sometimes they say you really shouldn’t do that [grade based on what the students just learned]— you should look at the overall thing – but I don’t think it’s fair to them to grade them the same way I grade the first paper as I do the fourth paper. By the fourth I’m a little bit less lenient.”

Dr. Thomas received his PhD in Composition from Indiana University of Pennsylvanina, and he serves as the Director of Composition at The University of Akron. His research specialty is social-epistemic rhetoric, and he is especially interested in composition studies relating to students at risk. His experience includes writing centers, composition and computers, pedagogical ethics, and portfolio assessment. Dr. Thomas approaches the grading of writing with contracts (which will be discussed more later), but his method leaves ample room for revision. He says, “The person [student] can revise the grade till I’m satisfied with it or until I tell them ‘let’s move on to another project.” He gives maximum opportunity for revision within the time constraints of the class, stating that “most of the time students can revise until we run out of time.” He takes the context of student in consideration, aligning his beliefs in that way with some of the student-centered notions of composition, but he rests the assessment itself in his own hands, removing the emphasis slightly from the student.
Writing in the Disciplines

As it turns out, the other disciplines can foster the notion of revision as much if not more than Composition courses. Dr. Roland Seth obtained his PhD in Economics at The University of Connecticut. At the undergraduate level he’s taught Economics courses including various Labor Economics courses, Comparative Economic Systems, Urban Economics, Microeconomic Theory, Women in the Labor Market, as well as both one and two term Principles of Macroeconomics courses. Dr. Seth is an Associate Professor at The University of Akron.

Dr. Seth is alarmed at students who don’t take the chance to rewrite. He says that one of the challenges in teaching writing is “to break an old habit that many of our students seem to have about writing things at the last minute and the first draft is the last draft.” He recognizes writing as a process, not a product. Throughout my interview with him, I was surprised at how what he valued in writing from the standpoint of Economics matched up with what is valued in Composition. Since I assumed that writing in other disciplines focused on product, I didn’t think that professors in disciplines outside of Composition gave their students the same opportunities that most writing courses permit.

Joanne Stratford is an Adjunct Faculty member in the Sociology Department at The University of Akron. She teaches Introduction to Sociology and Sociology of Gender. Ms. Stratford seems elated when students take advantage of such opportunities to revise in her sociology courses: “I wish more people would give me a first draft. Like I said, I really encourage them; it just doesn’t appeal to too many people.” She later adds, “I got one today and I was very happy about that. I have a paper due next week in one of my Intro classes, and I’ve had two papers so far
come to me . . . So we’re clocking down here to the end of the wire and I’ve received two out of a class of fifty, but they have the opportunity.” Stratford is eager to receive revisions and disappointed that more students don’t turn in drafts. Revision in Stratford’s class occurs before the deadline for the paper. Before the product needs to be turned in, there is plenty of room for process.

Taylor Beaucedine is an Associate Professor in History at The University of Akron. She graduated with a PhD in Women’s History from Binghamton University. She has taught U.S. History Since 1877 and U.S. Women’s History in which she incorporates looks at social history, cultural history and diplomatic history. In her course she offers a Tuesday and Thursday discussion section where a teaching assistant and the students discuss writing assignments that have already been handed back to the students with grades. Beacedine explains that “the idea I wanted to get across to them is that you can always improve on an essay; every essay needs work.” I asked Beaucedine how many opportunities they have to revise these papers. She replied, “Unlimited! My philosophy is if a student wants to do better, give them the opportunity to do better.” Her History courses offer revision until near when grades are due, giving the writing process and her students a chance to work until the natural confinements of a course demand that product enters the picture.

Dr. Ben Laken is an Associate Professor in Political Science at The University of Akron. He graduated with a PhD in Political Science from The University of Washington. He teaches Law, Mediation, and Violence; Crime, Punishment, and Politics: A Comparative Perspective; Law and Society; Understanding Racial Conflict; Government and Politics in the United States; The Politics of Policing. Political Science
courses taught by Dr. Laken give opportunity for revision as well. In his undergraduate courses, he integrates peer editing into his classroom revision process. The students bring in multiple copies of their papers and they work on revising it. Laken says:

I think it’s easier to see in someone else’s work when they’re being vague or when the evidence doesn’t work or when there is no claim, or when it’s incoherent, or when it’s begging the question, or when it’s preaching to the choir, or any of the kind of problems that any piece of writing can have. It’s hard to see it in your own writing, but you read your peers’ writing and this isn’t reading a scholarly article, but your peers – same level as you’re writing on the same topic as you, you can see those problems. And I think you learn an important lesson in a peer critique group. You learn how to begin to see those problems, and the hope is that you can turn around as you revise your paper, having gotten some feedback from your peers, you can take that skill to be able to see it and begin to see it in your own writing.

Laken understands that part of the process of writing is teaching yourself to be a skilled reader, to be able to revise your own work. Laken uses group work to hone the revising skill in a way that students can understand. By revising the work of their peers they can begin to see the same patterns in their own writing, and they get to view these similar practices in writing on a similar level as their own. They practice revision by seeing what is good about the writing of others and what could be improved. The students may then apply what they learn to their own processes of writing.

All four of these professors in other disciplines have made room for revision and process of writing in their classes. However, it’s not their knowledge of Composition
theory that surprises me. The knowledge that writing is a skill learned over time with practice is not as elusive as it may seem, and these teachers are capable educators. Instead, what surprises me is the idea that these professors have the time to focus on writing in their classroom in a way that treats writing as a process rather than a product. In Composition courses, the process of writing is often the focus of the entire course. In other disciplines where the subject matter is the focus of the course, it is sometimes more of a strain to find the time to devote to writing.

What it All Means

The consistency between Composition and the other disciplines concerning revision and a focus on process is surely comforting to the student who grows accustomed to the notion of “writing is a process” that is taught in first-year Composition courses. Obviously, not all classrooms across the disciplines will be offering the same opportunities, but at least there is some crossover that will help students practice writing as a process not product. The disconnect I imagined existing between Composition and the disciplines may still exist in some courses and subject areas. However, the instructors interviewed for this project do value revision, and so the disconnect I imagined is not as necessarily imminent when students transition from one classroom to the next.

In fact, the major difference in process was that first-year Composition courses made the process a requirement, demanding drafts of papers and revision, while the disciplines allowed for optional revision. If disciplines outside of the Composition Program maintain a process-oriented outlook on writing, then like other skills and art forms students will have an opportunity to practice, and their writing can truly be given the chance to improve, which will ultimately result in better products anyway.
Karmen was easily my most organized pupil in the fall. The first nine months, she had every assignment in on time, and, being that it was my first quarter teaching at the school, often kept me up to date in terms of school policy. The last week, she asked for an extension on the final paper. She said she had some personal matters going on. I gave her the extension, and she turned it in only a day or two late.

The following quarter, I received a voicemail from the college. Karmen was trying to get a hold of me, and she left her number with the school. Concerned, I called her back. I expected her to ask for tutoring, but what I didn’t expect was an hour long conversation, a portion of which I talked to her husband, to whom I had never before spoken. She talked about what she saw on the news that day, how her family was doing, and what it was like to be a mother.

Some of the conversation was very strange. At other points in time, she talked about her writing class and how much she was struggling. When she started talking about other instructors at the school, I made arrangements to tutor her, and I quickly but gracefully got off the phone.
I met her early the next morning, and I looked over her writing. I sifted through her notes and outlines, and I gave her some pointers on what I perceived the instructor wanted from her. The most astonishing aspect of the situation was how much of her personal life she confided in me when her main objective was to get academic help with a paper.

