TEACHING THEM TO FISH: 
CREATIVE NONFICTION AS A TOOLKIT FOR TRANSFER

Nicholas Edmund Novosel

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Committee:

Sue Carter Wood, Advisor

Catherine Cassara
Graduate Faculty Representative

William Albertini

Lee Nickoson
ABSTRACT

As its title suggests, this dissertation explores how creative nonfiction (CNF) writing is uniquely suited to teach writing as a strategy to assess and address different rhetorical contexts, thus giving students the tools to harness the experience of past compositions to meet the challenge of future ones. By synthesizing the tenets of CNF pedagogy (as espoused by Bishop, Bradway, Hesse, and Root), the objectives of first-year composition (FYC) instruction (as defined by professional organizations in the Composition and Rhetoric field such as the NCTE and the WPA), and the recommendations of transfer theory (as described by proponents from Perkins and Salomon to Bergmann and Zepernick), my project posits a CNF-infused course design that highlights the personal and professional relevance of FYC by teaching writing as an adaptable skill.

After providing an overview of the project and surveying its theoretical influences, Chapter One locates the pedagogical potential of creative nonfiction, which I argue results from its ability to be grounded in both the real and the reflective. Chapter Two suggests how the genre can utilize this metacognitive capability to build a bridge between past, present, and future writing by emphasizing parallels between the features of CNF writing (reflection, veracity, emotion, voice/style, and narrative structure) and commonly agreed-upon FYC objectives (critical thinking, research, argument, audience awareness, and organization). Chapter Three then explores the former’s ability to teach the latter by outlining transfer theory, which studies the extent that writing skills can transcend contexts. This sets the stage for Chapter Four, which
puts theory to practice in the form of the aforementioned FYC course design that explicitly teaches for transfer by using CNF’s different subgenres to model different contexts, and then using the aforementioned parallels to highlight similarities and differences between contexts. Finally, Chapter Five summarizes my conclusions, acknowledges the limitations of this study, and suggests avenues for the further research and development of like-minded pedagogies.
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CHAPTER ONE: BRIDGING CREATIVE NONFICTION AND FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION: PROJECT BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

Introduction

I admit that opening with a story is cliché, and that many composition dissertations that have come before mine have probably started the exact same way – with a quick little ditty about how a personal experience has illuminated some truth about the teaching of writing. But clichés get to be clichés for a reason, and the fact that so many academics use anecdote as a way in – and often also as illustration and validation – both articulates and embodies my dissertation project.

Using the story of a personal experience to establish a personal connection to and ultimately present a personal take on subject matter are natural moves for any writer, particularly one thrust into an unfamiliar composing situation (like, say, a first-year composition student). And falling back on these stories to help explain and justify their thoughts is a natural way for a writer to express their argument(s) on – and perhaps more importantly in – their own terms.

A little subjectivity can go a long way, especially for writers at the introductory stage of academic discourse. My experience teaching first-year composition (FYC) has illuminated many truths, but negotiating the chasm between the personal needs of the writer and the academic expectations of the writing as I moved from an expressivist writing program to a more traditionalist one has shown me the power of creative nonfiction pedagogy to merge the potential of the personal with the requirements of the professional. Defined by creative nonfiction scholar Robert Root as “the written expression of, reflection on, and/or interpretation of observed, perceived, or recollected experience,” creative nonfiction (CNF) grants writers the opportunity to engage with personal and narrative composing processes (“Variations on a Theme of Putting Nonfiction in its Place” 295). Additionally, I believe it grants composition teachers the opportunity to harness these personal and narrative composing processes to spark student interest
and foster ownership of and investment in their writing, while simultaneously teaching valuable composition objectives such as critical inquiry (via reflection), veracity (via honest and accurate research), argument (via cultivating rhetorical appeals – chiefly pathos), audience awareness (via discerning which voice and/or style is most effective given the particular task), and organization (via building narrative structure).

The remainder of this chapter both encapsulates the experiences and research that have led me to hold this position, and investigates the potential of CNF writing as a particularly effective way to bridge the benefits of expressivist pedagogy with the expectations of academic writing. In true CNF fashion, the second section, Expressivism and the Power of the Personal, parallels the story of my own conversion to expressivism – and the complications that arose when I moved to an FYC program with a more traditionalist focus – with a brief history of expressivism and the chief objections of its critics. Juxtaposing my experience with these contrasting schools of thought helps illustrate a central theme of my project: apart, each approach has legitimate limitations, but together, they can mitigate each other’s weaknesses.

Of course, expressivism is a movement – one that goes beyond the initial turn inward and subsequent call to turn back outward that parallel the contrasting approaches I’ve encountered in my own teaching career. As such, the third section, Breaking the Binary, recounts how expressivism evolved to answer its critics by moving from an either/or to a both/and approach. After discussing expressivism’s rebuttal and resurgence, which called on Composition to deconstruct the binaries of personal and academic genres, I also explore how the field responded with a series of progressive pedagogies that have reimagined collegiate writing as equal parts reflection and analysis. Factoring in the sociopolitical pedagogies (critical, cultural, and feminist), community-engaged pedagogy, and the Writing Across, In, and Beyond the
Disciplines movements, I illustrate how these efforts have successfully turned the turn inward into a powerful lens for looking outward, and in the process created models of FYC that merge the personal (i.e. expressive) with the professional (i.e. academic).

Continuing this theme, the fourth section, Creative Nonfiction as Transferable Skills, suggests that a pedagogy combining CNF, academic learning objectives, and transfer theory can be an especially effective, student-friendly way to appropriate the both/and approach to introductory writing instruction. To accomplish this, Section Four locates the pedagogical potential of CNF, which I argue results from its ability to be simultaneously grounded in the real and the reflective, then explores how the genre can build a bridge from expressivism to FYC standards, specifically examining CNF scholarship and academic objectives in depth, and introducing transfer theory into the mix to stress the connection between them. Focusing on the features of CNF writing and commonly agreed-upon FYC objectives helps illustrate the former’s ability to teach the latter by highlighting similarities; and including transfer theory – which studies the extent that writing skills can transcend contexts – helps suggest strategies for linking these CNF skills with their counterparts in academic writing. Finally, the fifth section, Proposed Study, reasserts the reasons I wish to do this work and provides my specific research questions, the methods I’ll employ to help answer these questions, and an overview of the ensuing chapters.

Expressivism and the Power of the Personal

Personal Narrative: How Expressivism Shaped My Pedagogy

As a new graduate student and a soon-to-be first time FYC teacher I had never heard of expressivism or CNF pedagogy, but the writing program at my Master’s institution used one of the expressivist movement’s central figures as our introduction to the Composition/Rhetoric field. Peter Elbow’s works *Writing Without Teachers*, *Writing With Power*, and “Being a Writer
vs. Being an Academic” served as foundational texts for the composition practicum, which incoming graduate students took in advance of teaching an introductory writing class the following semester. The progressive tenets espoused therein served as guidelines for novice teachers and novice students alike, shepherding us into a discourse that valued exploration and innovation as much as – if not more than – form and function. The resulting teaching philosophy, as I saw it, centered on the self (via the reflective turn inward) because, according to Elbow, when students write about what they know best, i.e. themselves (via autobiographical experiences or approaches to a subject), they move beyond merely summarizing information to interpreting it (“Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic” 80-81).

Coming from a literature background, I was not an immediate convert. I was intrigued by the way Elbow pushed his students to look within, using their own lives, their own ideas and feelings as primary sources; but after an undergraduate career spent looking without, I had trouble signing off on the self as a source of authority (81). At first glance, I found Elbow’s model too liberal, too idealistic, and altogether unquantifiable. And it didn’t help that his nomenclature was similarly hard to grasp. In Writing With Power, the titular power Elbow advocates is synonymous with his intangible idea of voice, a concept difficult to define, but one intrinsic to an expressivist philosophy of writing. He admits that “sometimes I fear I will never be clear about what I mean by voice,” and he’s right; the closest he gets is using a slew of vague terms like authenticity, authority, sincerity, along with magic potion, electricity, mother’s milk (286).

I couldn’t see what he meant until I started teaching that next semester. Since we had to include a personal narrative among our assignments, I settled on a travelogue essay that elicited an adequate amount of description and reflection. Most submissions were solid; they were
authentic, authoritative, and sincere – I recognized that, but for the most part I didn’t see anything magical or electric or mother’s milky. Things changed, however, when I got to what was literally the last essay in my stack. Titled “Same Ocean,” it detailed a student’s summer vacation and the experience of reading an essay about it to her seventh grade class. While the vacation itself – a family camping trip to Myrtle Beach – was lovely, reading the story was traumatic, as some classmates mocked her for staying in a tent rather than at a hotel, condo, or some other more luxurious beachfront property. Her travelogue encompassed all of this, moving seamlessly from the joy of remembering the first time she saw the ocean to the embarrassment she felt thinking her family wasn’t good enough. But what really gave it voice – what really gave it power – was her reflection, where she recounted how her father consoled her by explaining that she enjoyed the same ocean as anybody else, regardless of accommodations, and her own realization that no matter how she got to the beach, she got there, and got to experience something wonderful and beautiful that none of her classmates could ever take away from her.

It was an eye-opener, one of those essays that makes you sit down and rethink your own abilities as a writer. The description was alive, the structure complex yet smoothly flowing, but what separated her essay from the others was how she recreated exactly how she came to the moral of her tale. As much as I hate the term “aha moment,” reading this essay was mine. Witnessing a writer move so beautifully from chronology to catharsis illustrated Elbow’s power of the personal. Through reflection the writer of “Same Ocean” found her voice, and put the kind of power into her writing that pushed it beyond a mere assignment, sparking an epiphany for student and teacher alike.

Despite initially dismissing expressivist personal writing as a crutch, I came to view it as a method that allowed authors to access, own, shape, and share their ideas in a personal,
powerful, and organic way. My conversion complete, I set about constructing writing assignments that fostered a personal attachment to and investment in subject matter and used reflection to foster critical inquiry. I continued to use memoir to help students turn memories into narratives of personal understanding, and even as I veered into research essays I maintained the impetus on subjectivity, pushing students to interpret material in their own words in an effort to avoid simple regurgitation of others’ words. The destination wasn’t nearly as important as the journey, so long as I saw evidence of progress, of personal growth, of the movement toward understanding in the writing. But the problem with overvaluing process is that inevitably, somebody else needs to validate the product.

Just as my experience at my Master’s institution showed me what FYC could be, my next graduate teaching experience reminded me what FYC must be, challenging my expressivist philosophy considerably. At this university, my students and I had to hew closer to an essay model meant to produce writing that would readily transfer into multiple disciplines by meeting criteria culled from diverse and varying curricula and distilled into tangible and quantifiable objectives. These standards aimed to bring clarity to the writing program’s goals and equip FYC writers with the tools they’d need for success at the college level and beyond. Still in that honeymoon stage of teaching, I initially resisted what I viewed as formulaic writing, which stressed the academic and objective at the expense of the personal and reflective. Yet while my expressivist course design was structured to enforce similar aspects, the alignment with departmental learning objectives wasn’t transparent. I was seeing evidence of the kind of introspective reflection that mirrored the sort of critical inquiry the objectives mandated, but it was unclear if students carried this connection outside of my class, or whether the techniques I meant to model were translating into other less narrative assignments. As much as I loved the
prompts I assigned and the writing they elicited, I realized that my immersion in and devotion to expressivist methods left me vulnerable to standard academic writing objectives, and that I wasn’t preparing my students for writing outside FYC as well as I could have – and should have – been doing (according to said objectives).

Expressivism’s Emergence in Composition Studies

My personal experience contrasting expressivist pedagogy with departmental objectives follows much the same storyline as the movement’s inception. I was hardly the first writing teacher to fall in love with expressivism for the way it simultaneously celebrates the self and utilizes writer-centered composing processes, as a brief history illustrates. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, scholars like Donald Murray, Ken Macrorie, and Elbow challenged the existing current-traditionalist paradigm for its dogmatic devotion to form and content. As Chris Burnham and Rebecca Powell point out in “Expressive Pedagogy,” proponents of current-traditionalism stressed conforming to strict grammatical and stylistic standards and advocated for arguing “exclusively from existing authority available through research in proper sources” (113). The early expressivists took issue with both assertions, though particularly the latter, as they viewed the source of learning as the internal processing of material (best achieved, as they saw it, through reflective writing). Echoing Paulo Freire, these scholars believed learning lies in the process of inquiry, and viewed banking – mastering information through the memorization and recall of static facts – as evidence of compliance rather than knowledge (Pedagogy of the Oppressed 58). Although not as overtly political, the expressivists were similarly liberatory, championing alternative pedagogies that move from communicating knowledge about existing authorities to creating knowledge derived from one’s personal authority. Whether Murray’s conception of writing as a means rather than an end (A Writer Teaches Writing), Macrorie’s
rejection of academic language in favor of individual terminology (*Telling Writing*), or Elbow’s aforementioned devotion to voice (*Writing Without Teachers*), all agreed on composing as a metacognitive exercise in personal meaning-making.

As Elbow and his contemporaries were popularizing expressivist pedagogy, other scholars were putting practice to theory, positing expression as a natural – and perhaps the original – function of discourse. In his *Theory of Discourse*, James Kinneavy claims expression is “psychologically prior to all the other uses of language,” as the genesis of communication is typically the expression of some sort of want or need (395-96, 401). As he goes on to explain, this innate urge to use expression to secure a desire establishes the primacy of the personal, via the idea of the self as the driving force of discourse, and the idea of discourse as a means to achieve personal goals – both fundamental and foundational components of expressivist pedagogy (401). James Britton, in *The Development of Writing Abilities* (11-18), takes these ideas even further, bridging this expressive function of discourse to his expressive function of language, which outlines the metacognitive capabilities of writing the expressivist pedagogues would harness. Britton identifies the expressive function of language as a hybrid of the transactional and poetic: one can use language to accomplish things but also examine how language works to accomplish things (i.e. metacognition), and then work to make their language as effective as possible, thus giving them the best chance to accomplish their goal(s) (83, 85).

Taken together, these theorists make a strong psychological case for expressivism, drawing on latent communication and composing processes to posit self-interest and recursivity as precursors to metacognitive inquiry. But despite the clinical tone of their analyses, both ultimately return to the importance of the individual. Desire may spark discourse, but something must first spark desire. For Kinneavy, that spark was a personal emotional connection: “Man
uses language to achieve the projects that he values, and the desire for the project has an emotional component” (403). Thus “since it is by language that man finds both his self and his thoughts, and since self is emotionally grounded, it follows that all discourse is emotionally grounded” (403). Britton, too, stresses this personal connection, though he moves from drive to delivery, dealing more with how it actually facilitates learning via metacognition. The referential function of language is to represent and summarize reality, yet the expressive function, as Burnham and Powell summarize, “provides a means for individuals to connect abstract concepts with personal experience and to negotiate the boundaries between public and private knowledge. The result is concrete understanding and learning” (“Expressive Discourse” 116).

The Problem with the Personal

Whether philosophical or pedagogical, the self is both the literal and figurative heart of expressivism, inspiring a personal connection that, whether through inquiry or analogy, drives the meaning-making processes that result in “concrete understanding and learning.” But to some, the idea of the self as engine was as dangerous was it was liberating, risking a philosophy that privileges a singular voice at the expense of the larger conversation. In Rhetoric and Reality, James Berlin exemplified a growing opposition that charged the turn inward with ignoring the outside world (14). As Burnham and Powell point out, Berlin and other social rhetoricians viewed expressivism’s primary flaw as “a false and otherworldly epistemology of the self that privileges individualism and rejects the material world” (117). While more theoretical, these critics viewed subjectivity ultimately as a distraction, a preoccupation that limited students to too narrow a scope.
In the more pragmatic “Writing With Teachers,” David Bartholomae applies their critique to the task at hand, explaining that expressivist pedagogy creates students who focus too much on personal opinion and not enough on existing scholarship. This ultimately engenders a dangerous anti-academic attitude, he cautions, leaving students ill-equipped to engage in the “existing conversation” – if they’re even aware of it (66). Expressivism may have begun as a reaction to “the impersonality of the university machines” (to borrow Kinneavy’s phrase), and even Bartholomae admits that the affront to academic writing was well-intentioned, “part of a much larger project to preserve and reproduce the figure of the author, an independent, self-creative, self-expressive subjectivity” (65). But to him, this was an overreaction that neglects the necessary business of the academy – putting individual thoughts into conversation with existing authorities, and following the conventions that allow access to said conversation (66). According to Bartholomae, academic writing isn’t “simply a matter of reproducing standard texts, but of using them as points of deflection, appropriation, improvisation, or penetration” – to borrow expressivist terminology, as a way in (66). And since this is the writing by which students will ultimately be measured, this is what we should teach them (71).

**Breaking the Binary**

**Expressivism 2.0**

The return to form Bartholomae and other critics advocated brought expressivism to an impasse. Much like the stalemate I faced in my own clash with departmental learning objectives, a gulf appeared to open between expressive and academic writing. In an effort to move beyond this binary, a rebuttal to Bartholomae’s traditionalist proclamation, bolstered by a new generation of expressivist proponents, would suggest that not only can the two genres of writing coexist, but also that expressivist reflective writing might even pave the way for more standard academic
fare. In “Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic,” his response to Bartholomae’s “Writing With Teachers,” Elbow admits to a perceived conflict between the titular roles, though he doesn’t believe there needs to be (72-73). Students should occupy both roles, and by prioritizing exploration before presentation, they can situate their own ideas within Bartholomae’s “existing conversation.” Keeping the impetus on the individual, Elbow encourages his students to take themselves and their ideas too seriously – “rather than just summarize and make comments from the periphery” (80). Autobiography – getting students to take ownership – is a necessary first step. It must occur before students place themselves, meaning their ideas, in the larger conversation. Once students care enough about their own ideas, Elbow believes, they’ll want to make others care about them, and be invested enough to shape their arguments accordingly (80).

More recent scholars have put some theoretical heft behind Elbow’s hypothesis. Anne Herrington and Marcia Curtis (Persons in Process) and Nick Tingle (Self Development in College Writing) argue that students have “a psychological need for personal agency.” According to these authors the illusion of discovery is invaluable (Herrington and Curtis 359, Tingle 61). Students need to believe their opinions and ideas matter, especially at an early stage in their educational development (which is likewise true at an early stage in their academic development). By allowing students to believe they’re the first to think of something (to borrow Elbow’s phrasing), teachers are engaging their egotism, harnessing their self-centeredness to fuel investment and inquiry. To complete the equation, Sam Watson (“Confessions from Our Reflective Classroom”) and Jane Bowman Smith and Kathleen Blake Yancey (“Reflections on Self-Assessment”) posit self-assessment as a strategy to move students into the next stage of development – needing to have their opinions and ideas validated by outside sources. These
scholars claim this self-critical reflection helps students compare how they see their writing to how others see it, a step that lets them situate their ideas in the larger world (Watson 92, Smith and Yancey 170, 173). In this incarnation, expressivism values the self, but makes the necessary move beyond it, giving students both a voice, and the voice to enter the larger conversation.

Echoing their predecessors, these second wave expressivists champion the subjective, lauding its innate ability to make students think independently and come to their own conclusions. However, they acknowledge that at some point the turn inward needs to turn back outward, and consider additional perspectives. These scholars maintain that students shouldn’t rely solely on existing sources of authority – but they shouldn’t ignore them, either. This brand of expressivism addressed the charges of its critics and evolved accordingly, establishing a model where the process of personal writing could help create the products academic writing requires. As Elbow’s rebuttal elaborates, expressivist writing and academic writing needn’t be in opposition, as the goal of the former can help students achieve the goals of the latter. Ideally, it shouldn’t be a question of doing either/or, but doing both.

The Continuum Approach

The expressivists weren’t alone in their advocacy of a more fluid approach to composition studies. Several concurrent pedagogical movements in the Composition/Rhetoric field also answered the call to view college writing less in terms of opposing genres and more as a genre-spanning continuum. For these pedagogies, writing is driven by context – the context of the rhetorical situation that necessitates the text, and the context of the world that created the rhetorical situation. Karen Burke LeFevre explains both kinds of contexts in Invention as a Social Act, which introduces the concept of writing as a continuum that evolves to meet whatever exigency arises, employing whatever tools are necessary to do so (48-50). In this sense,
LeFevre’s continuum is rhetorical context, but it also hinges on social context – the larger societal influences that comprise our world, and world view (93). These concepts would characterize the theory – and more importantly the practice – of the sociopolitical pedagogies, which argued writing could – and should – be equal parts personal and public, and invested writing with increased significance by connecting it to the sociopolitical sphere.

In addition to helping spur the expressivist movement, critical pedagogy was at the heart of Composition’s Social Turn. Rooted in Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (and like expressivism, specifically his critique of the banking model of education), critical pedagogy pushes students to think critically about their world as they see it – to not just accept information that is handed down to them, but to question this information, where it’s coming from, and why it’s being handed down. As Ann George summarizes in “Critical Pedagogies,” Freire’s – and likewise critical pedagogy’s – chief goal is critical consciousness, which gives students “the ability to define, analyze, and problematize the economic, political, and cultural forces that shape their lives” (78). Although this concept aims to revolutionize more than just composition departments, it found a ready home in our field. As George explains, “because language and thought are inextricably linked, language instruction becomes a key site where dominant ideology is reproduced – or disrupted,” making composition classes a perfect space for personal exploration into the political sphere (79). But while providing a fine theoretical framework for this sort of inward/outward thought, critical pedagogy’s target can prove too big for students. Social justice is a noble goal, but the utopia Freire envisioned isn’t quite a realistic objective for a fifteen week course. New approaches to critical pedagogy, then, would personalize the quest for justice and turn the paradigm on its head, creating a critical consciousness that focuses both on how our world shapes us and how we shape our world. Cultural and feminist pedagogies let
students explore how culture and gender create individual and collective identities, which gives them perspective on how society influences these identities, but also the agency to realize that they can influence society right back. As Laura Micciche writes, this brand of pedagogy helps students “connect local, personal experiences to larger contexts of world-making” by utilizing personal reflective writing, then situating it in a larger context (“Feminist Pedagogies” 129).

With cultural and feminist pedagogies, the focus and purpose of critical pedagogy gets personal, giving students both access to and an outlet for their own meaning-making practices in a way consistent with LeFevre’s continuum.

Community-engaged pedagogy continues the personal focus and activist purpose of the sociopolitical pedagogies, but it makes the leap from thinking about problems to doing something about them. Community-engaged pedagogy (also known as community literacy or service learning) asks students to consider problems that affect them and their larger community, then work toward solving these problems through writing that engages in and with community partnerships (Laura Julier et al. “Community-Engaged Pedagogies” 55). But apart from the commendable social dynamic, what makes community engagement such an appealing pedagogy is that it gives students “authentic purposes and audiences” for their writing (Julier et al. 57).

The rhetorical situation is present in the sociopolitical pedagogies, but it really comes to the forefront here, as “matters of form, genre, voice – and even process – emerge from exigencies in the social situation” (Julier et al. 57-58). With community-engaged pedagogy, the rhetorical situation is always in flux, so students need to be on their toes in order to meet the needs of the audience and context. As Julier writes, “the movement back and forth between action and reflection is essential,” which fits perfectly with the idea of writing as a continuum (58-59).
The Writing Across, In and Beyond the Disciplines pedagogies (which bring the focus back to the business of the academy) may not be as concerned with the ends of the sociopolitical and community-engaged models, but they’re grounded in the same means – particularly the ability of writing to adapt to different rhetorical situations, and the relatability of a real world context for those rhetorical situations. For the discipline pedagogies, that context is the writing students will do throughout college and beyond, specifically the genres that meet the needs of certain disciplines, and the professional environments those disciplines will ideally lead to. As Chris Thaiss and Susan McLeod explain in “The Pedagogy of Writing in the Disciplines and Across the Curriculum,” these models expand the scope of FYC to focus on learning “the content of a discipline and the particular discourse features and rhetorics used in writing about that content” (284). Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) foregoes a traditional introductory writing class in favor of a collaborative approach that asks teachers in multiple disciplines to emphasize writing in their respective courses. Writing in the Disciplines (WID) simplifies that idea into a class (or sequence of classes) that survey different disciplines and the genres they require (Thaiss and McLeod 284). Writing Beyond the Curriculum (WBC) builds on WID but goes a step further, putting “students in rhetorical situations that approximate those they will encounter as professionals in their field” (Thaiss and McLeod 295). Instead of having students write for one context and one audience, these models seek to expose students to a variety of academic and professional contexts and introduce them to the genres that best suit those contexts.

The Impetus for My Project

Second-wave expressivism and the sociopolitical, community-engaged, and discipline-specific pedagogies vary in approach, but all operate under the guiding principle that writing
instruction needs to move beyond the “one audience, one context” model toward a genre-transcending continuum that can adapt to fit multiple academic and non-academic settings. CNF pedagogy – the subject of my dissertation – takes up much the same mantra, providing students a variety of personal and reflective genres to suit a variety of rhetorical situations. Additionally, it is my belief that CNF pedagogy has two potential advantages over the other progressive pedagogies: first, it affords a more self-contained (pun intended) course that doesn’t have to depend on the outside cooperation or collaboration of a community-engaged or discipline-spanning/specific model, allowing for easier implementation; second, the reflection inherent in CNF writing grants students and teachers the opportunity to explore connections between the different genres (thus contexts) they can work with in a transparent and metacognitive way.

For these reasons, CNF pedagogy can be an especially effective way to introduce the continuum concept to students. Like the kind of writing advocated by the aforementioned forward-thinking pedagogies, CNF is grounded in a reality that lets students center their writing on an immediate and important subject – themselves. Also keeping with these pedagogies’ fluidity, CNF’s varying subgenres afford a writing model malleable enough to fit different rhetorical situations. But perhaps what makes CNF such an appealing pedagogical tool is how its innate reflective nature gives students space to explore similarities and differences between these different rhetorical situations. This meta-awareness of context variance is at the heart of the Teaching for Transfer (TFT) movement, which like the second-wave expressivist and progressive pedagogies, posits the ideal model of writing instruction as one that arms students with a skill set to tackle multiple exigencies. In *Writing Across Contexts*, Kathleen Blake Yancey et al. affirm the centrality of reflection to TFT: “By focusing on key terms and reflection, students engage in both theory and practice about writing, which allows for the development of a
theory of writing – or a framework of writing knowledge they can apply to new writing contexts – both within the course and beyond it” (71). CNF’s introspective nature, then, grants this writing the perfect opportunity to enact the principles of transfer theory by bridging seemingly disparate genres while explicitly examining how the skills of one can translate into another.

**Creative Nonfiction as Transferable Skills**

**Creative Nonfiction Overview**

The potential of CNF derives from the way the genre aligns expressivism with empiricism. As the very title reminds us, CNF is not fiction, and “the stories and people in creative nonfiction are based upon actual events, people, and information” (Becky Bradway and Doug Hesse, *Creating Nonfiction* 7). But though grounded in reality, CNF is an interpretation, leaving room for the subjective cognitive processes that, according to expressivism’s proponents (and even some of their critics), foster learning. Bradway and Hesse define CNF as inherently subjective, identifying a “strong authorial voice and style” as the other non-negotiable feature of the genre which, in addition to personal narratives/memoirs, includes opinion/editorial essays, reviews, profiles, and literary journalism (3). CNF, then, must always be both fact-based, and an individual interpretation/presentation of those facts – a duality that makes the genre uniquely suited for the teaching of writing.

This potential is particularly applicable to FYC, where CNF can help students embrace the power of the personal while checking the excesses of expressivism. As previously stated, CNF conventions dictate that all facts involved – whether experienced, observed, or researched – must be rooted in empirical reality. But it’s the collection, interpretation, and presentation of these facts, I believe, that shows the genre’s true pedagogical promise. With CNF, students can’t simply receive and relay information; they must actively pursue it (through remembering,
observing, or researching), actively engage it (by commenting on and contextualizing it), and then actively organize their conclusions so they can present them to an audience as effectively as possible. Having students pursue the information (as opposed to having it dictated to them) can engender a personal attachment to – and ideally personal investment in – subject matter. Having students engage the information on their own (as opposed to regurgitating an existing interpretation) can foster the kind of metacognitive inquiry which, as several scholars have pointed out, can lead to genuine learning. And having students organize their conclusions on their own (as opposed to following a prescribed order) can teach them how to structure their thoughts with an eye toward audience and context.

I believe this simultaneous collection, interpretation, and presentation are what allow CNF writing to bridge the personal needs of the writer with the academic expectations of the writing, making the genre the perfect tool to ameliorate the friction between the two. As such, I believe it’s also the perfect tool to reshape and revitalize FYC, utilizing students’ natural subjective and metacognitive composing processes to achieve requirements rather than succumb to them. With this dissertation I study how the subjective skills of the former can satisfy the objectives of the latter, as well as structure a series of CNF-infused assignments meant to explicitly illustrate this personal-to-academic writing transfer. But before moving forward, it’s important to clarify exactly what I mean by CNF skills, academic writing objectives, and writing transfer; hence the following synopsis of the scholarship that has helped me narrow which specific skills and objectives to investigate, and informed my understanding of the logic behind transfer theory.
Creative Nonfiction Features and Academic Writing Objectives

In my introductory section I identified five core features of CNF – reflection, veracity, emotion, voice/style, and narrative structure – that exemplify the simultaneous processes of collection, interpretation, and presentation, and suggest the genre’s value to writing instruction. A preliminary survey of CNF scholarship posits reflection, the ability to meditate on material as one uncovers it, as the defining feature of CNF. Several scholars, including Wendy Bishop, Becky Bradway, Doug Hesse, Robert Root, Michael Steinberg, and David Seitz, view this metacognition as the main pedagogical affordance of the genre. The personal yet self-aware struggle to come to terms with material constitutes learning, which, like the expressivists, they define as an individual and transparent process of contextualization (i.e. a writer putting information in a personal context, then situating this in the larger context of existing scholarship). This metacognition also paves the way for the continuum concept advanced by the second-wave expressivists and the progressive pedagogies, as well as the skill-set transfer advanced by the TFT movement (whereby students can reflect on the similarities and differences between writing tasks, and eventually discern enough similarities to develop their own writing toolkit). As Bishop affirms, CNF writing can help students “develop a substantial set of strengths from which to undertake other disciplinary writing challenges as they explore past and present with an eye to the future” (“Suddenly Sexy: Creative Nonfiction Rear-ends Composition” 273).

