The Theme System: Current-Traditionalism, Writing Assignments, and the Development of First-Year Composition

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This dissertation titled
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ABSTRACT

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The Theme System: Current-Traditionalism, Writing Assignments, and the Development of First-Year Composition

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Rhetoric and composition histories have given considerable attention to first-year composition in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. However, they have primarily limited their attention to current-traditional rhetoric’s manifestations—especially its over-focus on superficial correctness. They have failed to give any significant attention to the writing assignments central to composition classes. To address this gap, this dissertation examines the history of composition instruction in the United States through the lens of writing assignment genres. I argue that such an examination can reshape our understanding of our field’s history and is significant for understanding the role and history of many writing assignments still in use today, which might influence current teaching and future developments in our discipline and our classrooms. Focusing on assignments, I utilize genre theory as a theoretical lens in analyzing and understanding their role and historical development. Examining and revising composition history through the lens of what I call a “theme system” and genre theory complicates the field’s conception of the period’s current-traditional focus and can inform our understanding of current pedagogical practices that have roots in the theme system.

In making my argument, I first trace the history and development of theme writing from its roots in classical rhetoric and sixteenth-century English education to its
forms when first-year composition was instituted at Harvard in 1885. I then examine how the spread and development of first-year composition, characterized by a theme writing approach, can be seen as the spread and development of an assignment genre system: the theme system. Following this, I reexamine the design of Harvard’s influential English A, focusing on the role and purpose of the course’s writing assignments. Finally, comparing the writing assignments in three popular current composition textbooks to assignments of the early twentieth century, I establish that despite a widespread condemnation and dismissing of current-traditional writing pedagogy of the beginning of the twentieth century, many current writing assignments are rooted in the assignments of the theme system.
DEDICATION

To Emily, Anthony, Lucia, and Joseph.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: COMPOSITION HISTORIES AND WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Disciplinary histories offer scholars more than just understandings of origins. Such histories also offer ways of viewing and conceptualizing professional identities, for disciplinary historization is also a form of self-scrutiny. Maureen Daly Goggin states in *Authoring a Discipline* that “historical accounts themselves both reflect and help foster the vitality of a disciplinary community insofar as they are contingent on a group’s interests. In other words, history may both indicate and help sustain those interests” (xiv). Writing and reading a field’s history can, then, be of central importance to present and future disciplinary identity.

No history, however, can be all-encompassing and thorough, and historians have their own biases and perspectives. Histories of rhetoric and composition are no exception. Composition histories have helped shape the field’s self-understanding and identity, but they are limited. Many of the popular macrohistories have examined the beginnings of first-year college composition classes in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Scholars such as Albert Kitzhaber, James Berlin, Robert Connors, and Sharon Crowley have examined the background, development and focus of what we now call “current-traditional rhetoric,” which dominated writing instruction in the late nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century. In particular, these histories have highlighted that period’s “current-traditional” emphasis on grammar and mechanical correctness—a product-centered approach to teaching writing that focuses primarily on superficial correctness rather than aspects of writing, such as process, that
scholars value today. While many composition histories’ characterizations of writing instruction in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century as being focused primarily on correctness are not inaccurate, they are, like all histories, incomplete. In viewing the “big picture,” these macrohistories also miss many important aspects of composition history and give superficial attention to other important aspects, such as writing assignments.

Although composition’s macrohistories have given considerable attention to the status of first-year composition at the beginning of the twentieth century, they have primarily limited their attention to current-traditional rhetoric’s manifestations—especially its over-focus on superficial correctness. They have failed to give any significant attention to the writing assignments themselves. To address this gap, I examine the history of composition instruction in the United States through the lens of classroom assignment genres. I argue that such an examination can not only reshape our understanding of our field’s history, but it is also significant for understanding the role and history of many writing assignments still in use today, and so can influence our current teaching and future developments in our discipline and our classrooms. Although some composition histories in recent decades have also recognized the inadequacy of the dominant narrative centered on the beginnings of first-year composition at Harvard, many of these histories have turned to alternative narratives, including local histories, instead of giving a closer examination of aspects of the dominant narrative. With this project being focused on assignments, I utilize genre theory as a theoretical lens in analyzing and understanding their role and historical development. Examining and revising composition
instruction history through the lens of what I call a “theme system” and genre theory complicates the field’s conception of the period’s current-traditional focus and can inform our understanding of current pedagogical practices that have roots in the theme system.

In this introductory chapter, I establish the groundwork for this argument, review the academic conversation on this time period, situate my work as a revisionist history, describe my historiographical methods, and establish genre theory as forming my theoretical approach. I then give an overview of the chapters of the dissertation.

The Theme System

To establish the groundwork for my argument regarding the writing assignments of the formative decades of first-year composition, I must first give some attention to these assignments. I view them through the lens of an assignment system—the “theme system”—that encompassed most writing assignments across most colleges. “Themes” were what most student compositions were called, being rooted in a long history of “theme writing,” which consisted primarily of short writing exercises on one manageable theme or topic. More abstract topics might include Happiness or Freedom; argumentative topics might include Capital Punishment Should be Abolished; by the late nineteenth century, topics would be more personal, such as What I Observed at the Park Yesterday. Perhaps the best example of theme writing in current use is the five-paragraph essay, also called the five-paragraph theme, which evolved from older forms of theme writing. The four modes of discourse—exposition, description, narrative, and argument—were all different types of themes, as well as shorter “daily themes.” These theme assignments
formed a system in that particular forms of themes were adopted in colleges and
textbooks across the country, being the most common and popular forms of writing
assignments. First-year composition courses across different institutions were
interconnected through a shared use of theme assignment genres. Viewing the approach
to writing instruction and assignments as a “theme system,” however, is not my own
invention, but is a term some educators used at the beginning of the twentieth century to
describe the dominant approach to writing instruction, including William Mead (1900),
and Bernard DeVoto (1928). This approach was centered on themes—the central
classroom genres.

Examining writing instruction at the beginning of the twentieth century through
the lens of the writing assignments reveals some aspects of our field’s history that have
been overlooked. As Dan Mezler observes, “Writing assignments are revealing classroom
artifacts. Instructors’ writing assignments say a great deal about their goals and values, as
well as the goals and values of their discipline” (W240). The writing assignments of the
early twentieth century and their use in composition courses, then, also reveal a great deal
about what instructors of that time valued. Amy Devitt, in making a historical
examination of genres, including themes, argues that genres have the power “to maintain
contexts as well as shape them,” which is certainly the case with writing assignments
(123). Examining the history of composition instruction through the lens of classroom
genres, then, can also demonstrate how these genres maintained and shaped writing
instruction. Beyond understanding the past, however, such an examination is also
significant for understanding the role and history of some classroom genres still in use
today, thus influencing future developments. However, composition histories have not undertaken such an examination.

**Composition Histories**

The academic conversation on composition history in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century has focused on two narratives: the dominant and the alternative narratives. For the past few decades, the dominant narrative, which some call the “Harvard narrative,” has remained a central part of composition history. Although some recent histories have challenged and revised elements of it, Patricia Donahue observes, “The Harvard narrative as a story of origin and imitation has become so deeply entrenched within our discipline as to function as an ‘always already’ beyond which it can be difficult to go. It has acquired an iconic function as a moment of instantiation, origin, beginning” (222). While the macrohistories of composition on this period differ in their scope and focus, they largely agree on their historical account regarding Harvard’s role in the development of composition, the focus on mechanical correctness, the poor labor conditions of composition teachers, and the dominance of current-traditional rhetoric.

Composition historian Ryan Skinnell offers a succinct timeline summarizing the dominant narrative regarding the birth of first-year college composition at Harvard, on which the composition histories of Kitzhaber, Berlin, Crowley, Connors, and Brereton generally agree:
1869: Charles W. Eliot is appointed president at Harvard and gives his famous inaugural speech lamenting “the prevailing neglect of the systematic study of the English language” (“Inaugural” 2).

1872: Adams Sherman Hill, presumptive creator of first-year composition, becomes assistant professor of rhetoric.

1874: Harvard begins requiring an essay during the entrance exam. The results, which demonstrate students’ shocking “illiteracy,” provoke dismay among Harvard’s professors (Connors 129).

1879: Hill publishes “An Answer to the Cry for More English,” in which he calls for “the study [of English] to be taken up at the threshold of college life” (52).

1885: Harvard’s “English A,” precursor to modern FYC courses, becomes a first-year requirement to address students’ deficiencies.

1900: By all accounts, “Most colleges followed Harvard [in adopting] the freshman composition course that by 1900 had taken hold almost everywhere” (Brereton 13). (Endnote 2, 108).