Since Karmen, there has been one of that same type of student in my classroom pretty much every quarter. When dealing with students who tell their life’s story on a whim, I struggle to maintain a balance between polite participation in the conversation and stark professionalism. One of my fellow instructors at the college said that she never really encountered a situation where the student’s personal life entered the student-teacher dynamic. She teaches math. Is the extreme interpersonal relationship between student and teacher an oddity that only affects Composition?
STUDENT AS PERSON

As a Composition teacher, I found myself encountering student-teacher relationships that were different from my experiences as a student interacting with teachers of other subjects. This led me to believe that Composition may have a unique view on the student, interaction, and identity. Sondra Perl (1994) asks “how . . . do we see beyond the boundaries of a familiar story and envision a new one?” (427). She explores the “connections between the texts we read and the lives we live, between composing our stories and composing ourselves” (427). This kind of exploration underlines a tendency in the field to value self and identity, not just in writing, but in writers (our students). Perl sees a direct relation between text and writer, and she focuses particularly on someone telling their personal stories. Paying particular attention to how students “shape themselves,” Perl captures a sentiment that many Composition scholars and teachers hold in valuing the student as person (428). Valuing the student’s personality and personal stories is an aspect of some composition classrooms where we, as Compositionists, focus on student identity and how to incorporate and allow growth of the student in the classroom.
One measure of the way that the Composition student is valued as a person is through the use of personal narrative in some Composition classrooms. Personal narrative involves the “unique self” and the “construction of the student” (Newkirk, 1997, 85). Though the notion of personal writing is open to debate (some argue that it doesn’t allow for the same kind of analysis and criticism as more academic writing), the argument still encapsulates the disconnect between Composition and the disciplines in viewing the student as a person. The discussion surrounding the role of personal narrative shows the differences of opinion even within the field of Composition.

Bartholomae (2003) discusses how the student’s identity actually needs to be assimilated or “appropriated” into academic writing (623-624). And, though somewhat disturbing to those adhering to those who don’t value or agree with the philosophy that personal narrative should have a central role in the Composition classroom, many institutions see academic writing as preparation that translates into the disciplines better than personal narrative. This debate over the role of the personal narrative in the first year Composition class is thriving in the field, highlighting even more so the emphasis Composition places on the student as a person. Bartholomae’s cry for academic style mimics the sentiment of the disciplines in terms of valuing academic discourse. However, Bartholomae also has a place for narrative in his writing classroom, and just as a Composition instructor can embrace academic discourse and minimalize personal narrative, instructors across the disciplines can find places for personal writing as well.

Even so, personal narrative is just one topic relating to the student as a person or focusing on student identity. When grading writing, many instructors in English have to sort out their own personal beliefs and strive for objectivity. Teaching the student and
viewing them as both an academic entity as well as a person with an identity is one challenge that the disciplines encounter less often (or the challenge is less difficult) because student identity isn’t as emphasized, thus some Composition classrooms differ in nature in this aspect than those in other subject areas.

The Situation

In freshman composition classes that use personal narrative, it’s a fairly inevitable encounter – there’s going to be that student who writes a heart-wrenching story about a personal trauma – drug problems for example. The student is revealing their past and personal values to you through his writing. This complicates writing assessment. It changes the nature of the student-teacher relationship. This interpersonal relationship may lead to directing the student to counseling services if he or she still has a problem or if the issue is still creating psychological repercussions.

Through this narrative research I confirmed my hunch that personal details about students would come up more often in the Compositionists’ interviews. Conferences, small classes, and other components of some composition classrooms help to construct the interpersonal relationship. Another reason for strong interpersonal relationships in some composition classrooms is the use of personal narratives. These narratives speak of the student’s lives and that can create an interpersonal relationship between student and teacher. Students may write passionately about their beliefs in Political Science, History, Sociology, and Economics, but an opinion on a particular subject is different in nature from a story about their family, their past, or their intimate relationships.

One challenge for Compositionists then becomes how to put a grade on this heart-felt writing. If it’s poorly organized, without enough detail, without a solid introduction
or conclusion, how do you tell that student that it isn’t good enough? By placing a “C” on something so embedded in the student’s personal life, educators may not just be commenting on grammar or flow, but rather validating or invalidating the student’s personal experience. Validating or invalidating a personal narrative can impact a student deeply. Composition courses dealing with narrative must then be careful to emphasize the personal experience as a writing choice, and instructors have to be cautious about placing a concrete notion of worth (in terms of writing quality) on personal narrative assignments.

An exploration of interpersonal relationships in writing assessment was one of my original ideas for this thesis, but I broadened the scope in order to explore a larger cross section of what encompasses writing across the curriculum. The topic of interpersonal relationships continues to interest me. How much is too much to know about your student? How do interpersonal relationships work as a catalyst for education? How do different cultures and genders respond when teachers or students build interpersonal relationships? These relations are sparking a growing interest in the field. In this instance, I look at how the interpersonal relationship can affect composition as it services the general education requirements and thereby affects the disciplines according to my narrative research.

The Composition Field

Lad Tobin writes in his book, *Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Classroom*, about the challenges that arise in teaching because of the how we view the student. He tells the story of his brother, Joe, who taught in Chicago. One of Joe’s students, a thirty year old Nigerian gentlemen, was hoping to become a doctor
back in Nigeria. Before pursuing such a goal, he was hoping his academic pursuits would go well in Chicago. He was so frantic about getting good grades that he wrote all over his paper how much he needed an “A.” He pleaded for one saying “A, A, A” and left his phone number, asking Joe to call when he graded the paper.

Joe paced nervously, not knowing what to do. He knew he couldn’t give the paper the A, and he wasn’t even sure that it was a B paper. He called the student, explaining that he gave the paper a B. The man thanked him emphatically, so the scene ended happily. However, the idea in this story is one familiar to many writing instructors. You get to know your students and it’s more difficult to give them bad grades. It’s especially hard when you know that they’re trying and actually care what they receive on a paper.

Similarly, Eva, a graduate student teaching writing, tells about her troubles in *In Our Own Voice: Graduate Students Teaching Writing* with grading students she knows somewhat personally. She says:

I hated stepping away from my students and trying to grade their work objectively. I had to face the fact that I was not a stranger to my students. I knew that Kyle’s girlfriend was pregnant and that this was consuming him. I knew that Susie was so tired from working and taking care of a teething baby at night that she could barely stay awake in class. I knew that Clyde was worried to death that his younger brother was going to join a gang back home (Dennis, Long, and White 265).

It’s difficult when you know about how hard a student is working in a class or what kinds of complications are making it difficult for them to focus on their work. However, the
content of personal narratives can, in their own right, bring in a part of the interpersonal relationship between student and teacher that complicates the grading process.

The Compositionists

I asked the group of teachers about some of their bad experiences teaching writing and about specific instances with students to try to examine the interpersonal relationships between students and teachers in Composition. Many of these conversations led to the topic of interpersonal relationships. Dr. Janice Dean now teaches English Composition 112, a course centered around research and argumentative writing.

She thinks back to when she used to teach personal narrative:

What I recall from those experiences are some really heartbreaking personal stories of students who had gone through or maybe even were currently going through some really awful personal situations, ranging from trying to recover from rape, domestic violence, or depression. It’s partly difficult for me because other than being a generally supportive and accessible teacher, I’m not qualified to counsel students, and so I have referred students to a campus counseling services when I thought they might benefit from it. I tried to do that in the most sensitive way possible, you know, protecting their privacy and that sort of thing, but also seeing that if they didn’t want me to know those things then they wouldn’t have written them.

Dr. Dean’s sentiment represents something similar to what I’ve felt in the classroom. There’s a point where a student divulges so much information about their personal life that you need to step back and think about what to do. How do you respond to this kind of sharing?
Does the student need counseling? Dr. Dean continues, “One of the reasons why I don’t teach English 111 [is] because I don’t feel particularly comfortable saying ‘I’m going to give you a grade, and you paid me tuition, now tell me some of your most personal traumas and inner most thoughts, and then I get to decide if they need help or not’.” This was a surprising view. In Composition, which I perceived as a field filled with personal narrative, and instructor strives to avoid using personal narrative in her classroom.

As Dr. Dean says, “we talk about it [our students’ writing] amongst ourselves; we’re concerned about them even.” The concern for another human is natural, especially for a student in a situation where they are entrusted to your leadership and knowledge. In our concern as teachers we discuss these delicate cases with colleagues in a check to ensure that we’re taking the right course of action, to enlist the advice of others to make sure we’re doing the right thing.