The other features identified all revolve around reflection, either dealing with collecting material to reflect on, or presenting the results of said reflection. CNF’s veracity as real (albeit interpreted) experience grounds the writing in the here and now or there and then, either way the result of empirical observations (Root and Steinberg, The Fourth Genre xxvi). Its emotion helps
recreate the personal connection to and investment in subject matter for an audience, as a possible way to move – and thus influence – them (Bishop 259; Bradway and Hesse 6-7). Its voice and style utilize idiosyncratic linguistic and syntactical choices to tailor the writing to a specific audience (Bradway and Hesse 7). And its narrative allowance lets the internal narrative of a writer’s understanding (i.e. the story of their coming to terms with the material) serve as an organic way to organize their thoughts, forcing them to “put the puzzle together on their own” instead of adhering to an abstract outline or more mechanical organizational device (Seitz, “Mocking Discourse” 377).

The core academic features previously identified – critical inquiry, research, argument, audience awareness, and organization – were also determined during previous research, where I examined the position statements of two organizations, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), in addition to keeping the objectives from my previous institutions in mind. Both the “NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing” position statement and the “WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (v3.0)” are amalgamated lists of goals for FYC programs derived from teachers and writing program administrators across the country. These documents aim to regularize what can be expected to be taught in FYC, rather than lay down an absolute set of standards that must be adhered to. As such, they provide teachers with a broad spectrum of achievement requirements, giving them a good idea of what they should build toward as they structure individual classes. Yet despite making space for flexibility, both statements stress the importance of certain core skills, particularly a writer’s ability to think critically (NCTE “Writing is a tool for thinking”; WPA “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Composing”), conduct research (NCTE “Writing and reading are related”; WPA “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Composing”), pose an argument and
anticipate audience (NCTE “Writing grows out of many different purposes”; WPA “Rhetorical Knowledge”), and organize their thoughts (NCTE “Writing is a process”; WPA “Processes”).

Admittedly this summary is just a start, but even with such a limited sample it’s possible to see a pattern emerging, as these core skills find ready parallels with the five features that CNF writing can organically pull from students: reflection, veracity, emotion, audience awareness, and narrative structure.

Transfer Theory: Making the Connection

Finding common ground between CNF and academic writing is a vital part of the work I hope to do, but to move from theory to practice I need to make these connections visible – thus accessible – to students. This involves enacting transfer theory, which outlines how to transform writing into a genre-transcending process. Preliminary research in this area has uncovered divergent opinions on which writing skills can transfer from one context to another. While there is disagreement on the extent to which transfer occurs, scholars generally agree that it can only exist to the extent that we teach for it (Robin Snead, “Transfer-Ability” 1). In this sense the metacognition inherent in reflection – in addition to being the CNF feature credited with fostering learning – is what allows skill transfer to take root. The consensus amongst proponents is that some degree of transfer is possible, but only if students are aware of this possibility. David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon exemplify this consensus in “Teaching for Transfer,” arguing that “transfer does not take care of itself” (22). Reflection, then, is the catalyst, as students establish connections between skills through forward reaching thought (projecting how knowledge can be applied in future contexts) and/or backward reaching thought (recalling past knowledge to address a present context) (25-26). Students, however, typically don’t see these connections on their own – they need a primer. As such, transfer theorists including Anne
Beaufort (College Writing and Beyond 149, 152), Julie Foertsch (“Where Cognitive Psychology Applies” 378-79), Susan Jarrett et al. (“Pedagogical Memory” 65-66), and Yancey et al. (Writing Across Contexts 101) advocate explicitly for Teaching for Transfer courses that directly show students how writing specific to one situation can apply to others.

In addition to helping students see connections between CNF and academic writing, transfer theory broadens these connections to include writing students have done before FYC and writing they’ll do after it, which addresses what transfer theorists (and many other composition scholars) view as a fundamental problem with FYC: the investment deficit. Scholars like Linda Bergmann and Janet Zepernick suggest that the reason FYC students often don’t see how composition skills can carry over is not because they can’t distinguish similarities between FYC assignments and extracurricular, cross-curricular, and discipline-specific writing, but because they view FYC as an isolated incident, a prerequisite burden existing independently of their more major requirements (“Disciplinarity and Transfer” 139-141). CNF scholars also point out the problem with this perception, utilizing CNF’s unique ability to draw from the past while keeping an eye on the future to combat FYC stagnation. “Nonfiction is what composition is when it’s at home and also when it wants to get dressed and go out into the world,” they remind us, positioning the genre as a bridge to help students connect their past interests with future obligations, consequently investing FYC with renewed relevance (Root 239). Transfer theory, however, takes that next step, and aims to substantiate this idea by illustrating how exactly FYC can draw from the writing students do for leisure, and lead into the future assignments they’ll have to do for their major and eventual career.

Many transfer theorists posit the investment problem as one of context, or rather a lack thereof. Scholars including David R. Russell (“Activity Theory and Its Implications for Writing
Instruction”) and David William Smit (The End of Composition Studies), echoing expressivist, progressive, and CNF pedagogies, claim teaching writing in a vacuum compounds the investment deficit, as students view the writing as busy-work, products useful only for the time being and the task at hand. Their answer is a more context-specific FYC, typically aligned with the discipline pedagogies that apply a set disciplinary destination to make the journey more important and the transfer more apparent (Russell 69-70, Smit 140-42). Although the discipline pedagogies are not the purview of my project, this move to replace arbitrary contexts with specific writing situations nonetheless falls in line with my belief in CNF pedagogy. Transfer theory scholarship, I believe, shows why CNF can be a good fit for FYC. It maintains the guiding principles of the discipline-specific model, particularly a shift from an abstract to a concrete focus, and a visible link between past, present, and future writing(s). But the genre is already a discipline in itself, providing students a concrete focus (again, themselves) applicable regardless of their major, and negating the need for an aggregate – though ultimately artificial – cross-curricular model.

**Proposed Study**

**Anecdote as Validation**

A more recent teaching experience at my current institution has reinforced why I feel this work is worth doing. I was lucky enough to teach an intermediate writing course outside of the FYC program, and keeping with my research interests, assigned a variety of CNF subgenres. I was interested to see how my students, who were products of the more traditionalist, academic objectives-focused approach discussed earlier, would fare with the more anecdotal writing I’d been weaned on. For their first two essays, a travelogue memoir and local ethnography, they more than exceeded my expectations, slipping into storytelling mode like they’d never left it,
moving seamlessly from moment A to moment B. Things began to unravel, however, by the time we reached essay number three, which wrapped a traditional argumentative research paper in a personal narrative (which I presumed would help them establish a personal connection to their subject and lead into their research organically). But while their content was solid, most students got lost in transition, and the organization that seemed like second nature in their previous writings simply didn’t translate.

This failure (which admittedly was mine, not my students’) helps me illustrate the need for the work I hope to do. While my students had little difficulty organizing a story, they had trouble transitioning from CNF to a more formal argument – even one bracketed in narrative elements – without sufficient guidance on my part. And while as graduates of our institution’s FYC program they had been drilled in the three-point thesis structure said program uses as a template for academic writing, they were unable to employ one of these prefab outlines when faced with a prompt that deviated from a traditional FYC argument. Granted this hardly constitutes a case study, and organization is only one of the writing skills students need to learn; but this experience reminds me that neither expressivist CNF pedagogy nor the academic-objectives-only models seem to be enough to prepare students for the multitude of writing scenarios they’ll face after FYC.

My project is not alone in dealing with CNF pedagogy, academic objectives, or even transfer theory; a passing glance at any recent conference program in our field will prove that each – particularly CNF pedagogy and the Teaching for Transfer movement – is the topic of much discussion. But I believe my approach is an effective way to synthesize these bodies of scholarship in search of a set of best practices, enacting expressivist theory through CNF pedagogy, and putting both in conversation with academic objectives via transfer theory.
Despite the limitations of each approach, a combination gives students the tools to tackle the unknown, at least as far as their writing is concerned. This model holds on to the idealism of exploration and personally meaningful writing, but it doesn’t lose sight of the realism that this writing ultimately needs to translate into success in other genres for other disciplines, and consequently is willing to work with academic objectives, or at least towards them.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions allow me to build on my preliminary research and combine these disparate yet interrelated areas of scholarship, ultimately (or at least hopefully) leading me to a set of best pedagogical practices to reinvigorate FYC.

1. What does existing scholarship suggest about a relationship between CNF features and academic writing objectives?
2. How does transfer theory make this relationship more apparent – and thus more valuable – to students?
3. What pedagogical practices can foster transfer between CNF and FYC writing?

**Methodology and Methods**

This dissertation involves combining diverse scholarship to create a pedagogical model that quite literally moves from theory to practice. As such, I employ a methodology that does the same, specifically by mixing expressivist theory and critical pedagogy to make the case that because learning is personal and experiential, composition instruction should be more accommodating to writing that is personal and experiential. A fusion of the expressivist belief that personal reflection enables a student to process information rather than regurgitate it and the liberatory belief that knowledge should challenge the status quo rather than sustain it, this approach allows me to investigate areas where expressivist, CNF, and transfer theory scholarship
overlap (specifically in regards to metacognition as learning tool), as well as advocate for change in the form of an FYC that better incorporates this shared belief.

When it comes to conducting this research, my methods largely consist of reading and synthesizing existing scholarship. In *Becoming a Writing Studies Researcher*, Ann Blakeslee and Cathy Fleischer discuss how for qualitative and theoretical projects like my own, reading often serves as a primary method, writing that “it’s more than just developing a sense of what’s already out there. You read…in order to uncover answers to your question or to learn more about different aspects of it” (106). My project falls in line with this line of thinking, as literature review will provide the theoretical foundation for the pedagogical work to come later. Secondary methods including autobiographical teacher research, artifact analysis, and action research will also be utilized, shoring up said theoretical foundation and emphasizing the need for said pedagogical work, respectively (Blakeslee and Fleischer 102, 117).

Autobiographical teacher research sets the stage, as I use moments from my own teaching experience to introduce my pedagogical philosophy and lead into the research questions that guide the project. To determine a relationship between CNF features and academic writing objectives, the subject of my first research question, I examine CNF scholarship alongside position statements on FYC learning objectives in an effort to establish a correlation. To explore whether transfer theory can make this relationship more apparent, the subject of my second research question, I examine transfer theory scholarship in relation to my findings regarding connections between CNF features and academic objectives, which I believe helps show how CNF (which due to its reflective nature has the potential to make these connections more apparent to students) can enhance FYC. Finally, to explore what pedagogical practices can best
foster these connections, i.e. the transfer of skills from one genre to another, I employ action research to propose a course design advocating a change of course for FYC.

**Chapter Outlines**

As my research questions and methods section suggest, my dissertation aims to establish a relationship between CNF and academic writing, and explore how making said relationship more transparent can improve FYC for all parties involved. The abstracts that follow, then, preview how each chapter will accomplish this.

**Chapter One**

My first chapter recounts my personal narrative as an FYC instructor in both an expressivist and more traditionalist writing program to introduce CNF pedagogy as a bridge between the two, pairing my own experience with the allowances and limitations of each approach with the inception, rejection, and resurrection of the expressivist movement. Additionally, I review the progressive pedagogies that shared the stage with expressivism’s resurgence, and illustrate how the guiding principles of these movements influence my belief in CNF pedagogy and transfer theory as a way to invigorate FYC. Chapter One then concludes with a detailed overview of how exactly I plan to use the remaining four chapters to substantiate my claims by answering my research questions.

**Chapter Two**

My second chapter addresses my first research question (What does scholarship suggest about a relationship between CNF features and academic writing objectives?) with a two-part literature review focusing on the features of CNF writing, and possible parallels with commonly agreed-upon academic objectives. Part One focuses on the five core features of CNF – reflection, veracity, emotion, voice/style, and narrative structure – that I believe both embody
and model the simultaneous processes of collection, interpretation, and presentation discussed earlier, as well as parallel five core requirements of academic writing – critical inquiry, research, argument, audience awareness, and organization. Part Two shifts to these academic writing parallels, looking at common learning objectives for FYC programs, specifically those established by the major professional organizations in the Composition/Rhetoric field, to help me identify the skills FYC classes should be developing, and corroborate a connection between CNF features and FYC objectives.

Chapter Three

My third chapter addresses my second research question (How does transfer theory make the relationship between CNF features and academic writing objectives more apparent – and thus more valuable – to students?) by summarizing transfer theory scholarship, which focuses on the extent that writing skills can transcend contexts, and the TFT movement, which suggests theoretical and pedagogical approaches to increase the likelihood of skill transfer. I then synthesize this research (which suggests that certain writing skills can transcend contexts, so long as the connection between contexts is made explicit) with the expressivist and CNF scholarship I’ve previously uncovered to illustrate how metacognitive awareness enables CNF to meet the academic objectives of FYC.

Chapter Four

My fourth chapter addresses my third research question (What pedagogical practices can foster transfer between CNF and FYC writing?) by outlining an FYC course design that puts this synthesized theory to practice, balancing the ideals of expressivism with the appeal of CNF, and utilizing transfer theory to establish clear connections between CNF and academic writing. Serving as a culmination of the previous chapters’ research, Chapter Four includes an overview,
example, and rationale for each major writing assignment in an effort to explicitly illustrate how reflection, veracity, emotion, voice/style, and narration can translate into critical inquiry, thorough research, and knowledge about argument/persuasion, audience awareness, and organization/structure.

Chapter Five

My fifth and final chapter considers whether my findings met my expectations by both assessing how my research on expressivism, CNF, academic objectives, and transfer theory – as well as the resulting pedagogical model – addresses my research questions, and illustrating where my findings support my initial hypothesis about CNF’s viability in FYC settings, and where they don’t. Additionally, Chapter Five considers what implications my research and course design could have for FYC in general, exploring the similarities and differences between my model and other CNF-inflected templates, and investigating additional scholarship that suggests a renewed interest in expressivist tenets through CNF pedagogy and transfer theory scholarship.
CHAPTER TWO: CREATIVE NONFICTION FEATURES AND ACADEMIC WRITING OBJECTIVES

Introduction

In “Suddenly Sexy: Creative Nonfiction Rear-ends Composition,” Wendy Bishop goes anecdotal, opening with a personal narrative about her daughter Morgan’s frequent fender-benders to highlight the importance of reflection to creative nonfiction writing, and to the learning process in general. After five accidents in under two years, with “damage generously spread across three family vehicles,” Bishop admits that as a parent, it’s difficult not to succumb to frustration (257). “I can see my daughter as uninitiated, inexperienced, and juvenile,” she writes: “I may lecture her about safer driving, drive with her for another practice year (my foot pumping the imaginary, passenger-side brake pedal), and wait for her to ‘grow up’,” all to make sure that she learns the necessary lesson (258). This understandable first reaction, equal parts impatience and mistrust, fast becomes a metaphor for the kind of writing instruction Bishop believes is all too common – the kind that makes students believe they can’t learn anything from themselves. As she explains, “Textbooks and curriculum, especially in first-year programs, are conservative, regularizing rather than destabilizing” (271). These authoritarian approaches (which have clear parallels to the current traditionalist and banking models described in my previous chapter) rob students of their agency, imposing blueprints that don’t provide students the space to examine their mistakes and learn from them.

What’s lost, according to Bishop, is the “teachable moment,” that exigency for examination, introspection, and – with luck – growth. Bishop lays out the alternative to the authoritative by describing a better path for her automotively-impaired daughter. As she puts it, “I can view her as a young adult and accept that this is what our car insurance is for. […] That is, I can view Morgan…as an individual with an insistent need to make meaning of her life as it is
unfolding and as an individual who will evolve” (258-59). Paraphrasing Scott Russell Sanders on writing, she reminds us that what her daughter needs to learn from the experience, “to discover what she doesn’t know, clarify what she doesn’t understand, preserve what she values, and share her discoveries with others,” is something our students should be learning as well (259).

CNF, then, serves as a vehicle to help students merge memories with possibilities, allowing them space to reflect on past experiences in order to contextualize their meaning for the present, and future. As Bishop summarizes, “To encourage students to meet themselves in their writing is to teach generously, to open up options, to begin discussions, to allow the old to interact with the new” (273). But as expressivist, CNF, and other progressive pedagogies have shown, if CNF is the vehicle, reflection is the engine – the cognitive activity that unlocks the pedagogical potential of personal writing. In addition to the promise of getting to draw on their own experiences, opinions, and ideas, reflection lets FYC writers take a step back and consider – perhaps for the first time – why they are sharing these things, and how. By helping students “dramatize the process of their thinking,” CNF introduces first-year writers to metacognition, the personal theory-building that marks the first step toward an adaptable writing strategy – or toolkit – for use in future academic and professional contexts (Anderson qtd. in Bishop, 271). As Bishop affirms, “When allowed to explore literary nonfiction – essay, memoir, personal journalism, and the other literatures of fact – our writing students will develop a substantial set of strengths from which to undertake other disciplinary writing challenges as they explore past and present with an eye toward the future” (273).

This chapter explores CNF’s “substantial set of strengths,” as well as how they can help students tackle “other disciplinary writing challenges.” This will address my first research
question – What does scholarship suggest about a relationship between creative nonfiction features and academic writing objectives? – with a two-part literature review focusing on the features of CNF writing, and possible parallels with commonly agreed-upon academic writing objectives for first-year composition. Part One: Creative Nonfiction Features focuses on the five core features of CNF – reflection, veracity, emotion, voice/style, and narrative structure – that I believe both embody and model the simultaneous processes of collection, interpretation, and presentation discussed in Chapter One, as well as parallel five core requirements of academic writing – critical inquiry, research, argument, audience awareness, and organization. Part Two: Academic Writing Objectives shifts to these academic writing parallels, looking at common learning objectives for FYC programs, specifically those established by the major professional organizations in the Composition/Rhetoric field, to help me to identify the skills FYC classes develop, and hopefully corroborate a connection between CNF features and FYC objectives.

Part One: Creative Nonfiction Features

In Creating Nonfiction, Bradway and Hesse describe their titular genre as “fact-based writing with literary qualities” marked by a “strong authorial voice and style,” which is in step with how many CNF writers define what they do (3). While a good description for the character of CNF writing, a definition that might be of more interest to teachers of writing – and particularly teachers of FYC – is Robert Root’s, which pinpoints CNF’s pedagogical promise by describing it as “the written expression of, reflection on, and/or interpretation of observed, perceived, or recollected experience” (“Variations on a Theme…” 295). This definition highlights CNF’s empirical roots, which we tend to associate with memory due to the personal and narrative nature of much CNF writing, but just as often include researched information. However, it also encompasses the idea of interpreting these memories and facts, highlighting the
The centrality of reflection to the appeal and potential of CNF. As Bishop’s story, and the work of the CNF, expressivist, and transfer theory scholars cited in my previous chapter suggest, reflection enables the simultaneous processes of collection, interpretation, and presentation that make CNF effective pedagogy.

The section that follows will illustrate how – and more importantly, why – CNF scholars champion reflection (or writing to explore/discover, as some authors term it) as the defining feature of the genre. In doing so, I’ll take into account how the other CNF features – veracity, emotion, voice/style, and narrative structure – hinge on reflection (either recalling, recording, or collecting information to interpret, or presenting the results of said interpretation). And before moving on to an in-depth discussion of these other CNF features, I’ll also preview how the reflection inherent in CNF can make writing instruction more transparent by getting students to think about the larger context of/rhetorical situation for their writing – a metacognitive move that helps them see how certain skills can transcend contexts, and thus begin to build their own writing toolkit.

Reflection

As stated above, reflection is widely regarded as the defining feature of CNF writing by many of the genre’s proponents – be they writers, scholars, pedagogues, or any combination of the three. But of particular import to my project, reflection also illustrates how CNF pedagogy falls in line with the goals of expressivism (the school of thought that, as I outline in Chapter One, serves as a guiding influence for my pedagogy). Simply put, expressivism advocates an active processing of material rather than a passive recitation, i.e. metacognition over memory. Students should come up with their own interpretation of material, and then find where, how, and why this interpretation fits in with the existing conversation (echoing Elbow’s response to
Bartholomae’s expressivist critique). Reflection is a clear embodiment of this ideal, asking students to explore their thoughts, feelings, and opinions about a topic before presenting these things to a larger audience. As such, reflection is inextricably linked to expressivism, as well as the progressive pedagogical movements (sociopolitical, community-engaged, and discipline-specific) that grew out of it. But this brief summary is concerned mostly with why reflection works; next, I’ll turn to the aforementioned CNF writers, scholars, and pedagogues to illustrate how it works.

In *The Fourth Genre*, Root and Steinberg explain how something as simple as the opportunity to write about one’s self sets the stage for reflection. Attraction gives way to investment and inquiry, and CNF’s personal subject matter often “becomes the catalyst or trigger for some personal journey…or self-interrogation,” demonstrating how the genre’s expressive allowances pave the way for its pedagogical potential (xxiv). Echoing the sentiments of many of the sources I’ve reviewed thus far, Root highlights the expressive and reflective components of CNF writing. He likes the term “discovery,” writing how students – referring to their personal narratives – often tell him “how working in nonfiction leads them to discoveries about the meaning of their own experiences, discoveries that enhance their understanding of their own lives” (“Variations on a Theme” 294). Root also hints at how this idea of discovery can move beyond the personal, likening his students’ comments to “what working writers say all the time – that the writing is for themselves, to discover what they didn’t know they knew, to find a way to understand the things that matter to them” (29). Bishop too points out the importance of this initial spark (albeit a bit more poetically), arguing that “we all need to essay our lives,” for “in doing so, we never arrive at the end of things but agree to linger thoughtfully, painfully, ecstatically along the way” (267). In this sense, reflection gives writers the chance to bring in
their personal interests, and take a step back and consider why these particular interests are important to them. While that initial spark is invaluable, the greater value actually lies in taking this step backwards, which makes it possible for CNF writing to become “sites of growth and staging areas for maturing thinking” (Bishop 269).

To better explain this idea of stepping back, Bradway and Hesse cite Carl Klaus’s comments on the dual nature of the essay – “it is a story of events that is also a story of the writer’s mental journey” – to help bring the reflection inherent in CNF to life (7). Telling the story is really only half the story, as CNF is equal parts recollection and introspection. Bradway and Hesse elaborate on the psychology on the inside of the narrative, focusing on the writer’s self-awareness of their interpretation. They claim that “when a writer decides what ‘truth’ is, he is going through a very personal process of intuition and evaluation,” adding that “creative nonfiction usually displays a kind of self-consciousness – a need to comment on the process of writing ‘reality’ and a need to examine the writer’s own position in and upon the events” (7). They later explain this self-consciousness in terms of reflective writing, where a writer seeks “to understand an experience, observation, or text, exploring it for meanings and connections” (20).

This search for meanings and connections is key, because this is where the simultaneous processes of collection, interpretation, and presentation begin. As students put pen to paper (or more likely finger to keyboard), they reflect on their internal processing of material, creating a text that funnels their inner thoughts into an outside product. The initial draft is meant more for the writer, as a way to crystallize their thinking as finite thought. But eventually they’ll reflect on this thought further, looking for connections between their interpretation and others, thus entering the existing conversation. And ultimately they’ll refine this thought so they can share it with an outside audience, this time utilizing reflection not only to interpret material, but to
present the results of said interpretation as effectively as possible. Reflection, then, enacts metacognition on two fronts: it lets writers interpret freely and then step back and examine their interpretations, which expressivist and critical pedagogies posit as the root of learning, and it lets writers examine the way they ultimately present their interpretations in order to do so more effectively given the context and audience, which CNF and teaching for transfer scholars posit as sound pedagogy.

This idea is rooted in the Freirean anti-banking belief that the kind of learning that really sticks involves allowing students to come to their own conclusions before considering the conclusions of others. CNF writing has obvious parallels with this turn inward, but the genre is just as concerned with giving students the opportunity to turn back outward. Bradway and Hesse remind us that personal exploration should lead beyond the personal, as good CNF focuses “on life, on one’s experiences, and what these experiences teach us about the greater world in general” (13). They cite CNF writer Steve Almond’s work in *Candyfreak* to help illustrate this point. Explaining his motivations, Almond writes “I wanted to write about candy in a way that honored my autobiographical experiences, but also allowed me to understand the industry and its history,” demonstrating how CNF is a way to explore personal experiences, thoughts, feelings, and opinions, and then make connections to larger conversations about these same topics (29). This is akin to the turn inward/turn outward move the second wave expressivists and subsequent progressive pedagogies used to answer the critique that personal writing is too self-centered.

Reflection gets the ball rolling, and we can use it “to reach for connections that extend beyond the purely personal” in a way that transforms CNF from mere personal narratives to narratives of personal understanding (Root and Steinberg xxv).
CNF’s pedagogical potential is also rooted in its reflective nature, though what elevates the genre is the way the reflection impacts presentation. As students compare their conclusions with existing conversations, they refine their initial thought into something worth sharing. This involves a noticeable shift in perspective from what they’re saying to how they’re saying, which gets students thinking about writing in a metacognitive way. Here reflection enables students to anticipate audience and context, and shape their text accordingly. Doing so requires them to acknowledge the rhetorical situation – the specific set of circumstances that necessitates their text, and the expectations and conventions that shape its delivery. This step back is where students can begin developing their own theory of writing, which presents a unique opportunity for writing instruction. As a genre, CNF is inherently flexible, with subgenres that suit various (and varying) rhetorical situations while maintaining the same core set of skills discussed previously. Exploring the spectrum of CNF exposes students to different rhetorical situations in a way that invites comparisons. CNF, then, gets students looking for connections between different kinds of writing and different kinds of writing strategies. As teachers, we can utilize the lessons of transfer theory to highlight these connections, thus helping students to build their writing toolkit.

To expand upon this idea of a writing toolkit, i.e. certain malleable skills that students can apply to evolving rhetorical contexts, I’ll next discuss four other defining features of the genre – veracity, emotion, voice/style, and narrative structure. As previously stated, these features revolve around reflection, either dealing with collecting material to reflect on (veracity), or presenting the results of said reflection (emotion, voice/style, and narrative structure). But the metacognition inherent in each further explains how CNF enables learning while enacting pedagogy, and perhaps more importantly for my project, suggests some noticeable parallels with
common collegiate writing objectives – critical inquiry, research, argument, audience awareness, and organization.

**Veracity**

If CNF can be understood as a writer reflecting on material, veracity is all about how this material is collected, or in many cases recollected. Undoubtedly the genre gives license for interpretation, but this interpretation needs to be rooted in reality – whether experienced, observed, or researched (Bradway and Hesse ix). Veracity deals with fidelity to the source material, which impacts the credibility of the author, and ultimately the genre. Simply put, while a writer has room to explore a topic and present the story of their interpretation, the facts met therein must be reported as accurately and honestly as possible. In *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up*, CNF author and proponent Lee Gutkind highlights the importance of the N, writing that intentional dishonesty, whether slight exaggeration or outright fabrication, moves the needle too far toward fiction, which calls into question CNF’s legitimacy. As he explains, “the word ‘creative’ has been criticized in this context because some people have maintained that being creative means that you pretend or exaggerate or make up facts and embellish details” (6). “This is completely untrue,” he reminds us, emphasizing that in order to work, CNF must balance both terms – “creative” and “nonfiction”:

The word “creative” has to do with how the writer…shapes and presents information. “Creative” doesn’t mean inventing what didn’t happen, reporting what wasn’t there. It doesn’t mean the writer has a license to lie. The word “nonfiction” means the material is true. The cardinal rule is clear – and cannot be violated. (7)
Other CNF scholars affirm their genre as “reliably factual, whether the author has lived it or observed it and recorded it” (Root and Steinberg xxvi). However, most grant a bit more leeway for interpretation, given that our memories are imperfect, and the experience of coming to one’s own conclusions is such a valuable cognitive activity. Root and Steinberg aren’t as stern about sticking to the facts as Gutkind is, writing that CNF writers “sometimes alter the accuracy of events in order to achieve the accuracy of interpretation” (xxvi). Bradway and Hesse cite CNF writer Joan Didion to illustrate this point about how the search for truth can be as important as the truth itself: “Not only have I had trouble distinguishing between what happened and what merely might have happened, but I remain unconvinced that the distinction, for my purposes, matters. (…) How it felt to me. That is getting closer to the truth” (14-16). This view of CNF’s veracity doesn’t necessarily sanction the exaggeration or fabrication that Gutkind cautions against, but it does make room for narrative allowances, if that’s what it takes to get the writer’s “truth” across.

While facilitating the learning potential of reflection and individual interpretation, these “allowances” do leave the door open for serious ethical issues, specifically the kind of embellishment that steers the genre too far toward fiction. Gutkind lists some of CNF’s most infamous offenders – including *A Million Little Pieces* memoirist James Frey, *New York Times* reporter Stephen Glass, and Howard Hughes biographer Clifford Irving – to remind writers of the very real consequences of taking liberties with the truth (or at least getting caught taking liberties with the truth) (14-17). All three faced stiff penalties for fabricating information in order to advance their stories; Frey and Glass were discredited on national television (by talk show host Oprah Winfrey and *60 Minutes* correspondent Steve Croft, respectively), and Irving went to prison for seventeen months (15-17). Granted Gutkind is dealing with professionally
published works that reach a much larger audience than most student-produced CNF; and since this audience pays money to consume a product, the stakes for knowingly defrauding them are raised significantly. Still, these cautionary tales illustrate what can happen when a writer damages their relationship with an audience by losing their trust.