In addition to Hill’s call for more English, several reports in the 1890s, known as the Harvard Reports, lamented students’ apparent illiteracy, blaming high schools and secondary schools for student inadequacies in grammar and writing. These reports and Harvard’s influence, composition histories say, led to the spread of the first-year composition course and a composition pedagogy that, as Donald Stewart puts it, “reduc[ed] writing instruction to a concern for superficial mechanical correctness” and
“greatly increas[ed] an unproductive and debilitating fixation on grammar instruction” (455). Many compositionists today would concur with Stewart’s assessment of this pedagogy as largely negative and ineffective.

The macrohistories of the field, which reflect widespread interests and values of the profession, as Goggin puts it, also represent composition instruction at the beginning of the twentieth century in largely negative terms. Kitzhaber’s *Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900*, originally written as a dissertation in 1953, and John Michael Wozniak’s 1951 dissertation *English Composition in Eastern Colleges, 1850-1940* (published in 1978), helped establish the dominant narrative, with later histories relying on them heavily. Kitzhaber’s work is certainly the most influential and well-known of the two, being more thorough and well-written.

Kitzhaber examines the last half of the nineteenth century, which he recognizes as a transitional period for rhetoric in American colleges, which included a shift from oral to written rhetoric and the establishment of first-year composition courses. Kitzhaber’s main focus for his history is the “developments in rhetorical theory and practice” in the last half of the nineteenth century (1). He examines the main trends in higher education, the development of the field of English, the most influential rhetoricians and rhetorics, and the most common practices and focuses of written composition/rhetoric at the end of the century, particularly the modes of discourse, paragraph-writing, and an emphasis on grammar and correctness. Ultimately, Kitzhaber concludes that the rise of these practices and theories was largely negative: “Running beneath all these theories, however, and stronger than any of them, was the doctrine of mechanical correctness. A few of these
devices and theories were fruitful, most were not” (222). Further, according to Kitzhaber, writing instruction in the late nineteenth century was “not a great period,” although significant in understanding the recent background of current (1950s at the time of Kitzhaber’s dissertation) rhetorical theory and composition courses (226).

Wozniak’s dissertation extends further into the twentieth century than Kitzhaber’s ventures, but covers some of the same background and history of composition instruction in American colleges. Although he relies more on course catalogues and course descriptions to see the trends in course offerings and popular textbooks used in Eastern colleges, Wozniak recognizes some of the same significant events, movements, and educators as does Kitzhaber, including much of the “dominant narrative,” such as the significant role of Harvard in the development of first-year composition. Wozniak offers little evaluation of the developments in composition instruction in comparison to Kitzhaber, but concludes that “the many experiments that were tried and the trends that emerged and receded have numerous lessons to offer those who now take part or who will take part in the continued evolution of college composition” (207). However, he offers no details concerning what these “numerous lessons” are. Later composition historians would rely heavily on both Kitzhaber and Wozniak.

In the 1980s and 1990s, James Berlin, Sharon Crowley, Robert Connors, and John Brereton built upon the work of Kitzhaber and Wozniak, further elaborating on nineteenth-century backgrounds, also further establishing the Harvard narrative as central to understanding the history of the discipline. Central to this narrative was current-traditional rhetoric, which, Berlin emphasizes, “was a product of the new, elective
university” and its commitment to the scientific method in the late nineteenth century (Rhetoric and Reality 36). Berlin and Crowley, in addition to examining the theoretical background of current-traditionalism, both highlight the consequences of this scientific approach to writing instruction, including limited attention to invention, which Berlin terms “a managerial view of invention” (Nineteenth-Century 64), more prescriptive arrangement with an emphasis on unity, coherence, and emphasis, and considerable attention to correctness in both style and mechanics. Connors’s work in numerous articles in the 1980s and 1990s, much of which forms his 1997 history Composition-Rhetoric, gives additional attention to issues in writing instruction in the current-traditional period, including mechanical correctness and grammar, the problem of labor and overworked teachers, textbooks, and the modes of discourse. Beyond this, Brereton’s The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875-1925 compiles original sources of the period that further establishes the dominant Harvard-centered narrative of composition history.

As part of this dominant narrative, composition histories have reviewed some of the central influences on the evolution of composition instruction through the nineteenth century by examining the background and origins of current-traditional rhetoric. Berlin, Crowley, and Kitzhaber, for instance, cite the influence of the works of George Campbell (1776), Hugh Blair (1783), and Richard Whately (1828) on current-traditional rhetoric. In The Methodical Memory, Crowley observes, “British new rhetoric influenced the development of the American rhetorical tradition now called current-traditional rhetoric. Important nineteenth-century American rhetoricians regularly cited their indebtedness to
Campbell, Blair, or Whately. Many early American texts are simply redactions of the work of one or another of the British rhetoricians” (12). The texts of these authors were, Kitzhaber emphasizes, “by far the most widely used texts” (49). Both Kitzhaber and Crowley credit Campbell and Blair with influencing what would be the current-traditional theory of style, which ascribes to both correct grammar and correct expression. These histories cover a wide range of issues and a substantial period of time, giving a “big picture” examination of composition history in the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century that gives considerable attention to aspects of writing instruction that many current scholars view negatively.

With the macrohistories of composition focusing largely on some of the negative aspects of composition instruction, particularly the apparent over-focus on superficial correctness, these histories also helped establish and reify the field’s perception of current-traditional rhetoric as a defining characteristic of this period of writing instruction. The term “current-traditional,” which was first used in 1959 in Daniel Fogarty’s *Roots for a New Rhetoric*, was popularized in the midst of the process movement in composition, starting with Richard E. Young’s “Paradigms and Problems: Needed Research in Rhetorical Invention” in 1978. Young’s definition of current-traditional rhetoric helped establish the main characteristics of what scholars of the process movement would view as a failed and ineffective approach to writing instruction. According to Young, current-traditional rhetoric included “the emphasis on the composed product rather than the composing process; the analysis of discourse into words, sentences, and paragraphs; the strong concern with usage (syntax, spelling, punctuation)
and with style (economy, clarity, emphasis); and so on” (31). Berlin and Crowley, building on Kitzhaber’s work, also adopted the term and, as Connors later observes, “current-traditional rhetoric’ became the default term for the tradition of rhetoric that appeared specifically to inform the composition courses of the latter nineteenth century and the twentieth century up through the 1960s” (Composition-Rhetoric 4). Crowley, one of the harshest critics of current-traditional rhetoric, calls it “a historical hangover,” being both outdated and ineffective (Methodical Memory xii).

However, some scholars, including Connors, have noted problems with the field’s use of the term “current-traditional.” Connors observes, “Current-traditional rhetoric became a convenient whipping boy, the term of choice after 1985 for describing whatever in nineteenth- and twentieth-century rhetorical or pedagogical history any given author found wanting. Got a contemporary problem? Blame it on that darn old current-traditional rhetoric” (5). Similarly, Paul Kei Matsuda argues that the popular conception of current-traditional rhetoric was a “discursive construction” of the process movement (70). That is, the negative representation of current-traditional rhetoric was constructed to support the ideas of the process movement. Susan Miller suggests that “current-traditional’ or ‘product’ theory appears to have been created at the same time that process theory was, to help explain process as a theory pitted against old practices” (110).

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1 Such condemnations of current-traditional rhetoric’s product-centered focus on correctness, however, does not mean that modern scholars do not also value polished style and grammatical correctness. These are certainly important. However, in contrast to the field’s reified idea of current-traditionalism, scholars today also place a high value on other aspects of writing, including the writing process, the social context of writing, and well-researched persuasive writing, which might be of more immediate concern to teachers in the composition classroom. Grammar and correctness, then, are given most importance when a writer is revising and polishing. Some popular texts in the field today focus particularly on style and grammar, including Joseph Williams and Joseph Bizup’s Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace, 11th ed. (2013), and Martha Kolln and Loretta Gray’s Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects, 7th ed. (2012).
Whether or not a popular hatred of current-traditional rhetoric was fostered by the process movement, the characteristics that Young and others attribute to current-traditional rhetoric have been perpetuated in the field’s macrohistories, even though, as Matsuda observes, non-current-traditional pedagogies, including “many of the tenets of process pedagogy existed long before the rise of the process movement in the latter half of the 20th century” (68). Similarly, many writing assignments in current use also have long histories and direct ties to the current-traditional period, although this is not widely acknowledged and discussed in composition scholarship.