Ms. Tane shared some of her experiences with our graduate class. She found herself in a hard situation, grading a paper titled “I Done Got Laid.” She explained the nature of the essay and said in our interview that “I think what was hard about it is he approached a topic that I feel myself, personal value-wise, that I wouldn’t have written about in that tone, in that dialogue, in a college atmosphere, and he approached it in more of a joking kind of way where they tried to show the beauty of it, but not the way I would have.”

This is the hesitation felt by teachers when grading something that personal, grading something that irremovable from the student’s personal values and personal life. The teaching assistant, Ms. Tane, concludes “Then I had to put that all away and look at
it through their eyes.” This is one of the major aspects to grading writing. When forming a conception of the student’s identity through the personal narratives that students write, it’s important for educators to pull away from their values and see the writing from the point of an instructor and to see the morals and beliefs through the individual’s eyes.

Dr. Dean echoes this student-centered approach in argumentative writing: “I want them to make better arguments, more persuasive arguments, even if they’re arguing towards an end that I personally disagree with.” In this same spirit, Ms. Tane is trying to make the quality of their writing better even if their story is told in a way that conflicts with her personal values or if the telling of the story doesn’t fit in with what she would choose.

Some interpersonal relationships reach extremes where negative aspects interfere with education. Dr. Thomas, the Director of the Composition program, recalls a time when he taught in Cincinnati during rioting in the city. The student, who he calls Erika, “lived in some of the neighborhoods that had been vandalized, this was back in 2001, and she just kind of like deteriorated as the semester went on. There was an incident in my class right after the riots had occurred. I call it racialization.”

The class had a discussion about the rioting. One of the students spoke out about how horrible the rioting was, and how those participating deserved punishment. He expressed his ideas so poignantly that Erika stood up, swore, and left the classroom. It was clear that Erika sympathized with the oppressed state of those rioting, while the class condemned them. Erika’s personal beliefs contrasted with the beliefs of the class in a way that ostracized her from the group. Dr. Thomas needed to bring her back into the classroom as an equal member.
Unfortunately, Erika had personal habits that conflicted with the academic setting. Dr. Thomas and Erika’s interpersonal relationship eventually contained a personal attack when Erika began to make comments like “oh you think you’re so smart.” She marched out of his office with “nasty words” just as she walked out of the classroom. Dr. Thomas remembers:

And she showed up high one time, you know, real obvious, I could smell the marijuana on her. And she didn’t want to learn. I was trying to say ‘What about introductions, what did we learn about introductions?’ She couldn’t tell me. So then I get to the point where I have to say “your introduction isn’t doing what it should for this essay.” So I wasn’t able to teach, and it just became a really awful situation with her.

Dr. Thomas’s experience with Erika shows how her personal habits interfered with learning and how their interpersonal relationship, turning to personal insult, complicated the teacher-student dynamic. Even though he doesn’t really use a lot of personal narrative in his classroom, he does teach subjects in which students feel a great deal of personal investment. In this case, the interpersonal relationship intensified due to her personal values and behaviors. Whether this was a result of the classroom dynamic affected by the rioting discussion or whether she just didn’t want to learn, as Dr. Thomas expressed, is debatable. Whichever the case, Erika’s experience as a student changed the nature of the relationship and ultimately resulted in a grade which didn’t please her.

Dr. Thomas’s explanations of writing and the struggles to find the effective way of handling the classroom dynamic was rooted in concern, both for the student’s writing ability as well as her social standing with the rest of the class. Perhaps Dr. Thomas and
the student didn’t particularly connect well, or maybe the surrounding factors of debate at the time affected the institution so much that it ultimately broke the dynamic of the classroom. However, the emphasis here is that there is a reality of “connecting” with students, not necessarily over personal writing, but because writing is personal, that can disrupt the classroom dynamic. In a subject like composition where so many different arenas of thought can interact with a variety of topics, some very personal, the interpersonal relationship between student and teacher can affect the student’s success in the course and the degree to which the teacher is successful in reaching the student on a social and academic level. In other words, whether the student successfully learns in the classroom can depend on values removed from the institution, found in the student and the teacher and their relationship.

In the Disciplines

Across the disciplines, it’s clear that the professors share the same concern as instructors in Composition for their students’ writing abilities. Many of the same values in Composition are mentioned in the conversations I had with the four professors in the areas of History, Economics, Political Science, and Sociology. At any major institution, some of the faculty are bound to discuss writing for their course or Composition in general with professors from the English Department; in fact, one of the professors of other disciplines is married to one of the Compositionists. It isn’t unheard of to find similar instances of heavy interest and focus on writing across the curriculum in other universities. Moreover, it’s important to emphasize that when choosing the professors for this study across the curriculum, I chose to speak to those who were recommended by a faculty member in Composition based on their interest in the subject. So while all of the
educators I spoke to “cared” about writing in their classroom, it’s important to note that this doesn’t necessarily represent the typical professor, nor does it represent even the typical professor outside of Composition at The University of Akron. What it does represent is a closer look at a few instructors who represent parts of the field, and that data serves as an interesting comparison to each other between Composition and the disciplines.

While those I interviewed cared about writing and their students, they didn’t have the kind of personal information imbedded into the interviews as did the Compositionists. In Sociology, for example, Ms. Stratford said that she had two situations that she can even remember where grading writing was difficult. One instance was where a student turned something in and she “wouldn’t accept something that extraordinarily late.” Another instance was where a student considered herself an “A Student” and argued that her work should be graded higher. However, unlike “Erika” who smoked marijuana and had strong opposition in class about the riots, or Dr. Dean who spoke of her students’ traumatic writing, Ms. Stratford never really goes into the details of interpersonal relationships with the students. From her conversation with me about writing assessment she never mentions personal details about their lives or any kind of understanding of them outside of the context of student. This isn’t to say that she doesn’t know any of her students personally or that she doesn’t have interpersonal relationships with them, just that it doesn’t exist to the extent that she brings them up in an interview about writing assessment and experiences with specific students. In contrast, the Compositionists mentioned personal details about the students or discussed how personal their writing could become.
Along similar lines, Dr. Seth in Economics had various disagreements over grades with students, but he says that “I have not had in my experience with one exception any personal face-to-face confrontations that were uncomfortable for me, and that one that I can remember was a very old one. It wasn’t even at this institution, and it’s over 25 years old.” Dr. Seth tells that story, and it involves a student who was confused about an aspect of critical thinking and the order of words. Once more, the details of the difficult experiences in writing assessment revolve around academic issues, and the account is devoid of personal traits or relations with the student. In Dr. Seth and Ms. Stratford’s stories of difficult grading experiences with writing, the only personal details they even mention are the students’ genders.

Like Dr. Seth and Ms. Stratford, Dr. Laken didn’t mention any personal stories, interpersonal interactions, or personal traits of his students when discussing difficult experiences grading. He’s in the field of Political Science, and while he experiences the same occasional respectful grade dispute, and the rare event where a grade is disputed to a third party in the institution, his stories, like the other two previously mentioned, don’t include intimately personal details about the students’ lives like the instances mentioned in composition.

In the History Department, Dr. Beaucedine talked to me about her experiences with her students. Like the all of the others in this study, she seemed genuinely concerned with writing and how to best teach her students those skills. Like the others in the disciplines, she had little to say about personal traits or interpersonal relationships with the students. In fact, in her writing assessment she makes her demands clear, but
she is a step removed from the act of grading in some cases. Dr. Beaucedine has a group of teaching assistants who “do most of the grading.”

Many universities across the country have large classrooms set in seminar halls built to hold hundreds of students. Dr. Beaucedine’s group of teaching assistants who do much of the grading is typical of many of those classrooms. While her classes may not be massive in size, her group of grading assistants shows another side of removal from interpersonal relationships that can exist in the classroom, even in Composition programs at major universities.

Overall, Dr. Beaucedine’s comments concerning difficult experiences grading mirrored those of the other three educators across the disciplines, indicating that the interpersonal relationships that exist in the disciplines are fewer and different in nature (in that there are less personal stories exchanged in the course content) than in the composition classrooms.