Interestingly enough, however, the very danger inherent in exaggeration highlights the metacognitive capabilities of veracity, which involves staying as honest as the circumstances allow, but also admitting when, where, and why liberties have been taken. Veracity factors heavily into CNF subgenres involving memoir, personal narrative, and observation; these depend on memory, and can require a writer to fill in gaps by approximating missing information to the best of their ability. CNF permits this approximation, but veracity pushes writers to acknowledge it. Whether they’ve played with their timeline or recreated dialogue to craft a more complete narrative, writers ideally should provide a disclaimer (either textual or extra-textual) to alert readers of any such allowances (Gutkind 36-37). In addition to memory, veracity is equally important when it comes to researched material, such as in literary journalism, where it pushes writers to examine their subjectivity. It’s not enough to just report a personal take on a subject; writers must also consider why they are of that opinion and what led them to taking that particular position. Here veracity helps a writer examine their bias, and – just as with any narrative allowances – alert their readers to it. Whether the source material is experienced, observed, or researched, then, CNF writers are processing and presenting facts, and then stepping back and examining the way they processed and presented them. CNF’s reflection may allow the personal experience of coming to one’s own conclusions, but its veracity forces writers to think about their subjectivity, and be honest about it in their writing.
Emotion

Joan Didion’s line about capturing the feeling of the experience nicely sets up the next defining feature of CNF, emotion – or more specifically, an emotional attachment to and investment in subject matter that comes through in the writing. As I discussed in my first chapter, emotion is that initial spark that draws a CNF writer to their subject (it’s also, according to Kinneavy and Britton, the generative spark that underlies all discourse). Emotion is the “way in,” the attraction that inspires and propels the text into existence. Ideally, it also characterizes the text, leaving visible traces of that initial spark throughout all stages of the writing, from first draft to finished product. With CNF, writers can explore topics they want to write about in a way that encourages their attraction rather than suppresses it in the interest of objectivity. What results is writing with feeling, writing with noticeable passion that hopefully spills over from author to audience. And it is in this spilling that emotion can be harnessed; just as it draws a writer in, it can draw a reader in, and then be put to a more persuasive purpose.

CNF can be stealthily persuasive, owing largely to the way the genre invokes pathos. As Bradway and Hesse confirm, with CNF the idea isn’t “to relay facts in an objective tone” in order to convince an audience, but rather to move them by emphasizing a personal connection to a subject (6). True, CNF is fundamentally about accommodating reflection, giving an author space to come to their own conclusions. Yet the emotion inherent in the genre – emotion that revolves around the personal connection to subject matter – simultaneously presents writers an opportunity to steer an audience toward the same conclusions, facilitating a metacognitive awareness of how passion can lend itself to persuasion.

While CNF can technically employ all the rhetorical appeals – ethos if an author cites their personal experience, and logos if the narrative structure presents a natural cause-and-effect
order that suggests a logical progression toward a conclusion – pathos is the appeal most commonly associated with the genre. Bradway and Hesse break down the two most common ways CNF uses pathos to persuade, which they term the plea for understanding and the call to action (7-8). The former, which is the more common and more subtle approach, deals mainly with sharing an experience or point of view with an audience in hopes that they’ll empathize, and ultimately share the same (or at least a similar) feeling toward the topic. As Bradway and Hesse elaborate, “Creative nonfiction nearly always pleads for an understanding, whether it be of a social problem or something as seemingly mundane as the isolation of childhood” (8). This is how most CNF writers mount an argument; “rather than diagramming it, or laying it out point by logical point, they get us to see the truth from their eyes” (Bradway and Hesse 19).

Autobiographical pieces that hinge on personal experience (particularly memoirs, personal narratives, and observation/ethnographies) deftly employ this strategy, capturing, as Didion put it, “How it felt to me” in an intensely clever way that invites audiences – rather than instructs them – to feel the same. However, CNF can also seek to persuade an audience with a more direct call to action. As Bradway and Hesse explain, “chasing an idea is compelled by a need to right a wrong, to reform” (7). Position pieces follow this model by taking a noticeable stand (think essays, opinion/editorials, and critiques); these forms maintain the personal connection to transfer the passion onto the reader, they just are clearer about their argumentative intentions.

Through either approach, CNF writing encourages a writer to cultivate emotion, and, on a deeper level, to cultivate an awareness of how that emotion can be used to influence an audience.

**Voice/Style**

CNF writing can be distinguished by a strong authorial presence – a presence that makes clear to an audience that this piece was written by a person, a subjective individual with thoughts
and opinions all their own. As the preceding paragraphs hopefully convey, reflection and emotion are the foundations of this presence, granting writers the space to explore and the chance to express. If these features mark what’s going on beneath the surface, voice and style are the surface – the idiosyncratic linguistic, grammatical, and syntactic choices CNF writers employ to get their message across to an audience in a uniquely personal way. Simply put, voice and style are what allow authors to sound like themselves in their writing. Different than Elbow’s conception of voice, which hews closer to the emotional pull discussed in the previous section, voice and style are the linguistic markers of personality, the I-inflected transcript of an author’s interpretation meant to share with an outside audience. But more than just a textual incarnation of an author’s inner thoughts, voice and style also mark a conscious effort on their behalf to refine their message.

To better explain this effort, it’s worth returning to Britton’s expressive function of language, which he defines as a fusion of the transactional and poetic. As he explains, people use language as a means to an end, as a way to achieve certain goals (the transactional). However, they have the metacognitive ability to examine these means – to study how language works to accomplish things, and then work to make their language as effective as possible (the poetic), thus giving them the best chance to achieve their goals (83, 85). In many ways, CNF is an embodiment of this expressive function. As writers, we often engage the genre because we want to achieve a goal with our writing, whether it’s direct persuasion or simply shared understanding. Finding and then refining our voice can help us do just that, perfecting the rhythm of our words so our message sticks the landing.

Like the use of emotion, playing with voice and style can help a writer to both influence an audience, and step back and examine how they were able to do so. These CNF features,
however, present an even more important metacognitive opportunity, inviting writers to think about how they might reshape their delivery to reach a different audience. From a writing teacher’s standpoint, this metacognitive moment – perhaps more than any other – unlocks the pedagogical potential of CNF by explicitly introducing the idea of writing as strategy. Cultivating voice and style help a writer connect with an audience, but experimenting with voice and style help them anticipate audience, and in doing so, pushes them to think about which voices/styles are best suited to reach which audiences. This opens the door to an understanding of rhetorical context, and consequently of writing as adaptable skill(s) to meet varying contexts.

These toolkit-building epiphanies are fueled by CNF’s reflective nature, but they’re facilitated by the genre’s diversity and flexibility. CNF’s interrelated subgenres – including personal narratives/memoirs, essays, critiques/reviews, place writing, ethnographies/observations, profiles, and literary journalism – help introduce students to multiple audiences and contexts, while the genre’s inherent flexibility makes CNF writing uniquely suited to meet the needs of different rhetorical situations. As stated previously, all forms of CNF involve some degree of collecting, interpreting, and presenting information. The different subgenres maintain this general formula, they just alter the presentation depending on the aim and the audience. As Root and Steinberg write, CNF can be “lyrical, expository, meditative, informational, reflective, self-interrogative, exploratory, or analytical,” or any combination in between (xvii). Admittedly these options tend to overlap whether the piece aims to share an understanding or make an argument; however, CNF concerned with the latter will be a bit more direct, and possibly more formal in tone. For example, a personal narrative about a trip to a national park will be more experiential than an ethnographic observation of the place, which will shift focus from memory to location. And an essay about conservation would funnel both into a
more tightly structured narrative that builds toward an argument for protecting these natural resources. All might be anchored in the same personal experience, but as the objective of the piece changes, that experience will be put to work in different ways.

As surface features, voice and style are perhaps the most visible markers of how delivery can change from one rhetorical situation to the next. As such, they are a natural place for students to begin developing rhetorical strategies for tackling different tasks (and a natural place for teachers to begin discussing skill transfer, but more on that in the next chapter). Working under the CNF umbrella, students can reflect on the similarities and differences from subgenre to subgenre. This helps them theorize which approaches apply for the entire genre, and which approaches may need to be tweaked depending on exigency and audience.

**Narrative Structure**

In simplest terms, the final CNF feature I’ll be discussing is all about how story makes things stick. By tapping into story – which some psychologists theorize is an innate way to process, organize, and receive information – CNF’s narrative structure often allows it to resonate in ways other writing cannot. As I’ve stated elsewhere, this narrative allowance draws students in, giving them space to tell their stories. But it can be just as appealing to teachers, as in essence this narrative structure gives students a way to organize their thoughts, organize their writing, and possibly, organize an argument.

In fact, the pedagogical potential of CNF owes much to the cognitive potential of narrative. In “Narrative Turns in Writing Studies Research,” Deborah Journet explains that narrative “is fundamental to how people organize and make sense of their lives,” and as such is “a way of constructing experience or discourse” (14). While her work deals specifically with the benefits of using narrative to present research, her findings echo the sentiments of the CNF
scholars who posit narrative as a default organizational device. According to them, we gravitate toward story because its very nature puts things in order. This order can be sequential or cause-and-effect, but either way it’s a logical progression from one “thing” (whether a concrete event or an abstract idea) to the next. In this way, narrative is an organic way to move thought from chaos to clarity. Harnessing this capability gives writers a kind of template to present their findings to an audience – an audience that, some believe, is similarly hard-wired to receive information in narrative form.

In “The Narrative Construction of Reality,” psychologist Jerome Bruner explains why our brains are so receptive to narrative by illustrating how stories help people understand the world around them. His research outlines how storytelling is akin to an evolutionary response, helping humans to better organize, contextualize, and thus better remember information. Two of Bruner’s narrative principles – particularity and diachronicity – facilitate thought by allowing us to simultaneously separate and relate information (6-11). In order to process seemingly endless stimuli, our minds need to both mark certain things (i.e. events or ideas) as separate from others (particularity), and find a way to relate these separate things to each other (diachronicity). We accomplish this by to installing a “meaning-preserving sequence” that strings disparate thoughts together as a unified whole (6). The resulting order is a narrative, one that depending on the focus of the sequence can take the form of a traditional story (a sequence of events) or look more like an argument (a sequence of ideas). Either way, narrative’s ability to stress connections between its parts helps author – and audience – to better remember the whole.

Moving from organizing thought to organizing text, CNF’s narrative structure provides an author with important opportunities to both create their own organizational strategy, and step back and examine said strategy’s effectiveness. Concerning the former, CNF can help students
organize writing by prompting them to think of their own formula rather than just following a preexisting outline. The way we organize memories in story-form so we can understand and recall them mirrors how we structure stories when we write them down. True, chronology is often a guiding force, particularly for experiential/autobiographical texts; and the intent of the narrative, whether it’s more about sharing an experience or an opinion, impacts the nature of the presentation. Still, CNF writers have to make important decisions about which events and/or ideas are included and – more importantly – how they relate to each other. Finding a way to connect them creates order, a visible progression of one thing to the next that emphasizes both the singular importance of each event/idea and the collective importance of the greater sequence.

In “Mocking Discourse,” David Seitz explains how this opportunity isn’t lost on students, who both recognize and appreciate the chance to take ownership of their writing, and find their own way. “Most tend to view their use of the forms of academic writing as strictly based on someone else’s manual,” he writes, adding “The design is already made for them, and they just follow prescribed direction more as rote motion, than as conscious action” (377). But taking away these “instructions” forces students to put the puzzle together on their own – to make their own decisions about what goes where, and why. As one of Seitz’s students summed it up, “You’re making your own toy instead of just putting on another leg for the assembly line” (377). This illustrates narrative’s metacognitive moment, which pushes students think about how their order influences their overall effectiveness (whether they’re relaying an experience or an opinion, and whether they’re aiming for shared understanding or direct persuasion). How to lead from one thing to another to keep the story cohesive and make it its most powerful – this is, in a sense, the building blocks of organization, and a skill students can carry into other writing situations.
As the first half of this chapter has shown, the five aforementioned CNF features – reflection, veracity, emotion, voice/style, and narrative structure – provide an opportunity as much as an aesthetic. Each marks a definitive quality of CNF writing, but also a vital metacognitive moment for CNF writers. By giving authors the chance to simultaneously reflect for the writing and on the writing, they promote a set of skills that posit composing as an expressive and adaptive process meant to produce the most effective product for an evolving rhetorical context. These features, then, illustrate CNF’s potential as a pedagogical tool, one whose reflective nature lets students present an interpretation while examining their presentation.

**Part Two: Academic Writing Objectives**

Interestingly enough, though, the features of CNF also show how the so-called “fourth genre” aligns with many of the goals of first-year composition programs, as put forth by the major professional organizations in the Composition and Rhetoric field. In their “Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing,” the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) also describe effective writing pedagogy as a two-pronged process that lets writers develop both “a repertory of skills, strategies, and practices for generating, revising, and editing different kinds of texts” and “reflective abilities and meta-awareness about writing” (“Writing is a process”). Like CNF, their preferred approach to writing instruction promotes a reflective and reflexive strategy. And just as CNF relies on its features to enact this approach, FYC emphasizes specific objectives to steer the writing in a similar – if admittedly more formal – direction. While representing only one of the organizations and position statements I examine, this brief citation highlights an important connection between the defining features of CNF writing and the desired outcomes of FYC programs, which both utilize reflection to foster critical inquiry and advance the idea of writing as a set of adaptive skills.
With the rest of this chapter, I further explore the relationship between CNF writing and introductory academic writing, examining position statements from the NCTE, the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), and the Writing Across the Curriculum Clearinghouse (WACC), and highlighting what I believe are parallels between the features of CNF and the objectives of FYC writing. These documents confirm that academic writing also relies on reflection to initiate and complete a sequence of collecting, interpreting, and presenting. Despite some variance in terminology and delivery, the position statements share a belief in a process whereby students use research to collect material, critical inquiry to interpret it, and an awareness of argument, audience, and organization to present it. This sequence is made up of desired skills that have become discernable outcomes for FYC students. According to the position statements, they are not so much standards to measure proficiency, but rather goals programs should emphasize in order to help students develop an adaptive writing strategy – an approach that shares core thinking and composing skills but is flexible in how it employs them (“WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (v3.0)” “Introduction”). While their purpose parallels CNF’s pedagogical potential, several outcomes themselves seem to parallel the main CNF features, specifically critical inquiry (reflection), research (veracity), argument (emotion), audience awareness (voice/style), and organization (narrative structure). The following discussion shows how certain commonly agreed upon outcomes provoke similar metacognitive moves as their CNF counterparts, both making these parallels more explicit, and suggesting how doing so illustrates CNF’s potential to promote skill transfer (the subject of Chapter Three).
Critical Inquiry

As stated above, academic writing hinges on a writer’s ability to think critically, both about the material they engage with, and the strategies they use to ultimately present their findings. As such, critical inquiry (or critical thinking) is a – if not the – key FYC outcome, sort of the center the whole process revolves around. This primary academic writing objective helps facilitate the subjective learning processes that many consider ideal pedagogy. Recalling the anti-banking philosophy of education discussed in Chapter One, critical inquiry helps students move beyond simply receiving and relaying information by allowing them to experience multiple discourses and experiment with multiple modes of delivery. Just as reflection embodies and enables the learning and pedagogical potential of CNF, critical inquiry drives academic writing on the interpretation and presentation fronts – the former fostering individual thought, the latter refining inner dialogue into a deliverable script.

In FYC, critical inquiry takes the form of a student engaging with a topic on – and in – their own terms. Concerning the former, the NCTE, in their “Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing,” affirm writing as a “medium for thought,” explaining how writing can be used “to solve problems, to identify issues, to construct questions, to reconsider something one had already figured out, to try out a half-baked idea” (“Writing is a tool for thinking”). As with CNF, here writing is a way of thinking and a way of learning – an outlet for personal exploration into scholarly topics, and a place to sit with the material before one has to hand over their findings. The WACC illustrate just how valuable this time can be in their “Statement of Principles and Practices,” explaining that by allowing students to reflect on their ideas, “writing makes thinking visible” – facilitating connections “between new information and learned information, and among areas of knowledge across multiple domains” (“Part Three: Principles
and Practices for WAC Pedagogy”). This metacognitive moment helps writers examine their own epiphanies, *and see* where their conclusions fit into the larger conversation, mirroring the “turn inward, turn outward” model expressivist, progressive, and CNF pedagogues champion. Because in essence, reflection is inquiry – thinking critically on a topic, examining how and why one feels a certain way about it, and how and why others feel as they do.

Critical inquiry can help a student refine their thinking, but more importantly (at least from a teaching perspective) this outcome presents the perfect opportunity to shift the focus to the writing – and do so rather explicitly. As much as critical thinking is about, well, thinking, it’s also about taking a step back and considering how to best present the results of said thinking. Just like the reflection inherent in CNF, this objective pushes students to examine both what they are saying and how they are saying it. The advantage here, though, is that since learning objectives center on writing instruction, the focus on the “how” can be much more transparent. The position statements accomplish this with a change in terminology, moving from thinking “critically” about subject material to thinking “rhetorically” about effective strategies for sharing an interpretation. Yet despite the difference in nomenclature, deep, complex thought is still at play as a writer moves from thinking about how they came to an understanding, to thinking about how they can best transfer that understanding to someone else.

Anticipating audience is how a writer begins to think rhetorically, and the position statements make it clear that getting writers to think rhetorically should therefore be an immediate priority for FYC. The NCTE, WPA, and WACC share a belief in writing as rhetorical, and in ideal writing instruction as that which teaches students to recognize that there are many different rhetorical situations, and that each will require different strategies to successfully navigate. Echoing the sentiments of the other statements, the WACC maintain that
“effective writers are those who have learned to write across a variety of rhetorical situations, for
a variety of audiences, and for a variety of purposes” (“Part Three: Principles and Practices for
WAC Pedagogy”). By exposing students to various contexts and varying genres, FYC can teach
students “to think rhetorically, understanding that all aspects of writing – from voice, to
organization, to stylistic conventions – are affected by the rhetorical situation” (“Part Three:
Principles and Practices for WAC Pedagogy”). To be sure, anticipating context is also the
purview of other outcomes – specifically audience awareness, but also argument and
organization. Still, being able to refocus one’s attention from interpretation to presentation – that
deeper metacognitive moment where one switches from thinker to writer – is an invaluable
pedagogical step, one that matches CNF’s reflective move toward delivery. And the position
statements’ strategy for achieving this outcome – having students examine and experiment with
several genres in order to experience multiple rhetorical situations – meshes with CNF’s
rhetorical flexibility (owing to the genre’s many subgenres).

Research

The next shared learning outcome, research, does not directly sync with its CNF
counterpart, veracity, as well as critical inquiry matches reflection. Yet there’s still a clear
parallel, as both involve expanding a base of knowledge – specifically the need for a writer to
collect or consult supplemental materials to gather additional information on a topic. But where
the FYC outcome emphasizes being thorough when collecting materials, the CNF feature
emphasizes being transparent when reporting results. However, though they may stress different
aspects of the approach, each highlights the centrality of conducting, interpreting, and reporting
research to the learning and writing process, as this gives authors the tools to explore and
ultimately enter existing conversations.
According to the position statements, research evolves from a writer’s need to expand their knowledge on a topic, prompting them to move beyond their initial interpretation to see both what others have said and are saying. As the NCTE summarize, “for writers to contribute to a given topic or to be effective in a given situation, they must be familiar with what previous writers have said” (“Writing and reading are related”). In FYC, then, research is an expansive process of gathering, typically involving consulting and collecting existing sources of authority on a subject (personal observations and individual data collection are other valuable research methods, but these endeavors aren’t as common in introductory writing courses). As such, learning where and how to access these sources – whether they’re print or, as is increasingly true, digital – is also a central FYC focus. Simply being familiar isn’t enough, though, as writers need to take things a step further by contextualizing this information in their own words in order to fully interact with a source. The WPA affirm this sentiment, writing that students should “use strategies – such as interpretation, synthesis, response, critique, and design/redesign – to compose texts that integrate the writer’s ideas with those from appropriate sources” (“Critical Thinking, Reading, and Composing”). Research, then, is all about getting a good sense of what else is out there so a writer can examine their take in light of existing scholarship, with the ultimate goal of entering into Bartholomae’s “existing conversation” with credibility and confidence.

With CNF, research also evolves from a writer’s need to expand their knowledge on a topic, but veracity is less about the breadth of material collected and more about an author examining their perception of this material. CNF research often involves more than just consulting existing sources. Since CNF writing is by nature more reflective and personal, research in this genre typically involves recollection and observation – important but highly
subjective cognitive activities that bring biases and opinions to the forefront. Veracity mandates that an author’s preconceptions, preferences, and prejudices are factored into the research, so that the personal processes that informed their interpretation are a vital part of any conclusions they reach. This not only promotes honesty and transparency within research (including the more traditional, academic kind like argumentative essays and comparative analyses), it also presents a greater metacognitive opportunity for writers to explore the biases and opinions that helped shape their outside sources. Therefore when they establish connections with existing scholarship, they’re not only looking for connections between what was said, but also how it was said.

Like the research advocated by the position statements, CNF enables the much-aforementioned turn inward/turn outward move. Both push students to learn what came before – not so the existing conversation takes priority over an original interpretation, but so it can add credibility to it, and help students establish connections between the two. And these connections, as previous scholarship suggests, can facilitate both learning (because students have made them on their own), and pedagogy (as thinking about how they were able to make connections can help students get their audiences to make those connections too).

**Argument**

Argument presents another imperfect parallel between academic and CNF writing, as this titular objective often entails a direct and logical form of persuasion while its CNF counterpart, emotion, involves a more subtle and, well, emotional kind of influence. Additionally, the position statements themselves deal with argument indirectly, as the need to convince an audience falls into the larger fold of their call for a rhetorical approach to composition instruction – an approach that includes meeting multiple contexts and audiences, many of which involve the
need for a writer to take a stand on an issue or explain a position with the tacit goal of getting their readers to come to a similar conclusion (in a sense, persuasion). Yet despite this apparent disparity, both features at their core involve a connection between author and audience, and an awareness about how best to make said connection.

From an academic standpoint, argument is about persuasion – convincing an audience that your line of reasoning and ultimate conclusion is worth agreeing with. FYC programs have historically held onto this interpretation, and consequently put an argumentative impetus on much of the writing assigned therein. In a traditional course model essays typically follow some variation of an “arguing a position” paper, and courses often culminate in a research essay that measures a student’s proficiency in the format. As noted, the position statements make an argument for moving beyond this approach, advocating for an FYC with a more diverse range of rhetorical situations so students gain experience meeting multiple purposes with their writing (which, as the expressivist, progressive, and CNF pedagogues cited previously believe, is the key to building an adaptive writing strategy that can ultimately help students transfer FYC skills into other academic and professional endeavors). But even with this caveat the position statements highlight the importance of the argumentative, confirming it as a fundamental writing skill for students to acquire. When discussing appropriate FYC assignments, they outline argument-minded writing encompassing both academic (research reports, argumentative essays, analyses) and civic (editorials, reviews, blogs) genres (WACC “Part Three: Principles and Practices for WAC Pedagogy”). These assignments have different purposes and target different audiences, but at heart they have the common goal of sharing an author’s subjective interpretation, and hoping it’ll rub off.
Returning to argument’s CNF complement, we find that while the method may differ, the motive remains the same. Emotion is about moving an audience – sharing an experience, getting them to feel what the author feels, or sharing an opinion, getting them to think what the author thinks. Obviously both can be put to persuasive use, particularly the latter, but while CNF doesn’t stress persuasion (at least not explicitly), the genre does hold the skill of connecting with an audience as paramount. Sharing personal reflections to transfer epiphanies from author to audience involves a level of intimacy few other genres can match, which can result in a powerful connection between the two parties. And as the section on emotion in Part One emphasizes, once an author creates this connection, they can put it to work. This is that opportunity, that metacognitive moment where – with the proper guidance – writers can begin to think about how they influence an audience, and thus begin to anticipate an audience’s reaction.

While academic argument is typically more focused on logos and ethos, the position statements also affirm the importance of this pathos-inspired metacognitive move, which they discuss in terms of an author forming a relationship with their audience. As the NCTE explain:

> The different purposes and forms both grow out of and create various relationships between the writer and the potential reader, and relationships reflected in the degrees of formality in language, as well as assumptions about what knowledge and experience is shared, and what needs to be explained. Writing with certain purposes in mind, the writer focuses her attention on what the audience is thinking or believing. (“Writing grows out of many different purposes”)

The pedagogical implications here are hard to miss. Whether through a traditional academic argument or an emotional CNF reflection or perhaps some combination of the two (more on this
in Chapter Four), simultaneously connecting with an audience and being aware of that connection can be the first step toward an adaptive writing strategy. Establishing, exploring, and ultimately employing this relationship helps writers anticipate what an audience wants and needs, and as a result shape their message to better meet their readers’ expectations.

**Audience Awareness**

The idea of anticipating audience is a great way to introduce students to the idea of thinking rhetorically, as well as introduce the next writing objective, audience awareness (which, incidentally, are more or less one in the same). Argument and/or emotion certainly get the rhetorical ball rolling, prompting writers to think about the impact they have on an audience. But audience awareness, which mirrors the drive and delivery of the CNF feature voice and style, is thinking rhetorically. Simply put, this is the act of stepping back, sizing up the situation, and forming both an immediate strategy to complete the current task, and an accumulative strategy to tackle similar tasks in the future. Just like voice and style, audience awareness encompasses the metacognitive moment that builds writing theory and the linguistic, syntactical, and structural choices that put it into practice, making this objective a natural focal point for writing instruction.

Audience awareness’s importance to writing pedagogy is affirmed by the position statements, which all stress the need for students to think rhetorically – which technically involves anticipating not just audience, but also rhetorical context and exigency (WPA “Rhetorical Knowledge”). Like the dichotomy discussed in the preceding paragraph, the position statements outline this rhetorical approach to writing instruction in terms of theory, practice, and an ability to connect the two. Their theory centers on the pedagogical significance of exposing students to multiple rhetorical situations, a tactic that teaches them how different
rhetorical tasks require different rhetorical strategies. This is why, according to the statements, students should experience and experiment with multiple genres. As the WPA explain, when students “gain experience reading and composing in several genres,” they are able to better understand how “genre conventions are shaped by readers’ and writers’ practices and purposes.” Ultimately, this helps students “develop facility in responding to a variety of situations and contexts calling for purposeful shifts in voice, tone, level of formality, design, medium, and/or structure” (“Rhetorical Knowledge”). This ties the position statements’ theory of analysis and anticipation into a knowledge of conventions, which in essence is the practice – the language and organizational choices writers make to suit each respective genre. As the NCTE summarize, readers “expect the style in a piece of writing to be appropriate to its genre and social situation.” Writers, then, “need to be aware of stylistic options that will produce the most desirable impression on their readers” (“Conventions…are important to readers and therefore to writers”).

Audience awareness – the objective that perhaps best embodies the position statements’ pedagogical philosophy and approach – can be seen as a combination of awareness and implementation, similar to how CNF uses voice and style to align metacognition with actual writing strategy. As such, it’s an opportunity for students to step back and think about how delivery can change from one rhetorical situation to the next, and consequently an opportunity for teachers to help students begin developing rhetorical strategies for tackling different writing tasks. However, it’s worth remembering that CNF’s focus on voice and style can ultimately push writers to do what the position statements are asking for here. This is a lot of recap from Part One, so pardon the repetition, but these features help writers reach an audience, and then step back and examine how they were able to do so. CNF’s genre diversity and flexibility also expose students to many different rhetorical situations, so they can learn the different
expectations for the differing subgenres, and begin to experiment with how they might reshape their delivery to reach a different audience. This is serious toolkit-building stuff – in essence the same kind of metacognitive moves that comprise the statements’ conception of and advocacy for rhetorical thinking.

**Organization**

When it comes to teaching students organization, that act of actually shaping the structure and direction of a text, the position statements make two seemingly contradictory but ultimately interrelated recommendations: writers need to know the basic organizational expectations for their intended genre, yet understand that since these genres are continually evolving, there is no set organizational formula. In other words, writers need to view organization as a tactic, a skill informed by existing patterns but adaptive enough to meet the needs of an ever-changing rhetorical context. As a writing objective the position statements link organization to thinking rhetorically and a knowledge of conventions. To successfully sculpt a text, students need to consider the expectations of an audience with regards to organization – having done enough reading in a genre to know what kind of structure the rhetorical situations therein typically demand, and shaping their content accordingly.

While the position statements stress the importance of using prevailing conventions to compare and contrast different organizational models, they caution against the use of catch-all formulas, which they claim hinder the metacognitive moments discussed often and elsewhere in this chapter. You don’t have to listen too closely to hear echoes of critical pedagogy (and the expressivist, progressive, and CNF pedagogies inspired by critical pedagogy’s anti-banking beliefs) when the statements discuss the need for students to create a structural strategy rather than follow a prescribed order. As the NCTE warn, writing cannot “be turned into a formulaic
series of steps,” since there is not “a single type of writing…that will suffice in all situations” (“Writing is a process,” “Writing grows out of many different purposes”). For these reasons, writing instruction “must provide opportunities for students to identify the processes that work best for themselves as they move from one writing situation to another” (“Writing is a process”). The CCCC take a similarly strong stand against “the rise of standards-based education in the United States,” a trend they feel is responsible for inflexible approaches to writing instruction that breed “formulaic writing” and “unoriginal thought” (“Statement on the Multiple Uses of Writing”). In these instances the statements read more like warnings, using aggressive language to reiterate the dangers of a model of instruction they – and much of the aforementioned scholarship – view as outdated and ineffective. While I’ll try to keep my analysis more pedagogical than political, this Freirean turn illustrates how adamant the position statements are about giving students a chance to take a step back and figure things out for themselves, as these decisions are the metacognitive moments that facilitate learning and create opportunities for pedagogy.

As an academic objective, organization is about finding your own way rather than following a formula, but somewhat paradoxically it’s also about knowing conventions and adhering to expectations. This forms a surprisingly close parallel with CNF’s narrative structure, which gives writers a way to create their own formula, and CNF’s genre flexibility, which gives writers experience in multiple rhetorical situations so they can learn the conventions appropriate for a variety of purposes. Concerning the first half of the academic equation, CNF’s narrative allowance can help writers organize a text without following some sort of prescribed order, aligning nicely with the position statements’ recommendations. As reported in Part One, CNF is typically the story of an experience, the story of how an author came to an understanding, or
some combination of the two. Narrative, then, is literally the tie that binds, as writers string disparate but related things (events or ideas) together to create a unified sequence that helps them accomplish a larger goal. Whether that goal entails sharing an experience, sharing an opinion, or again, some combination of the two, this process involves making conscious decisions about what things to include, what order to put them in, and how to connect them effectively. This is the crux of organization – structuring a text to produce a desired result, and CNF’s path can serve as a model for the kind of self-made schema the position statements advocate.