One of the purposes of this project is to challenge and revise the dominant master narrative that the macrohistories tell. In the last two decades, many scholars have also offered such challenges, and so my own history participates in this ongoing trend. Many of these composition histories have turned from macrohistories to microhistories, which have included local and revisionist histories. Ryan Skinnell observes that some recent histories have been a reaction against the Harvard narrative, with the recognition that this prevailing narrative was not the complete history: “Later generations of historians challenged the Harvard narrative, turning to local, archival research at alternative sites (normal schools, women’s colleges) using less traditional sources (lecture notes, diaries) as a way of demonstrating the breadth of history informing contemporary writing teachers” (95-96). Such a reaction against the prevailing narrative, however, is not a condemnation or dismissing of it, but a recognition that we cannot simply accept this narrative as complete, for the broad examination of the history of writing instruction at the largest and most prestigious schools cannot tell the story of composition at all
institutions. Without the initial histories, there could not be revisionist histories. One historian who recognizes this is David Gold, whose *Rhetoric at the Margins: Revising the History of Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1873-1947* offers local histories of rhetorical education at three institutions: Wiley College (a black liberal arts college), Texas Woman’s University, and East Texas Normal College. Situating his work as a revisionist history, Gold argues, “We must continue to complement broadly drawn, comprehensive master narratives with finely-grained local and institutional microhistories” (7). Such revisionist histories, then, do not necessarily contradict the “comprehensive master narratives,” although some do, but complement them by adding to that narrative.

Beyond Gold, Patricia Donahue and Gretchen Flesher Moon’s edited collection *Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition* also participates in such revisionist history by giving additional local microhistories of composition at various institutions that do not necessarily fit into the Harvard narrative. In her contribution to the collection, Kathleen A. Welsh emphasizes that “the Harvard model may have been the prototype for many nineteenth-century composition-rhetoric courses; however, it represents just one configuration among many. Student writers in nineteenth-century America may have shared textbooks, theme topics, essay formulas, and cultural narratives in common, but they did not write out of identical contexts” (15). This ongoing trend of writing local microhistories of composition at different institutions adds considerably to a fuller understanding of composition history, and hopefully will continue, for each institution’s history has something unique to offer.
Noting this trend in scholarship on composition history, Linda Ferreira-Buckley notes in her published response to “Octalog III” that with most histories now tending to be microhistories, “Most scholars now acknowledge that their essay, book, or presentation focuses on only a small piece of something much bigger and more complex” (247). It is certainly understandable that scholars writing microhistories would not make broad “big picture” conclusions. With this tendency to stay local, however, with “small picture” histories of previously unexamined sites of writing instruction, the dominant Harvard narrative of the field’s history has received less attention in recent decades. This narrative has, of course, already been the focus of the macrohistories, and the current trend is to revise composition history by examining the unexamined. However, additional attention to the prevailing narrative that has already been told can offer new revisions and additions to composition history, for the “big picture” narratives, with their large scope, give inadequate attention to many aspects of writing instruction, including the writing assignments. Although most revisionist histories so far have departed from the Harvard narrative by examining alternative sites of writing instruction and local histories, this project participates in revisionist history by going more deeply into the Harvard model with a detailed examination of its writing assignments.

Although I recognize the value of the Harvard narrative, I also recognize it as incomplete. For instance, histories’ attention to writing assignments in this narrative has been limited primarily to examinations of the four modes of discourse—exposition, description, narrative, and argument. The modes were, of course, different types of themes and were probably the most widespread assignments. Although Kitzhaber and
Connors have examined the modes in detail, their attention has focused on the classification of discourse rather than the modes as central writing assignments. Kitzhaber observes, “The reasons why the four forms became so popular toward 1900 and after were concerned chiefly with the narrowing of rhetorical theory and its increasing rigidity” (138). While the modes’ role in rhetorical theory is important, their role in classroom practice as writing assignments is also important. Similarly, the histories making up the dominant Harvard narrative have given little attention to theme writing, its history, and role in first-year composition. My revision of composition history attempts to address this inadequacy and therefore revise the dominant Harvard narrative.

Gold aptly observes that in examining local histories, the popular and simplified conception of current-traditional rhetoric is clearly inadequate. “What we have dismissed as current-traditional rhetoric,” he says, “often represents a complex of interwoven practices, both conservative and radical, liberatory and disciplining, and subject to wide-ranging local and institutional variations” (5). This “complex of interwoven practices” is revealed with closer examination, which local microhistories do and the larger macrohistories do not. My own reexamination of some elements of the macrohistories—the assignments—also demonstrates this “complex of interwoven practices,” particularly in my in-depth reexamination of Harvard’s prototypical English A course in Chapter 4. Beyond this, however, my examination of the dominant Harvard narrative through the lens of an assignment system revises the narrative itself by recognizing that in addition to the current-traditional focus on correctness, the early decades of first year composition were also characterized by a system of theme writing assignments to which we owe many
of our assignments today. Instead of focusing on the more negative elements of this period of writing instruction, we can then better recognize how it also shaped what composition teachers do in their classrooms today.

Historiographical Approach

In this project I have depended heavily on primary sources from the time period I am examining, including textbooks, course catalogues, journals, magazines, and professional books. Many of these sources are also cited in the macrohistories, although I have approached them with a different lens; many others, however, are not. My historiographical method in approaching these sources is largely shaped by Robert Connors’s 1992 essay on historiography “Dreams and Play.” In his essay Connors asserts that what composition historians do is “browse with directed intention. There is a track, constraint exercised by the developing hypothesis, but we may and must dart off the track to follow a likely scent, a fascinating claim, a mysterious author, a curious fact” (24). He further asserts, “Historical research at its best is detective work, with all the intellectual rewards of problem and puzzle solving” (24). It is, I believe, this directed browsing and puzzle solving that has led me to my research on the theme system.

Stemming from the research I did for an article that traced the five-paragraph essay to theme writing, I began the research for this project with a vague research question asking what I could learn about the history of writing instruction by closely examining theme writing. Based on my previous research on the five-paragraph essay, I began with a hypothesis that other assignment genres might have developed from theme writing as well. I found this, as Connors puts it, a kind of detective work, with a
particular puzzle regarding the role and influence of theme writing that I wanted to solve. As I browsed with “directed intention” through old composition textbooks, journal articles, course catalogues, and popular magazines, following the trail and darting off the trail, I discovered the theme system.

Beyond browsing, however, historical research has a purpose. As Crowley observes in Octalog I, “Few historians of rhetoric and composition . . . write essays or books about early nineteenth-century writing instruction for the pure pleasure of adding to the growing body of historical research in this area” (7). While in my own case I could probably research for the pure pleasure of it, I must ultimately come to conclusions about what my research really means, why it is important, and why scholars who do not see the inherent value and pleasure in history should also care. Crowley observes that the composition historian generally wants “to guide teachers of composition in making pedagogical choices by acquainting them with those which have been made in the past” (7). With this in mind, it is important to acknowledge that I have my own biases and opinions about composition pedagogy and history that cannot be completely laid aside for me to write an objective history. No history is truly objective with fallible and biased writers. For this reason, Connors emphasizes, the composition historian must be cognizant of his or her own prejudices (“Dreams and Play” 21). In my own case, although I do not ascribe to it in my teaching, I am sympathetic to current-traditional pedagogy, partly because I think it has become a whipping boy for what is unpopular, and partly because I have known many effective teachers who ascribe to some of these unpopular tenets of current-traditionalism. However, with such sympathies, I approach
my historical data with the assumption that the dominant pedagogy at the beginning of the twentieth century has positive elements and was not completely ineffective, as some historians, such as Crowley, might contend. My examination of writing assignments of the theme system and their connection to current assignments, then, is also an attempt to reconsider the negativity surrounding current-traditional pedagogy and the assignments that characterized it so that we might also reexamine their influence on current practice and the implications that connection could have for future practice.

Theoretical Approach

Since my reexamination of the formative years of first-year college composition focuses on the writing assignments—the central genres of the composition class—I will apply our field’s work in genre theory as my theoretical approach in order to analyze and understand the use and development of these theme assignments. One of the important principles of genre theory is that genres are not just categories; studying genres does not just involve the classification of discourse, although classification is certainly involved. In her seminal article “Genre as Social Action,” Carolyn Miller argues that “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of the discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (151). Genres, then, perform actions. This idea applies to classroom writing assignments and the formation of the theme system. In his analysis of genres in the first-year writing course, Anis Bawarshi contends that “each genre enables individuals to enact a different situated activity within an activity system. Together, the various genres coordinate and synchronize the ways individuals define, interact within, and enact an activity system” (107). This is just as
applicable to the first-year writing course at the beginning of the twentieth century, wherein the theme genres, although being under the control of the instructor, also control and dictate the activity of the course and its participants. Bawarshi further observes that beyond this control of activities within a composition course, these genres also “link one activity system to another through the shared use of genres” (107). This linking of one activity system to another through shared assignment genres is what forms the larger theme system.