What it All Means

When you get to know students personally through their writing, it can complicate writing assessment. The field needs to (and has) make leaps to deal with assessing such personal content and managing classroom dynamics that may emerge. This strive is one of the ongoing topics in the field, and the acknowledgment that the situation is fragile and complicated makes the attempt to improve the situation more realistic. If we’re aware of the challenges of grading writing, then we’re better able as educators to deal with those challenges.

My impression of the disconnect between composition and the disciplines waned under pressure of these interviews. While the instructors from other disciplines didn’t
necessarily involved personal narratives or discuss personal details about their students in this study, their concern focused on the students and their abilities. The interviews with Compositionists suggested a different underlying reason for the unique kind of interpersonal relationship outside of personal narratives. Since neither Dr. Thomas nor Dr. Dean stress personal narrative in their classroom, that cannot be the source of the kind of interpersonal relationship in writing classrooms. Instead, the incentive for unique student-teacher relationships (in some instances) must be the topic of writing itself. Writing, whether regarding personal experiences or not, can be a very personal reflection of ideas and thoughts.

Why is writing personal? It’s personal because it’s about the student, their beliefs, their lives, and even their arguments. It’s a student’s ideas poured out on paper.

So where is the disconnect between Composition and other disciplines? In focus. Large history classrooms, small intimate Sociology seminars, Economics courses, and Political Science lectures all have one thing in common: they focus on something other than writing. While writing is a major component to all of the instructors in this study, they all have a primary course content objective placed outside of this very-personal art of composing writing.

To put it succinctly, I imagined a large gap splitting a personal-narrative based Composition and an argumentative removed-from-student span of other subjects. Instead, I found that not all Composition classrooms incorporate personal narrative and the instructors in other disciplines valued student identity. The difference in the interpersonal relationship between student and teacher in a Composition course and other subject areas is that Composition classrooms often span a variety of subjects. Those
subjects involve the student, often very directly, and the focus is directly on the student’s writing abilities. In other classrooms, student identity may be valued, but is not the focal point of the subject area. Rather than a large gap, Composition and the disciplines have a slight disconnect between them. This disconnect, though slight, still affects learning in the classroom and how the student is perceived.

So how can this disconnect be soothed to promote learning? If instructors simply acknowledge a student’s situation, that can go a long way to understanding how it can affect students. Other classrooms may have afforded the student the opportunity to express themselves in different ways. The acceptance of a variety of student perceptions in an academic setting could maintain an interpersonal relationship accepting of student identity, and the student may be able to pass more comfortably between a Composition course where their experiences are valued and another class where they aren’t quite as directly connected to the subject matter.

Creating a balance between allowing student growth/exploration of their ideas and leading the student to be aware of and accustomed to academic practice can soothe the slight disconnect between the disciplines and composition enough to help the student succeed in the institution while allowing them to remain themselves.
In my research course, my students are searching for their voices, their ability to use the voices of others, and the academic skills of stepping into a conversation. Their purposes are different; some wish to explore a topic, while others want to argue their point of view. Some want to convey information, while others wish to persuade. It is my job to help them, whatever their purposes, to step into that conversation and become part of that research community.

Two of my students, Shawna and Amy, are having problems choosing topics and getting comfortable doing research. Both of them are female high school students in a program that lets them take college courses early, and they had similar problems in their writing. Both of them struggled to find a topic, both were worried about finding research, and both of them talk about page requirements as though falling one page short is punishable by death.

For Shawna, research is a struggle. She uses a source and then edges around it, throwing in a quote from a source and leaving it to fend for itself. She has a voice, now that she finally settled on a topic, but I try to use writing to help her better explain
information. I told her to focus on summarizing and transitioning into the research she’d found.

For Amy, her voice is barely breaking through. She’ll find a source and analyze it – she gives solid, insightful points – but she just can’t put her own thoughts in there. She’ll tell me every angle on a situation, but she’ll never tell which she personally adheres to. Constantly reassuring through the question “can we use ‘I’ in a paper?” she never really firmly stands on her opinions. Through her writing, I try to develop her sense of voice. I have her read her paper, and then put it down and tell me what she thinks about the topic and to go further.

In the same class with similar students, their writing styles and, therefore, purposes branched off in different directions. If these variants occur with the same course, what is the spectrum of writing purposes like in other disciplines?
CHAPTER VII

THE PURPOSE OF WRITING

Peter Elbow (1994) explains his purpose of teaching writing: “I teach two kinds of thinking . . . First order thinking is intuitive and creative and does not strive for conscious direction or control . . . . Second order thinking is committed to accuracy and strives for logic and control” (25). Elbow’s orders of thinking translates over into writing. The first order of writing arises in Composition through writing exercises such as freewriting, brainstorming, and other less structured, creative writing. The second order is more formal, organized, logical pieces of writing. Lynch, George, and Cooper (1999) discuss how Composition promotes what can be considered the second order of writing. Composition has been focused just as much on taking “generations of students through the laws of logic, the etiquette of dispute, and the lessons of preparedness.” We strive to create a “way of understanding and teaching argument that prepares students to participate in serious deliberations on issues that face all of us every day (391). Some in Composition may devalue one purpose of writing and value the other, but Composition contains both freethinking and organized writing.
In the Disciplines

I imagined that many disciplines focus primarily on the second order writing concerns. This isn’t to say that the disciplines don’t value or recognize brainstorming or initial reaction, just that it’s often not a part of the writing in their course. My initial perception was that the purpose of writing in the disciplines focused solely on persuasion and argumentation. Because of this narrow view, I imagined quite a disconnect between the disciplines and Composition.

So what are the purposes of writing in the disciplines, and how do different purposes exist within Composition? In the Disciplines I imagined that writing in other disciplines is used to teach the student how to persuade the reader. This narrow view of writing in other disciplines closed the ability of writing off to a single function, and even that function (persuasion) was a concrete entity serving only the purpose of the discipline. In other words, not only did I see writing only used as persuasion, but I didn’t image that a political science course would translate that power of persuasion outside of its own discipline. Through this study, my outlook on how writing functions in other disciplines changed. The narratives of the instructors from other disciplines show a more diverse purpose for writing than argumentation alone. In fact, these narratives show ideals that match up with composition.

So what are some of the purposes of writing? The interviews from the four disciplines each emphasize a different aspect to how writing can improve learning in general. Each of the aspects I discuss cross over into the other interviews, but each concept particularly stands out in one interview. Also, I connect that purpose of writing to the individual instructor and discipline. However, each concept is not mutually
exclusive. Below I show how the instructors in the disciplines talk about their different purposes of writing and how they structure the assignments in their course to promote those ideals.

**Writing for Critical Thinking/Analysis**

Ms. Stratford focuses the long paper assignment in her course on analysis. Not only is analysis part of her curriculum, but it’s how she defines an “A” paper. “I guess for a paper the way I visualized it was a ‘C’ was someone who met the basic requirements for the paper. A ‘B’ was someone who met the basic requirements and then was able to throw in some sociology concepts correctly. And an ‘A’ was someone who could do those two things and then offer some analysis.

Ms. Stratford’s definition of analysis involves applying the concepts of sociology to interpret the world around the students – whether in film, scholarly writing, or the social world in itself. While still taking a stand, her student’s main objective should be to apply what they learned in Sociology to an authentic situation rather than to persuade others of one particular viewpoint. She conveys this vision of analysis to the students through assignments. Her options of papers range include cultural diversity, interviewing an international student; print analysis, analyzing a recent article; or film analysis, examining a film. All of these concepts apply sociological concepts in different ways, through writing, to practice analysis.

Why Ms. Stratford emphasizes critical thinking and analysis became clear when she discussed what she viewed as the biggest challenge in teaching writing in sociology. She says that “teaching critical thinking has been a challenge, but it’s also been
something I’ve been working on too. And, I’ve read some articles on it, and I try to work on that and integrate those into my teaching.”