Concerning the second half of the academic equation, CNF’s genre diversity gives students a good introduction to a variety of rhetorical contexts and their attendant conventions. An abundance of subgenres – including personal narratives, position essays, reviews, ethnographies, profiles, and literary journalism – showcase distinct writing tasks, each with their own objectives and approaches to meeting them. Students need structured experience with these varying rhetorical situations, according to the position statements, in order to have a better understanding of different conventions, including different organizational structures and how to employ them. Within CNF, students are shown how to relate an experience with feeling and detail (personal narrative), take a stand and argue their position (essay), explain an opinion (review), describe a person or place (profile and ethnography, respectively), and research a broad topic or issue in a personal way (literary journalism). While there will often be some overlap in approach, each subgenre requires particular rhetorical moves, particularly in regards to organization. Through the subgenres, students can practice how to structure stories, arguments, and everything in between. Working in CNF, then, students get the variety, and a survey of existing conventions.
Conclusion

My goal with this chapter has been twofold: explore the defining features of CNF writing and the target objectives of introductory academic writing, and in doing so begin to establish connections between them – both between the characteristics of the writing, and the metacognitive moments to step back and examine the effects of these characteristics. These connections, I believed, would lay the theoretical foundation for the pedagogical work I’ll do in the ensuing chapters of this dissertation, and in my eventual teaching career. Having completed this chapter, I do feel that in many ways the features and objectives match up, keeping with my initial pedagogical assumptions about CNF’s ability to teach academic writing skills. However, I now believe the places where these features and objectives don’t align as neatly can be even more beneficial to writing instruction. These imperfect parallels show features and objectives that don’t mirror so much as complement each other, which perfectly illustrates how assigning students a combination of CNF and more traditional academic writing can fulfill the ideals of the “both/and” continuum approach to writing instruction advocated by the critical, expressivist, progressive, and CNF pedagogues. This exploration of genre fluidity – of the drive and delivery of different rhetorical contexts – is the genesis of getting students to think rhetorically, which (as I mentioned elsewhere in this chapter) helps them view writing as an adaptive skill, and in turn establish their writing toolkits.

Moving forward, my next chapter explores how to make connections between different but related genres – and thus different but related writing skills – more visible to students. Chapter Three discusses transfer theory, a pedagogical approach that explicitly links disparate concepts to help students focus on the relationship between them. This growing body of scholarship, in concert with the expressivist, progressive, and CNF scholarship I’ve drawn on
thus far, will form my rationale for a model of FYC that illustrates how CNF features and academic writing objectives align and/or complement each other. This alignment embodies a “best of both worlds” approach to writing instruction that also foreshadows the work to come in Chapter Four (which outlines just such an approach via a course design that uses a progression of CNF subgenres to help students develop adaptive writing skills to tackle more academic fare).
CHAPTER THREE: CONNECTING THE DOTS: TRANSFER THEORY’S IMPORTANCE TO WRITING INSTRUCTION

Introduction

The previous chapter explored how creative nonfiction writing can satisfy the standards of first-year composition by highlighting both the similarities between CNF features and FYC objectives, and how a metacognitive awareness of these similarities can help students begin to think rhetorically. Such an approach to writing instruction enacts the reflective and reflexive principles of expressivist and progressive teaching philosophies, imparting students with an awareness of their writing as a means rather than an end, thus advancing the idea of writing as an evolving rhetorical strategy to tackle assignments beyond the confines of FYC. The success of this toolkit-building model, however, hinges on a person’s ability to make a connection between two different rhetorical contexts – between different exigencies, different audiences, and oftentimes different genres altogether.

While connections like the ones described in Chapter Two may be apparent to people trained to look for them (like, say, teachers of writing), they can go unnoticed by those not used to looking through a rhetorical lens (like, say, many FYC students). These missed connections pose a significant challenge for collegiate writing instruction, where students typically have to go from a general introductory writing course to content-specific writing-intensive courses in a relatively short amount of time, often armed with little more than the assumption that skills from the former will translate into the latter. The expressivist, progressive, and CNF pedagogies I’ve previously discussed use reflection and variety to remedy this situation, providing students more opportunities to focus on their writing and a wider range of contexts to write in. But even with admitted advances, these more forward-thinking approaches can still face the same problem
attributed to traditionalist FYC pedagogies – that students just aren’t connecting the dots between writing contexts.

My third chapter, then, will take a closer look at these missed connections, focusing on why students so often fail to make them, why this failure hinders writing instruction, and how a pedagogical fusion of transfer theory and CNF offers a possible solution. The first section, Missed Connections, will examine impediments to transfer that inhibit students’ ability to share writing strategies between dissimilar contexts, using Lucille McCarthy’s prescient case study – a forerunner to transfer theory scholarship – to suggest the reasons students frequently have problems translating FYC skills into other writing contexts. The second section, Transfer Theory: Ties That Bind, will discuss how more recent transfer theory scholarship corroborates McCarthy’s findings, then explore transfer theory’s ability to make connections between contexts more visible. Doing so will involve elaborating on Chapter One’s brief summary of transfer theory scholarship, specifically highlighting the different kinds of connections that can be made and the cognitive forces behind them, illustrating why the transfers these connections enable are so important to the field of writing instruction, and reporting on transfer theory’s call for a rhetorically adaptable, genre-transcending approach. Finally (and perhaps most importantly, considering my project), the third section, Creative Nonfiction: Answering the Call, will show ways that CNF is uniquely suited to articulate and institute transfer theory’s recommendations, chiefly due to its ability to demonstrate multiple rhetorical situations, and its metacognitive ability to train attention on similarities between these different rhetorical situations.
Missed Connections

Lost in Transition: A Case Study

Lucille McCarthy’s “A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing Across the Curriculum” provides a perfect case study on missed connections as well as a fitting introduction to transfer theory, illustrating why the lessons learned from this area of scholarship are necessary to help students approach writing as strategy. McCarthy tracked a single student’s progress through writing-intensive coursework in multiple disciplines to investigate why the skills of FYC so often get lost in transition as students advance into other classes. “Dave,” her subject, encountered writing assignments in three courses over his freshman and sophomore years – Freshman Composition, Introduction to Poetry, and Cell Biology. Despite noticeable differences in content McCarthy found that the writing required seemed similar, consisting primarily of “informational writing for the teacher-as-examiner” involving summary or analysis (243). However, Dave didn’t recognize any similarities between the kind of writing the prompts were asking for, and “interpreted them [the assignments] as being totally different from each other and totally different from anything he had ever done before” (245). After analyzing her data – which drew from Dave’s writing (prewriting, drafts, and revisions), his teachers’ writing (assignment prompts and evaluative comments), plus interviews and observations with Dave and all three teachers – McCarthy posits three reasons Dave wasn’t able to see what from her perspective were clear similarities in approach: his primary focus on the content rather than the context of an assignment, and his not being given the time or the terminology necessary to examine his own writing.

Concerning content, Dave was so focused on the subject matter of his classes (writing, poetry, and biology, respectively) that he wasn’t able to notice similarities in the types of writing
required therein (which, as mentioned, all dealt with summary or analysis). McCarthy initially was perplexed by this, as Dave’s composition class was fairly forward-thinking, advancing the beginnings of a rhetorical approach to writing as strategy (244). The instructor’s goal was to teach students “a certain way of developing the thesis that’s generalizable to their future writing,” so her main focus was cohesiveness – teaching students to string sentences and the ideas they carry together so they can organize and thus better communicate their purpose, whatever the prompt (244). Since cohesion is what his FYC teacher explicitly asked for, Dave correctly viewed cohesion as the content, and successfully applied these skills to his FYC writing. However, when he moved on to other writing-intensive classes (Introduction to Poetry and Cell Biology), the content shifted, and so did Dave’s focus. Cohesion was still vital for success in these assignments, but he wasn’t focusing on it directly; instead he trained his attention primarily on his ability to interpret poems and to learn and properly apply scientific terminology (245). This led him, McCarthy believes, to focus on what he was doing, not on how he was doing it, making it difficult to recognize any similarities in strategy if the content wasn’t also the same (248-50).

Concerning time, McCarthy found that Dave was given some opportunity in his composition class to take a step back and reflect on whether or not his rhetorical choices were appropriate for the task at hand. He may have lacked the specific instruction to recognize his choices as rhetorical (more on that in a minute), but he was at least able to talk about his work with fellow students during peer review sessions, which got him to begin to examine his writing and consider whether or not it accomplished its goals. As the previous chapters have illustrated, this metacognitive thinking about writing is the foundation of a rhetorically adaptive approach, which if properly cultivated can get students to see similarities in purpose and rhetorical strategy.
Unfortunately, Dave wasn’t given enough of these opportunities outside of his FYC class. McCarthy writes that “in neither Poetry nor Biology was time built into the class for students to talk with each other about their writing,” something Dave “lamented” (257). This essentially put a stop to any rhetorical growth; without the chance to step back and reflect on his writing, he wasn’t able to see any patterns develop across contexts, and was forced to start anew with each new assignment (McCarthy 275).

As for terminology, McCarthy believes the final reason Dave wasn’t making any connections was due to “differences in vocabulary for discussing writing” (258). As she explains it, “Students’ texts were treated quite differently in these three courses, and this affected how Dave saw the assignments, and, perhaps more importantly, how he saw himself as a writer” (258). All of Dave’s major writing assignments were asking for some combination of summary and analysis, but this common task went by a different name in each course – arguing a position (Comp), interpreting literature (Poetry), and summarizing scholarship (Biology). Dave was able to grapple with existing source material and come to his own conclusions rather easily when he was following the lead of his FYC position essays. He was able to identify the individual parts that together created the overall structure of his essay – the thesis, main points (topic sentences), sub-points (support, via explanations and evidence), and conclusion. Again, in Composition he was given names for these things, which helped him delineate them and recognize their function (in essence, the foundation of a rhetorical approach). The problem, as we see with McCarthy’s other impediments to transfer, was that this practice didn’t continue with the other classes. Dave’s Poetry and Biology instructors expected cohesion and structure, but they didn’t make these concerns explicit, nor did they talk about how the writing can achieve these things (i.e. defining the parts and their functions). Just as he didn’t have enough time to examine his writing
in these classes, he didn’t get the rhetorical direction to examine the different parts of writing and see how they accomplish their task. Not having the explicit rhetorical instruction – which McCarthy believes is exemplified by the vocabulary to identify different rhetorical moves – made it difficult for Dave to see any similarities.

Conclusions on Connections

In her closing analysis, McCarthy concludes that Dave’s inability to make connections can be traced to a lack of metacognitive focus on his own writing. However, she doesn’t fault Dave’s predisposition toward the ends of a writing assignment, finding his tendency to focus wholly on subject matter less an indictment of his writing than of his writing instruction. Despite his admitted inclination to value content over context, the impetus is ultimately on Dave’s academic writing education – both his FYC program and his subsequent writing-intensive classes – which, McCarthy believes, should ideally provide more opportunities for him to examine his writing, and more direction to help him do so. As she summarizes, “Because all writing is context-dependent, and because successful writing requires the accurate assessment of and adaptation to the demands of particular writing situations, perhaps writing teachers should be explicitly training students in this assessment process” (McCarthy 262). Granted the composition class she observed did foster the beginnings of such an approach, but McCarthy places more weight in what happens afterward, citing the need for rhetorical thinking to span writing curricula. In order for students to bridge FYC writing instruction with subsequent writing assignments, teachers need to help them develop a rhetorical lens, giving them the chance to examine their words so they can view writing as an adaptive strategy and begin building toolkits that make use of and add to their introductory writing skills.
McCarthy’s study can be seen as a prologue of sorts, both to transfer theory’s arrival in composition studies, and to my next section, which will discuss the ramifications of said theory’s arrival. Published in 1987, McCarthy’s marks one of the first attempts to apply the prism of transfer theory – which examines the extent that knowledge can be transferred from one context to another – to the study of collegiate writing skills, foreshadowing many of the conversations to come concerning writing pedagogy. Though one student is admittedly not the most reliable sample size, transfer theory scholarship has shown that Dave’s inability to see connections mirrors the experience of many FYC students transitioning into other writing-intensive coursework. As such, many composition scholars have utilized transfer theory to troubleshoot and improve writing instruction. For these reasons, my next section will delve deeper into transfer theory scholarship, exploring how their findings confirm McCarthy’s impediments to transfer, and affirm her belief that students have the ability to apply skills between different contexts if they are explicitly taught to do so. This will ultimately help me introduce transfer theory pedagogy, which joins expressivist, progressive, and CNF pedagogies in looking at writing as rhetorical, so that even as the content changes, the strategy can remain the same.

**Transfer Theory: Ties that Bind**

**Introducing the Exigency**

Transfer theory scholarship may call the viability of FYC into question, but these studies ultimately shed light on how to improve the effectiveness of introductory writing instruction – and consequently all writing instruction at the collegiate level. Like McCarthy’s findings, they illustrate why missed connections pose such a threat to FYC. The inability to spot rhetorical similarities leads students to view their FYC instruction as an isolated incident rather than a potential template, causing students to start anew with each “different” assignment instead of
developing a malleable strategy to approach future writing tasks. This creates a serious image problem for composition programs, whose viability traditionally rests in an ability to instill notions of form and function that transfer into subsequent writing assignments. This perception can come from post-FYC students, who can’t see how FYC writing relates to their more major requirements, as well as discipline-specific instructors whose students don’t apply the aforementioned FYC notions of form and function to discipline-specific writing assignments. Either way, such charges put FYC on shaky footing, and highlight the fundamental importance of transfer to a writing program’s success.

In “‘Transfer-Ability’: Issues of Transfer and FYC,” Robin Snead explains why transfer is “a significant force in the perception of first-year writing as an introduction to academic writing” (1). She cites fellow transfer theory scholar Elizabeth Wardle to elaborate how this concept underlies valuations of FYC effectiveness:

While the goals of FYC are debated in our journals, the fact that nearly every student is required to take FYC suggests that administrators, policy makers, parents, and students expect the course to prepare students for the writing they will do later – in the university and even beyond it. Implicit in these expectations is the assumption that FYC should and will provide students with knowledge and skills that can transfer to writing tasks in other courses and contexts. (“Understanding ‘Transfer’ from FYC: Preliminary Results of a Longitudinal Study” 65)

1 Robin Snead’s concise yet comprehensive bibliography expertly outlines prevailing theories on how knowledge/skill transfer works and what this means for writing instruction. I can’t give enough credit to this compilation, which in addition to suggesting a wealth of pertinent sources (including McCarthy) helped shape my understanding of transfer theory (which shows how one can build a writing toolkit), and consequently this project (which explores how CNF can facilitate toolkit-building).
While neither Snead nor Wardle condone this assumption as the sole determiner of FYC’s viability, both affirm it as the view of all (or at least most) parties involved when it comes to introductory writing instruction’s responsibilities. In simplest terms, FYC skills need to transfer, and if students aren’t carrying skills from FYC into their major-specific courses, FYC is ineffective. Unfortunately, as the following paragraphs will show, transfer theory scholarship suggests that by-and-large writing skills aren’t carrying over (which coincides with studies like McCarthy’s that show transfer doesn’t exist in writing unless explicitly prompted, but more on this later). Transfer theory’s first area of concern, then, is to look at the reasons why.

**Perception and Disciplinarity**

A closer look at foundational and more contemporary transfer theory scholarship seems to corroborate McCarthy’s findings about why students can’t see connections between FYC and other writing-intensive courses. As Linda Bergmann and Janet Zepernick point out in “Disciplinarity and Transfer: Students’ Perceptions of Learning to Write,” “The primary obstacle to…transfer is not that students are unable to recognize situations outside FYC in which those skills can be used, but that students do not look for such situations because they believe that skills learned in FYC have no value in any other setting” (139). The first reason transfer often fails to take root, then, is because students perceive FYC as unrelated to their majors and thus eventual careers.

This brings us back to the investment gap, what Snead refers to as “student perception” and, consequently, “student disposition” (“‘Transfer-Ability’” 1). Susan Jarratt, Katherine Mack, Alexandra Sartor, and Shevaun Watson explain investment in terms of disciplinarity – the idea that standards and practices are set by individual disciplines – and therefore believe that student writers are impeded “by their perceptions of the disciplinary gap between humanities and
the other disciplines” (“Pedagogical Memory: Writing, Mapping, Translating” 51). Bergmann and Zepernick’s research helps illustrate this point. To complete “Disciplinarity and Transfer” the authors surveyed focus groups of students from three different disciplines (the humanities, engineering, and geology) to discern students’ perceptions of collegiate writing instruction. Unfortunately their initial responses suggest students are against FYC before they even get to college, viewing it as a rote, mechanical class/requirement apart from discipline-specific classes more relevant to their major/career. The following themes emerged from their study: (1) students make a separation, viewing FYC writing as “personal and expressive rather than academic and professional,” and (2) since this writing was perceived as “inherently not ‘disciplinary’ or ‘professional’,” it “offered few features that could be transferred” (129). These findings were confirmed by follow-up sessions, where students used terms like “‘fluff’, ‘b.s.’, and ‘flowery’” to “characterize the kind of writing they did in FYC,” and terms like “‘concise’, ‘to the point’, and ‘not a lot of flowery adjectives’” to describe the writing they did in other disciplines (125). In addition to suggesting that the binary between expressive and analytical writing might be even more ingrained than I (along with the expressive, progressive, and CNF pedagogues) thought, Bergmann and Zepernick’s research shows that because students don’t see FYC as relevant beyond its confines, they don’t look at the writing they’re doing therein as something that can translate into other, more discipline-specific classes.

Research in disciplinarity shows that like McCarthy’s Dave, students focus more on content classes (as opposed to cohesion classes, which in essence is how they view FYC). These content classes are often related to their major, which is related to their career, so they recognize the material covered as inherently more “useful” and consequently take it more seriously. Bergmann and Zepernick further explain this in terms of the regard students have for their
teachers: “English teachers were seen by our study participants as primarily concerned with ‘formats’ and ‘styles’ that were not rooted in any particular disciplinary framework. However, teachers in other fields, as disparate as history and electrical engineering, were perceived as caring more about content, hard facts, or ‘what really happened’” (131-32). This aligns with McCarthy’s findings about Dave’s preoccupation with content, and specifically his initial reaction to bypass cohesion and dive headfirst into content once he left FYC. Interestingly, both McCarthy’s research and subsequent transfer studies highlight one constant that students carry with them after FYC. Students do seem to value audience anticipation as an important, scratch that, the most important transferable skill – how to please a certain teacher, and eventually their workplace audience. As one of Bergmann and Zepernick’s students put it, “he who controls the paycheck controls the world” (136). This preoccupation with audience foreshadows two foundational principles of transfer theory pedagogy – that students crave a real rather than abstract context for their writing, and that students have a penchant for sizing up an audience. It also leads into my next point, which is that if students think teachers value cohesion and critical thinking about writing, they’ll be more likely to carry these skills across curricula.

**Time and Terminology**

The remaining reasons students can’t see connections also seem to corroborate Dave’s tale. On the whole, transfer theory scholarship echoes McCarthy’s chief finding: that there isn’t transfer because we don’t teach for it. Like McCarthy, most transfer theorists believe the greatest impediment to transfer is writing instruction that doesn’t give students the opportunity (the time) or the direction (the vocabulary for examining writing rhetorically) to look at their own writing outside of FYC. According to aforementioned scholars like Snead, Wardle, Jarratt (et al.), and Bergmann and Zepernick – as well as soon-to-be-mentioned scholars like Julie
Foertsch, David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon, and David Russell – after content, students usually focus on surface-level similarities and differences, and thus don’t look for deeper structural similarities. Transfer theory scholarship concludes that if their writing instruction doesn’t focus on these continuities between contexts, neither will students. And even when their FYC takes a rhetorical, writing-as-strategy approach (like we saw with Dave), if this approach doesn’t continue to some extent in other writing-intensive courses, students most likely will miss any connections.

This is why transfer theorists advocate for direct transfer instruction. As Bergmann and Zepernick’s study found, students exhibited basic rhetorical awareness – which the authors define more specifically as conscious analysis of audience, discourse communities, rhetorical situations, and relevant textual models – after FYC even if they weren’t given specific rhetorical instruction (134). They just didn’t view these critical thinking and writing skills as tactics they could employ elsewhere because these skills weren’t mentioned in their other classes (134). Bergmann and Zepernick’s findings, which are emblematic of transfer theory scholarship in general, suggest that students have the tools, they just need the encouragement and the space to use them. As psychologist and transfer proponent Julie Foertsch affirms, with explicit transfer instruction even rhetorical novices can be trained to look for deeper connections instead of just superficial similarities, and thus more accurately move knowledge to new contexts (“Where Cognitive Psychology Applies” 372).

Transfer theory research shows that even more traditionalist FYC pedagogies still push students in the right direction, using outline formulas (which emphasize part and function) and peer review (which trains students’ attention on their writing) to get them to begin to think rhetorically. However, transfer theory pedagogy pushes writing instruction to take it a step
further, and find a way to be more explicit about these things *as a strategy*. As with many moments in this dissertation, metacognition is key. But instead of only focusing on current writing contexts, here metacognition is used to consider how past writing experiences can be used in the present, and how the accumulation of these experiences can – with proper guidance – form a strategy for tackling writing in the future. Returning to Jarratt et al.’s “Pedagogical Memory,” the authors explain that if teachers want to elicit transfer, they need to be explicit with their language for discussing and, more importantly, describing writing. This lets students in, showing them the framework of an FYC class and its terminology – in short, what things are and what/how they do. Dissection helps expose the functionality of writing, breaking the totality of a piece into easier-to-grasp parts – parts which can then be explained as rhetorical moves. Ideally, this process becomes a model for students to anticipate future contexts, helping them break unknowable wholes into recognizable parts. In this way explicit instruction cultivates metacognitive awareness, and pushes students to think about how the writing they encounter in FYC can both relate to their past writing experiences, and how it could relate to their future ones (bringing in other rhetorical contexts, and other genres) (65).

I believe this is why Jarratt and her collaborators close their study by concluding that the strongest student writers engage in reflective processes – a statement that echoes the majority of transfer theory scholarship. These students, according to Jarratt et al., looked back and thought about how they learned before eventually projecting these skills into future writing contexts. Getting all students to this level is the goal of transfer theory pedagogy. As Jarratt et al. put it, “These capabilities can be developed through…the cultivation of a student’s ability to narrate their own writing history” (66). This is how transfer theory pedagogy takes the idea of a reflective and rhetorical approach to the next level – not just by cultivating this approach in FYC,
but by attempting to project this approach into other writing courses. In essence, this is the goal of my next chapter, which outlines a pedagogical model to help make connections between past, present, and future writing more visible to students. But before talking about specific ways to build this bridge (the bridge being skill transfer, the idea of writing as an adaptive strategy, and/or writing toolkits...they all basically mean the same thing), it’s important to examine knowledge transfer from a more cognitive standpoint, and specifically break down the different kinds of transfer that are possible (and thus the cognition that enables these connections).

**The Cognitive Connection**

In “Teaching for Transfer,” education researcher David Perkins and psychologist Gavriel Salomon posit transfer—which they define as applying knowledge from a previous context to a new one—as one of the building blocks of learning (22). Similar to the way narrative shows how people construct memory, finding ways to relate disparate events or ideas, transfer shows how people use memory to learn—specifically by finding ways to apply previously-acquired knowledge in new situations. The commonality here is connection. Transfer theory maintains that we look for ways to use the knowledge we have in new situations, or we relate new information to past experience(s). Looking for connections is how we link disparate events (as with narrative), but it’s also how we build knowledge.

Julie Foertsch details the psychology behind this process in the appropriately titled “Where Cognitive Psychology Applies,” where she discusses how transfer is central to how memory works, and specifically how memory functions to help us learn. She agrees with Perkins and Salomon that learning is rooted in transfer, which she likens to the psychological concept of retrieval (from memory). As Foertsch explains, memory has two types—episodic (specific moments in time), and semantic (a generalized summary culled from one’s collective
episodes). When someone encounters a new context, they reach back for memories of similar contexts. These memories are episodic, but we can mine singular episodes or group related ones together to come up with a consensus course of action, creating the semantic. We do this through summation, which is a natural process of stacking like-minded (pun intended) memories so we don’t have to store as many. Basically then, we store memories by connection, and we access them by connection too – i.e. how they relate to the desired context (how they’re similar or dissimilar, depending on the perspective we want) (Foertsch 366-67). And it is in this accessing of memories that we learn.

Not surprisingly, the psychology behind transfer has significant implications for writing instruction. Memory serves as a strategy to help us to be prepared, utilizing transfer to search, assess, and project. Transfer theory pedagogy seeks to model similar processes, utilizing transfer to build a reservoir of rhetorical skills that can be drawn upon to perform as-yet-unseen rhetorical tasks. The connection is connections, as both memory and transfer theory pedagogy hinge on the ability to move beyond the present to look backward and/or forward. As so many things in this dissertation have, this selection strategy ultimately brings us back to metacognition. The act of self-awareness underlies Freire’s anti-banking beliefs, which hold that we learn by thinking for ourselves, not by memorizing for someone else. It also embodies expressivism’s call to turn inward to draw on personal experiences to help contextualize information, and CNF’s reflective nature, which makes the genre well-suited to move from thinking about thinking to thinking about writing. Transfer theory simply affirms why metacognition is imperative to writing instruction. In order to “move” knowledge, we first need to be able to step back and examine how it functions in its original context, then examine the new context, then consider whether it will fit.
Why Transfer Theory Works: Mediating/Merging General and Specific Knowledge

Whereas the previous section illustrated why connections are important to learning, this section will explore why and how transfer theory facilitates making these connections. First, however, it’s necessary to look at the differences between general knowledge and specific knowledge – which are often viewed as opposing interpretations – and examine why transfer theory pedagogy ultimately serves as a way to mediate this debate. Returning to “Where Cognitive Psychology Applies,” Foertsch details the concepts of general knowledge and specific knowledge, and how creating a separation between the two proves problematic for learning in general, and particularly for writing instruction. General knowledge is broad, universal knowledge that can stand on its own. In terms of writing instruction, Foertsch explains it as “useful generalizations [that] can be made across the wide variety of writing contexts,” things like thesis statements, topic sentences, supporting points, and conclusions that can frame and organize a piece of writing regardless of its purpose or context (362). Understandably, this view is supported by “cognitively-oriented researchers” who look for basic patterns that underlie all (or at least most) discourse, and can be seen in agreed-upon standards like academic learning objectives – broadly applicable models that (ideally) will transfer from one rhetorical situation to the next (Foertsch 363). In opposition to this line of thought is specific knowledge, a more localized interpretation which holds that all knowledge is rooted in context. This belief is held by “socially oriented writing scholars,” who emphasize that “each writing community has its own local conventions, its own initiation procedures, its own specialized ways-of-knowing” (361-62). From a composition perspective, this approach aligns with disciplinarity, and would follow pedagogical models that are based on specific disciplines, not overarching connections that link disparate subjects (Foertsch 363).
The problem – according to Foertsch, and many transfer theorists – is that too often general and specific knowledge are viewed as binary constructions. Similar to the way LeFevre and the progressive pedagogies suggested that expressive and analytical writing are two points on the same continuum, transfer theory scholarship holds that general and specific knowledge are different ends of the same spectrum. Transfer theory proposes that both cognitive and social researchers are correct, agreeing that general skills exist, but admitting that most students view writing as context-specific like McCarthy’s Dave. As such, students routinely see content as inherently more important than cohesion, and “invent the university” over and over without carrying over any of the general skills learned in introductory writing classes (McCarthy 233-234). Transfer theory pedagogy aims to solve this problem by doing both the general and the specific, using the concept of general knowledge to bridge different specific knowledges.

Foertsch summarizes her findings by outlining the particulars of this tactic:

Such an approach…would involve students and teachers working together to contrast and compare different writing contexts and assignments and to make generalizations about writing and rhetorical skill. To be successful, such an approach would also use real-life examples from a variety of academic contexts and have students analyze these examples in a way that encourages transfer. In other words, this general knowledge approach would not be entirely decontextualized. It would use context-specific examples, but point out the commonalities (and the differences) between them. (378)

Like Foertsch, transfer theory pedagogy advocates for the use of context-specific examples to help highlight generalizable connections. These generalizable connections then become the skills that carryover, and thus the strategy to help students anticipate the contexts to come. As
such, transfer theory ultimately shows that general and specific knowledge are not mutually exclusive concepts, and – more importantly – that the kind of connections we want/need students to make are most visible when the two work in concert.

**How Transfer Theory Works: Establishing and Anticipating Connections**

To begin thinking about how we can actually take transfer from theory to practice, it helps to look closely at the different kinds of knowledge transfer – specifically low road and high road transfer, and backward-reaching and forward-reaching transfer. Doing so more explicitly illustrates the different kinds of connections that can be made, which has important implications when it comes to harnessing these connections to help students build an adaptive writing strategy. In the aforementioned “Teaching for Transfer,” David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon explain the psychological mechanics of transfer, beginning with the distinction between the low road and the high road. Low road transfer, in the authors’ words, is “the automatic triggering of well-practiced routines in circumstances where there is considerable perceptual similarity to the original learning context” (25). Put simply, it’s old behavior fitting a new, similar context, like using one’s experience driving a car to drive a truck (25). Low road transfer is all about surface-level similarities which spark subconscious connections, the kind we make without even realizing we’re making them. As Perkins and Salomon explain further, “opening a chemistry book for the first time triggers reading habits acquired elsewhere, trying out a new video game activates reflexes honed on another one, or interpreting a bar graph in economics automatically musters bar graph interpretation skills acquired in math” (25).