Beyond genres’ performance of actions, however, Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin argue that genres are situated and embedded in disciplinary activities, and so they also reflect, and even influence, their users’ norms, values, and ideology (497). Applying this idea to classroom assignment genres, we might see how assignments can reflect and embody values of the instructor and the institution. For instance, as a simplified example, an argumentative research paper requiring a strong argument and effective synthesis of research on a given topic reflects the instructor’s and university’s valuing of these qualities. Similarly, the themes of the writing classes of the early twentieth century also reflect the values of the instructors and institutions, such as the ideal of grammatical purity; but, beyond this, the classroom themes can also reveal values not usually associated with current-traditional rhetoric, such as the importance of students’ ideas and work in the writing process, which I discuss in Chapter 4.

Examining genres in terms of history offers additional insight about genres, and, for the purposes of this project, insight about writing assignments at the beginning of the twentieth century. In Writing Genres, composition scholar Amy Devitt examines the
connection between genre and history in her chapter “A History of Genres and Genres in History.” Of the academic disciplines, composition, perhaps more than any other discipline, is centered on genres. Drawing from Berkenkotter and Huckin’s principle that genres are inherently dynamic, Devitt observes that “genres that have persisted over time must have changed, even if that change is not generally visible at the time. Logically, since they reflect their cultural, situational, and generic contexts, and since those contexts change over time, genres, too, must change over time” (89). As Berkenkotter and Huckin put it, “Genres change over time in response to their users’ sociocognitive needs” (479). This principle that genres are dynamic and change according to the needs of their users is central to understanding the history of a genre and how a genre functions in history. As I demonstrate in this project, particularly in Chapter 2, the theme perfectly illustrates this principle of dynamism in its development and evolution over time. Even when a genre such as the theme might have appeared to its users to be static, historically we can see that this was not and is never the case.

In addition to applying this principle of dynamism to my examination of the theme system, I also draw from Amy Devitt’s notion of genre sets—a group of genres that function together within a particular setting—and Charles Bazerman’s conception of genre systems, which is similar, but broader than Devitt’s genre sets and might include multiple genre sets. Anis Bawarshi applies the idea of genre sets to his analysis of the genres of the first-year composition class, calling it a “constellation of genres,” consisting of all the genres involved in the course, including the syllabus, writing prompt, and student essay (105-6). My own examination of a genre set in the composition course is
somewhat narrower than Devitt’s conception of genre sets and Bawarshi’s constellation of genres, in that I focus on the assignments, excluding other course documents. Rather, I would call it an *assignment genre set*. In the composition classroom, the writing assignments students compose differ, but are also interconnected in serving the goals of the course. Each classroom has its own *assignment genre set* that participates not only in the larger context of the university, serving the goals of the course and school, but also in the disciplinary community. The classroom assignment genres of composition courses are shared throughout the composition disciplinary community, and thus we see these assignment genres adopted in similar ways in the localized settings of colleges and universities across the country in which composition courses are offered. This shared use of assignment genres across different settings forms what I call an *assignment genre system*. The spread of Harvard’s theme approach to first-year composition by the beginning of the twentieth century, which included its longer fortnightly themes and short daily themes, formed an *assignment genre system*—the *theme system*. When viewed historically, the principle of dynamism also applies to genre sets and genre systems. Devitt observes, “As the needs of the group change, the genre set changes to reflect those needs” (54). Such dynamism in a discipline’s genre sets and systems is clear in the changing trends of assignments in a discipline (see Mezler). As my theoretical lens, then, genre theory is helpful in understanding the theme system and its genres.

**Overview**

As a revision of the dominant narrative of composition, this project focuses primarily on late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century writing instruction. In
Chapter 2, “A History of Theme Writing,” I argue that although composition histories have examined the theoretical background and origins of current-traditional rhetoric, such background is incomplete without also understanding the history of the assignment genres of current-traditional rhetoric, which are based in theme writing. In making this argument, I examine the history of theme writing in English education. I first review theme writing’s earliest forms, including its roots in the classical Greek and Roman progymnasmata and its use in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English Grammar School, and then trace its development and use up to the late nineteenth-century United States. This history notes the parts and rules of the theme in its various types and stages of development, particularly the complex themes and simple themes, and how the term theme came to be practically synonymous with essay by the late nineteenth century. I further demonstrate that theme writing was firmly entrenched in American education at both the college level and lower levels throughout the nineteenth century, and so when first-year college composition emerged in the 1880s, the use of theme writing was a continuation of assignments already established in writing instruction. Finally, after considering educators’ responses to theme writing in the nineteenth century, I apply some principles from genre theory to analyze and understand theme writing’s development.

In Chapters 3 and 4 I examine the theme system, its characteristics, and assignments. First, in Chapter 3, “The Theme System,” I argue that despite the recent scholarly trend to focus on local and alternative histories that complicate the “Harvard narrative,” this dominant Harvard narrative needs to be reexamined through the lens of the theme system and its genres and its formation from Harvard’s approach to first-year
composition. Rather than only viewing this period through its current-traditional over-focus on correctness, we can recognize how it can also be characterized by a theme-based approach to writing instruction. In making this argument I first examine Harvard’s role and influence on the spread of a theme approach to writing instruction across the United States and establish that Harvard’s approach formed what some educators of the time called a “theme system.” I then review responses to this theme system of both students and teachers, illustrating that although correctness was a central element of the approach, greater concerns were the effectiveness of theme assignments to teach writing and teachers’ overwork with such frequent themes. I go on to examine factors that contributed to the evolution and continuance of the theme system. Finally, I apply genre theory principles to analyze the theme system’s establishment and development.

Chapter 4, “What English A Was Really Like: Copeland and Rideout’s Freshman English and Theme Correcting in Harvard College,” is an extension of the argument made in Chapter 3 that the Harvard narrative needs to be reexamined through the lens of the theme system and its genres. While Chapter 3 focuses broadly on the formation of the theme system from Harvard, Chapter 4 makes a close examination of Harvard’s prototypical first-year course, English A, and the specific assignment genres and pedagogical practices of the course that complicate the dominant narrative of Harvard’s course and current-traditionalism. In making this examination of English A, I rely on Copeland and Rideout’s book-length description of the course for the 1899-1900 academic year. In particular, I consider Harvard’s use of the daily theme, the purpose and sequence of longer fortnightly themes, the instructor’s role and feedback, and the course
readings and examinations. Although there was considerable attention to correctness, as composition scholars have recognized, I also examine other aspects of the course that are not usually associated with current-traditional writing instruction.

In Chapter 5, “Theme Writing Assignments and Current Practice,” I argue that despite a widespread condemnation and dismissing of current-traditional writing pedagogy of the beginning of the twentieth century, many current writing assignments are rooted in the assignments of the theme system. In making this argument, I first examine three current popular composition textbooks, connecting many of their writing assignments directly to assignments from the theme system in the four modes of discourse. I then give a detailed examination of the research paper’s evolution from theme writing to its various current forms, demonstrating how tracing the development of some assignments can reveal additional connections of current genres to those of the theme system. Finally, in Chapter 6, “Conclusion: Revising History and Rethinking Current Practice,” I discuss the implications of this project for composition history and pedagogy.
CHAPTER 2: A HISTORY OF THEME WRITING

In Chapter 1, I established that this project revises the dominant Harvard-centered narrative of composition history, viewing that narrative through the lens of writing assignments, which have received insufficient attention in composition histories. The macrohistories have given considerable attention to the early decades of first-year composition’s product-centered focus on mechanical correctness—current-traditional rhetoric. In contrast to the generally negative narrative of the current-traditional period, I argue that examining composition history through the lens of writing assignment genres can reshape our understanding of composition history, and that such an examination can inform our understanding of the role and history of many writing assignments used today, which can influence current and future developments in our field and in our classrooms.

Composition histories have detailed the theoretical and institutional background of current-traditional rhetoric, which is certainly valuable in understanding composition history, but is also part of the negative narrative, showing the origins of the current-traditional epistemology that scholars have rejected. However, there is really more background to current-traditional writing instruction than composition’s macrohistories have addressed, just as there was more to early first-year composition classes than grammar instruction. Shifting attention from the theoretical level to the more concrete writing assignment genres and their origins, we can see an additional element of the background of current-traditional writing instruction.

In this chapter, then, I argue that although composition histories have examined the theoretical and institutional background of current-traditional rhetoric, it is also
important to understand the history of the assignment genres of current-traditionalism, not only because it adds knowledge to composition history, but also because it is significant for understanding the current-traditional assignments from which many current assignments that we still embrace originate. The assignments of early first-year composition are based in a tradition of theme writing, and so in making my argument I examine the history of theme writing up to the late nineteenth century, when first-year college composition began at Harvard. This examination demonstrates the deep roots of theme writing in English education, long before the eighteenth-century theoretical roots of current-traditional epistemology, as well as the dynamic nature of writing assignment genres.