It’s no wonder she focuses on analysis in her classroom when talking about and using writing if her students are struggling with critical thinking through writing. Analysis of film, articles, books, and life itself is a big part of sociology as a subject and involves critical thinking. Through teaching her students critical thinking through writing, she strengthens their grasp of analysis and vice versa.

Writing to Express Understanding

Dr. Beaucedine uses writing in her history course for communication reading comprehension. She gives her students a question that prompts a short essay writing. The answer to the question is found through the reading assignment for the same week. The students can keep the question in mind to focus their reading experience and to ensure that they begin to comprehend the point that the instructor found important. Dr. Beaucedine says that she tries pulling the teaching assistants away from the mechanical aspects, to “look around the quality of the writing: grammar, spelling, vocabulary. It’s impossible of course to not think that an essay is better when it is really well articulated, but I try to get them to see through the essays to whether or not the students appear to have understood the question.” Here, it’s clear that Dr. Beaucedine values “comprehension of the reading materials and lectures.”

To better explain Dr. Beaucedine’s views on writing and comprehension, it’s important to clarify her statement that “if an essay is poorly written, it is impossible to say that the student has comprehension; it has not been communicated.” Notice that she doesn’t definitively say that the student didn’t comprehend. Instead, she explains that the
student hasn’t actually conveyed to her that he comprehended the material. Her History course promotes the understanding of history, and her writing is used to meet that teaching goal.

To summarize, Dr. Beaucedine uses writing as a means for the student to explore and convey comprehension of reading material. She acknowledges that better articulated pieces of writing no doubt count as better essays, but that substandard essays in terms of vocabulary and grammar can still convey comprehension, though there are lower levels of quality of writing that fail to convey as much because the writing skills are poor. In the end, she has trouble “distinguish[ing] between [her course] as a history course and [her course] as a writing course. It’s not entirely successful. I mean, you have to use language in order to communicate ideas.” Though Dr. Beaucedine attempts to distinguish between her course as a writing or History class, the fact that she has trouble separating the two elements shows how deeply ingrained writing is in her class. Moreover, the purpose of writing is used to express the understanding of the subject matter, a purpose that can be connected to a style of writing where students are novices, certainly more connected to the initial, first order forms of writing at times than the second order that focuses on logic and structure.

Writing for Persuasion

Though writing has many purposes, Political Science, because of its policy-based controversies and emphasis on both oral and written persuasion, demands finely tuned argumentative writing in order to exert standpoints on a variety of political issues. Dr. Laken stresses the importance of argumentative writing in his interview: “I tell my students that politics is about persuasion – to persuade someone to support a candidate or
a policy or position. And, in the study of politics, we are going to ask them to improve their ability to construct persuasive arguments.” Dr. Laken extrapolates on the use of evidence to the student and explains to them how to use scholarly sources and primary texts to focus on “defending that claim. That’s how I talk about writing.”

Argumentative writing so encapsulates the spirit of political science that it becomes not just a part of writing in his course, but how he discusses the topic of writing in his classroom. A major reason he focuses on defending a claim is because he sees the assertion of a viewpoint as one of the most challenging aspects to writing. He says the biggest problem he has concerning writing in his course is “that students are resistant to an assignment that says take a position and defend it.”

The writing in Dr. Laken’s class is designed to enable students to find their voice in making arguments and backing up those arguments. Writing is a training camp for persuasion and argumentation.

Writing to Articulate Meaning

For writing in economics, Dr. Seth uses writing to help students better articulate meaning. He conceptualizes writing as a cognitive process, writing as thinking; that thinking then forms knowledge through writing. Borrowing elements from other notions of writing purposes (comprehension, learning), writing to articulate meaning serves the purpose of Economics. Writing, like Economics, sorts out a complex web of ideas. Dr. Seth discusses writing to express meaning through his assignments. He mentioned that he used to have his students write “short reaction papers or short position papers.” His students may already know how they feel about a particular topic or concept in Economics, but Dr. Seth’s short reaction or position papers allows the student to practice
articulating that; rather than just having an opinion, they practice expressing their
meaning. These assignments also indicate an inclination towards persuasive writing,
though not the kind of focus that Dr. Laken’s course lent to the style of writing. Instead,
Dr. Seth goes on to champion a style of writing that’s purpose is to “help students to
articulate ideas, concepts, expressions and, therefore, help to clarify and solidify those
concepts in their own minds.”

He goes on to explain how often times people have some understanding of a
concept but that they can’t really articulate their comprehension into words. As Dr. Seth
explains, “often times if students don’t try to write something down they sort of mentally
say ‘yeah, I understand that, I could describe that’ but when you actually ask them to say
it or write it down. It doesn’t come as easily as they otherwise would think.”

Dr. Seth’s students are using writing to express comprehension of writing as do Dr.
Beaucedine’s students. But it’s more than comprehension; it’s articulation. It’s not quite
argumentation, but it’s taking a position. It’s comprehension in transit to argumentation.
This purpose for writing is a good example of how blurred the lines between purpose can
become when discussing intention and use of writing in the classroom. Because of these
blurred lines, it is important to note that not only do the purposes of writing cross over,
but so do these purposes between the instructors.

Composition

The purposes of writing in the two-semester Composition sequence reflect both
the creative, intuitive expression and the organized logic that Elbow (1991) expresses in
first and second order thinking. The Composition program contains two key freshman
writing courses: English 111 & English 112. English 111 was designed to “foster
students’ expressive, reflective, and critical abilities” (English 111 Course Rationale). The course promotes expression, reflection, and critical thinking. English 112, on the other hand, “focuses on argumentation.” The purpose of this course is to further develop critical thinking, reflection, and expression in a more formal academic writing structure. In other words, the course provides practice in taking solid, well thought-out stances in writing on a variety of topics. Students make the move from backing up points about personal narratives/essays and personal beliefs with their own thoughts and accounts to using the same critical thinking to back up issue-based essays and research papers (English 112 Course Rationale).

Because of the purposes expressed in the course rationales, I couldn’t imagine both creative writing and more logical writing co-existing in the same course. In fact, though I knew writing is a mixture of the two, I didn’t expect the pedagogical methods in either English 111 or English 112 to promote both styles of writing. In short, I didn’t discount the student ability to produce writing that is both expressive and logical. Instead, I imagined the curriculum as focused on one element of writing and largely ignoring the other. Discussing the purpose of writing with two of the instructors lent me a vision of both an English 111 and an English 112 classroom that promoted writing that exemplified both of Elbow’s orders of thinking.

Ms. Tane teaches 111. What she values in writing matches up with the English 111 course rationale. After surmising the student’s use of the specific lesson they had been taught, she says “then I look at the aesthetic beauty of it . . . – the wording, the language use . . .” Ms. Tane’s course is freshman composition and contains personal narrative writing. So amidst the narrative, where does the logical structure enter Ms.
Tane’s English 111 course? First she evaluates how the student tells his story, then she looks at the aesthetic beauty of the story. Even in expression, she checks that the student comprehends specific lessons in the classroom, lessons like organization, flow, structure. It makes sense, then, that she looks for how they tell their stories as well as how they use the individual writing pointers she gives them.

In alignment with the objectives of 112, Dr. Dean emphasized research in her interview, claiming that it was “困难” to teach “the students who have a sort of lack of experience in research.” She spends a lot of time “helping students to understand that particularly at their stage in their education that research should be used to explore and refine a particular question that they’ve found interesting within a larger topic that they’ve found interesting.” Though the other instructors didn’t emphasize research writing, they all contained some kind of assignment involving research, in many cases the largest assignment in the course was a research paper. Certainly, research as a purpose for writing is a notion spanning all categories of learning. Dr. Dean’s research is geared specifically at the exploration of questions and topics about which the students are curious. This curious exploration is an expression reminiscent of the creative side of writing, and that creativity is the place in Dr. Dean’s classroom where the second order concerns of writing such as logic and structure meets up with the intuitive qualities.