In contrast to these unconscious alignments is high road transfer, which the authors define as the “deliberate mindful abstraction of skill or knowledge from one context for application in another” (25). The important distinction here is “mindful,” as high road involves
the conscious search for connections, often occasioned by a difference between contexts. Unlike with the more instinctual low road examples, where existing similarities lead one to make a connection between point A and point B, here a scarcity of existing similarities forces one to reflect and project in order to help make sense of things. High road transfer marks that metacognitive moment where we stop, step back, and tackle a foreign context by looking for connections with a familiar one. The purpose of this, as we saw with memory, is to grow knowledge by moving it. Perkins and Salomon explain that we can do this by accessing our past and anticipating our future, cognitive moves that despite the difference in direction are both examples of “reflective thought [that] involves abstracting from one context and connecting with others” (26). With backward-reaching high road transfer, we mine our memory, looking back across various contexts to find and abstract general info or skills that can help solve a current problem. With forward-reaching high road transfer, we think about the future as we learn something, then “abstract it” so we can use it in new contexts (26). The combination and culmination of the backward- and forward-reaching processes is in essence how transfer theory merges general and specific knowledge: backward-reaching allows us to go over multiple specific knowledges to discern patterns of general knowledge, then forward-reaching allows us to use those patterns to help with as-yet-unseen specific knowledges. This kind of complex, reflective thought can be put to good use in writing instruction, because high road transfer involves deliberate abstractions, and as such utilizes and models the very processes of connection and transfer for students. Being explicit about backward- and forward-reaching high road transfer can help introduce the concept of writing as a strategy to establish and anticipate connections. These moves, then, are the foundations of transfer theory pedagogy – abstracting
rhetorical similarities from different rhetorical contexts, and anticipating use in future rhetorical contexts.

**Transfer Theory Pedagogy**

Moving from psychology to pedagogy offers a more practical look at these concepts, and illustrates how they’d look in an actual classroom setting. As previous paragraphs have outlined, transfer theory recommends that writing instruction should be (1) rhetorical, (2) context-specific, and (3) explicit about connections between contexts. Transfer theory pedagogy simply puts its titular theory into practice via an overlapping three-step process that corresponds to and embodies these principles. Like the expressivist, progressive, and CNF proponents discussed throughout this dissertation, transfer theorists agree that collegiate writing instruction should be rhetorical in nature in order to make the parts and functions of writing more visible to students.

Step One, then, is simply giving students the time and the direction to examine writing (specifically their own, their colleagues’, and relevant examples) to see how the different features therein work to meet the needs of a specific exigency. Explaining how a thesis can focus and guide an argument, how analysis provides summary and commentary, how an anecdote can serve as evidence – this kind of writing instruction actually teaches students to fish, showing them how a structure works instead of just giving them a structure to follow. As transfer theory scholarship affirms, outlines, examples, and peer review sessions are a good start, but more time (and terminology) to reflect on what actually comprises a composition is needed to get students doing the kind of dissection that’s a first step toward viewing certain parts of writing as transferable.

Getting students to think rhetorically is only part of the equation; they also need a real and relevant setting in which to practice this approach. We’ve seen previously that transfer
theorists view all writing as rooted in a specific context, and collegiate writing in particular as rooted in a specific discipline. We’ve also seen that students place less value in writing with an artificial or generic context, and often don’t take FYC seriously because they don’t see how it translates into success in the discipline-specific classes that will ultimately lead them to a career. Since writing is context-specific, and students pay closest attention to contexts specific to their personal and professional interests, Step Two holds that writing instruction should give them these real and relevant contexts. This suggests a significant departure from traditional FYC models, which are primarily focused on cohesion and typically don’t have a specific disciplinary focus. Of course cohesion is still fundamentally important to writing instruction; it’s the backbone of a rhetorical approach. Transfer theory pedagogy simply suggests grounding the writing in real subject matter so that the students will see it as applicable to their degree and thus eventual career. This way students see cohesion not just as an immediate goal, but as a future tactic.

Simply giving students real contexts, however, doesn’t complete the equation. Following the lead of the expressive, progressive, and CNF pedagogues previously covered, transfer theorists believe students also need experience in multiple contexts, especially if they’re ever to see the kind of connections that show how skills can carryover. An important goal of transfer theory pedagogy, then, is to expose students to multiple rhetorical situations – preferably rooted in relevant disciplines – in order to more accurately represent the multitude of exigencies and genres they’re likely to encounter outside of FYC, and set up parallels that invite comparison and contrast. After getting students to take a strategic look at writing, and showing them multiple real-world contexts, transfer theory pedagogy can at long last begin Step Three – actually showing students connections. For transfer to work, as Foertsch reminds us, students and
teachers must work together to “uncover, discuss, and justify” principles of discourse in various contexts, and then connections that span these contexts (378). This process involves teachers and students explicitly discussing problems, strategies for solutions, and how these strategies relate to previous strategies (i.e. how they transfer) (Foertsch 374). Step Three then specifically models transfer as a problem-solving skill, directly showing students how finding similarities in strategy teaches them to think backward (how previous skills can apply to a current rhetorical situation) and then forward (how they might be applied to future rhetorical situations). Here the part/function approach comes full circle, breaking down writing into observable functions that can be made visible across contexts, and thus “moved” across contexts.

Incorporating all of this into introductory writing instruction is admittedly daunting, which is why many transfer theorists promote discipline-spanning and discipline-specific FYC models such as Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Disciplines (WID). By marrying a rhetorical approach with disciplinarity, these models give students the foundational skills of introductory writing, but pair cohesion with content that’s apropos. Transfer theorists are particularly fond of WAC, which utilizes disciplinary collaboration so the writing-as-strategy strategy can be applied to multiple rhetorical situations across multiple disciplines. WAC is curriculum-spanning, relying on several writing-intensive content courses instead of a detached composition course (or sequence of courses). Teachers in these typically entry-level courses (in subjects ranging from the humanities to the hard sciences) focus on how to write in their particular field of expertise in addition to covering content, showing students a multitude of rhetorical situations in their natural disciplinary habitat. WID embodies the spirit of the curriculum-spanning approach, but opts for a simpler implementation, modelling the WAC method with a survey of subjects. WID, then, exposes students to a variety of discipline-specific
writing assignments in a single class that can cover multiple fields, or be narrowed to a certain major. Both WAC and WID offer students authentic writing contexts pertinent to their college career – focusing on their major, minor, and prerequisite requirements. The obvious advantage of these models may be their real and relevant focus, but the act of placing writing from different disciplines in close proximity to each other is perhaps even more invaluable, facilitating that metacognitive moment that underlies the entirety of transfer theory. Reflection is what invites students to break things down on a structural level, to compare rhetorical contexts (and the skills necessary to complete them) to one another. In this way, students can see that different fields have different styles, but certain tasks overlap. Summarizing existing interpretations of literature and summarizing existing research in biology won’t sound alike in a vacuum, but examined back to back, students may notice similarities in the underlying structure. The closeness of these connections is how discipline models create an environment that allows the rhetorical approach to flourish – teaching writing as a strategy to size up a rhetorical situation and act accordingly.

**Creative Nonfiction: Answering the Call**

Despite the promise of the WAC and WID models, there are some logistical and pedagogical drawbacks to the discipline-specific approach. Concerning logistics, implementation is complicated and potentially costly, requiring significant collaboration and coordination amongst many departments, which at some institutions could be difficult to institute on the scale proponents advocate. Funneling all incoming students into catch-all intro writing courses has its pedagogical limitations, as we’ve seen; but reimagining each major discipline’s gateway course as writing-intensive, not to mention ensuring that said courses’ instructors also have the pedagogical training to teach writing along with content, might be too much to take on for some universities. This idea of teacher training brings us to the pedagogical concerns, mainly
that cross-curricular models often don’t ensure that the rhetorical approach is carried on in each discipline-specific class (or in the case of the survey-of-subject-matter models, that the rhetorical approach is carried on with each discipline-specific example). As transfer theory scholars like Bergmann and Zepernick and Perkins and Salomon point out, even if instructors have training in the teaching of writing, the complicated logistics of discipline-specific models make it difficult to gauge whether teachers are emphasizing connections explicitly (by comparing and contrasting writing in their class to writing in other disciplines), and stressing these connections as students move from class to class.

I mention these limitations here because I believe CNF can do the gist of what the discipline-specific pedagogies do without some of the drawbacks. Admittedly CNF models of FYC are not as comprehensive, lacking the disciplinary focus that lends WAC and WID their relevancy. Still, CNF pedagogy can provide the genesis of a real and rhetorical approach for schools that don’t have the ability to institute WAC or WID, and maintain the metacognitive focus on writing between contexts (something that WAC and WID have trouble doing, according to transfer theory scholarship). In short, CNF is a self-contained class, meaning it doesn’t require the significant infrastructure work of the discipline-specific models (i.e. it takes less time, and more importantly less money, to implement). Additionally, CNF is a genre that encompasses many subgenres (modelling a variety of rhetorical situations), and its reflective nature (via thinking about writing) helps train attention on connections between subgenres (thus modelling transfer). Finally, CNF facilitates the kind of personal reflection that the critical, expressive, and progressive pedagogies believe helps students learn through their own interpretation (as opposed to only learning through someone else’s). Not surprisingly, the
paragraphs that follow will elaborate on these capabilities and benefits, and in doing so, form the rationale for the course design to come in Chapter Four.

**Discipline-Specific Problems: Logistics and Pedagogy**

Discipline-specific writing classes might be ideal, but the reality of the university system (not to mention the current economic climate many colleges and universities find themselves under) could make this approach cost prohibitive. The logistics of cross-curricular collaboration represent a significant investment of time and money; large amounts of both would need to be spent in order to replace a traditional FYC course with a curriculum-spanning sequence. To institute WAC, schools would have to reshape the traditional gateway course as a writing intensive course. This would involve either revamping every intro-to-a-discipline course, or deciding which disciplines are important enough to merit their own writing-intensive remodel (Intro to Literature, Intro to Biology, etc.), which ones could be grouped together under a general field heading (i.e. Intro to the Humanities, Intro to the Sciences, etc.), and which ones could be left out (either deemed unnecessary for the remodel, or not popular enough to warrant it). These would be exceedingly difficult decisions to make, and since enrollment and the types of degrees students pursue are always in flux, these decisions would likely have to be revisited frequently, and the system restructured based on which disciplines rise or fall in popularity.

Instituting WID could also prove problematic. For WID models that present a survey of disciplines, schools would have to make similarly difficult decisions about which fields to include and which to leave out, decisions that again could change as enrollment and interests fluctuate. However, the result would cut out the legwork of converting every intro class, and improve on traditional FYC models by exposing students to disciplines they’ll need for their majors and minors. This solves the authenticity half of the investment gap equation, giving
students the real and relevant contexts they favor over generic ones, but it doesn’t solve the authority half. As we saw with Jarratt et al. and Bergmann and Zepernick’s research on disciplinarity, students pay more attention to the subjects they believe they’ll need and the people they believe are authority figures on these subjects. Whether it’s a generic class or a teacher outside their comfort level, students recognize artificiality and tend to tune out. This brings us to the big problem with WID, because as David Russell points out in “Activity Theory and Its Implications for Writing Instruction,” no one teacher can be an expert in all genres (58). Even if the topics covered are relevant to their futures, students in survey classes will know that their teacher isn’t (and logically can’t be) an expert in each field, and thus save their closest attention for their “real” professors in their “real” content classes. WID that specializes in a specific discipline can solve the authority problem, giving students assignments and instructors grounded in a specific field; but this brings us right back to the implementation complications that plague WAC programs, and introduces another wrinkle – class size. Many intro courses are lecture-style, with fifty to one hundred students enrolled (as opposed to traditional FYC courses, which are typically capped at twenty to twenty-five). Schools then would have to create more classes to allow for smaller class sizes to accommodate grading for writing-intensive assignments, again increasing the overhead for an already pricey endeavor.

Going through all this trouble, however, doesn’t guarantee that the most important part of transfer theory pedagogy will take root. While transfer theorists may champion discipline-specific models, transfer theory scholarship shows that emphasizing writing across the board doesn’t guarantee that connections are being emphasized along the way. Despite the best of intentions, Bergmann and Zepernick admit that discipline-specific models might ultimately be an “optimistic fiction,” because even though they give students the real world, major-specific
contexts they want, these models are not necessarily showing them how skills can transfer from one context to the next (126). Yes, WAC and WID are marked improvements over writing-in-a-vacuum approaches; these classes invite comparisons, giving students opportunities to see connections. However, these classes seem to be more focused on providing reality (relevance) and variety, but not on pointing out connections between variations. This oversight brings up perhaps the biggest concern with the discipline-specific models: they’re not always transparent about transfer, because discipline-specific teachers don’t always have pedagogical training in writing. WAC and WID want teachers to be experts in their field and writing instruction, but the elephant in the room is that discipline-specific teachers typically don’t have experience with composition pedagogy. While their education and experience make them knowledgeable about the writing required by their field, they may lack the training to explain said writing in a rhetorical, strategic manner. Their degrees typically involve learning content, but not necessarily how to teach that content, let alone how to teach people to write about it. Discipline-specific instructors, then, are adept at showing students what their writing needs to do, but not necessarily how the writing can do it. So while the discipline-specific models advocate a rhetorical approach, they don’t always do the work of teaching for it.

**CNF Solutions: Implementation and Trans(fer)parency**

Not only can CNF do this work, explicitly taking a rhetorical, writing-as-strategy approach to FYC, it’s also a more cost-effective way to enact transfer theory principles. Before I dig too deep into the pedagogy, it’s worth discussing how CNF can carry on the spirit of the discipline-specific models without the logistical complications. In short, a CNF version of FYC can operate without university-wide collaboration or restructuring. Like traditional FYC models, it can be a stand-alone class, which eliminates the need for any outside organization. It does so
largely by being a self-contained class, modelling different rhetorical contexts and the process of finding connections between them during the course of a single semester. CNF is admittedly a pared-down version of the WAC progression, but it maintains the essence of teaching students to recognize similarities and make connections, which as we’ve seen can help them recognize rhetorical situations and react accordingly. Implementation would require reimagining FYC as a CNF course, but as my next chapter will show, this would be an alternative to revamping all the discipline-specific intro courses. It would also, I believe, be as pedagogically sound as a WID course; since CNF’s subgenres encompass multiple rhetorical situations, they could be utilized to show a progression that builds on previous skills, and thus emphasizes connections. Finally, as a CNF model would a self-sufficient course, it wouldn’t require a continual reassessment of the university landscape to update the system based on trends in enrollment (unlike with the discipline-specific models, which could change due to overall numbers, and what programs students are going into).

**Authenticity and Authority**

Despite not being tailored to students’ majors and minors like the discipline-specific models, CNF can still provide the authenticity and authority that transfer theory scholarship shows students want – and need – in order to view FYC as useful. Concerning authenticity, CNF is not an amalgamated though ultimately artificial form of “academic writing,” but rather an accessible style of reflection and commentary that students can recognize in their own writing and the writing of many professionals. CNF scholarship reminds us that much of what students write (personal and narrative texts, tweets, and status updates) and read (memoirs, magazine articles, and social media posts) fall under the CNF umbrella. True, this type of writing may lack the immediate relevancy of the discipline-specific models, which – as disciplinarity research
shows – can prove problematic. But if positioned properly, CNF can ground FYC writing in the real world context that transfer theorists recommend, and save schools the headache of instituting WAC or WID. This positioning leads perfectly into CNF’s authority. As stated, CNF pedagogy facilitates a rhetorical approach that can help students view FYC writing skills as tactics they’ll need in the future. CNF’s reflective nature enables metacognitive opportunities to think about what writing is doing, and how to improve the writing to make it more effective. With the proper (read: explicit) instruction, this can teach students how to use writing as a strategy to size up an audience and exigency and give them (the audience/exigency) what they want.

Transfer theory scholarship confirms that this is the skill students desire from FYC, as they view it as vital to their college and eventually their professional careers. Even though most transfer theorists advocate discipline-specific models, some proponents express reservations about WAC and WID for this very reason, and as such suggest a class that cuts directly to the chase by analyzing writing requirements (i.e. what different contexts and rhetorical situations expect) (Bergmann and Zepernick 141-42; Perkins and Salomon 30). For these scholars, it’s not just about getting experience with real rhetorical situations, but rather learning how to analyze what the particular expectations are, and how to meet them, a perspective that clears a path for CNF pedagogy. As Chapter Two illustrates, CNF’s metacognitive powers can train a writer’s focus on what a task is asking them to do, employing an innate sense of audience awareness. If instructors are upfront about this capability, CNF can show students from the start that this brand of FYC will be teaching a transferable, necessary skill, and they’ll learn it from someone who knows how to use this tactic. Continuing with authority, disciplinarity research affirms that students pay more attention when they view an instructor as an expert in their field. Whether their background is in composition/rhetoric, literature, and/or creative writing, composition
teachers are people who have spent their careers studying writing, and are traditionally at least somewhat familiar with a rhetorical approach (as even those without a comp background receive some pedagogical training through their prerequisite practicum for teaching writing at the college level). Emphasizing the potential of CNF’s reflective nature, then, helps teachers both reclaim writing as a discipline unto itself and own their expertise in this area, all while advancing FYC as a strategy for future writing.

**Emphasizing Connections and Facilitating Metacognition**

CNF is able to do this transfer-friendly rhetorical analysis due to the visibility of its reoccurring features and the variety of its multiple subgenres. As the WAC and WID models illustrate, putting different rhetorical situations in close proximity creates the right conditions for connections to emerge, but students often need an extra push in order to find them. In short, CNF facilitates those “right conditions,” utilizing subgenres (such as memoir, ethnography, review, and literary journalism) to model the same sort of genre stacking, and then gives that “extra push,” explicitly pointing out similarities to students. Since certain aspects of CNF are present and recognizable in its various incarnations, it’s possible to emphasize connections between related but different rhetorical tasks. The “push” begins, then, with instructors highlighting these aspects in an effort to teach students how to dissect writing into parts. As transfer theory scholarship (and other proponents of the rhetorical approach) affirms, breaking down the parts of writing makes it easier for students to see what these things do and how they do them. Furthermore, locating these “parts” in different subgenres shows how the function is similar, but the presentation is different, depending on the needs of a particular exigency.

A brief return to the national park example from Chapter Two (featuring a progression from personal narrative to literary journalism) helps to demonstrate the potential of CNF
pedagogy (as well as preview the course design work in Chapter Four). With the right direction, students can be pushed to look at similarities between the “moral” that concludes a memoir piece about a visit to a national park and the thesis statement of a literary journalism piece on the importance of preserving our national parks. The memoir is about sharing an experience, so the moral will be personal, narrative, and fall towards the end of the essay to bring a sense of closure to the story while offering a final reflection. The literary journalism piece is about conservation, so the thesis will sound more formal, and come earlier to point out the focus of the argument. Even though the location and language of this summative statement has changed, the basic purpose – to reinforce the point or message of the essay – remains the same, and students can see how the moral of a memoir bears resemblance in appearance and function to the thesis statement of a more conventionally argumentative piece. For CNF pedagogy to work, combination is key: the initial dissection can teach which rhetorical moves accomplish which rhetorical tasks, but the comparison shows how things like language and location may need to be tweaked to accomplish different (though often related) tasks. Admittedly this is just a brief hypothetical example, but it illustrates how CNF pedagogy can make the parts of writing more visible and turn them into moveable pieces.

CNF pedagogy gives teachers the tools to show students this process of dissection and connection, but for transfer to truly take root, students need to be able to do it on their own. According to transfer theorists like Perkins and Salomon, without “creative discovery,” where students have a “eureka!” moment about how to use knowledge from one context in another, transfer won’t catch on in a meaningful and lasting way (24). Thankfully, just as CNF gives teachers the opportunity to model these processes, it gives students the opportunity to find their own epiphanies. As we’ve seen, CNF’s reflective nature lets students interpret material on their
own terms, and shape the way they present this interpretation – i.e. their writing – in their own terms. Focusing on presentation gets them thinking rhetorically, noticing what writing’s doing and how it’s doing it. But when they apply this approach to different rhetorical situations, it leads to the kind of metacognitive moments where students can notice connections. Once they begin to make connections, they begin to look at writing strategically, reaching backward and projecting forward to move writing knowledge.

**Conclusion**

For these transfer-enabling “eureka” moments to happen, students need an environment that allows them to “step back” and look at an assignment to see similarities with past writing experiences (Foertsch 373). My next chapter, then, presents a course design that provides such an environment, modelling writing assignments that utilize CNF’s reflective nature to invite metacognitive introspection (in order to create the opportunity to look for connections). Following the lead of the national parks example, I use select CNF subgenres to simulate different rhetorical contexts, showcasing a fluid rhetorical situation that changes yet maintains some common features. More specifically, major essays highlight rhetorical moves and the overall movement from one rhetorical purpose to another to help students get into the practice of looking at the bones to find patterns, and thus begin connecting the dots on their own, ultimately building their toolkit/developing their strategy.
CHAPTER FOUR: CREATIVE NONFICTION/FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY: IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

Chapter Two outlined how the features of creative nonfiction writing align with certain learning objectives for first-year composition, and Chapter Three discussed how transfer theory suggests teachers can utilize these similarities (and differences) to teach writing as an evolving skill and adaptive strategy to meet ever-changing exigencies (which, fittingly enough, is exactly what transfer theory suggests students want to get out of FYC). Chapter Four, then, moves from explication to illustration, tying these threads together by showing students how to build a writing strategy that analyzes the rhetorical blueprints of past assignments and anticipates the rhetorical requirements of future writing situations. To accomplish this, my fourth chapter maps out a series of CNF-infused FYC assignments to create a sequence that explicitly draws parallels between the CNF features of reflection, veracity, emotion, voice/style, and narrative structure and the FYC objectives of critical inquiry, research, argument, audience awareness, and organization. Doing so, I believe, models a way to implement the metacognitive processes of collection, interpretation, and presentation in the writing classroom, all while fulfilling the promise of the key theoretical and pedagogical approaches covered in this dissertation: expressivism (turning inward to think on/in your own terms), the progressive pedagogies (writing as a continuum of rhetorical strategies), CNF (reflection to understand things, metacognition to examine how we present said understanding), and transfer theory (dissection of writing to examine the parts and functions, and then being explicit about similarities across contexts).

Chapter Four is comprised of six sections. The first, The Exigence and Audience of First-Year Composition, briefly reemphasizes why a marriage of FYC and CNF makes good
pedagogical sense, recapping common introductory writing course goals and how CNF writing can help students achieve them. The following four sections – The Personal Narrative, The Pop Cultural Review, The Article Critique, and The Literary Journalism Essay – outline the major essays that comprise my CNF-infused FYC model. For each of these, I introduce the assignment and then preview which CNF features will be utilized and what objectives they relate to. Next, I provide hypothetical examples of the assignment to help audiences visualize what such an essay could look like. Finally, I explain how the assignment utilizes certain CNF features, how these features align with certain FYC objectives, and how this alignment ultimately advances the toolkit idea of writing as an evolving, adaptive strategy. The sixth section, the Conclusion, concludes the chapter by summarizing how this CNF pedagogy is grounded in disciplinary tenets, and previews Chapter Five, which will do more to contextualize my model with related contemporary approaches.

The Exigence and Audience of First-Year Composition

Exigence

Before getting into the actual assignments, though, it’s necessary to briefly discuss how the genre and recurring theme that unite my proposed sequence suit the exigency and audience of FYC. By exigency I mean the mission and methods of introductory writing instruction – the institutional goals writing programs have for students, and the strategies we as writing teachers employ to help them reach these goals. Discerning the why and how of something as individualized as FYC isn’t exactly easy, as the wide variety of institutions, writing programs, and instructors results in a wide variety of objectives and approaches (Taggart et al. 6). Yet while there’s no set-in-stone standard for FYC, previous research – as well as my own teaching experience – suggest that many current models are the result of a combination of two of the more
influential movements in the history of composition instruction: the traditionalist focus on formal structure and the expressivist focus on personal exploration.

In their introduction to *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, Amy R. Taggart, H. Brooke Hessler, and Kurt Schick attribute many contemporary FYC models to the lingering effects of current-traditionalism, which stresses organization, and the influence of expressivism and the critical pedagogies, which, as we have seen, put more impetus on reflection and critical thinking (“What is Composition Pedagogy” 2). Joseph Petraglia traces a similar genealogy, and identifies students’ ability to “develop and organize ideas, use techniques for inventing topics worthy of investigation, adapt one’s purpose to an audience, and anticipate reader response” as a means of measuring how well this sort of combination theory is put to practice (“General Writing Skills Instruction and Its Discontents” xi). He also outlines the assignments that have traditionally been used to help students discover and demonstrate these skills, including narrative, informative, and argumentative prompts that allow students to hone their descriptive, expository, analytical, and persuasive writing abilities (“Writing as an Unnatural Act” 92-97). Admittedly the research here isn’t exhaustive, and these rationales, objectives, and assignments aren’t indicative of every writing program; but they at least approximate the amalgam of personal reflection and attention to form and function that comprise many an introductory writing class, and as such give a sense of what’s traditionally been offered to and expected of FYC students.

Considering exigency, it’s worth returning to the position statements of the professional organizations in the Composition and Rhetoric field – the National Council for Teachers of English’s (NCTE) “Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing,” the Council of Writing Program Administrator’s (WPA) “Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (v3.0)”, the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s (CCCC) “Statement on Multiple
Uses of Writing,” and the Writing Across the Curriculum Clearinghouse’s (WACC) “Statement of WAC Principles and Practices.” These platforms are particularly important because they provide a more up-to-date model of the standards and practices of FYC. As stated in Chapter Two, the position statements embody an effort to regularize the way FYC is taught, outlining what the organizations view as effective pedagogical methods via a series of skills and objectives for students to acquire and meet (WPA “Introduction”). Due to the aforementioned vastness of the field the statements can’t technically provide a comprehensive picture of what FYC is doing, but their espousal of what FYC ideally should be doing illustrates a model – albeit a more progressive one – in line with what Taggart and Petraglia summarize.

Though their terminology may vary, the position statements also value exploration, organization, and audience anticipation as hallmarks of successful introductory writing instruction. However, they take things a step further by taking a step back, highlighting the reflective and reflexive nature of this kind of composition to illustrate how metacognition can help students think about their thinking, and, more importantly, think about their writing (NCTE “Writing is a Process”). As the statements explain, “writing makes thinking visible,” and this power can be harnessed to help students examine how they investigate their ideas, interpret/contextualize their findings, and eventually share them with a larger audience (WACC “Part Three: Principles and Practices for WAC Pedagogy”; also NCTE “Writing and Reading are Related”; WPA “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Composing”). When it comes to implementation, the position statements don’t exactly include a master syllabus, but many of the assignments they suggest align with the prompts Petraglia details. Again, though, the statements take things a step further by taking a step back, stressing that tasks such as narration, exposition, analysis, and argument represent different genres, and encouraging students to notice the
similarities and differences between them (WACC “Part Three: Principles and Practices for WAC Pedagogy”; WPA “Rhetorical Knowledge”). This examination marks the beginning of a rhetorical approach toward writing, which the position statements affirm as the primary take-away they want FYC students to take with them (WPA “Rhetorical Knowledge”; NCTE “Conventions”). This is what helps students refine writing skills into a writing strategy (NCTE, “Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing”).

Taggart et al. and Petraglia outline what FYC has traditionally looked like, and the position statements outline what it ought to look like moving forward, but unfortunately none of these sources provide very specific directions about how to actually run a class. Thankfully, CNF provides us a possible pedagogy for doing so. As Chapter Two outlines, even though CNF is rooted in the creative it can still satisfy traditional models of form and function due to its narrative structure, which can help students organize their thoughts by stringing together episodes and/or ideas (Journet 14; Bruner 6-11). But CNF’s pedagogical potential is most apparent when we contrast its features with the objectives of the position statements. CNF’s introspective and reflective nature align neatly with the position statements’ call for more metacognitive approaches, providing the perfect opportunity to step back and reflect on the thinking (the exploration) and the writing (the organization and presentation) (Bishop 269; Bradway and Hesse 7, 20). Additionally, CNF’s multiple subgenres let it model different yet related exigencies that are easy to compare/contrast (memoir is narrative, profiles provide information, reviews offer analysis and argument, and literary journalism frequently combines all three). While traditional FYC models teach these multiple genres in isolation (or at least as separate entities), with CNF we can position them as subgenres falling under the same genre umbrella, and thus better trace how one relates to another. As pointed out in Chapter Three, this
genre-stacking facilitates the kind of rhetorical examination that makes trends visible, which helps students develop a skillset, and recognize when to use it (Bishop 273; Root and Steinberg xvii).

**Audience**

After examining how CNF suits FYC from an institutional and instructional perspective, it’s important to consider whether it meets the needs of the people who actually have to take the class – the students. Chapters One and Two outline the importance of letting students experience and experiment with the expressive function of language, illustrating how letting students examine their thinking helps them improve the way they communicate ideas. Yet however much they may benefit from this exploration, Chapter Three suggests that students themselves are preoccupied with the transactional function of language – specifically how their writing can work for them. Studies in transfer theory and disciplinarity confirm that what students want most is for the writing they do in FYC to be relevant to their college and professional careers (Snead 1; Jarratt et al. 51). As we saw in McCarthy’s “A Stranger in Strange Lands,” students tend to place more significance in their content classes because they believe the things they learn therein will help them long-term (248-50). What students value from FYC, then, are skills they can apply to the writing they’ll need to do in their specific field of study. Transfer theorists point out that chief amongst these skills are audience awareness and anticipation, which allow students to assess and therefore better meet the needs of their teachers and employers – helping them succeed in their major and ultimately secure a job (Bergmann and Zepernick 136). These scholars also remind us that in their search for relevancy students can ferret out artificiality (Bergmann and Zepernick 125). Instead of an abstract focus, students ideally want something
that fits with their field; but in the absence of that, they at least want something that gives them the writing tools they’ll need to move forward.