I first review theme writing’s earliest forms, including its roots in the classical Greek and Roman *progymnasmata* and its use in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English Grammar School, and then trace its development and use up to the late nineteenth-century United States. This history notes the parts and rules of the theme in its various types and stages of development, particularly the complex themes and simple themes, and how the term *theme* came to be practically synonymous with *essay* by the late nineteenth century. I further demonstrate that theme writing was firmly entrenched in American education at both the college level and lower levels throughout the nineteenth century, and so when first-year college composition emerged in the 1880s, the use of theme writing was a continuation of assignments already established in writing instruction. Finally, after considering educators’ responses to theme writing in the nineteenth century, I apply some principles from genre theory to analyze and understand
theme writing’s development and its importance for understanding current-traditional assignments.

Early Forms of Theme Writing

To understand the evolution of theme writing to its forms in first-year composition at the end of the nineteenth century, it is first necessary to examine its roots in classical rhetoric and its earliest forms in English education. The history of theme writing, then, really begins with the Greek and Roman writing exercises called the progymnasmata, which would later be adapted to the theme in Renaissance English education. J. David Fleming describes the progymnasmata as having been “traced back to the fifth-century BCE Greek sophists,” but notes the third to first centuries BCE as being “when a sequence of a dozen or so exercises emerged as a standard curriculum in writing and speaking instruction. . . . By the beginnings of the first century BCE, virtually all Greek and Roman rhetoric students were working their way through this more-or-less standard cycle of exercises” (109-10). James Murphy observes that these “graded composition exercises,” both oral and written, functioned as preparation for declamations, which were oral rhetorical exercises, somewhat similar to later propositional theme writing (62).

Although several progymnasmata texts survive, the most influential of the progymnasmata texts has been that of the fourth-century CE Greek Aphthonius “whose handbook,” Fleming notes, “exerted the greatest influence on later European education” (110). Aphthonius presented fourteen progymnasmata exercises: fable (mythos), tale (diégêma), saying (chreia), proverb (gnômê), refutation (anaskeuê), confirmation
(kataskeuê), commonplace (koinos topos), ecomium (enkômion), invective (psogos), comparison (synkrisis), characterization (êthopoeia), description (ekphrasis), thesis, and law (nomou eisphora) (Fleming 110). Each of these exercises took a different focus, and were of different levels of difficulty, building on one another. The progymnasmata would continue to be used as writing exercises into the medieval period (Lanham 97-99). It is these progymnasmata of Aphthonius that would be adopted in sixteenth-century England, from which the theme would emerge.

It is not certain how early themes were a part of English education, but they were certainly used as early as the sixteenth century with the emergence of the English grammar school. Don Paul Abbott observes that “Rhetoric and writing were taught most extensively in the English grammar school. Indeed, this institution was invented in the sixteenth century for that purpose,” probably beginning with the founding of St. Paul’s School in 1510 (149). Foster Watson notes in his 1908 history The English Grammar School to 1660 that the grammar schools had ecclesial roots and, similar to the ecclesial schools, “were emphatically ‘free’ schools for the children of the poorer classes” (104). According to Abbott, the English grammar school “was intended to educate boys from about the ages of seven to fifteen” and served as “a kind of middle school between the ‘elementarie’ and the university” (151-52). Further, it was “the heart and soul of English education” and “at the forefront of educational innovation” (152). Watson notes some of the earliest mentions of theme writing in English education in association with the English grammar school:

In the eighth Class, “To conclude you may exhibit, if you please, some formulae, which serving as a guide, a given theme may be conveniently treated.”

1590. Harrow School (Orders).

In the fifth form, they shall learn to make a Theme.

1593. Durham School (Orders).

The boys “to learn to make a theme according to the precepts of Aphthonius,” after they have learned letter-writing. (Watson 436)

Beyond the early references to themes, as Watson details, John Brinsley’s 1627 edition of Ludus Literarius or The Grammar Schoole is the best example of theme writing’s deep roots in English education with an in-depth discussion of themes and the structure and parts of themes.2 Written as “a Discourse between two Schoolmasters,” Spoudeus and Philoponus, Brinsley’s text clearly credits classical sources for theme writing (1). In discussing Theames in Chapter XIII he explicitly gives credit to Aphthonius as a source of themes and their rules.

Brinsley details the five parts of the theme, which would be used and adapted by subsequent textbook writers: exordium, narratio, confirmatio, confutatio, and conclusio (172-73). The exordium was a short introduction, “two or three lines, to gaine the approbation of the hearers, and their attention” (179). This might take the form of praise for the hearer or the topic. The narratio functioned as a description of the subject of the theme so that it is clear to the audience. The confirmatio contained the main arguments for the writer’s point on the topic, which might include some of Aphthonius’ “heads of

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2 Brinsley’s Ludus Literarius was first published in 1612.
Invention,” such as causes, effects, and subjects (180). The confutatio would consider counterarguments and objections. Finally, the conclusio, as Brinsley puts it, “is nothing but a collection gathered from all the former reasons: in which may be a short recapitulation,” so that it might “leave a deeper impression in the mindes of the hearers” (181).

In addition to owing credit to Aphthonius, Brinsley’s five parts of a theme are also clearly tied to Cicero’s six parts of discourse, which he describes in De Inventione: exordium, narratio, partitio, confirmatio, refutatio, and peroratio. Abbott observes that the Renaissance English grammar school was modeled largely on the works and teaching methods of Cicero and Quintilian, which Erasmus proposed in the sixteenth century (150-51). Abbott further argues, “It is no exaggeration to say that the rules of the classical oration were applied to every kind of discourse,” which included the application of both the progymnasmata and Cicero’s six parts of discourse to theme writing in the English grammar school (157). The idea of the theme itself was certainly not the invention of the English grammar schools. James Murphy observes that in the Roman schools, “the master assigns a problem (‘theme’) to one or more students” for oral delivery (69). Such oral exercises and written progymnasmata exercises were used to build skills and habits in students, quite similar to the theme of the English grammar school.

While the theme might, in the view of some students, be an exercise in drudgery, Brinsley argues that, beyond the attainment of skills, the purpose of the Theame was to instill virtue:
We are to consider, what is the end and purpose of their making Theames; and then to bethink ourselves, which way they may the soonest attaine unto the same. The principall end of making Theames, I take to be this, to furnish schollers with all store of the choisest matter, that they may thereby learn to understand, speak, or write of any ordinary Theame, Morall or Politicall, such as usually fall into discourse amongst men and in practice of life; and especially concerning vertues and vices. So as to worke in themselves a greater love of the vertue and hatred of the vice, and to be able with soundness of reason to draw others to their opinion.

(174-75)

The main example Brinsley gives of such a theme is the proposition “Children are to obey their Parents,” which is a typical topic of such themes (180). It is this focus on moral or political issues that, Watson argues, is central to the way Brinsley views the Theme: “The object of a good Theme is the presentation of such adequate subject-matter as may inculcate love of virtue and hatred of vice” (Watson 423).

Certainly, the production of virtuous pupils was an important part of the classical education students were given, but theme writing’s use and purpose was also aligned with an idea of correctness, which would become the main focus centuries later in the theme system. According to Brinsley, themes were to be short, “not above 12 or 16 lines,” might be recited to the teacher, and would be subject to correction of any errors (177). When pupils would recite their themes, the teacher would examine “each fault, as they are uttering it or after, by asking them short questions of the faults, and causing them to
answer them, and to shew how they should be amended; and so making a dash with a pen under every fault, or the letters where the fault is, to leave them to correct them after” (177). Such an approach to instilling correctness in the seventeenth century is strikingly similar to practices of the nineteenth century and current-traditional rhetoric’s focus on correctness, predating Campbell’s, Blair’s, and Whately’s influences on current-traditionalism. Composition histories have not made this connection, giving no attention to the history of theme writing. However, understanding the early forms of theme writing in English education and its indebtedness to the classical *progymnasmata* can demonstrate that the current-traditional valuing of correctness is also rooted in the assignment genres themselves.

These theme compositions, which were to be practiced regularly, were written in Latin, and were one method of helping students practice and become more fluent in Latin. Although it is possible that themes were also written in English in this period, Latin was the norm. Later in the seventeenth century, philosopher John Locke lamented in his 1693 work *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* the fact that themes were not written in students’ native language: “[L]et them make Themes in English, where they have facility, and a command of Words, and will better see what kind of Thoughts they have, when put into their own Language” (206). Despite early themes being written in Latin, their purpose and form is closely aligned with later English themes.