Crossover

As Ms. Stratford says, writing across the disciplines has to do with “concepts and so forth and theory.” But for all of these instructors, their disciplines relate to why they focus on particular purposes of writing in their classrooms. Obviously, just because the instructors focus more so on one purpose for writing in their interviews does not mean
that writing exclusively serves that purpose. Dr. Stratford values argumentative ideas in his economics course, saying he grades by asking “Are their ideas logical . . . do they provide support for the statements or do they simply make assertions . . .?” Also, Dr. Laken (who emphasized argumentation) discusses the importance of writing in “teaching[ing] people how to think.” So again, the lines are blurred between concepts, but the specific qualities that each instructor stresses seem to match up with their discipline.

How do the purposes of writing in the disciplines match up with Composition? All of the conceptions held across the disciplines match up with what values the Compositionists emphasize. The Composition instructors emphasized research, aesthetic language, and analysis. Like the disciplines, the ideas they put forth matched with their discipline and, even more so, their specific courses.

Dr. Thomas says that he looks “for critical insights, the ability to analyze, those are the most important things.” His students tend to value structure over content, so emphasis on critical insights and the ability to analyze helps to “desocialize students.” In other words, a student asking about comma splices and paragraph order, once honing their analysis skills, will begin to think more about what they are saying and how to say it rather than in what order. This ties very closely to Ms. Stratford’s challenges in teaching writing and use of writing in the classroom.

Since Dr. Dean teaches a course designed to teach argumentative writing, she says that “part of their jobs as the author, part of the rhetorical challenges they have to face is to sort of figure out what the perspective of someone who holds a different view than
they do on this particular subject matter.” This champions the idea of argumentation as well, a concept held high by Dr. Laken in political science.

Dr. Dean’s aspects of writing that she chooses to emphasize align with the issue/policy based research and argumentation class that she teaches. In fact, many of the categories match up with elements to writing valued across the disciplines. Dr. Seth’s Economics course stresses the articulation of meaning (organizing thoughts) just as Economics itself largely organizes and sorts interrelationships in the economy.

The purposes of writing in the different disciplines in this study match up exactly with some of the purposes of writing in Composition. Writing for critical thinking, to express understanding, for persuasion, and to shape meaning are all intentions that we have when we have students practice their writing skills. The way these purposes translate directly between the disciplines and Composition shows just how narrow my view of writing was in other subject areas and within Composition as well. Perceiving writing as purely argumentative in the disciplines closed off a lot of doors to writing that remain open through instructors like those interviewed for this study.

**What it All Means**

Lee Odell asserts stresses how writing can “help both students and teachers better understand the ways of knowing that are important in a particular academic context” (Odell, 87). Odell’s comment comes from understanding writing not just as a recording, but as a reflection and deeper understanding of thoughts. It represents the all-encompassing ability of writing to serve multiple purposes of knowledge, and it doesn’t confine that ability to English or to the disciplines. Unfortunately, not everyone realizes the span of writing’s purpose.
I originally wrote in my thesis prospectus that “In composition, the goal in writing is to become a better writer. In other disciplines, the goal of writing is connected to a better understanding of the subject matter.” It occurs to me in retrospect how offended both Compositionists and educators in other disciplines would be after reading that statement. Sure, one identifies one more than the other, but that doesn’t mean writing in the disciplines doesn’t make students better writers. It also doesn’t mean that writing courses don’t focus on a better understanding of subject matter. There is a bigger crossover there than I originally had the vision to notice.

However, though there are teachers inclined to open up the purpose of writing beyond simply grasping the concepts of the disciplines – to branch writing off until it encompasses other learning ideas such as critical thinking – there are also teachers who feel that writing courses are for writing improvement while writing in other subject areas is to explore one particular area of study; there are Composition teachers blind to the idea that critical thinking and argumentation finds a place in writing classrooms. There are teachers consigned to the idea of writing servicing the disciplines and the disciplines doing the educating. And though there isn’t quite the disconnect in purpose of writing between the disciplines and Composition that I originally envisioned, I still hope that the instructors who are open to a grander, wider spectrum of the purpose of writing outnumber those with more narrow views of Composition.
CHAPTER VIII

WRITING ASSESSMENT PRELUDE

When I first started teaching, I dreaded grading my students’ assignments. I had taught classes, but I never had to actually place a letter value on the writing. When I started teaching research writing courses, I felt as though my entire system collapsed into biases. I’d been that student who received a paper back with a “B” written on it and absolutely no other comments. I knew I had to strive to try to show my students why they receive the grade they did and how they could do better. I riddled my students’ papers with compliments, suggestions, and just general feedback on their style or how they used research. I got into the habit of grading this way, and I felt rather confident in my preferred system of letter grades and plenty of feedback.

One day, I was handing back papers to my students before class actually started. I handed Sam his paper, and I noticed that he was working on math homework. There was no feedback, no words of encouragement or wisdom, just giant red X’s. The problems marked wrong weren’t even corrected by that same imposing red pen. There was a hardened numerical score scrolled across the front.
The difference in grading between my course and the math class left me curious for a while. I imagined myself marking up a research paper with nothing but a bunch of red X’s and a number. I couldn’t imagine. Still, I recognized the difference in subject, the differences in grading styles, and the notion that academic assessment was probably best when allowing for differences in situation.
CHAPTER IX

WRITING ASSESSMENT

The sections “Revision” “Student as Person” and “The Purpose of Writing” are the areas where I had originally imagined composition theory drifted away from the connection to the disciplines. However, Mike Rose says that the educational system has “developed an obsession with evaluation and assessment” (34). The preoccupation with grading, especially for the student, is hard to avoid when dealing with student writing. Nancy Sommers, who conducted a study of freshman-year writers, observed that the research team was “unprepared for the pride of accomplishment that many freshmen experience, the joy of holding in their hands the physical representation of their thinking” (129). Students are preoccupied with grades not only because of the academic implications within the University but because they value their own writing. We, as teachers, as Compositionists, and as educators, stress the importance of writing. We discuss the technical effectiveness and aesthetic beauty, and then we give a hardened score – a letter or number grade – valuing or devaluing their work. Writing assessment is an important aspect of writing values because it is the concrete representation of how well students have practiced writing.
The good part is that our students can take pride in their work and learn how rewarding writing can be in its assessment. Grading can serve as a measurement of how far they’ve come or improved in the process. The bad part is that I hate it, and many teachers do. I just want to have class, to teach someone something, to spread what knowledge I have on something I enjoy. There’s nothing natural about grading. When I speak at a conference they don’t clap and say “B+!” Grading is something set in place by the university. While as educators we value learning and improvement over assessment, we cannot ignore it especially because of the connections between them.

I’m reminded of a Simpson’s episode where Mrs. Krabappel is sitting at her desk carefully grading papers. Someone comes in the classroom and asks if she wants to go somewhere. She just marks the rest with B’s and walks out the door. It’s a humorous view of assessment, but I think most instructors have felt like doing that at one point or another.

The problem is we can’t. We can’t because it’s important to the students, and we can’t because it’s important to the field. One of the reasons that Mike Rose recognizes the obsession with assessment is because, like the educational system itself, grading isn’t perfect. There’s a need in the field of writing to understand writing assessment and improve upon it. Grading writing can seem like a mysterious process to students and teachers alike. Rather meeting with frustration like Edna Krabappel and placing B’s on everything, we need to get a handle on it.

For that reason, we must analyze assessment, and in that spirit I’ve focused the final section of my thesis on writing assessment and what similarities and differences exist between Composition instructors and instructors in the disciplines. Because all
teachers approach grading differently, I did not begin my research assuming there would be a “gap” between compositions and the disciplines in grading particular.

Because there are both similarities and differences between instructors in the disciplines and instructors in Composition, it is valuable to continue this strive for understanding in grading.

In this section I will apply Isocrates’ principle of kairos – a principle allowing for situation – to the assessment tools used by instructors to make their criteria clear to their students. Through my research, I sought to explore what we, as Compositionists, value in writing and what instructors value in other disciplines. When I grade, I attempt to remain objective even though I know that grading requires a subjective leap when it comes to writing. How do other fields deal with this paradox? What do they value in grading?