This creates an opening for CNF, which can give students the reality and relevance they’re looking for, ultimately helping them view writing as a discipline unto itself. Concerning reality, CNF is a recognizable and wide-ranging genre that bears resemblance to much of the personal writing and reading (storytelling, opinion-sharing) students do outside of the academy, and shares similarities with the professional writing and reading (critical thinking, explication and analysis with evidence) they’ll do inside the academy (Bradway and Hesse 3). This takes away from the idea of a generic “academic writing in a vacuum” course, a sort of “one off” prerequisite class that students can’t connect to the writing they’ve done before FYC and the writing they’ll do afterward. Concerning relevance, CNF has the much aforementioned capability to train attention on the writing itself. As such, it can facilitate a metacognitive focus on composition (the writing) and context (the exigency, audience, and rhetorical situation the writing is for) that lends itself to the writing students will need to do in college, and more importantly, inside the workforce (Bishop 273).

Despite this fit, actually incorporating CNF in FYC requires a bit more refining in order to narrow the focus. For these reasons, I want the major and supplementary writing assignments to be focused on the concept of community, specifically a community the student identifies with. This could be a group conglomerated around a common location or a common interest, so long as members feel it’s unique enough to stand alone as a separate entity, and they feel that it’s important that they belong to this group. This way there is some real-world focus to what they’ll be writing about, but it’s also a way to connect to their personal lives and personal interests. Admittedly, though, there could still be investment gap problems, with students not seeing how it
relates to a specific class – at least initially. Hopefully through the course of the semester students will see how CNF – the “discipline” holding the course together – is not only a flexible genre that relates to writing inside and outside of the college setting, but a reflective and reflexive genre that positions writing as a means rather than an end. This can help them view writing as an evolving tool, and thus a relevant subject to study.

With that in mind, what follows are my proposed major writing assignments, specifically the progression of essays that will help students move from CNF writing to more traditional academic fare in a way that marries their personal writing needs (to come to conclusions on and in their own terms) with their academic/professional writing goals (to anticipate and meet the expectations of their audience).

The Personal Narrative

As Chapter Two showed, writing CNF often deals with the complementary processes of telling a story and thinking about why you’re telling it. This metacognitive duality is the basis for the first essay, the Personal Narrative. One of the most visible markers of expressivism’s influence on Composition, personal narratives are a staple of many FYC programs. Due to the aforementioned variation in FYC models there is, not surprisingly, significant variation in how these narratives are used, though they tend to either start the semester off, using story to engage a student’s introspective nature, or they close it out, using hindsight to reexamine previous essays. The former approach is rooted in reflection, but deals mostly with recreating an experience for an audience. The latter, however, narrows the focus from general experience to writing experience, forming a sort of literacy narrative that examines one’s personal composing practices. My first assignment will combine elements of both of these strategies – the storytelling scope of the more
traditional narrative and the metacognitive lens of the literacy narrative – to show students how writing can help them recall, recount, and reflect.

For this memoir-inspired assignment, students will narrate a memorable and meaningful anecdote (or series of anecdotes) about a community they identify with that, in addition to telling a story, both sums up what the group is about and why it’s important to them. In order to avoid a simple chronology of events (the dreaded “list narrative”), prompts and sample essays guide students to choose an experience that for them symbolizes both the community and their membership in it. Of course, telling an entertaining story is a vital part of this assignment. A deeper goal, though, is to use an experience as both a metaphor for a larger point and as evidence to support that point. This goal fulfills an important aspect of CNF – telling a story with a purpose, to inform and often influence an audience (sharing an experience, and sharing a point of view). It will also get students thinking critically, i.e. contextualizing their memories right from the start, so they don’t just default to a “what I did on my summer vacation” narrative. The assignment still plays on their natural inclination toward storytelling, but forces them to turn inward on a deeper level, considering why this story in particular comes to mind. What results will show students how story is a powerful way to come to an understanding, and to share that understanding with an audience.

When it comes to actually selecting their group, students can choose from any number of communities they identify with, so long as they are united by a common thread that marks their collective as unique. Admittedly this “common thread” leaves a lot of room for interpretation, but that’s kind of the point. It could be location, with students choosing their hometown, state, geographic region, or country. It could be identity, with students choosing a shared ethnic, gender, or sexual orientation. It could be interest, with students choosing a hobby, occupation, or
political persuasion they share with similarly-minded friends, colleagues, or compatriots. Or, as
case, it could be some combination of the three – a high school soccer
team, a family-owned and operated restaurant, a campus professional organization, etc. Simply
put, these kids have lots of identities and thus lots of options, and it’s important to note that
weighing these options is in fact the beginning of the metacognition that drives much of what’s
to come in this course design. Students will use reflection – CNF’s defining feature – before
they even start their writing: they’ll use it to think about the communities they’re a part of, and to
scan their memories for anecdotes they could share to illustrate and ultimately make a statement
about these communities. (Interestingly enough, this selection process is also the first time
they’ll use reflection as a strategy, which is something else we’ll see a lot more of in this course
design.)

**Creative Nonfiction Features/First-Year Composition Objectives at Play**

After using reflection during the pre-writing phase to choose their group, students will
continue to lean on it as a way to contextualize their past, looking for connections between
disparate memories so they can weave them together in a way that makes a point about their
community. This use of reflection to analyze experience and present the results of said analysis
models the kind of critical thinking they’ll do throughout their academic writing career –
contextualizing material, and looking for connections between disparate information and/or
opinions so that they can weave them into a cogent analysis or argument (WACC “Writing as a
mode of learning”; WPA “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Composing”). And in addition to
forming a nice parallel with the FYC objective critical inquiry, the Personal Narrative’s
reflective nature also gives students an opportunity to examine their own writing, getting them to
think critically about the way they present their story in an effort to recreate their conclusions for an audience.

This, then, draws attention to three complementary CNF features that emphasize FYC objectives. Emotion encompasses the passion of the students’ experience, and pushes them to focus on how they transfer it onto an audience (which aligns with argument, and how they’ll utilize certain rhetorical appeals to persuade). Veracity forces students to focus on what memories they selected and why, and how they tied them together (which aligns with research, and parallels how they’ll employ similar selective processes with sources and other outside stimuli). Finally, narrative structure further emphasizes the order in which events and/or ideas can be strung together (which, not surprisingly, aligns with organization, and ultimately previews how the rhetorical situation dictates the rhetorical blueprint). As such, the Personal Narrative will be a jumping-off point for the course, something that gets students thinking about thinking (through reflection/critical inquiry), and in turn thinking about writing (by using emotion, veracity, and narrative structure to draw attention to ways to reach an audience).

How it Works: A Hypothetical

Since there are so many ways the Personal Narrative could take shape, teachers might want to limit students a little by having them lean on identify first, specifically their personal and professional interests. Let’s start with an example of the former, since focusing on a hobby could be a less stressful way to ease first-year students into their academic writing careers. Say one such student has chosen a fantasy football league comprised of friends he went to high school with as his community. For this essay, he could write about which member organized the league, and who came up with the most clever team name (via the best combination of pop culture reference and football pun – the Golden Tate Warriors, the Blair Walsh Project, etc.). He
could also discuss the draft party, where everyone got together to pick their team (and drink), or catalogue all the trash-talking that went on throughout the season. Telling the story is a fun way to relive the experience, but thinking about why it’s fun, why these memories are good, gets him to look at the deeper context. Fantasy football leagues are often thought of as inconsequential broings on, or a loophole to federal gambling laws (and to be completely honest, they can certainly be these things). But, as the student comes to realize, they can also serve as a way to stay in touch with friends and/or family you don’t get to see as much as you grow older, and particularly as you move away from your hometown. Upon closer inspection, the student might think about how much his life is changing, and how all these things are a way to keep old friends from losing touch.

Now if an instructor doesn’t want such a casual kickoff to the semester, they could instead have students focus on their major/eventual career for this essay. For an example of this scenario, imagine a student chose his intended vocation, high school history teacher, as his community. For the essay, said student could explore what led him to this career path, detailing how a random bit of Titanic trivia on the side of a cereal box got him interested in the past at an early age. His parents, wanting to encourage the habit, took him to a local library to find books on the subject, but a chance meeting with some veterans shifted his focus to World War II history. Hearing their firsthand accounts of the European front led to his interest in classic and current war movies, then to military video games, then ultimately to scholarly books and documentaries. Tracing the different incarnations of his hobby helped him flesh out how his passion became a profession, specifically a desire to pass on this passion to a new generation. But thinking about how these different things got him interested also made him realize that he

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2 This example is inspired by the preface from a recent student essay, where the writer used an anecdote about his own history with, well, History as a lead-in to an argument for more interactive approaches to teaching the subject.
could use them to get his students interested. This results in him illustrating an inventive teaching methodology – using primary sources (veterans), multiple media (books and movies), and interactive experiences (games, reenactments, and role-playing) as teaching methods.

**Why it Works: A Rationale**

These examples may be brief, but they illustrate the power of the personal as an instrument that gets students to turn inward to contextualize information. Reflection gives students the opportunity to step back and look back, mining their memories to create their story. As they do this they’re engaging in the simultaneous cognitive activities of selecting certain memories, thoughts, opinions, and feelings over others, and considering why some jump out as more important than others. This act of contextualizing allows deeper themes to emerge. After realizing that his fantasy football anecdotes all center around things that bring a group of friends together, the author of the first hypothetical further realized that as time and circumstance – particularly distance – make it increasingly difficult to get together, the fantasy league is a dependable, unifying constant that keeps a group of friends connected. And after tracing the path from passion to profession, the author of the second hypothetical realized his history-buff hobbies could serve as good teaching methods.

That’s the point of the Personal Narrative: to get students reflecting on their experience in order to learn something, to come to a conclusion by making connections. This first writing assignment enables reflective (and thus metacognitive) thinking by allowing students to organize their memories in a way that helps them make sense of things. And in doing this reflection/contextualization, the assignment models the thought process of critical inquiry, which in essence is also about a student examining how they come to the conclusions they come to. The act of exploring one’s thoughts and then organizing them to the point where a point emerges
is similar in theory and in practice to the act of contextualizing material (whether from without or within) by looking for connections between disparate information and opinions and weaving them into a coherent line of thought. As Chapter Two showed, parallels can be seen between the way reflection helps one “to understand an experience…exploring it for meanings and connections” and the position statements’ belief that “writing facilitates connections between new information and learned information, and among areas of knowledge across multiple domains” (Bradway and Hesse 20; WACC “Writing as a mode of learning”). In this way the defining feature of CNF aligns with the key learning objective of FYC.

Reflection gets students thinking about what story to tell and then lets them think about why they’ve told it. But perhaps more importantly, at least from a pedagogical perspective, it gets them thinking about how to tell it. This is where students switch from reflection to reach their own epiphanies to building a narrative that recreates that epiphany for an audience. Instead of just using reflection to search memories for connections, here they’re using it to examine what memories best convey their deeper message, and then to determine how to stack these together to create the most effective narrative. Clarity and cohesion give way to emotion, as students begin to organize their memories in a way that transfers their understanding to an audience. They need to move an audience the same way the experience moved them (so they’re using emotion here as a persuasive strategy, which correlates to argument). Such moves mark the beginning of metacognition to refine the message, and are thus a great place for teachers to step in and direct students’ focus to their writing. Instructors can show students that their narratives aren’t just about finding connections so they can learn something themselves; they’re also about how best to share these connections with an audience in a way that conveys the story (the “how it felt to
me” part). Selecting episodes to pass on their passion brings about metacognitive moments focusing on presentation that will hopefully be the first of many for this course.

Making an emotional connection is a powerful affordance of CNF writing, but as we saw in Chapter Two, privileging the “creative” at the expense of the “nonfiction” can get people into trouble (Gutkind 14-17). This is where veracity factors into the composing process. As the title of Gutkind’s CNF guide warns us, *You Can’t Make this Stuff Up*. “The word ‘creative’ has to do with how the writer…shapes and presents information,” he explains, not with creating information (7). Veracity is the CNF writer’s better angel, the constant reminder to keep from exaggerating. True, CNF writing is by nature an interpretation, but CNF writers need to be honest in their interpretation, and honest about the fact that they are doing an interpretation. Narrative allowances (such as condensing time or estimating dialogue) are allowed, but students must be transparent about them (Gutkind 36-37). This transparency is veracity’s teachable moment. Students have to learn how to edit their experience – using a part to represent the whole, and doing so in a way that makes a connection with their audience; but they must always remain true to the source material so as to represent it honestly. This focus on fidelity is not only good practice, teaching students to stick to the facts and admit when creative license has been taken; it also previews the kind of research students will go on to do with their college writing careers, where they’ll be selective with how they use, paraphrase, and quote sources, but must always represent the source accurately.

In addition to these beginning metacognitive steps, the Personal Narrative also comes complete with some more rhetorical dissection that will help students further examine their writing. The Personal Narrative is, well, a narrative, so it lets students employ a natural organizational structure (in the form of a logical and – for the most part – chronological
progression of episodes/events leading to a summative “moral” that concludes the story).

However, there will be some variation as students decide what to include and what to leave out, and then how to tie everything together. These choices can be examined, a process that can introduce students to the concept of looking at writing rhetorically as a tool to fit a goal, and ultimately to reach an audience.

Obviously a personal narrative will differ greatly from more formal structures of academic writing, but this assignment is still a good place for students to begin dissecting their writing so they can see the different parts and their functions. Applying a rhetorical lens will show students how the story they tell is evidence that leads into the conclusion they come to. This view gets them thinking about how evidence (in this case their memories, their experience) is strung together (via transitions) to make a larger point (their moral). The narrative format of CNF, then, helps them examine organization, which like the combination of veracity and emotion ultimately gets them thinking about audience awareness. This is that metacognitive opportunity that so much of the previously examined scholarship has touted – using the “turn inward” to turn outward. This is the big takeaway from the first essay – getting students to use their own experience to make a larger point, and getting them to begin to examine how they can use writing to share that point with an audience.

This metacognitive structural dissection also gives teachers a chance to preview the next major essay, as well as highlight similarities and differences between a personal narrative and more persuasive/argumentative writing. Flipping the narrative’s organization can be a good way to introduce traditional argumentative structure, so students can see that for other assignments – including their second essay, the Pop Cultural Review – they need to start with their overall point and then move into evidence to support it. This sort of side-by-side comparison reinforces
looking at things rhetorically (examining part and function), and explicitly introduces the concepts of exigency and audience, teaching students that the format is ultimately dictated by what an audience expects. Someone reading a memoir will want a story that leads into some sort of theme (either implied or explicit), while someone reading a review will expect to hear an author’s opinion at the outset, and then see evidence to support that opinion. This plays right into students’ penchant for audience awareness. As we’ve seen in previous research on why students are typically content-driven (like with McCarthy’s Dave), students regard knowing how to size up an audience and give them what they want/need as one of the most important writing skills (as this will help them in content-driven classes) (McCarthy 248-50). Transitioning from a personal narrative into an argumentative essay in an explicit way is one way instructors can harness this inclination.

Showing students how narrative writing can bear some semblance to more argumentative writing is also a good way introduce the idea of writing as a genre-spanning continuum. It’s where we begin to show them that many kinds of writing are related, which is an important precursor before we show them that skills from one context can translate to another. This hopefully will illustrate how writing they’ve done in the past can be mined to help with future writing, further highlighting the idea of writing as an adaptable skill, one that helps an author size up an audience and present their points in a way to reach them.

The Pop Cultural Review

When people think of CNF writing, memoir is often the first subgenre that comes to mind (hence the focus of the first essay). But almost as popular as conveying a personal story is conveying a personal opinion, which leads perfectly into the second essay, the Pop Cultural Review. A lot of CNF can be categorized as commentary – writing that examines a specific item
or issue and conveys an author’s opinion on it/evaluation of it. Like telling a story to make sense of something, sharing (exploring, explaining, and justifying) one’s opinion in a direct, explicit way is a primary driver for a lot of the formal and informal writing that falls under the CNF umbrella. In addition to op-ed pieces, many film, television, literature, and music reviews fit this category due to a strong sense of the author’s personal opinion and personal style in presenting said opinion (Bradway and Hesse 3). Students can recognize this brand of CNF in much of what they read in print (I’m naïve) and online – whether published reviews/critiques or social media commentary. They can also recognize it in much of what they, as active consumers of popular culture, write themselves, as many of their social media posts praise or criticize the various pop culture offerings in their lives.

This urge to comment, to share one’s opinion is the basis of the Pop Cultural Review, where students will write an opinionated critique on a pop culture item, telling us what they think of it and why (again, exploring, explaining, and justifying their opinion). However, there will be an additional component, as the item itself has to in some way comment on the community the student identifies with, and the essay will factor this commentary into the overall evaluation. Students, then, will write about whether they liked the item and why, as well as what greater point the piece is making about their community, and whether they agree with that point or not (previewing the kind of rhetorical analysis that’ll come in the third essay, the Article Critique, thus continuing to establish connections across contexts).

Students first need to find a movie, TV show, song, novel, or short story that depicts/comments on their community in some way. Following the lead of some examples from popular sources (I’m thinking magazine reviews – *Time, Entertainment Weekly, Rolling Stone, The New Yorker*), their goal will be to evaluate the item on a surface level (i.e. do they
like/would they recommend it, and why or why not?), and a deeper level (how does the item’s depiction of the community match their experience with that community, and what larger conclusions can be drawn between the two?). The essay, then, will include the ingredients of a traditional review, including a brief appraisal that previews the student’s opinion, a summary/description of the item, and evidence (body paragraphs) that show how various aspects (acting or music or writing) contribute to their overall positive, negative, or “meh” impression. But more importantly, it will formally introduce students to rhetorical analysis (as they explore what argument their item is making, and how it’s making it) and push them to consider these “larger context” findings within their evaluation.

Creative Nonfiction Features/First-Year Composition Objectives at Play

The Pop Cultural Review lets students examine how their item’s depiction of their community matches their personal experience as a member of it. To do this it relies on the CNF features of reflection, narrative structure, and voice/style, the combination of which, I believe, can help teach the FYC objectives of critical inquiry, argument, organization, and audience awareness. Reflection will come into play when students explore their opinion of the pop culture item, considering whether they liked it or not, and then when they explain the reasons for their evaluation, discussing why they liked/disliked it. It’ll play a deeper part, though, when students think about how accurately the item portrays their community. Here reflection embodies the more FYC-friendly critical inquiry, because students will be doing a rhetorical analysis of sorts to see how the item makes an argument, then relating this argument to their own experience, and ultimately reflecting on how this comparison impacts their opinion.

Additionally, the combination of metacognition and critical thinking will open the door to a rhetorical analysis of students’ own arguments, letting instructors use the concepts of audience
and exigency to make students aware of the difference between narrative and more traditionally academic forms of writing. Outlining narrative structure can show students how the order has to be more direct in argumentative and analytical writing, calling attention to organization. And highlighting voice and style can show students how to adjust their presentation to make their language more direct and thus more formal, calling attention to audience awareness.

**How it Works: A Hypothetical**

As stated previously, Essay Two will combine elements of a traditional review with a rhetorical analysis, letting students provide both an initial reaction and a deeper consideration. There are several ways this two-step approach could take shape. Maybe a student journalist examines the way *Spotlight* spotlights honest reporting, thorough fact-checking, and never giving up on a story despite outside pressures to do so. And while she initially found the film’s more straightforward tone and lack of personal subplots kind of boring, the more she thinks about her field the more she likes how this focus aligns with the idea of “just the facts” objectiveness and a dogged pursuit of the truth. Maybe a member of a gaming club geeks out at the way *Stranger Things*, whose main characters are big Dungeons & Dragons nerds, highlights the complexity of role-playing games, and the imagination required to play them. Granted he realizes that the Netflix series is a sci-fi adventure, not a D&D documentary; but he nonetheless appreciates how the creativity of that adventure mirrors the creativity of its preteen protagonists, as well as the mindset you need to get into to play a game you make up as you go along. Maybe a student who traces his heritage to the Wyandot Indians objects to the way *Avatar* depicts an indigenous population as dependent upon a foreigner “messiah” to save them. Though he admits to digging the film’s exciting extraterrestrial setting, he finds that the tired “first contact” story arch perpetuates the stereotypes fellow Native Americans have been trying to combat for centuries
(that of the noble but uneducated native, and of indigenous people as unable to control their own destiny without outside help).

For a more complete example of how this essay could look, say a student chose her sorority as her community, and then chose to review *The House Bunny*, a 2008 comedy about a former model who helps turn around a fledgling sorority. The student may have thought the movie was funny enough and, on the whole, moderately enjoyable, due largely to the performance of the lead actress, the eclectic supporting cast and the banter between them, the colorful depictions of sorority theme parties, and the overall message that inclusion trumps elitism. However, the rhetorical analysis component pushed her to look closer at the conflict that drives the plot, where a sorority comprised of outcasts shake up the campus Greek system by challenging a cult-like, exclusionary sorority’s hold on power. To create that central struggle the filmmakers split sororities into binary camps, unpopular but inclusive and popular but exclusive. The student might find that this negates the complexity of sorority members; additionally, it uses the latter model to play on stereotypes of sorority members as superficial, conformist, and exclusionary. Also, she might object to the film’s “makeover” mantra, whereby the ex-model protagonist helps the sorority succeed by changing its members’ appearances, and object to the attendant message that success is popularity, and, even more troubling, popularity is boys liking you. Overall, then, the student could still say the movie was funny, but have serious misgivings about the way it reduces sorority members to stereotypes, suggests women’s value is based on appearance, and trivializes exclusionary behavior (not paying enough attention to the racial, socio-economic, and heteronormative factors that underscore this practice). So while she appreciates the humor, and the superficial attempt to champion inclusion, she could still have a
problem with how the filmmakers rely on stereotypes to make their case – stereotypes that don’t match the complexity of the sorority experience she has had.

**Why it Works: A Rationale**

For the Pop Cultural Review, students won’t simply be reflecting on whether they liked their piece, they’ll be adding more complexity by using rhetorical analysis to examine how the item makes its point about their community, and then discussing whether they (as an insider in/expert on this community) agree with the point it’s making. They’re giving their opinion (via reflection), *and* looking at how the larger context (the social implications) affect their opinion (via reflection done more formally, ala critical inquiry). The review portion harnesses students’ need to comment on – and in doing so evaluate – the world around them; but working in the rhetorical analysis gives the assignment more depth, and creates an essay that reads more like published CNF reviews, which in addition to the recommendation give the author room to explore the context around the content. This is a necessary step, because it shows how CNF can help expressive writing go beyond one of the criticisms of expressivism – mainly that it’s too self-centered (pun intended). It does this by explicitly modelling the turn inward/turn outward, helping students move beyond their own experience/thoughts/opinions to contextualize these things in the face of other experiences/thoughts/opinions (entering Bartholomae’s “existing conversation”) (“Writing With Teachers” 66). This further step is where we really see reflection give way to the kind of critical thinking that FYC expects, due to the way an author complicates their initial opinion by bringing in an outside source, and then weighing it against that source (NCTE “Writing and reading are related”; WPA “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Composing”).

In addition to working as a sort of intellectual on-ramp, Essay Two serves an even greater pedagogical purpose by facilitating metacognitive rhetorical analysis. This assignment presents
two key opportunities for examination and awareness – getting students to pay attention to someone else’s argument, and getting them to pay attention to their own argument. The Personal Narrative began to model a rhetorical lens, pushing students to think about how/why they came to their conclusions – specifically conclusions about their community, based on their experiences. The Pop Cultural Review, however, models the rhetorical process more explicitly, using an “everything’s an argument” epiphany to help students look at how the pop culture item makes some kind of statement. In essence, the way they looked for a moral in their story is similar to how they will look for a social commentary argument in their item. Here they’re simply turning the lens outward, thinking about what conclusions the composers came to, and how and why they came to these conclusions. Focusing on argument is a perfect springboard to critical inquiry and analysis – processing what people say by thinking about their reasons for saying it as well as the way in which they say it. This is an important content skill, as learning how to interpret a source (how to listen to it and talk back to it) plays a role in much of the writing students will do in their college career. But it’s also an invaluable context skill, as it reinforces the idea of dissecting writing to look at things rhetorically.

As previously cited research has shown, transfer theory posits that rhetorical thinking is often the first step toward getting students to view writing as a strategy to anticipate audience and exigency (McCarthy 262; Jarratt et al. 65; Bergmann and Zepernick 141-42; Perkins and Salomon 30). Keeping with these findings, the Pop Cultural Review gives teachers the chance to show students how the rhetorical lens they used to study their item’s purpose and presentation can be applied to their own writing in order to make it more effective. Thinking about how their item presents its argument is a way to transition into thinking about how they present their argument (in this case their assessment), which, with the proper guidance, is an explicit way to
get them to start thinking about how writing works to accomplish a goal. For teachers, this is another time to call attention to the idea of writing as a continuum, which shows how different kinds of writing are related (via the part/function approach). It’s also the perfect place to highlight exigency, which shows how different kinds of writing are, well, different, and how context and audience dictate these changes in appearance. The larger Pop Cultural Review unit plan emphasizes connections, but teaches students how to be aware of differences in audience expectations, and thus tweak their writing to meet an audience’s needs. Ultimately, then, this advances the part/function rhetorical view that is necessary for transfer to work, and for students to view writing as an adaptable skill.

Looking at the rhetorical blueprints to highlight similarities and differences between different kinds of writing helps students identify core skills that can transfer (which, according to scholars like Jarratt, Perkins, and Salomon, is the primary goal for FYC teachers). It also gets students thinking about how to meet the expectations of audiences (which, according to scholars like McCarthy, Bergmann, and Zepernick, is the primary goal for FYC students). A way to strengthen students’ rhetorical lenses even more is to recall the “narrative flip” discussed at the end of the Personal Narrative unit. Juxtaposing the narrative structure of the Personal Narrative with the argumentative and analytical structure of the Pop Cultural Review emphasizes core transferable skills and how audience expectations dictate format and conventions. The connections might not seem obvious, but a closer look (that good ol’ part/function dissection) shows that the way they strung certain events and anecdotes together to lead into a larger point about their community bears at least a fundamental resemblance to the way they strung opinions and textual evidence together to make an evaluation. Both assignments require evidence (events and anecdotes; opinions and textual examples) to back up a conclusion (the moral; the
evaluation). Both involve critical thinking to select which evidence best proves the point (deciding which stories to include and which to leave out; deciding which opinions and examples to include and which to leave out). And both involve the use of transitional devices to link events and ideas and move from one to the next. As a teacher you can point these things out, illustrating some of the skills that carry over.

Of course there are significant differences in structure and tone, differences which, as the instructor can show students, revolve around audience and exigency (i.e. audience awareness). This is really where the CNF features and FYC objectives converge, and the Pop Cultural Review utilizes reflection on narrative and voice/style to foster critical thinking about organization and language. The Personal Narrative was about putting the journey first, but informative writing – whether argumentative, analytical, or both – is traditionally about putting the destination first. Students still need to create a flow of examples, illustrations, and evidence to explain and ultimately validate a point, but here they have to start with the point they want to make, and work backward to prove it. Essay Two provides the opportunity to explicitly demonstrate what was previewed at the end of the first unit. Teachers can use the assignment to show how most academic writing puts critical thinking at the forefront, using the conclusion (in a figurative sense) to guide and organize the writing to come. Students can see, then, that while the actual thinking involved is similar to the reflection/contextualization they did in the Personal Narrative, argument and analysis require a more direct example of this skill in order to meet their audience’s expectations. There will still be parallels between this more straightforward kind of organization and the story structure they previously utilized – i.e. between the way they linked different but related episodes and the way they linked different but related ideas. But they’ll see argumentative and analytical structure as the inverse of narrative structure, and how just starting
with “the point” is in itself a closer representative of academic writing. If the Personal Narrative previewed how organization changes depending on what the writing needs to do, the Pop Cultural Review proves it.

This assignment also presents the opportunity to show students how the tone will shift along with the structure as they move further into more formal assignments. Voice and style, the features that make CNF uniquely personal, can themselves be tweaked to make the language – and thus the presentation – more direct (and perhaps less personal, at least in a sentimental sense; the language can still be unique and idiosyncratic). The Personal Narrative was about language that recreates the experience. However, more straightforward argumentative writing is about reaching an audience on a logical level as well, using language that recreates a progression of opinions, ideas, and information (evidence) that leads them to the same conclusion you have (NCTE “Writing grows out of many different purposes”). The basic shift is from reaching audiences on a purely emotional level (using anecdote as evidence to transfer feelings), to reaching them on a more logical level (which the Pop Cultural Review does, using aspects of the movie to show its argument, and as evidence to back up the evaluation/opinion). In addition to more elaborative explanations and support, the Review hinges on clarity. As such, language needs to be more direct and more explicit about how the argument is strung together (so lyrical and superfluously wordy passages should be limited, or at least minimized so they don’t take away from the task at hand.) This essay, then, gives teachers yet another chance to show how the rhetorical situation – the audience and exigency – dictates presentation (the way you structure your ideas and the words you use to voice them).

These pedagogical moves require a lot of guidance from the teacher, but they’re necessary to bring rhetorical blueprints into focus. Together they show students what’s the same,
but also what’s different and why it needs to be different. As previous research has shown, this is the skill students most want to get out of writing instruction – a strategy for sizing up an audience and meeting their expectations (McCarthy 262; Bergmann and Zepernick 136). This is how they see writing as valuable, as a way to mine the past to tackle the present and prepare for the future (because they’re learning how to use what they have, but also how to assess the rhetorical situation). This is why the Pop Cultural Review is in many ways the keystone of the entire course, because it gives students the metacognitive “aha” moments that will spur an awareness that carries over into subsequent writing, showing them why this metacognitive approach is important/useful to them.

**The Article Critique**

Essay Three, the Article Critique, is a continuation of the thought processes and rhetorical practices of the Pop Cultural Review, but it puts the analysis before the opinion in an effort to hew more closely to traditional academic writing models. Here students will be looking at a more formal piece of argument/social commentary on their community – a professional, published article – and determining what argument the author is making, why and how they’re making it, and whether or not said argument is, in their opinion, valid (based on their insider status within the community). The Article Critique serves as a transition from CNF writing to academic writing. Parts of the assignment share similarities with the opinionated argumentation of reviews and op-eds; these things will just come at the end of the essay after the analysis, so as to follow an order of thought more in line with the expectations of FYC, and specifically FYC learning outcomes (NCTE “Conventions…”; WPA “Knowledge of Conventions”). Where the Review wanted students to assess the pop culture item before they analyzed its argument, making way for an “aha” moment comparing the two that paves the way for metacognitive
rhetorical awareness about writing, the Critique positions them to analyze the argument before they assess it, modeling the “analyze, contextualize, comment” design of many entry-level academic writing assignments from both composition and content-specific courses (McCarthy 243).