Unfortunately, after Brinsley’s 1627 text, few sources on themes before the nineteenth century are available, and so it is difficult to say with certainty how the theme developed over the century that followed. However, after Brinsley, whose parts of the
theme are similar to Cicero’s parts of discourse, the parts of the theme differ in John Holmes’s 1739 text *The Art of Rhetoric Made Easy*. While Brinsley names five parts, Holmes lists seven: Proposition, Reason, Confirmation, Simile, Example, Testimony, and Conclusion (21). He demonstrates this structure with a sample theme in Latin and then, later in the book, a sample theme in English on the topic “Great is the Truth, and stronger than all things,” followed by the same theme in Greek (94-96). All seven parts of the theme are clearly labeled.

Six decades after Holmes’s text, in what Robert Connors describes as “the seminal book for ‘composition,’” John Walker gives a thorough treatment of themes in his 1801 textbook *The Teacher’s Assistant in English Composition; or, Easy Rules for Writing Themes and Composing Exercises on Subjects Proper for the Improvement of Youth of Both Sexes at School* (*Composition-Rhetoric* 218). As its subtitle clearly indicates, themes are an important part of the book. Like Holmes, Walker defines the Theme as having seven parts, and he gives a detailed description of each part:

A Theme is the proving of some truth. After the Theme or Truth is laid down, the proof consists of the following parts:

1st, The Proposition, or Narrative; where we shew the meaning of the Theme, by amplifying, paraphrasing, or explaining it more at large.

2d, The Reason; where we prove the truth of the Theme by some reason or argument.
3d, The Confirmation; where we shew the unreasonableness of the contrary opinion; or if we cannot do that, we try to bring some other reason in support of the former.

4th, The Simile; where we bring in something in Nature or Art similar to what is affirmed in our Theme, for illustrating the truth of it.

5th, The Example; where we bring instances from History to corroborate the truth of our Theme.

6th, The Testimony, or Quotation; where we bring in proverbial sentences, or passages from good authors, which shew that others think as we do.

7th, The Conclusion; when we sum up the whole, and shew the practical use of the Theme, by concluding with some pertinent observations. (112)

Although both Holmes and Walker adhere to seven parts of the theme, any comparison to Brinsley’s five parts shows that despite some evolution of the genre, the same basic structure of the Theme remains. The main differences are in the labels for each part and Holmes’s and Walker’s inclusion of a simile, example, and testimony. It is not clear why these headings were added as parts of the theme, but understanding how genres generally evolve, we might conclude that these parts were added because of teachers’ changing perceptions of what knowledge and skills students should exercise in writing themes. The addition of the simile, example, and testimony, which acted as additional evidence for the
theme’s argument, also required students to apply knowledge from other areas of their
education.

Walker’s rules for themes and what student themes actually looked like is best
illustrated in an example. With this in mind, Walker provides twenty-one sample themes,
with the parts labeled, to act as models. While others, such as Holmes, had published
sample themes, Walker’s text is probably the earliest to provide so many examples.
These themes are on topics relating to some virtue or moral, such as “None are
completely happy,” “Perseverance generally prevails,” “Nip Sin in the Bud,” and “No Art
can be acquired without Rules.” Each theme is short, around 300 words, and, to modern
readers, are somewhat entertaining. For instance, Theme 14 is on the topic “Evil
Communication corrupts good Manners”:

Proposition. Nothing is more certain than that a constant intercourse with
those who are vicious and immoral, will infallibly infest us with vice and
immorality.

Reason. Man is a creature of imitation; and it is as much impossible to
avoid imitating those manners which are constantly before our eyes, as it
is to avoid speaking a language we are constantly hearing.

Confirmation. Besides; whatever is perpetually present to us, loses its
singularity. Vice, which at first was odious, by too much familiarity
becomes less disagreeable; and, if it happens to be united with certain
qualities we admire, we slide, by insensible degrees, into an imitation of
those characters which at first shocked us with their turpitude.
Simile. As a young, unvitiated palate generally dislikes high-seasoned dishes and poignant sauces, but at last becomes fond of them; so a virtuous mind, which at first is disgusted with vice, by too much familiarity becomes enamoured with it.

Example. History, both ancient and modern, affords us a thousand instances of the danger of communicating with evil. None are more striking than the example of Solomon: That king, favoured by God so highly; blessed with wisdom, riches, and power, above all his predecessors; and authorised by God to build him a temple, and to compose part of the holy scripture; that king, by conversing too familiarly with the idolatrous nations with which he was surrounded, was at last seduced by them to wickedness and idolatry; and it is a question among divines, whether he ever repented and returned to God!

Testimony. The moralists of all ages have earnestly exhorted us to fly from the company of the wicked; and Dr. Johnson observes, with his usual acuteness, there are few who do not learn, by degrees, to practise those crimes which they cease to censure.

Conclusion. How justly, therefore, may we conclude with the sacred writer, that accustoming ourselves to the converse of those who are evil, will infallibly lead us to be evil, ourselves! (137-39)
is evident in the requirement of an historical example and the testimony of some authority. Such propositional themes also really had only one right argument a student could make, with the instilling of virtue being one of the goals.

While Holmes and Walker’s rules for themes differ slightly from Brinsley’s, the purpose and use of themes between 1627 and 1801 seems to be consistent. Just as Brinsley sees the purpose of themes to be to instill virtue, Walker defines a theme as “the proving of some truth,” with the topics of themes relating to virtue and morals, which, according to Brinsley, might be instilled in pupils by the practice of writing themes on such topics. As the nineteenth century progressed, however, despite two or more centuries of relatively constant rules and purposes of themes, the rules, purposes, and definitions of themes would change considerably.

Development of Themes in the Nineteenth Century

Crowley, Berlin, and Kitzhaber firmly establish that in the first half of the nineteenth century Campbell, Blair, and Whately were widely read, having a profound influence on the development of current-traditional rhetoric. At this same time, Walker’s theme writing—the early ancestor of current-traditional theme writing of the early twentieth century—was also widespread in writing instruction. In the early nineteenth century, John Walker’s text retained a strong influence, with many imitators. Elizabeth Appleton, for instance, advocates for adopting Walker’s themes for educating girls in her 1815 book *Private Education; or a Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies.* After all, Walker’s subtitle indicated that his book was meant for “youth of both sexes.” Appleton points out that to successfully follow Walker’s rules for themes, pupils will
only need “a good knowledge of history and a few general good writers” (98). Ian Michael observes that the “seven-fold structure” for themes taught by Holmes and Walker was also taught by “P. H. Pullen, 1820; John Davis, 1830; R. G. Parker, 1832; Alexander Reid, 1839” (309).

Despite Walker’s followers, however, in the early decades of the nineteenth century teachers were beginning to advocate additional forms of the theme that were not strictly governed by the seven-part formula. This departure from the seven-part formula is likely due, in part, to the changing definition and understanding of theme. In his 1813 second edition of Rules for English Composition, and particularly for Themes, John Rippingham takes a broader view of what constitutes a theme: “A theme is only the miniature of a declamation, essay, oration, or sermon. In each of these species of composition, a subject is proposed, an inference drawn; and arguments adduced to support and authorize that conclusion. If no more be indispensable in these extended writings, neither can any thing further be necessary to constitute a theme” (19). Rippingham goes on to assert that the parts of the theme include the Definition, the Argument, and the Judgment (48-49). Although such a three-part formula was certainly rule-based, they were looser rules with fewer parts than earlier themes. These themes were written on “simple” subjects, such as Justice, Prudence, or Gratitude, unlike the propositions of Walker’s themes. Such themes on abstract topics, however, were certainly not “simple” to write, but were only simple in that the topics of such themes could be expressed briefly, usually in one word. They were also more expository than argumentative.

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3 The first edition was published in 1811.
Rippingham’s broader view of themes was similarly adopted by others. Notably, George Jardine, in his 1818 edition of *Outlines of Philosophical Education*, dedicates over 70 pages to a discussion of themes, which includes a broad view of what constitutes a theme, with several different classifications. As Winifred Bryan Horner observes, “In his method of theme assignments, Jardine recognized the necessity of ordering the assignments in degree of difficulty as the session progressed” (101). While Brinsley, Holmes, and Walker viewed themes as relating to some truth, partly for the infusion of virtue in students, Jardine viewed themes as having a much broader purpose. Dividing themes into five separate “orders,” each apparently building on the previous, Jardine sees themes as serving multiple educational purposes. As he puts it, the first three orders of themes have the object “to teach the student to acquire materials or elements of reasoning and communication” (326). These themes were also to help students master class content, principles of arrangement and classification, and to practice the process of critical investigation, which goes beyond instilling virtue. The fourth and fifth orders of themes were for more advanced students: students were “required to execute themes of a higher order, of which the object is, to communicate their knowledge to others, in compositions, by which certain subjects are explained or illustrated in all their parts, or by which the truth or falsehood of propositions is established by appropriate arguments” (327).