Isocrates’ principle of kairos

Isocrates’ notion of kairos is, simply put, the idea that you can’t take one principle and apply it across the board. He promotes the idea of “fitness for the occasion” (1990 44, 48). You have to apply a principle based on the situation; the principle is derived from the situation. Kairos champions the idea of there being a time and place for everything. Because Composition tends to value the student as a person and has a great focus on student identity and interpersonal relationships, individual situations matter in the field. Even though the student as person translates differently into other fields, aspects of writing indicating special care to the student as a person (such as revision) value the student as a human taking part in an evolving skill.

For this very reason, understanding kairos is an underlying, often subconscious, part of writing assessment in both composition and in other disciplines. The faculty
members of all fields of study adapt their own methods of writing assessment based on their own personal preference, the assignment, the discipline, and even the students’ personal progress. The following sections, devoted to showing how kairos pertains to writing assessment, examines how the very same valued elements in writing already discussed (revision, argumentation, and student as a person) are reflected once more in the rubrics and syllabi.

**Across the Disciplines: Rubrics**

Rubrics, upon first glance, may seem to defy kairos. The rubric is, after all, a set of standards applied across the board in writing assessment. However, the structure of the rubrics can be set up in a way that allows for situational grading. The criteria aren’t arranged in a pyramid of linear standards or in a way so concrete as to bar focusing on the individual context. The rubrics, instead, are a set of guidelines for examining student writing within a context.

Dr. Seth breaks his writing down in a rubric for his students. There are four headings: Structure, Knowledge, Argumentation, and Striving for Excellence and Creativity. Within these headings, he breaks down the value of each into both points and a word rating like “acceptable.” He then explains what each rating entails. For example, if the student writes a paper and receives an 8 for structure, that student will know that it is considered “good” by the teacher and that that means the paper was “well structure; it contains a clear and precise thesis statement (question or theme), a main section in which the ideas are developed, and a clear conclusion.”

In similar fashion, Dr. Laken’s rubric is arranged like a checklist. The first section in the check list are criteria that the student must meet in the paper. The others
(Basic, Standard, Intermediate, and Advanced) show the student what level of writing they’ve achieved by how many boxes under that heading are checked.

The two professors have several similarities between their rubrics. First of all, they both use them. Not all professors give specific handouts for each paper requirement. Also, they both break down the criteria into both headings and points. From then on out, the two split in their vision of writing explanation. For Dr. Laken, the points are based on how many criteria within the heading are met. For Dr. Seth, points are dependent on each single criterion and how good that specific aspect is.

Isocrates’ notion of situational principles is really put into motion with these differences among the individual professors’ grading preferences. The professor bases assessment on what they value, and puts that in the context of both the course and the individual student.

The notion is also put forth in differences based on the professors’ individual fields of study. The rubric for Macroeconomics is organized in a chart-like fashion, emphasizing the interconnectedness of subheadings and the large scale purpose of writing. These same structured principles are vital elements in the actual course of macroeconomics. Similarly, Dr. Laken’s rubric is arranged as a checklist of main criteria which must be met. This style of organization actually conveys the persuasive, agenda driven field of political science.

**Syllabi**

Some professors choose to include information about the paper requirements in their syllabi as well. This way, the students have an idea of what the course expects from
them, and they have a point of reference to look back upon in terms of the overall objectives of the course as they relate to the paper.

Ms. Stratford, a sociology professor, emphasizes a checklist similar to Dr. Laken’s political science checklist. Instead of a rubric that breaks down the objectives into a set number of points, the syllabus criteria loosely illustrates to the student exactly what the function of the paper is. Ms. Stratford’s syllabus includes suggestions like “avoid using inappropriate language or colloquials” and “Remember that each paragraph should contain only one idea.”

The syllabus goes on to show the options for paper topic, including “Cultural Diversity,” “Print Analysis,” and “Film Analysis.” Each heading choice goes into a paragraph detail of what each choice entails. It shows the larger writing aspects involved in each topic. For instance, “Film Analysis,” suggests that you should not “devote time to re-telling the story, unless you are weaving interpretation and/or analysis through your descriptions.” The heading “Print Analysis” offers a different perspective on writing in conjunction with how the assignment changes. Here, Ms. Stratford says, “Critically think beyond what the article is saying and explore deeper implications. Are there social structural factors not mentioned in the article?” The syllabus guides you through each option, adapting to the different assignments and using language that most effectively explains the research and writing involved.

Dr. Beaucedine’s history syllabus takes the opportunity to focus on evaluation specifically rather than just the content which the student should integrate into their papers. Dr. Beaucedine’s syllabus briefly breaks down the quality of each essay into four categories – Excellent, Good, Passable, and Unacceptable. It gives a very blunt idea of
what type of writing falls under each category. “Good essays,” for example “are those that reveal a significant understanding of much of the material covered” while “Passable essays display a minimal comprehension of some aspects of readings and lectures.”

As with the rubrics, the differences found between these two instructors indicate a basic preference for different styles. In addition to the different disciplines and those simply preferential choices, these syllabi show the how the differences in assignments affect the instructors’ assessment methods and how they are conveyed to the student. For Ms. Stratford, her values in writing are conveyed in depth due to the purpose of the assignment. The end-of-the-semester paper is meant to place the student in the field using the terminology learned in the course. The assignment is a large-scale, all encompassing project. Her syllabus, therefore, takes time to show the student on a larger scale what is expected of them in terms of content.

In contrast, Dr. Beaucedine’s syllabus gives brief explanations so that the student understands exactly what she is saying in terms of essay quality. This mimics the design of the assignment that the student is writing for her course. The essays are designed to give students the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of the weekly readings and to further explore their ideas through written communication and critical thinking. The essays are designed for the same clarifying/explanatory purpose as the section in her syllabus that explains the essay assignment.

**Composition**

All three of the Compositionists interviewed in this study have similar elements as above. As with the instructors across the disciplines, the Compositionists have assessment methods that differ from one another as well. Their explanation of grading
and what they look for in student writing varies slightly but carries over similar concepts from one to another. A major difference between the instructors is found in their specific grading scales and systems of recording grades. However, their syllabi share certain concepts in Composition. The shared ideals between their syllabi are most strikingly observed in their inclusion and explanation of the portfolio. Despite differences in writing assessment they do have shared ideals in writing that convey what they and the department at The University of Akron value in Composition. The result is a supporting vision of Isocrates’ kairos combined with a somewhat unified, though varying outlook on the writing process.

The Composition program at The University of Akron consists of two freshmen-level courses (English 111 and English 112). The first course teaches personal narrative and essays, while the second is an argumentative/research course. Ms. Tane teaches 111, and Dr. Dean teaches 112. Dr. Thomas teaches both, and, though his assessment examples will be from English 111, his overall grading policies (aside from course-specific objectives) are consistent in both.

Dr. Thomas uses contract grading, which, in my experience, is one of the less commonly used grading methods in the English Department at The University of Akron. This unique style of grading rests largely on the instructor’s overall perception of the students’ work through the entire grading period. Rather than each assignment as a separate work achieving different levels, the student tries to reach a certain grade in the course overall. The paper revisions and the quality expected in the work depend upon the grade for which they choose to strive.
The contract method of writing assessment seems to acknowledge the inability of a completely objective grading standpoint. The contract admits that the essays are largely dependent upon “the satisfaction of Professor Thomas.” Also, it takes the student as a person into account by allowing for revision, expectations based on individual students, and renegotiation of contract. As student who has been in a contract grading course, I felt a greater sense of control over my grades and less pressure on each individual paper. Instead of worrying about a score, I was curious about what changes I would need to make. His contract rests more on what he refers to as “nuanced, content-based assessment that actually looks at the students’ ideas and their ability to think about complicated problems.” The contract below shows his emphasis on student ability, valuing effort in workshops, responding to student writing, and portfolios. Rather than emphasizing particular elements of writing, he emphasizes the student’s effort, once again valuing concepts such as student as person and writing as a process.