This essay, then, will employ familiar techniques as the Review to continue to make students aware of how writing skills can transfer, although the order will be noticeably different to continue to make students aware of how the rhetorical situation dictates differences in presentation. As for the familiar, the Critique will show students how the way they dissected a pop culture item is similar to the way they’ll dissect a more traditional argument. Students will once again perform rhetorical analysis – examining the content and the presentation of someone else’s words – before ultimately assessing their analysis. This process will reemphasize how to evaluate sources, but also teach them how to express their opinion on topics in a formal setting (so it’s still on/in their own terms, but they’re more consciously aware of how those terms need to be dressed up a bit to present to a more formal audience). As for the differences, students can see once more that the need to be direct in structure and tone is another expectation that dictates the organizational flip and increased need for clarity (of ideas via language).

To aid with their analysis, students will add a narrative component, incorporating anecdotes of their own as evidence to show why they agree or disagree – or do both – with the author’s take on their community. They will start by doing the traditional analysis, determining what argument the article is making about their community. Then they will do their own sort of assessment (like the Review), where they will evaluate why they feel the argument is valid, not valid, or somewhere in between. As they compile their reasons for this assessment, though, students will weave in anecdotes from their own experience to show why they agree/disagree. In
addition to further investing them in their topics, this personal narrative step emphasizes the CNF principle that they matter, that their experiences matter (Bishop 269; Bradway and Hesse 20). This is where they get their thoughts, opinions, and ideas from, and these things can help them make their points even as they advance into more formal writing. The anecdote component is also a way to emphasize the continuum idea by calling back the narrative writing they did for their first essay, and preview the Literary Journalism Essay, where they will rely in part on personal experience as evidence to make their argumentative main points.

**Creative Nonfiction Features/First-Year Composition Objectives at Play**

The Critique will feature the CNF features reflection, veracity, emotion, narrative structure, and voice/style in an effort to demonstrate all of the previously identified FYC learning objectives: critical thinking, research, argument, organization, and audience awareness. Reflection appears first as a more formal form of critical analysis, as students dissect their article to figure out what point it’s making about their community. The more CNF (read: personal) kind of reflection will come afterward, when they go back to mining their own experiences within the community to see if these gel with the article’s argument.

Reflection will guide everything else, but since students began in analysis mode it’ll fall more in line with the critical thinking of academic writing than the introspection of personal writing. Reflection about thinking will help students to research sources and map out an argument, and open the door to call back the CNF parallels of veracity and emotion. Research will come into play when they search for their article; argument when they analyze its point, and figure out how it’s making its point. And as for those CNF parallels, veracity and emotion come into play when analyzing the article’s argument pushes students to think about how their experience impacts their interpretation of said argument. Additionally, reflection about
presentation brings things back to metacognition/rhetorical awareness; this will help them track changes as they move from a more formal organization to the re-inclusion of some narrative elements, and place further emphasis on audience awareness to help them refine their tone.

**How it Works: A Hypothetical**

Like the Review, The Critique will focus on opinion and rhetorical analysis; again, though, this time analysis takes the lead and commentary follows suit in order to model a more traditional academic path. There are many ways this essay could take shape; students just need to settle on a community, and find an article that does the same (and the article doesn’t have to be scholarly, but should come from a reputable general circulation publication – be it print or online). For example, a cosplayer could explore sexism in fanboy/fangirl culture by reviewing Regan Morris’s “Comic-Con: Women Tired of Groping Geeks and Credibility Checks.” This student shares Morris’s central critique that the gatekeepers of geekdom, who are almost exclusively male, often create a hostile environment for female con-goers; as proof she cites the cat-calling and predatory picture-taking she’s witnessed at local cons, as well as the comics industry’s historical objectification of women. In the end, though, she feels Morris’s expose isn’t indicative of the entire cosplay community, and feels the article fails to focus on the many positives that unite all comics fans regardless of gender (such as getting to escape your reality for a few hours, having a creative outlet for costume and makeup design, and being amongst like-minded individuals who really commit to their fandom).

Sticking with issues of gender, another example could have a student enrolled in his school’s nursing program examine Roslyn Weaver’s article about how Hollywood continues to perpetuate a stigma against male nurses, “Men in Nursing on Television: Exposing and Reinforcing Stereotypes.” This student agrees wholeheartedly with the article’s point about
nursing being an important and rewarding job for anyone, and furthermore, feels the belief that caregiving is a “feminine” job is a dated stereotype that his industry has largely moved beyond (citing his own positive experience to show how the entertainment industry is lagging behind current attitudes in the medical profession). Switching gears a bit, another example could have a Catholic college student critique Jamaal Abdul-Amin’s “The Millennial View,” which focuses on the reasons the titular generation is increasingly cutting ties with organized religion. This student accepts the article’s central finding: that the strictness of many faiths’ dogmas, including that of her own, tend to go against the principles of acceptance millennials hold dear, and concedes that this kind of exclusion turns off many younger people. In her experience, though, it’s not that millennials aren’t religious, it’s just that they’re religious in their own way, focusing more on the big picture – the “message” of peace through reflection and the “mission” of helping those in need – and less on prohibitive rules and regulations. As such, she’s thankful Abdul-Amin spends time highlighting the spiritual and charitable parts of religion that many millennials like herself are attracted to.

For a more in depth (and somewhat topically related) example of how the Critique could work, say a student who identifies with campus activists has chosen to critique an article that casts her community in a less than favorable light. This student used the transition to college and the exposure to a more diverse environment to become more politically involved, joining campus movements that draw attention to social injustice and inequality in an effort to promote positive change. However, because she’s witnessed some blowback to these movements on social media and in the mainstream media, she knows there is a perception of millennials as overly PC and superficial, and wants to investigate that narrative. To examine this different perspective, then, she chose to critique Nathan Heller’s “The Big Uneasy: What’s Roiling the Liberal-Arts
Campus?” Originally published in *The New Yorker*, Heller’s article considers the complications of the current activist climate, so she thought it would be a good way to compare the popular media critique about oversensitivity and so-called “hashtag activism” with what she’s experienced on the front lines.

Keeping with the prompt, her first move is to analyze what Heller’s saying and how he’s saying it. As such, she introduces his setting – Oberlin College, an ultra-liberal private school with a history of activism – and outlines how he uses narrative examples to depict student activists who perhaps focus more on themselves than their cause. As she explains, his first move is to chalk up many “political” complaints as oversensitivity, which he does by using anecdotes – like one about a student who wants trigger warnings for ancient Greek dramas, and one about students who objected to a mural depicting multicultural musicians and demanded it be painted over. This leads to his second move, which is to suggest that this type of sensitivity is unrealistic, especially when students have to deal with the real (read: post college) world, which he illustrates with stories about students who demanded a protesting stipend, and that they be given no grade lower than a C, as their protesting schedule that semester made it difficult to study. While these points are made to almost comical effect (look at these whiny, lazy kids!), she notices a shift with Heller’s closing example of activist excess, which tells the story of a teacher who had to disband a class when students self-segregated. This presents his ultimate critique about the current activist climate: that these students are separating themselves into groups because they believe that only similarly minded people can truly understand them, and that this is antithetical to the idea of diversity (exploring new and divergent viewpoints), as well as the point of activism in general (creating a dialogue that results in change).
After completing her analysis of Heller’s argument, she moves to her evaluation (i.e. critique) of it. Simply put, she has some issues with it, but understands that his overall point is a warning, one that she feels is worth heeding. First, the issues. The student feels Heller generalizes, or at least doesn’t do enough to point out that a small private school is maybe not the best sample size (so perhaps he should do more to acknowledge that the environment at a smaller, private liberal arts school is different than the environment at a larger, public state school). Next, his examples show extremes, which are not necessarily on par with most campus activists. She uses examples from her experience to show that not all activists are like this (they’re not all PC to the point of absurdity, and they’re realistic). She’s participated in the One Grey Dress project to raise awareness of human trafficking and money (people sponsor the dress-wearers) to help victims, and started a bathroom petition to support LGBTQ rights. These were more about the goal, not the protesters themselves (there were no expectations of monetary or academic compensation). Additionally, they had tangible objectives (raising money to go to shelters, changing campus bathroom policies). So she disagrees somewhat with the author’s characterization of student activism, or at least of Oberlin’s brand of student activism as representative of the larger movement(s). However, she takes the sort of “warning” seriously, agreeing that it shows the problem with singular, insular thinking. This is not something she’s seen personally, but has seen in the media (Black Lives Matter vs All Lives Matter, i.e. people digging into a position to the point that they don’t want to hear from the alternative), and can recognize this as counterproductive to the kind of dialogue/cooperation necessary to actually bring about the kind of change that can make things better (i.e. excluding people is a bad way to go about equality).
Why it Works: A Rationale

Like the Pop Cultural Review, the Critique lets students examine someone else’s depiction of their community and compare it with their personal experience. The difference, however, is that the FYC objectives come before the CNF features, owing to the more analytical aim and more formal outline of the assignment. Instead of utilizing CNF features to organically meet the needs of the objectives by teaching the attendant thinking and composing skills, here the objectives are at the forefront to call attention to the goals of the assignment and thus the expectations of the audience. The Critique works, then, because it follows a model similar to the Review (where students analyze an argument and then contextualize the results), but makes them explicitly aware of what they’re doing and, more importantly, why (because this follows a more traditional academic writing format – one that aims to resemble the kind of summary/analysis assignments they’re likely to encounter in future content-specific classes) (McCarthy 243).

The Critique models critical analysis directly, this time positioning it as the driving force of the assignment. In doing this, it also highlights how the essay utilizes some form of reflection to guide all the composing therein – both the thinking (research, argument) and writing (organization, audience awareness). Concerning the thinking, reflection helps students choose their article and ultimately determine its argument. To some degree they’ll do a bit of mini-analysis to help them narrow the field to find their source and topic, scanning articles to find one that deals with their community, and skimming potential options to get a preliminary sense of what kind of commentary on their community it’s offering. Once they’ve settled on a source, then the more expansive analysis will take place, mapping the article’s argument via a rhetorical analysis that dissects the what, why, and how to uncover the meaning, motivation, and method. Reflection, then, guides the research, because students are already making connections to their
own experience during the selection process, and forming an initial opinion that will be revisited when they assess the effectiveness of the article via its portrayal of their community. It also guides their analysis, helping them work backwards to puzzle out how the piece builds its argument.

The rhetorical analysis is where students will see how a more formal type of “review” works in reverse. For the Pop Cultural Review they started with their opinion, then looked deeper to see what the pop culture item was saying, and then revisited their opinion so they could practice how to talk back to a source/put things into a larger context. The order here was for a reason – so they could have that aforementioned metacognitive moment comparing the item’s argument to their own argument, but also so they could explore their ideas before putting everything together. For the Critique, which is about moving into a more traditional argument, they’ll start with their analysis, then use their opinion to evaluate the results of their analysis. There’s a reason for this order, too – to model the formality of academic writing, which often amounts to being more direct about the direction of one’s writing (NCTE “Conventions…”; WPA “Knowledge of Conventions”) and thus the logic of one’s thinking (NCTE “Writing is a tool for thinking”; WPA “Critical Thinking…”). Of course there will still be exploration, just as there is in most academic writing; but here students need to have a better idea of the destination before they set off. In a sense, the writing needs to show their work, i.e. their thinking, using direct framing language to preview the destination and walk the audience through the journey so they can clearly (and logically) see how all the pieces (ideas and opinions) fit together.

In the analysis half of the assignment students see how reflection is critical thinking and critical composing, anticipatory skills that will help them meet the needs of audience and exigency alike. Once they move into the evaluation part, though, they can also see how this
more traditional approach isn’t completely dissimilar to some of the writing they’ve done in the past. True, the Critique means to model the directness and formality of academic writing; but it also serves to illustrate how this kind of writing doesn’t have to be divorced from the CNF features they’ve previously utilized (and thus the writing, CNF proponents like Bishop and Bradway and Hesse argue, they do on their own) (“Suddenly Sexy” 273; Creating Nonfiction 7).

Students can be reminded of the Critique’s similarities with the CNF features to help reemphasize connections with earlier assignments in a way that highlights the idea of writing as a continuum and the concept of writing as strategy. Personal reflection (the more CNF-y stuff) shows how opinions and feelings aid in evaluation, and can provide evidence to back up one’s position. This becomes apparent when students work in anecdotes and examples from their own lives to help them explain how the article’s argument about their community matches their experience (or doesn’t). Once again reflection helps students show their work, but instead of dissecting how an author comes to conclusions they can explore how they come to conclusions, and how this ultimately influences how they interpret and assess a source. In the front half of this assignment, reflection looked more professional, helping students research and dissect an argument objectively. In the back half, however, reflection gets personal again. Veracity allows introspection about biases to make the research more honest (owing to the inclusion of the anecdotes). This leads into emotion helping to make the ultimate argument about the article’s validity, but in a way that lets them be persuasive and honest about their subjectivity.

Moving from thinking to composing, it’s important to note that the Critique will be similar in structure to the previous essay, but that’s kind of the point. Interpreting a source is a big component of college writing (showing that you read it and learned something from it) (NCTE “Writing and reading are related”; WPA “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Composing”).
This similarity is maybe the best opportunity to show students how op-ed forms of creative nonfiction writing bear resemblance to academic writing; how the things they do on their own (consuming and commenting on pop culture) have significant skills in common with the kind of writing they’ll have to do in college (summarize/analyze a source, then offer their take on it). They just need to pay attention to their presentation. That’s why the organization flips to put the analysis before the commentary, and the framing language is more direct to better take readers through the analysis and argument. This is the time for teachers to show students how CNF skills – and writing skills in general – can transfer, they just need to be aware of the audience so they can tweak their presentation. If the Review was the keystone, the Critique’s the big transition between more popular writing and more academic writing, although there will be noticeable similarities in the rhetorical strategy. This assignment begins with the differences between personal and academic writing to help shift students into that mode; but in the end it really calls attention to the subtle similarities between the personal and professional.

In a way, the Critique models the crux of introductory academic writing: you find information that’s relevant to your topic, think critically/reflect on it to contextualize it in your own words, then present everything (the analysis and reflection/contextualization) in a clear and logical way. Additionally, this assignment shows students how to flip the order of the Review (which does similar things) so they can utilize these skills in a more direct and organized way. The point of all this is to solidify the idea of writing as strategy. As transfer theorists argue, freshman writing doesn’t have a content, so strategy needs to be the content (since this is what students want, and what teachers want students to take away) (McCarthy 262; Bergmann and Zepernick 141-42; Perkins and Salomon 30). As discussed in Chapter Three, what students most desire from FYC is for it to be useful in future classes. While transfer theory scholarship and the
recommendations of the position statements suggest there is no such thing as a catch-all template (Bergmann and Zepernick 131-32; NCTE “Writing is a process”), one skill that can help students in the future, at least in their other college classes, is analyzing and interpreting sources – thinking critically about their meaning and method, and contrasting them with one’s own ideas, opinions, and experiences (NCTE “Writing and reading are related”; WPA “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Composing”). The Critique models this approach even more explicitly than the previous essay, by putting the critical analysis first, and highlighting the FYC signposts (via the skills that go along with them) instead of letting students sort of stumble into them naturally. This order gives them that traditional academic writing experience in a déjà vu kind of way that invites comparisons with previous work. If the Review was about how things transfer, the Critique solidifies the idea of writing as a strategy. True, its model will not fit every exigency students encounter post FYC; but it gives them some foundational tools and a fundamental plan to approach the unknown. It teaches them to fish, so to speak.

The Literary Journalism Essay

The final major writing assignment combines skills from all three previous essays to create a well-rounded research essay that’s grounded in the personal. Furthermore, it repositions these skills as rhetorical tactics to tackle complex writing tasks, enacting the recommendations (and thus the principles) of transfer theory and solidifying the idea of writing as strategy (McCarthy 257-58; Foertsch 372; Jarratt et al. 65). Rooted in the creative nonfiction subgenre of literary journalism, the non-creatively titled Literary Journalism Essay is equal parts “exploring an issue” and “making an argument” paper. In it, students will rely on primary and secondary sources, using personal experience and opinion (via anecdotes and asides) as well as researched materials (like the article used for the Critique) as evidence to take a stand on an issue facing the
community in question. But more importantly, they’ll use all the available tools to do so in a way that both merges the features and objectives and calls attention to the parallels between them—specifically the relationship between reflection and critical inquiry, emotion and argument, veracity and research, narrative and organization, and voice/style and audience awareness.

For their Literary Journalism Essay, students will choose an issue facing their community (ideally something they see as a problem or threat to it), and offer an opinion on that issue in the form of a long (or at least longer, i.e. six to eight pages; this is FYC after all) essay combining their personal experience and expertise with their group with research on the issue to create a compelling argument that resembles the titular form of CNF reportage. As discussed in Chapter One, literary journalism is a subgenre of CNF that uses story as a way into an in-depth exploration of a topic or subject (Bradway and Hesse 3-4). Authors of these pieces, which are often found in newspapers and magazines as a supplement to objective “just the facts” reporting, use anecdote to lay out their argument—introducing it, structuring it, and supporting it; they then strengthen their argument with research, combining (comparing/contrasting) their opinions with the opinions of others. The immediate goal of this type of writing is to inform readers, but a deeper goal is to influence them. Literary journalism is about more than just sharing information; it’s about sharing an experience, and ultimately, sharing a deeply held opinion—getting someone to agree with you through implicit and explicit tactics (Bradway and Hesse 30).

With the Literary Journalism Essay, my CNF-infused FYC course will come full circle. Just as they began the essay sequence, students will again tell a story that conveys a moral. Now, however, they will develop that moral into a larger argument, and supplement this argument with outside sources that help explore, explain, and ultimately validate it. In essence, the Literary Journalism Essay is a nontraditional take on the traditional issue paper (emphasis on
the non-part). Students will use narrative as a way to introduce their issue and draw their audience in, then argument to take a stand on the issue, then research from outside sources to support their position. Keeping with the spirit of CNF, though, they’ll fall back on narrative to help supplement this support, interjecting anecdotal asides to confirm or contest claims throughout the body paragraphs. And they’ll end with a social commentary section – not unlike what they did with the Pop Cultural Review and Article Critique – that concludes the narrative and researched information with a more personal plea for understanding.

While some could argue that the Critique may seem the more appropriate place to end the course, as it puts the FYC objectives at the forefront and follows a format more in line with traditional introductory academic writing, I feel the Literary Journalism Essay is a better capper for two reasons. First, it adds a more expansive research component that is missing from the earlier essays. As we’ve seen, an important part of academic writing is the ability to bring in outside sources to see what else is out there, and use these materials to challenge, refine, and ultimately strengthen one’s own understanding of a subject/issue (NCTE “Writing and reading are related”; WPA “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Composing”). The Literary Journalism Essay meets this need by pushing students to learn more about their issue and explore additional perspectives on their community. But after turning outward, it pushes them to turn right back in to weigh these ideas against their own, facilitating a research requirement that works in tandem with the “coming to one’s own conclusions” ideal of CNF writing. Second, more than any other essay (or at least the three in this sequence), the Literary Journalism Essay blurs the lines between CNF features and FYC objectives – which not only shows connections in a way that emphasizes the idea of writing as a continuum, but also shows how skills can carry over in a way that emphasizes the idea of writing as a strategy. With the proper guidance, the Literary
Journalism Essay can be an opportunity to both show students how the subgenres they’ve explored can all work together, but also preview how individual skills can be put to work on specific rhetorical tasks they’re likely to meet moving forward. That’s because the line-blurring can be explicit, directly showing students how past meets present in an effort to anticipate the future.

**Creative Nonfiction Features/First-Year Composition Objectives at Play**

This assignment utilizes all the features of CNF (reflection, emotion, veracity, narrative structure, and voice/style) and all the objectives of FYC (critical thinking, argument, research, organization, and audience awareness). This time, though, it’s less about one teaching or meeting the needs of the other, and more about them being two points on the same spectrum, tactics working together in a way that helps cement the idea of transfer and writing as strategy. Reflection remains the guiding factor, as students will use the story of their experience to find their issue (i.e. comb through their experience with their community to settle on some kind of issue within it that they feel strongly about and want to take a position on), and more importantly, to support it (i.e. illustrate, explain, and validate said position). Critical thinking comes into play, though, because they need to figure out exactly which stories – and eventually which sources – to use, analyzing these arguments before deciding whether to use them to back up their own emerging argument. Emotion is at the forefront, because students will use story to support their point, and help convince their audience to feel things their way and thus see things their way. Yet argument isn’t far behind, for as students discover their point they begin to structure their essay to convey this point using all the tools at their disposal (so it’s the mapping that leads to organization, and also audience awareness; more on this in a second). Research enters the fray as students bring in and work in outside sources to confirm and/or challenge their
points. But just as quickly veracity takes over, since students need to check their bias, and weigh their sources against it (i.e. examine how their preconceptions affect how they interpret sources). Narrative structure takes center stage at the beginning as a lead-in to the project, but also throughout as stories reemerge as evidence, and then at the end to tie things together and drive home “the point.” This will call attention to the overall organization, which though it has CNF elements, also has FYC bones. Finally, voice and style will be tweaked as students further anticipate audience, knowing when to go anecdotal and sentimental, and when to go pragmatic and logical.

**How it Works: A Hypothetical**

Like with the other major essays, the Literary Journalism Essay revolves around a community a student identifies with. Unlike the other essays, however, this one also needs to focus specifically on an issue that impacts said community in some way. This duality gives students a more focused topic to research, and pushes them to take a stand or make a statement (thus helping them meet the requirements of the assignment). There are many directions students could go with their Literary Journalism Essays, though the most likely tactic is to investigate problems facing their community. An example of this approach could be a diehard college football fan looking at the dark side of college football fandom. The essay could begin innocently enough, remembering the Saturdays spent watching games with her grandpa, when she first fell for the sport, and leading up to her own tales of raucous pre-game tailgates and riotous post-game celebrations. But her research highlights the negatives that go along with (or perhaps come about as a result of) all the positives she so enjoys. After detailing only the most recent cases of academic dishonesty and recruiting violations, sexual assault and domestic violence – as well as the university-directed cover-ups of these crimes – her essay becomes an
argument, reminding fans that they need to be careful what they worship, because all the money such adulation brings in excuses a lot of inexcusable behavior.

Another example of a student taking the “problem facing” route could be a political science major arguing against argumentative politics. Dismayed by the divisiveness plaguing contemporary civic discourse, the student opens with an anecdote contrasting her middle school model senate, where children act like senators, with recent debates in the actual Senate, where – as she sees it – senators act like children. To investigate the root of this rancor, she examines the advent and impact of cable news networks, ultimately illustrating how their ratings-conscious model seems to have led to widespread polarization. As she puts it, us vs. them politics sells (i.e. conflict is interesting, compromise is not); it also sows the seeds of discord, suggesting to people that they have to choose sides, and then that they can only trust one side – their own. She sees hope in her generation, though, which doesn’t really watch cable news due to their distaste for traditional media. And while she admits that online sources can be just as partisan, in the end she makes a case for compromise – however boring it may be.

This problem-based approach isn’t the only option, as students could just as easily examine issues having a positive effect on their community. A student with a big appetite and an even bigger heart could settle on food enthusiasts (or foodies, as the kids call ‘em) as his community, and use his research to explore how food can bring people from different backgrounds together. He can begin by recalling the impact immigration has had on his taste buds, opening with the story of how trying Indian food transformed a picky eater into a more adventurous one. This awakening invited him to try a variety of ethnic foods (Thai, Hungarian, Ethiopian), which eventually turned his interests to the connection between food and place. This link spurs the rest of his research, leading him to look at why areas with the most culinary
choices tend to have the most cultural diversity, and thus more liberal opinions on immigration policy. As such, he uses the rest of his Literary Journalism Essay to investigate the potential of food to preserve old cultures and form new ones, letting immigrants keep in touch with the old ways while sharing those old ways with their new neighbors. In this way food can be a good ambassador for culture, and, as his essay argues, a panacea for a lot of our world’s current sociopolitical ailments, helping immigrants to maintain an identity and assimilate into a community by utilizing taste buds to facilitate cultural exchange.

For a more complete example of how the Literary Journalism Essay could take shape, imagine a student obsessed with musicals who recently read that his high school is cutting their theater program due to budget constraints. This student is an education major/theater minor, with hopes of being a theater director at a high school himself someday. His past experience as a veteran of many student productions led him to take up this path, and his current experience in the education field has only strengthened his belief in the positive takeaways of the dramatic arts. With Essay Four, he can further research the benefits of arts education – specifically theater programs, and also the movement to cut them. Ultimately though, he can combine these things with the story of his own experience to make a powerful argument for arts education funding – one that satisfies his personal needs (by letting him tell a story he wants to tell) and his professional ones (by practicing academic writing skills such as research, persuasion, and complex organization).

A story of his sophomore play could frame the essay, telling the tale of his high school’s well-intentioned – if not necessarily well-received – production of *My Fair Lady* (high school students plus cockney accents are never a good idea). This’ll draw the audience in, but also introduce the things he took away from his inaugural theater experience – the confidence it
inspired, the sense of community it engendered, and the creativity it invited. A literal comedy of errors then gives way to an argument about the benefits of theater programs by providing primary evidence of skills he learned, and then transitioning into secondary evidence corroborating his belief in theater’s ability to teach.

In essence, the Literary Journalism Essay allows the student to move from a purely emotional point to a logical argument. He begins this transition by outlining how an obvious benefit of being on the business end of an auditorium is the heightened sense of confidence it instills. After completing his run as Col. Pickering, he noticed immediate improvement in his communication skills (making that public speaking class a breeze); and after reading a newspaper article on this particular benefit (John Martin’s “Drama Improves Pupil’s Self-Esteem”), he also realized the experience prepared him to take more chances and pursue leadership roles. He next outlines how another obvious benefit is a sense of community, of people working together at disparate parts (costumes, lighting, music, acting) to put together a unified whole (the play); and blog posts like Justin Cash’s “Collaborative and Cooperative Learning in Drama Education” help him highlight how participating in theater facilitates teamwork-building, as collaborating with others on projects is a skill that will come in handy in many professional environs. Saving the best for last, he uses his third act to showcase the most important benefit: creativity. As the student writes, he recognized the play as a creative outlet, letting him interpret a character, get under his skin, think about what emotion he would feel, and then how best to convey that to an audience. But scholarly articles like Paul Sowden’s “Improvisation Facilitates Divergent Thinking and Creativity” and Rekha Rajan’s “Beyond Broadway: Connecting Musical Theater and Academic Learning” helped him better understand just how important these skills are to critical thinking, and how they help one think both outside
of the box (which happens when planning the production), and think on their feet (which happens when you need to improvise to solve problems during the production).

Additionally, this research helps him draw a connection to his current teaching interests, and his emerging pedagogy. Theater, he believes, can be a teaching method itself, which leads him to a discussion of process drama, an approach that uses modelling (i.e. play-acting) in day-to-day lessons. More sources from journals in his field, such as Chamkaur Gill’s “Process Drama: Bridging the Arts and the Sciences” and Susan Reams and Carol Bashford’s “Interdisciplinary Role Play” illustrate the affordances of using theatrical tenets in traditional subjects – the act of doing helps students remember things better, and the resulting “practice” lets students run through real world scenarios and plan for contingencies. Yet even as the student is completing the logical phase of his argument, he can still use additional personal anecdotes (maybe in the form of asides) to further punctuate his points. Such a strategy uses emotional appeals to persuade, but also ethos, since he’s highlighting his membership in this community, and he’s bringing in credible sources.

He then researches more fully the movement away from arts education in many schools to show why – bad pun alert – the curtain’s falling on these programs, finding articles like Alexandra Ossola’s “Is the U.S. Focusing Too Much on STEM” which point out that despite an increased interest in musical theater amongst millennials an increased focus on standardized testing and STEM fields has forced schools to trim the extracurricular fat in order to divert resources to math and science academics. This demonstrates fairness on his part, since he’s looking at the issue through multiple perspectives, including ones he doesn’t agree with – such as G.W. Thielman’s “The Liberal Arts are Dead; Long Live STEM.” However, he still has his overall belief in the value of these programs, and thus his argument. As such, he closes with a
sort of dramatic scenario about all the experiences future students won’t have, and thus all the things they won’t be able to learn (so after using logic and ethos to shore up his argument, he returns to emotion to drive home his point). In this way, he’s come full circle, as in this essay he’s used all the different writing styles from the semester (narrative, argument, analysis), and employed metacognition about rhetorical tactics so he can figure out when to use which one, thus using – and, one would hope, ultimately viewing – writing as a strategy.

Why it Works: A Rationale

The Literary Journalism Essay allows students to bring in their personal influences and interests to do comprehensive research with coherent presentation (and particularly a presentation of their own design). But the way the assignment merges students’ personal and professional writing needs isn’t the only reason it’s such a good way to wrap up the overall essay sequence and this course. As the final hypothetical example shows, the Literary Journalism Essay solidifies the idea of writing as a continuum, since so much of what’s happening here has visible parallels with what’s been done in the rest of the class. More importantly, though, it illustrates transfer, and thus the idea of writing as strategy, since the features and objectives work together to create a complex piece of writing, one that demonstrates critical thinking and composing skills that students will need for the rest of their college writing careers.

In the Literary Journalism Essay, reflection and critical inquiry work together to get thought going and to get thoughts organized. Reflection, as we’ve seen, is the engine that drives all CNF. In this genre, the actual writing is almost always preceded by a deep consideration of why we feel the way we feel about something, creating the metacognitive moment that sparks the eventual text (Bishop 269; Root and Steinberg xxiv). With this assignment, instructors can remind students that this reflection is basically the skill that drives critical thought and critical
composition: we find connections in a way that has meaning, which is what gives thought direction (Bruner 6); we then recreate this direction for an audience, which is how we can show meaning (Journet 14). As such, students will begin as they did in the Personal Narrative – with personal reflection, mining their experiences to find an issue that impacts their community and, consequently, them. This engages their critical thinking, though, because they need to figure out which stories to use, analyzing these stories’ individual morals before deciding whether to use them to back up (explain/illustrate) their overall argument. Through reflection, they will find their stories; through critical thinking, they will find their theme. For a more involved assignment like this one, reflection and critical thinking work together at several stages, but at the outset they help to generate thought and then to organize it, letting students narrow their muddled mess of cognition into the beginnings of a composition. This sets the stage for the features/objectives teamwork that gets this essay done by moving from thinking about thinking to thinking about writing.