Although these themes were still structured and rule-based, the rules were more flexible, for, Jardine argues, “Rules prevent deviations and irregularities, but they cannot create inventions, or lead to any high degree of excellence” (344).  

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4 For more detailed examinations of Jardine’s pedagogy, see Horner’s *Nineteenth-Century Scottish Rhetoric* and Lynee Lewis Gaillet’s “George Jardine’s *Outlines of Philosophical Education*: Prefiguring
The fourth order of themes is particularly notable, which Jardine divides into *simple* and *complex* themes. Jardine, though, was not the inventor of simple and complex themes, as they had been present in some texts on logic for some time, including H. Curzon’s 1712 *Universal Library*, although not in connection with a form of written composition (101-2). Jardine, of course, taught logic and philosophy and so applied simple and complex themes to written composition in his pedagogy. After Jardine, other textbooks would adopt the distinction between simple and complex themes, such as William Russell in *A Grammar of Composition* (1823), although it is not clear if Jardine influenced others’ adoption of this distinction. According to Russell, “*A simple theme generally contains a subject expressed in a single word; as, Virtue, Patriotism, Honor,*” and “*A complex theme contains a proposition, or complete sentence; as, Virtue is respected, Patriotism is admired*” (135). The complex theme follows Holmes and Walker’s seven-part structure and makes a clear argument. The simple theme, however, makes no proposition, being primarily expository, has a subject that can usually be stated in a simple word, and is markedly different in structure with five parts: Definition, Cause, Relation to time, Relation to place, and Effects (136). Russell details the rules for these five parts:

1. When the subject requires explanation, *define, or explain* it.

2. Show in what the subject *originates*.

3. State the subject as it existed in ancient, and as it exists in modern times; or, in other words, give *a history of the subject.*
4. Show the *extent* of the subject; that is, whether it relates to the whole world, or to a particular part of it.

5. State the *effects* of the subject, as good or bad (136).

The five parts, Russell goes on to explain, might be reduced to three: the nature, the importance, and the effects of a subject (137). This plan for the simple theme is then illustrated by a sample theme on the subject of Peace, which, although bearing some similarities to the “complex themes” of Walker, is notably different:

1. **Definition.** Peace is the ultimate wish of all men.

2. **Cause.** For in whatever manner we desire to exercise our faculties, in the acquiring of knowledge, riches, or honors, we all look forward to a state of peace and tranquility, in which alone we think that we can enjoy them. In this happy state it is, that the merchant expects to enjoy his riches, the soldier to be secure from toils and dangers, and the statesman to lay aside his anxious cares.

3. **History.** So agreeable to the mind of man is a state of peace and tranquility, that all the poets of antiquity imagined such a state to have existed in the ages immediately subsequent to the creation of man, and to have continued till human depravity gave rise to discord and strife. The Divine Being has shown us, that he himself regards peace as one of the greatest benefits that can be conferred on man. Peace on earth was the benediction announced by the angels on the birth of the Saviour; and, at
his birth, under the reign of the Roman Emperor Augustus, the whole
world was in a state of peace.

4. **Extent.** In every well-ordered community, peace is the aim and
the enjoyment of all ranks; and it is only the prevalence of selfish feelings,
false views of honor, and corrupt passions, which prevents its being
enjoyed by all the nations of the earth.

5. **Effects.** Peace gives the human faculties liberty to expand
themselves; and it has been generally styled the Nurse of Arts; for, when a
nation is at peace, there are room, and leisure, and taste for improvements
of every kind.

But however desirable peace may be, it is found, when not
accompanied by virtue, to be productive of almost as many evils as war
itself. The riches acquired in peace, are apt to give a taste for luxury and
prodigality; and these excesses generally lead to prodigacy. The quiet and
ease which men enjoy in a state of peace, have a tendency to make them
careless and irreligious; and these dispositions open the way to every other
vice. It is in a state of peace that those feelings are cherished, which
generate war: security begets self-sufficiency; self-sufficiency, insolence,
and insolence, quarrels. Thus peace, the most desirable thing on earth,
may, by the depravity of those who are not virtuous enough to bear it,
become productive of the most dreadful scourge of human nature,—a state
of war. (137-39)
As is evident in Russell’s sample, the simple theme on an abstract topic was more expository than argumentative. Although by the end of the nineteenth century the topics and labels for types of themes would change, the early “simple” and “complex” themes were strikingly similar to the expository and argumentative themes of current-traditionalism, which were two of the four modes of discourse.

Russell’s simple and complex themes also reflect a broadened understanding and definition of what a theme was, which is evident in Rippingham and Jardine as well. The distinction between simple and complex themes was also made by S. E. Parker’s Logic, or The Art of Reason Simplified (1837) and Richard Hiley’s English Grammar, Style, Rhetoric, and Poetry (1846). Notably, while Hiley’s simple theme is largely the same as Russell’s, he divides it into six parts: definition, cause, antiquity or novelty, universality or locality, effects, and conclusion (201). Despite a difference in terminology and the addition of conclusion as a distinct part, Hiley’s six parts are essentially identical to Russell’s five.

Also departing from Walker’s seven-part theme, similar to Jardine and Russell, B. H. Smart distinguishes between unlimited and limited themes in Practical Logic, or Hints to Young Theme-Writers (1823). According to Smart, “An unlimited theme generally contains many theses; for whenever the writer goes into a new branch of his subject, he must lay down, or have in view, some new proposition, that is a new thesis. In a limited theme, there is but one main proposition, to which every other ought to be subservient” (71). Interestingly, what Smart terms the limited theme is identical to Jardine’s and Russell’s complex theme. Smart acknowledges that his understanding of themes is a
departure from Walker’s, with what Smart calls a Thesis (the limited theme) fitting Walker’s definition of a Theme, and the unlimited themes fitting what Walker called Regular Subjects. This difference from Walker is rooted in Smart’s broader definition of themes: “The Author of the present manual, believes he is better warranted in using Theme as a general name for all exercises in composition” (71). It is only the thesis (limited theme) that follows Walker’s rules. However, even when following such rules, Smart emphasizes that they do not need to be followed strictly. His rules for the unlimited theme, for instance, might be divided more loosely, as Rippingham does, into Definition, Arguments, and Judgment or Conclusion (79). While some educators adopted Smart’s distinction between unlimited and limited themes (such as J. W. Gilbart in Logic for the Million), most others who divided themes into multiple types would distinguish between the simple and complex theme, like Jardine and Russell.

Three decades after Smart and Russell, Robert and Thomas Armstrong describe a similar division of the types of themes, but with four types rather than two, in their 1853 text A Practical Introduction to English Composition, Part II. Although the Armstrongs do not name each type of theme beyond First Method, Second Method, etc., their themes are similar to Jardine’s and Russell’s simple and complex themes. While their first three methods vary slightly in structure, these methods are all for simple subjects. The first two methods focus on general topics such as Navigation, Agriculture, Newspapers, Commerce, Music, and Education, but with a slightly different structure for each method. The third method included topics of virtues and vices, such as Patriotism, Friendship, Anger, Avarice, and Envy.
Although themes in the mid nineteenth century differed from those that characterized early twentieth-century current-traditionalism, most notably in the later abandonment of the strict parts of themes, the genre was clearly evolving, not only with various types of themes, but also with a more inclusive definition of a *theme*. Somewhat like Jardine, the Armstrongs’ four methods for themes reflects a broader understanding of *theme* than earlier authors, such as Holmes and Walker, with the theme not being restricted to one or two particular types. After the Armstrongs, composition textbooks would continue to reflect the view that a theme was any short organized school composition, no longer listing the types or headings that should be included. For instance, in T. S. Pinneo’s 1864 *Pinneo’s Guide to Composition*, a theme is broadly defined as “the *subject* upon which a person writes or speaks” (146). While this definition seems to mean the *topic* of a composition, Pinneo’s illustrations of themes demonstrate compositions similar to what previous authors called the *simple theme*, with similar topics and structures, but not strictly adhering to the specific parts of either simple or complex themes.

William Scott Dalgleish’s 1864 edition of *English Composition in Prose and Verse* similarly defined a theme as “a series of paragraphs discussing the different parts of a subject, so arranged as to give a complete exposition of the whole subject of which it treats” (97). Like Pinneo, Dalgleish seems to have discarded the parts of a theme previous authors had listed. Dalgleish notes his departure from the more traditional approaches to themes: “The plans suggested for Theme writing will, it is believed, be found at once less ambitious and more practical,—more within the comprehension and the powers of school
boys and girls,—than those usually adopted” (7-8). Instead, Dalgleish describes the different elements of which themes are likely to consist, either combined or exclusively: Narrative Themes (which might include Incidental Themes, Biographical Themes, and Historical Themes), Descriptive Themes, Reflective Themes, Discursive Themes, and Argumentative Themes (which, similar to the complex theme, might include the introduction, proposition, proof, refutation, exhortation, and recapitulation) (97-120).