Dr. Thomas’s Grading Contract: English 111

“A” Contract

I, ____________________________, agree to do the following in order to achieve an “A” in English Composition 111 during the second summer term of 2004. I will:

• Complete 5 essay assignments to the satisfaction of Professor Thomas;
• Meet the deadlines for the four in-class workshops, including having the appropriate number of copies, responding to all elements of the assignments, and responding to questions and comments with intelligence and civility;
• Turn in four acceptable workshop summaries at the time of your revision conference, along with the draft;
• Attend four revision conferences with true revisions of your essay, not just proofread or lightly edited copies of the draft;
• Do all assigned reading by the due dates;
• Achieve at least 58 participation points;
• Achieve at least 7 workshop leadership points;
• Write a competent in-class essay;
• Submit a portfolio that receives no lower than 16 points on the portfolio rubric; Conduct myself appropriately, which includes being on time to class, paying attention, and treating other students with respect.

Dr. Thomas recognizes what Knoblauch and Brannon (1984) said, that “the growth of student writers is not the same as the improvement of texts” (151). In that same spirit, Dr. Thomas evaluates the progress of the student through workshops and conferences, and sets his expectations on the student based on their individual abilities. In this way, contract grading represents kairos. Writing assessment is focused on the student, which is a changing entity, and alters based on the situation.

Dr. Dean and Ms. Tane offer a point-based grading system. However, even though both instructors use a point-based system, the specifics within those systems are tailor to suit their individual preferences; this is another representation of kairos even within similar grading systems. Ms. Tane’s points are in larger quantities, totaling 1000 points. Each essay, homework, quiz, exam, and journal is 100 points. Timed writings are somewhat less at 50 points, and the portfolio is slightly more at 150 points. Her grading scale is 90-100 (A).

Dr. Dean’s course is laid out with 50 points for five papers, 20 points for a portfolio, and 10 points each for class participation, oral presentation, and in-class writing assignments. Her grading scale is laid out in the usual 92-100 (A) fashion. Dr. Dean’s standards for evaluating academic writing are below (reformatted):

**Standards for Evaluating Academic Writing**

**Accuracy.** Free from errors or distortions; true.
**Assignment.** Fulfilling all requirements of the assignment.
**Breadth.** Encompassing multiple viewpoints.
**Clarity.** Understandable; the meaning can be grasped.  
**Depth.** Containing complexities and interrelationships.  
**Logic.** The parts make sense together, no contradictions.  
**Relevance.** Relating to the matter at hand.  
**Significance.** Focusing on the important, not trivial.

These concepts match up with the goals for English 112. Taking “diverse positions on a range of issues” (breadth) is a key part of the 112 course. Also, English 112 places emphasis on clear articulation (clarity above) and topic-oriented arguments (relevance).

**Portfolios**

While the grading contracts are largely removed from the point-based systems, the qualities they value in writing are similar. For example, all three of the professors, in their syllabi, require an end-of-semester portfolio, an element of writing that is absent (as far as the rubrics/syllabi indicate) from the courses of the four instructors from other disciplines. Portfolios have become a staple teaching tool amongst composition teachers. It fact it is unmatched in “interest and enthusiasm” for its power to connect “discourse about teaching and assessment” (Huot 171-172). It’s no surprise that such similar portfolio assignments exists between the Compositionists, but it is important to acknowledge the shared pedagogy between the instructors, though situation principles create differences.

Dr. Dean’s portfolio requirement says that it should “include optional revisions of the first four papers, any extra-credit assignments given throughout the term, and a 1-page narrative account of what each student has learned about her or his individual writing process.” The syllabus, in its portfolio requirement, not only shows the consistency through Composition despite some differences, but it also reflects the major
values in composition such as revision (optional revisions), argumentation (the papers themselves), and student as person (narrative showing student’s individual knowledge).

Ms. Tane’s syllabus professes similar explanation (showing the similar values within The University of Akron). The portfolio “includes a letter in which you discuss the revision process, and you will need to cite examples from the various drafts of the final revisions you choose to include.” Her portfolio requirements take the same stance of emphasizing revision and process as Dr. Dean’s portfolio.

Similarly, Dr. Thomas’s syllabus offers an explanation of portfolios supporting those same ideals. His syllabus states that “the portfolio should contain strong revisions of the student’s two best essays (plus all drafts leading up to the final versions), the reflective letter and the in-class essay.” Though Dr. Thomas’s grading methods were very different from the other two Compositionists in this study, his values of writing and how he promotes those values through the portfolio are congruent with some common beliefs in the field and the overall values of The University of Akron’s writing agenda.
CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION

First-year Composition, in one of its many roles, services the general education requirements. There are demands placed on writing instructors to educate students how to write papers, which is a skill that crosses over into other courses in a variety of fields. Before the research contained herein, I envisioned writing across the disciplines as an outlet so removed from the aspects of writing practiced in Composition that Composition was ultimately disconnected from the practices of disciplines. In other words, I thought the general education requirements placed on Composition failed to translate over into other areas of study. I initially sought out to find the stark differences between the disciplines and composition.

Instead, I found myself surprised at how similar the fields were. In recognizing the connections between writing across the disciplines and Composition at The University of Akron, one must acknowledge the contribution Writing Across the Curriculum initiatives made to spreading the theoretical and pedagogical practices found in writing and implementing them in fields outside of writing. Fulwiler and Young (1990) give an overview of what concepts Writing Across the Curriculum has instilled in
the disciplines. The programs all promote improving “student writing and learning in all content areas of the curriculum.” They also “base their programs on a common core of language theorists” such as Donald Murray and Peter Elbow, and “promote similar process-oriented composition pedagogy” (1-2). It’s no surprise, then, that revision operates so well between composition and the disciplines. Also, WAC programs promote ideals such as “writing-to-learn” and “writing [as] a means of learning and communicating disciplinary knowledge” (Fulwiler and Young 1-2). The spirit of the purpose of writing in WAC matches well with the instructors across the disciplines and, also, with some of the sentiment of Compositionists. The disciplines are not always product-based argumentative writing machines disconnected from comp theory. The disciplines can represent an off-shoot of the same notions in composition theory through WAC programs and instructors dedicated to better implementing writing in the classroom.

So do the gaps exist? There still remains a disconnect in composition’s focus on student as a person and the disciplines perception of the student’s self. The term used in many Composition classes is “voice.” We want to hear what the student is saying in their words. Harris (1997) says that some classrooms ask, “What moves does [the] writer make?” This author’s-intent brand of reviewing writing aligns with conferences, revisions, and workshops where we ask those same questions to our students.

All in all, writing across the disciplines coexists well with Composition studies. Shearle Furnish (1995) acknowledges that “By and large, teachers in the humanities (more than just the ones who specialize in teaching composition) recognize the virtue and necessity of assigning much writing” (491). Sociology, History, Political Science, and
Economics, all rooted in the liberal arts and social sciences, connect with the humanities. The assignments, syllabi, rubrics, and their narrative testimonies reflect a close similarity in writing values.
REFERENCES


March 15, 2005

Jocelyn Gooch
1042 Maple St.
Belleire, Ohio 43906

Ms. Gooch:

The University of Akron’s Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) completed a review of the protocol entitled “Gradual Writing Across the Curriculum”. The IRB application number assigned to this project is 20060706.

The protocol was reviewed on March 11, 2005 and qualified for exemption from continuing IRB review. The protocol represents minimal risk to subjects and matches the following federal category for exemption:

(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information is recorded in such a manner that subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to subjects; AND (ii) any disclosure of responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of civil or criminal liability or be damaging to subjects’ financial standing, employability or reputation

Enclosed is a copy of the informed consent document, which the IRB has approved for your use in this research.

Annual continuation applications are not required for exempt projects. However, you must immediately notify the IRB if any changes or modifications are made in the study’s design or procedures that do not fall within one of the categories exempted from the regulations. Any such changes or modifications must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to their implementation.

Please retain this letter for your files. If the research is being conducted for a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, the student must file a copy of this letter with the thesis or dissertation.

Sincerely,

Sharon McWhorter, Associate Director

Cc: Diana Reep, Department Chair
    Janet Bean, Advisor
    Phil Allen, IRB Chair