Next, emotion and argument work together to refine the thought generation and organization, and ultimately help students situate their work. In true CNF fashion, students begin the essay by getting personal, using the story of their experience to introduce and illustrate their position. As we’ve seen, this involves establishing an emotional connection, transferring the “how it felt to me” from author to audience. Despite the personal nature of their narrative, however, as soon as students take a stand on a position, they’re making an argument, which means they’re making a conscious effort to structure their overall essay to convey this point. With literary journalism, doing so involves using all the tools at their disposal, so instead of just getting readers to feel things their way, they also need them to see things their way. This is the transition from appealing to the heart to appealing to the head, articulating their thinking in a
way that’s more than purely emotional. This articulation involves the deliberate selection of what thoughts and opinions to bring in, and how to order them. Instructors can show students how like with a complex math problem, it’s not enough to just write the answer; they have to show their work. As in the Pop Cultural Review and Article Critique, here students are consciously organizing their argument; they’re creating a path audiences can follow in order to see their thought process, and ideally follow it to the same conclusion.

After creating their path, though, students must – per the requirements of the assignment – bring in outside sources to validate and/or challenge their ideas and opinions. This involves the more professional kind of critical thinking, as students determine whether the sources are relevant, analyzing others’ arguments before deciding to use them to complement or contest their own. But it also involves the more personal kind of reflection, as they examine how their emotional connection to their community influences how they read sources. Students have to compare/contrast sources’ ideas and opinions with their own, pushing them to consider how their past influences how they view alternative perspectives. This helps them be upfront and honest about their biases, while also seeing where their point of view fits in respective to what else is out there (Bradway and Hesse 28). Research and veracity work in tandem, then. Students expand their knowledge, as they learn more about their community and issue; but they also expand their worldview, as they begin to understand the larger conversation on these topics, and then situate their work in this conversation (Bartholomae would be so proud). This helps them grow their authority and their credibility, which can both be seen as strategies to help them strengthen their argument.

For these reasons, I believe the relationships between emotion/argument and research/veracity occasion the biggest metacognitive opportunity of this assignment. With the
proper guidance, students can see how the way they mix stories, opinions, and sources is akin to employing a series of rhetorical strategies. As they step back, writing instructors can step in, bringing up the idea of part/function dissection, and how audience and exigency are what dictate the strategy they employ. Yes, the Literary Journalism Essay is technically one assignment for one audience; but the imagined audience requires different types of writing at different times, so getting students to do a little reflection here can really train their focus on what part served what function. By looking back and thinking about when they were going for the heart and when they were going for the head, when they were providing information and when they were acknowledging their bias, they can examine what they were trying to accomplish and how they accomplished it. Seeing how the opening anecdote introduced their point in a personal way, or how setting up the progression of their supporting ideas (whether from themselves or a source) made their case in a pragmatic way, or how bringing in authoritative and at times opposing viewpoints made them seem well-informed and fair-minded – this helps put their writing into context. When we force students to look at the bigger picture, they can begin to see differences. And when they begin to see differences, they’ll start to notice the “when to do what” stuff, and also how they can use all these things together.

This awareness bleeds into the final “working together” pairs, narrative structure/organization and voice and style/audience awareness, which involve a more self-aware shift to the presentation as students tweak the structure and tone of their writing to best reach audiences on multiple levels. As such, these pairs give teachers two more opportunities to use dissection to emphasize writing as strategy, really reinforcing the rhetorical approach recommended by transfer theorists like Bergmann and Zepernick (“Disciplinarity and Transfer” 141-42) and Perkins and Salomon (“Teaching for Transfer” 30). The first opportunity involves
examining narrative structure. Story is most prominent at the beginning of the essay, where it introduces and illustrates the central argument; but personal narrative pops up throughout, as smaller stories reemerge as supporting evidence, and a final testimony brings emotional closure to the assignment. Calling attention to the narrative threads in the overall organization can emphasize how the CNF elements parallel FYC structure (so the opening story is kind of like an introduction that leads to a thesis, the sections with evidence supporting the argument are similar to traditional body paragraphs, and the closing narrative is kind of like a conclusion). But more importantly, it also shows students how depending on the task, the structure will differ (so to establish an emotional connection, go with narrative; to provide supporting evidence to bolster an argument, aim for a progression of ideas rather than a progression of events). Like with the metacognitive moment from the previous paragraph, this step back furthers awareness about audience and exigency, and how different tasks require different organizational structures.

The final opportunity involves narrowing the lens even further, zooming in on the language itself to show students how voice and style can be tweaked as they further anticipate their audience. In a way, this step is an extension of the first metacognitive moment involving the relationship between emotion and argument. Students have already seen how this essay can require different strategies to either “show how it feels” or “show their work;” here, though, they’re taking that step back to think not just about the task and the structure, but about the language. By asking students to recall the different kinds of writing they’ve attempted (throughout this class, and throughout this essay), teachers can push them to think about when they were trying to draw an emotional response from an audience, and when they were trying to sway an audience based on a logical (rather than lyrical) presentation of ideas and opinions. The emotional appeals won’t just look different (meaning organizationally), they’ll sound different.
They’ll be anecdotal, more informal, and at times maybe even conversational, relying on word choice and the rhythm of the language to stir emotions and recreate the author’s passion in an audience. Same thing for the logical appeals. Here students won’t want their audience to stumble into an epiphany, but rather follow a path to a conclusion they could already see coming. The language, then, will be more objective in tone, and the words will have a clarity and directness of purpose that makes it easy to move from points A to B. Again, students will have made these observations already, but that was more on the macro level. This time they’re refining the smallest building blocks of the essay to really polish their writing, and reach a particular audience and particular exigency in the most effective way possible.

The move from macro to micro is a good way to sum up the Literary Journalism Essay, which in essence is about looking at the big picture to notice similarities and differences, and then zooming in on the details to learn when to be similar and when to be different. This is the real transfer moment here, where the theory becomes a reality. Writing instructors can show students how yes, it’s all related, which can definitely be seen by how all these features and objectives come together to make a unified essay. But different parts call for different strategies, and writing can be a plan of attack, a way for students to search their accumulative arsenals and deploy the appropriate rhetorical weapons. The metacognitive moments in Essay Four help students discern when to go anecdotal and sentimental, when to go logical and pragmatic, and when to do some combination of both. True, they’ve done these things with the other essays, but this time they’re really doing all in the same essay. And they’re not just using all the rhetorical strategies, they’re paying attention to where and how they use them. This approach lets them assess and address the needs of a particular rhetorical situation, which – keeping with the aims of expressivism, the progressive pedagogies, CNF, and transfer theory – is the primary goal of this
assignment, and this course. Through a combination of CNF and FYC, students can learn what to look for, and how to react. They’re not just learning about writing as strategy, then, they’re experiencing it.

**Conclusion**

The goal of Chapter Four, as well as of this entire dissertation, is a course design incorporating creative nonfiction in first-year composition curriculum. The previous discussion shows what – given a chance to teach such a course – my assignments would look like, what I believe they could do, and why I believe they could do it. By asking students to choose a community they identify with and then mine their past for a story that both symbolizes the group and their membership in it, the Personal Narrative utilizes reflection to foster critical thinking and critical composing alike, getting students to explore why they tell the stories they tell, and to look at the form and function of narratives in general. The Pop Cultural Review then transfers this introspection to someone else’s story, using a review of a film, television show, novel, or song that depicts or in some way comments on said community to show students that everything can be an argument, and the way they analyze said arguments can be applied to their own work as well. The Critique simply follows the thread of rhetorical analysis further, offering students a more formal opportunity to examine what writing does and why/how it does it. By shifting to a more traditional focus (an article) and flipping the organization (putting the analysis in front of the opinion), it shows students what features and skills from more personal writing (narrative and opinion) transfer into more academic writing (analysis and argument), prompting them to pay even closer attention to the aim of the assignment and the needs of their audience. Finally, the Literary Journalism Essay incorporates aspects and in turn skills from all three previous essays, using a marriage of narrative, argument, and analysis to model a continuum of rhetorical contexts
in a way that ultimately lets students practice writing as a strategy of rhetorical analysis and accommodation.

Altogether this sequence of assignments harnesses the turn inward to turn outward, letting students use reflection to refine their thinking and their writing, creating a self-centered (and self-contained) model of writing instruction that teaches a strategy to use on future writing. In essence, I feel CNF is a way to do what the position statements say we should be doing in a way that heeds the recommendations of all the theories I’ve looked at (expressivism, the progressive pedagogies, and transfer theory) while satisfying the needs of all parties involved in FYC (students, teachers, and even administrators).

Moving forward, Chapter Five reconsiders this potential, revisiting my initial research questions to explore how my survey of CNF and FYC scholarship establishes parallels between the characteristics of CNF writing and the goals of FYC pedagogy, and how my course design enacts transfer theory to make these parallels visible to students. Doing so, I believe, affirms a rhetorical approach to writing as strategy, which as we’ve seen aligns with current trends in the Composition and Rhetoric field, and as such helps my project find surer disciplinary footing. However, it’s important to also recognize the drawbacks and limitations of my study so that any future incarnations of this course design can be improved upon. Chapter Five, then, discusses how my course design is highly theoretical (it’s a design that hasn’t been tested), and how my model is an approach, but certainly not the approach (there are several other models doing similar things). Thankfully, the limitations of the work I’ve done illustrate the work I still need to do. Chapter Five also previews these future research avenues, exploring a longitudinal study to test the results of my course design, and outlining a comparison/contrast survey of other FYC programs to see how my model stacks up with contemporary progressive approaches.
CHAPTER FIVE: ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

Introduction

Keeping with my creative nonfiction theme, I’d like to close with an anecdote, specifically the story of a recent student who couldn’t divorce herself from narrative in her own writing. No matter the task, she would start with a story and unspool from there, making good attempts to do the necessary work, but often having trouble organizing her thoughts and staying on topic. This proved problematic, because the assignments in the FYC model I was following tended more traditionalist than expressivist, which meant exposition and analysis in the service of argument. The student in question was a strong writer with good ideas, but she would follow narrative digressions to the point of distraction, and often ended up with oddly structured papers that scored well below the grades I assumed she’d get considering her writing potential. This experience was frustrating for her, because she enjoyed writing and wanted to pursue it beyond FYC, but was growing increasingly discouraged by her low marks. It was frustrating for me too, because she was one of my most dedicated students, but I couldn’t get her to see any connection between the kind of writing she wanted to do – narrative – and the kind of writing the class required.

This frustration persisted for two semesters, from the beginning of our institution’s first FYC course to the end of the second one. I spent the bulk of this time trying to get her to change her narration into exposition, but in the end she solved her problem by using one to do the other. Most of the essays we wrote were smaller papers (4 pagers) with single argumentative tasks (make your own argument, analyze someone else’s, etc.). But our final assignment was lengthier (8-10 pages) and had multiple tasks – a research essay that had students identify a problem, explore its causes, and then propose solutions to solve it, incorporating outside sources as
support. Instead of forcing her to separate narrative, this time I let her use it. We talked about how it could be a nice way in and a nice way out, opening with story to establish a personal connection and outline the issue, and then closing with story to wrap up by reemphasizing these things. While I was happy to see her reenergized and optimistic about writing again, I’ll admit I was worried about the final product, considering the complexity of the assignment and her previous problems with organization.

I shouldn’t have been. Instead of using narrative to merely bookend her writing, she used it as an organizing thread to tie together her overall argument about the need to combat media (both social and traditional) that advocates body image at the cost of one’s health, and as framing language to introduce the different sections – and functions – of her essay. The student began with an incredibly personal story about her own struggles with eating disorders to profile the pro-anorexia community online. Next she summarized these “pro-ana” sites and analyzed how they work (specifically how they use aspirational rhetoric to argue for eating disorders), but wove these threads around a larger personal narrative about how she fell into their trap. This led into the “speculating about causes” portions of the assignment, where she contrasted her own beliefs about body standards with the cultural influences that perpetuate negative body stereotypes. Finally, she posed her solutions (mandating disclaimers for altered/Photoshopped images, and tobacco-style warnings for websites that provide dangerous and unhealthy advice) and used stories to back them up, specifically hypotheticals about how if these things had been in place she might’ve been deterred. The result was a deeply moving essay that sounded nothing like the typical end-of-semester research paper, but also an incredibly effective essay that did everything the research paper needed to do. In the end she found her compromise between her personal and
professional voice by using the former in a way that satisfied the needs of the latter, and in doing so finally got the difference between the two.

In simplest terms, this student “got it” when she thought about what the writing needs to do. This realization resulted in her strategy of “using one to do the other” – using narrative as a structure to separate the individual tasks (the problem, its causes, and her solutions), while uniting them in service of a larger goal (her argument). It was great watching her “get it,” seeing the metacognitive moment as she realized that story and the more formal part are separate because they need to do separate things, but they can work together because they’re in service of the same goal. This student made these epiphanies on her own and used them to compose a fine argumentative essay. Returning to the larger argument of this dissertation, however, transfer theory scholarship has shown that most students won’t come to such realizations and develop effective writing strategies on their own. As explained in Chapter Three, students have the ability to do so, but just don’t make the connection (Bergmann and Zepernick 139).

More of these metacognitive moments are needed, and I hope that my dissertation has illustrated how a CNF model of FYC could better facilitate them, all while letting students merge personally and professionally relevant writing. The remainder of Chapter Five will provide a summary/synthesis of my findings, recapping how my course design utilizes reflection to simultaneously show students how different kinds writing are related while reminding them that different rhetorical situations call for different rhetorical approaches. The first section, Research Questions Reconsidered, restates my three research questions and discusses how I was able to answer them. The second section, Contributions and Limitations, recaps the contributions of my project and then discusses its limitations in an effort to pinpoint areas to improve upon. The third section, Potential for Future Research, discusses where I see this dissertation going next as I
attempt to address the concerns of the previous section, including an introduction to two
potential projects. Finally, the Conclusion brings this research to a close by offering a
summative note on the benefits of bringing CNF into a more sustained conversation with
contemporary understandings of best practices in college writing instruction.

**Research Questions Reconsidered**

My first research question, “What does existing scholarship suggest about a relationship
between CNF features and academic writing objectives?”, was considered in Chapter Two,
“Creative Nonfiction Writing Features and Academic Writing Objectives.” In this chapter I
discussed how CNF scholarship highlights the genre’s reflective capabilities as a way to teach a
rhetorical approach to writing, getting students to turn inward to examine their thinking and then
turn outward to examine the way they communicate said thinking – i.e. their writing. This
metacognitive lens matches what most current Composition/Rhetoric scholarship advocates for
first year writing instruction, because it gives students a strategy that helps them assess and
address rhetorical context, which ultimately opens the door for writing skills to transfer. After
examining CNF scholars like Hesse and Bradway, Bishop, and Root and Steinberg, and
referencing the FYC position statements of major professional organizations in the
Composition/Rhetoric field such as the NCTE, WPA, and WACC, I found that several CNF
features align with FYC objectives – specifically reflection and critical inquiry, emotion and
argument, veracity and research, narration and organization, and voice/style and audience
awareness. Highlighting these parallels, I believe, makes it easier to establish a continuum-style
relationship between CNF and FYC writing, which will help students make visible connections
between genres and recognize skills that can carryover.
My second research question, “How does transfer theory make this relationship (between CNF features and FYC objectives) more apparent – and thus more valuable – to students?”, was the focus of Chapter Three, “Connecting the Dots: Transfer Theory’s Importance to Writing Instruction.” This chapter first established that students are content-driven, and as such what they value most from introductory writing instruction are audience assessment and anticipation skills that will help them succeed in content-specific classes (McCarthy 262, Bergmann and Zepernick 136). For these reasons, transfer theory scholars suggest stressing the relationship between different rhetorical situations to show not just the parallels between CNF features and FYC objectives, but how some aspects of writing can be altered to satisfy different audiences. Transfer theory outlines two ways writing instruction can do this. The first is giving students experience with multiple rhetorical situations, and then placing these rhetorical situations in close proximity so students can identify patterns. The second is simply being explicit about the similarities between the CNF features and FYC objectives, and – more importantly – the differences, to illustrate how some things (such as structure and tone) need to change depending on context (audience and exigence). Applying the lessons of transfer theory, then, teaches students to look for this rhetorical context, which helps them meet the needs of their audience (which will help them in their content-specific classes). This ultimately lets them build a writing toolkit, the first such “tool” being the reflective metacognition that enables them to assess audience. As they carry these audience anticipation skills with them, they’re also carrying the things they’ll do to tailor their writing to a specific rhetorical situation, such as previously acquired reflection/critical thinking, organization, and voice/style skills.

My third research question, “What pedagogical practices can foster transfer between CNF and FYC writing?”, was the subject and substance of Chapter Four, “Creative Nonfiction/First-
Year Composition Pedagogy: Implementation and Implications.” Extending from the previous three chapters, which in many ways serve as the rationale for the project, Chapter Four outlined a sequence of writing assignments that attempt to facilitate transfer by exposing students to different rhetorical contexts and then stressing similarities and differences between these contexts. As for the actual pedagogical practices, the sequence starts by putting multiple genres in close proximity to each other, utilizing CNF’s subgenres to model variations of narrative, opinion/editorial, analysis, and argument so students can better notice similarities and differences between the respective rhetorical situations. The order of the sequence highlights the use of reflection and its evolving purpose, letting students transition from examining their experiences, ideas, and opinions to examining the way they communicate the results of this examination in textual form. This shift allows moments for rhetorical dissection, where instructors can step in and make connections between similar tasks more visible to students (like how the analysis of someone else’s argument shows them a way they can present their own argument). More importantly, reflection also occasions moments for students to step back and notice where and why certain aspects of their writing need to be adjusted as audience and exigency change (like the move from narrative to analysis and argument in the second essay, the Pop Cultural Review, and the combination of these things in the final paper, the Literary Journalism Essay). Paying attention to the parts and function of their writing lets students begin to develop their writing strategies, as each next step involves comparisons and contrasts, continuities and adaptations. Additionally, the personal nature of CNF provides further opportunity to expand their continuum-view beyond the scope of the class, by reaching backward to link these essays to related extracurricular writing (and reading) from their past, and forward to project connections with future writing. As such, they end up experiencing writing as a continuum, using their
newfound strategy to move along the spectrum (by drawing from past writing experience and anticipating future writing experiences).

**Contributions and Limitations**

Revisiting the research questions helps me to highlight the chief contributions of this dissertation – the way the project establishes connections between CNF features and FYC objectives, and then harnesses these connections to create a course model that teaches students how to view and then utilize composition as a series of strategies to meet the needs of different rhetorical contexts. The first half of this equation, the establishment of connections, was accomplished primarily by illustrating how the CNF features can help satisfy the FYC objectives. As Chapter Two shows, the position statements of the professional organizations prioritize critical inquiry and audience awareness, which the reflection that underlies CNF helps facilitate (via metacognitive moments for thinking about thinking, and then thinking about presentation). This reflection pushes students to pay attention to how emotion can be used to persuade, and how considering bias can lead to more honest and active reportage (correlating with the FYC objectives argument and research). But more importantly, from a writing instructor’s perspective, it leads to a heightened awareness of organization and language (which can ultimately help students meet audience and exigency).

Establishing these parallels helps validate CNF as method by proving the genre can meet the needs of an introductory writing course (per the guidelines of the professional organizations). Ideally, this can help instructors justify using this genre in FYC; but highlighting the parallels between CNF features and FYC objectives also previews the pedagogical benefits of getting students to make connections between different writing contexts, which nicely transitions into the second half of the equation, the actual course design. The essay sequence detailed in Chapter
Four gives writing teachers a blueprint for FYC that – using the aforementioned parallels as a basis for comparison – creates moments for students to notice similarities in purpose but differences in presentation. Utilizing rhetorical dissection and genre-stacking, my course design teaches students how to map the different parts and functions of their writing, and then trace this dissection as they move from one subgenre of CNF to another. Doing so shows them what can stay the same and what must change (or from a pedagogical standpoint, which structural and stylistic skills can carry over, and which can’t), giving instructors the opportunity to teach writing as a strategy of rhetorical assessment.

In addition to providing an easy-to-follow and easy-to-implement model, I believe the essay sequence outlined in Chapter Four both aligns with the pedagogical gist of the major theoretical influences in which this project is based (expressivism, the progressive pedagogies, CNF, and transfer theory), and meets the needs of the major stakeholders involved in FYC. Concerning the former, this design models a way to implement the metacognitive processes of collection, interpretation, and presentation in the writing classroom, all the while fulfilling the promise of the key theoretical approaches covered in this dissertation: expressivism (turning inward to think on/in your own terms), the progressive pedagogies (viewing writing as a continuum of rhetorical strategies), CNF (using reflection to understand things, and to examine how we present said understanding), and transfer theory (dissecting writing to examine its parts and functions, and then being explicit about similarities and differences across contexts). Concerning the latter, students do the kind of personal exploration that helps them expand their thinking, which is what teachers want; students learn how to assess an audience and tailor their writing to meet said audience’s needs, which is what students want; and teachers and students get to do this in a way that’s relatively easy and inexpensive to implement, which is what
administrators want. For these reasons, as well as those covered in the previous paragraphs, I believe my CNF model has real potential as a methodology and method of introductory writing instruction.

Despite these contributions, however, there are some drawbacks to this project that are worth addressing. For starters, my initial understanding of FYC as problematic – the exigence for this entire project – is in itself problematic. Said understanding is based on personal experience teaching at only two institutions, as well as secondhand research, specifically transfer theorists like McCarthy and Bergmann and Zepernick’s work on problems with the way students retain and apply the lessons of FYC in subsequent writing classes, and recommendations by professional organizations like the NCTE and WPA about how to improve retention and application by exposing students to multiple rhetorical contexts and teaching them to think rhetorically. What I didn’t do, though, was gauge (or at least attempt to gauge) the ways FYC is actually being taught today by looking at existing writing programs. Admittedly, this type of research was beyond the scope of my dissertation. To be sure, there is significant variation in FYC philosophy and pedagogy, and with over 4,700 institutions – colleges, universities, community colleges – in the United States alone, looking into each and every writing program wouldn’t have been possible at this stage of my project (“Fast Facts: Educational Institutions”). Additionally, even if I did such a survey, it wouldn’t take into account potential variation within institutions themselves (as different teachers can use different pedagogies in delivering the same curriculum). However, to get a better picture of where my pedagogy fits in, I acknowledge that I need a more complete picture of the range of approaches to teaching first-year writing.

I also acknowledge that while my “FYC by way of CNF” model has a lot of potential, this potential is at the moment entirely theoretical. This leads me to the most obvious limitation
of my project: my course design hasn’t been tested on an actual introductory writing class. The work of this dissertation – the rationale and course design – is a good start, as I hope the previous paragraphs attest, but it’s only a beginning. It is based on reputable recommendations about reflection and rhetorical analysis (Bishop, Bradway and Hesse, Root and Steinberg), and informed by the results of previously published studies about what students and teachers expect and accept from FYC (McCarthy, Bergmann and Zepernick, Jarratt). Additionally, I’ve established solid parallels between CNF features and FYC objectives, parallels on which I based the connections that fuel these assignments (as seeing these connections shows students how skills can transfer, which is ultimately what lets them develop their writing strategy). But without actually witnessing students go through the progression from narrative to opinion to analysis to argument, I can’t really know if the skills I expect to carry over will carry over. Without hard data I can’t be sure that my course model would improve skill transfer. This dissertation was meant to be a first step, but the fact that it is only a first step does limit its viability.

**Potential for Future Research**

Thankfully, as I mentioned earlier, the limitations of the work I’ve done highlight the work that still needs to be done, and as such provide possibilities to continue researching the impact of CNF on FYC pedagogy. Potential next steps, then, could involve completing a survey of first-year writing programs at other institutions to get a more accurate picture of how (and where) CNF fits in with existing models, and conducting a multi-semester teacher research study that implements a CNF-inspired FYC course design similar to my own, and then tracks students’ progress through it on to writing-intensive discipline-specific courses.
Surveying journals, books, and program websites could provide a snapshot of what other first-year writing programs are doing, and help determine if a “using CNF to teach writing as strategy” strategy is unique. Researchers pursuing this path could examine recently published journals and books that detail pedagogical models for FYC, searching mainstay Composition/Rhetoric scholarly publications such as *College Composition and Communications*, *College English*, and *Writing Program Administration* for articles about course designs. Additionally, they could review a sampling of universities’ official websites, specifically using their writing program homepage (which hopefully include descriptions of actual assignments, and maybe even essay prompts and samples). Setting up such a survey wouldn’t be easy, due to the aforementioned number of institutions and institutional variation that’s out there; but ultimately the results could help discern to what extent other FYC courses include CNF writing (including memoir, opinion/editorial, and literary journalism), and more specifically if these assignments involve highlighting reflection and metacognition to let students step back and examine their own writing.

In addition to seeing how/where a CNF-infused approach fits in, it’s also important to see whether it actually works, hence the teacher research study. As the progression from Personal Narrative to Pop Cultural Review to Article Critique to Literary Journalism Essay is meant to foster the kind of metacognitive reflection and rhetorical dissection that show students how skills can transfer, this design (or a similarly constructed one) creates an opportunity for teacher researchers to examine the extent these transitions deliver. By studying the movement from essay to essay, they can look for similarities and differences in the way students create and elaborate their content, organize their thinking, and alter their tone to present said thinking as they switch from narrative to analysis to argument to a combination of all three. And by
studying the performance from essay to essay, they can see if explicitly drawing attention to these similarities and differences in thinking, structure, and tone between different kinds of writing results in any improvement in overall writing skill.

Gauging students’ ability to transfer skills leads right back to the ultimate goal of this course design – getting students to think about writing strategically, assessing the situation so they can see which skills can carry over and which can’t (i.e. what needs to be adjusted depending on the rhetorical context). Unfortunately, it also leads to the problem with studying only an FYC class, i.e. does teaching students to think strategically actually get them to think strategically long-term, or will they abandon this tactic once they leave the confines of the introductory class and, like Lucille McCarthy’s Dave, end up approaching each new assignment like it has no connection to anything they’ve done before (“A Stranger in Strange Lands” 245)? To fully test whether this CNF method teaches students to fish, then, a semester-spanning study that tracks their progress through an additional content-specific writing-intensive course is needed.

Researchers could study students’ work as they advance into a writing-intensive class, something introductory in the humanities (like literature or history) or the social sciences (like sociology or psychology). Entry level classes in these disciplines would be good observation sites because the writing assigned therein frequently involves various combinations of exposition, analysis, and argument, making these texts a good place to look for parallels with students’ previous work. When it comes to examining the writing, researchers can observe how students figure out what these new writing assignments are asking for, seeing if they draw on their FYC skills to assess and address these needs. Documenting which students (if any) are making connections with past assignments by utilizing familiar composing skills would help
determine if any of them are employing a strategy. This textual analysis would involve looking for evidence of metacognition to create and then present content, focusing on the way students use reflection/critical thinking, organize their structure, and alter tone. The presence or absence of these variables could help determine if the contiguous contexts of a CNF course design advance a strategic approach, and in doing so make FYC instruction more transferable, and in effect more viable.

**Conclusion**

I think it’s fitting that this project was inspired by two different contexts (more specifically my two different teaching contexts) and my efforts to examine the relationship between them. As I wrote in Chapter One, I am indebted to the writing programs at my two previous institutions: the first, which included more personal writing, and focused on reflection to process information; and the second, which included more professional writing, and focused on organization to present information. It’s easy to trace their influence on my teaching philosophy and thus pedagogy, which advocate using metacognition to generate and organize thought, moving students from thinking about thinking to thinking about writing. Put simply, the goal of this dissertation was to enact this pedagogy, using a best of both worlds approach that merged the strengths of what I viewed as the more creative model with the strengths of what I viewed as the more traditional one. In trying to create my course design, however, I encountered a problem with the “both worlds” approach – specifically the idea that the worlds are separate to begin with. I thought I was looking for similarities between contexts, but what I was doing was focusing more on differences. In viewing one as “creative” and one as “traditional,” I was viewing them as separate from each other, and thus missing the kinds of connections that make the pedagogy I aspire to possible. Through my work on this dissertation, I came to realize the
problem with this kind of binary thinking, and the pedagogical benefit of viewing writing as a continuum. This continuum-view is how teachers and students alike can see connections, which is ultimately how we can see what features, skills, and tactics carry over from one context into another.

In essence, the exact thinking that let me see connections is what I want to pass on to students, because this is the engine that makes transfer work, and makes rhetorically strategic thinking possible. This chapter simply recaps how my dissertation has attempted to do this, first by answering the research questions I initially posed (chiefly by highlighting where the features of CNF writing and the objectives of FYC align, and discussing how we can get more engagement from students by letting them do reflection, but still teach them what they’ll need for future classes by turning that reflective lens on their writing); and then by showing the contributions this work makes to the Composition/Rhetoric field (establishing the aforementioned parallels, and creating the course design). Of course, it’s important to acknowledge that this work is far from finished, which this chapter accomplishes by admitting the limitations of my model (particularly that it hasn’t been properly considered against other current approaches, and it’s as yet untested), and then illustrating how they suggest avenues for future research (a survey of other contemporary FYC models to see where my CNF approach fits in, and a semester-spanning teacher research study to measure the extent my model improves the likelihood of skill transfer). But despite these limitations, I believe this project is an important beginning. By showing how highlighting the similarities between contexts can prepare students to deal with the eventual differences, it has demonstrated the best ways that CNF can add value to FYC instruction, embodying a philosophy and pedagogy I hope to continue as I move forward as a teacher and researcher.
WORKS CITED