Notably, Dalgleish’s types of themes include three of the four “modes of discourse,” which would become the central types of themes in composition classes of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. In addition, he defines themes as including an “exposition” of the topic. Composition historians Kitzhaber, Connors, and Crowley emphasize the importance of the modes in the classification of discourse in rhetorical theory in the nineteenth century, crediting Alexander Bain as popularizing them, having borrowed them from Campbell. However, in addition to their role in nineteenth-century rhetorical theory, the modes also became types of themes, as Dalgleish illustrates. As assignment genres, then, the modes evolved from theme writing as the theme broadened to include different types of themes, beginning with the distinction between simple themes, which were expository, and complex themes, which were argumentative. The adoption of the modes as central theme writing assignments by the end of the nineteenth century is better understood when they are also viewed as assignment genres that evolved from earlier assignment genres.

Other educators in the second half of the nineteenth century who adopted similar broad views of the theme with looser rules included Alonzo Reed and Brainerd Kellogg
(1877), whose advice on structure was to “find the natural order in which these points should stand” (271). Although at the beginning of the nineteenth century the theme was more narrowly defined with its specific parts, at the end of the nineteenth century theme had become a more general term for a short school composition on a narrow topic, with looser rules for structure. It was with this absence of the previous strict parts of the theme and the inclusion of various types of themes, including the four modes of discourse, that the freshman composition course would be established at Harvard in 1885, largely in response to students’ poor performances on Harvard’s written entrance examinations.

The Theme Merges with the Essay

Although writing assignments for composition courses in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were most frequently called themes, they were sometimes called essays, which is the term more commonly used today. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, before what constituted a theme broadened, theme and essay were distinctly different forms of composition. Ian Michael observes that the theme was “the older, classical form that originally covered all forms of pupils’ prose and verse composition,” which would be “reasoned, impersonal and serious” (309). An essay, on the other hand, “carried for a long time its literal sense of an attempt: a piece of writing that did not profess to be finished or systematic,” very much like the essays of the sixteenth-century essayist Michel de Montaigne (309). Walker’s Teacher’s Assistant represents the essay as a form of composition more difficult than the theme, being without such clear rules, and recommends assigning students such compositions after they become more advanced writers (156). Writing in 1842, G. F. Graham described the
essay as being less common than other forms of writing, which “differs from the theme, as its divisions are arranged more according to the will of the writer, than in the latter composition, where a stricter regard to close reasoning is required” (303). A decade later, Robert and Thomas Armstrong would emphasize the same distinction: “A Theme is an exercise in which the subject is treated according to a Set of Heads methodically arranged. In this respect it differs from the Essay, wherein the writer is at liberty to follow his own inclination as to the arrangement of his ideas” (103).

However, as the nineteenth century progressed, even as the Armstrongs emphasized a difference, the distinction between theme and essay began to blur. By the end of the nineteenth century, theme and essay would be practically synonymous in many composition textbooks. Michael describes some of the main factors for this blending of terms:

Various factors weakened the distinction: chiefly that a topic could be treated either as an essay or as a theme. Montaigne wrote on cruelty and Bacon on superstition, but either subject could be treated as a theme. A second factor was the reputation of [Joseph] Addison. He called some of his papers “essays” (Spectator no. 476) and they could all easily be so regarded. This, as it were, let the essay into school. A further factor was the gradual rejection during the nineteenth century of the seven-fold structure to which the theme had traditionally been restricted. A prescribed structure that was more than Beginning, Middle and End was felt to be too rigid; but as an essay also required a beginning, middle and end the
difference between theme and essay was further weakened. By the time the essay had lost some of its personal quality and the theme had lost most of its formal structure the terms no longer signified a clear distinction.

(309) Although topics might be treated as either themes or essays, textbooks in the later nineteenth century discussed essays as rule-based forms of composition, more akin to themes than attempts. With both themes and essays being represented as rule-based forms of composition, primarily in schools, the terms began to take on similar, often the same, meanings. As early as 1839, some authors’ definitions and descriptions of essays were already closely resembling themes, such as Alexander Reid’s in *Rudiments of English Composition*. Reid’s section on essays gives instructions on both Narrative and Descriptive Essays, as well as Miscellaneous Essays. While the topics of these essays are similar to those of themes, they are also similar in structure, which is evident in the sample essays provided in the book. Most notably, in Section IV on Miscellaneous Essays, Reid details a method with five parts: Definition, Cause, Antiquity or Novelty, Universality or Locality, and Effects (129). These parts closely match the five parts of William Russell’s simple theme. Reid immediately follows this in Section V on Miscellaneous Essays with the seven parts of a complex theme (131). What is most notable is that Reid called these essays, making no mention of theme.

This blurring of the difference between essay and theme was certainly not complete, as some authors like the Armstrongs, and William Swinton (1874, 1877), who borrowed heavily from the Armstrongs, continued to distinguish between the two. Others
at the end of the nineteenth century, however, made less distinction. Timothy Bancroft (1884), for instance, describes a broader definition of essay, which would include compositions like themes: “The term Essay signifies a trial or proof, and applies to any brief paper upon popular themes of the day” (5). William Davidson and Joseph Alcock (1884) equate the terms: “The Theme or Essay is a series of paragraphs on some given subjects, arranged in logical order” (181).

As the nineteenth century progressed, with the definition of theme broadening to mean almost any short composition for school, the strict rules for the structures of the different types of themes were dropped in most textbooks, although there were still clearly delineated types of themes, including the four modes of discourse. Michael’s assertion that the similarity of topics for both essays and themes primarily contributed to the blurred distinction may be true. However, the genres of essay and theme may also have largely merged because the essay’s looser rules began to tighten, and the theme’s tight rules began to loosen.\(^5\)

Theme Writing in the United States

Although the textual evidence for theme writing’s development is primarily in British and Scottish texts, it is important to understand that American education and textbooks were highly dependent on such texts in the early nineteenth century. Connors observes that “Britain continued to dominate American language instruction long after

\(^5\) The blending of theme and essay only applies to school genres. The literary essay in the tradition of Montaigne was separate from what became the school essay. However, coinciding with the merging of theme and essay, Ned Stuckey-French describes how in the second half of the nineteenth century, the traditional essay was declining, with fewer people being interested in reading them: “Societal changes, most often associated with a new, faster pace of life, were seen as the biggest threat” (42). The decline of the essay in this period and the evolution of the theme to its state at the end of the nineteenth century are likely connected, with changes in society and literacy affecting both.
she had ceased to dominate America politically” (Composition-Rhetoric 71). Kitzhaber, Connors, Berlin, Crowley, and others have observed the influence of Scottish and British rhetoricians on American rhetoric in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly Hugh Blair, George Campbell, and Richard Whately, who are central to composition histories’ theoretical background of current-traditional rhetoric. American editions of these authors’ works were used in rhetorical education throughout the nineteenth century.

Beyond Campbell, Blair, and Whately, however, many other British textbooks were also published in the United States, such as Walker’s Teacher’s Assistant in 1810, which was an important influence on American writing instruction. In addition to such reprinting, however, American composition textbook authors frequently borrowed heavily from their Scottish and British counterparts, sometimes with no acknowledgement. For instance, Lucille Schultz points out that many nineteenth-century writers include ideas and portions of Whately’s Elements of Rhetoric, with some giving full acknowledgement to Whately, while others would “borrow silently” (112). American textbooks that addressed theme writing would also generally borrow from British sources, such as William Swinton, whose treatment of themes is taken directly from Robert and Thomas Armstrong, whom Swinton only acknowledges briefly in his textbooks’ introductory notes.

Whether or not American textbook authors acknowledged their British sources, the practice of theme writing that had such a long history in English education also held an important place in writing instruction in the United States in the nineteenth century in
both early education and college-level instruction. With a long history and tradition, despite evolving in form, some educators, like many educators today, clung to forms of writing instruction that were long-established. Carr, Carr, and Schultz’s *Archives of Instruction*, as well as Schultz’s *The Young Composers*, clearly illustrate that writing instruction for the young included theme writing, which is also evident in early textbooks’ discussions of the purposes of themes, including Brinsley and Walker.

Although theme writing would most clearly be a part of college-level composition instruction after Harvard’s establishment of the first-year composition course in the 1880s, theme writing was already common in college-level writing instruction earlier in the nineteenth century. This is clearly evidenced in college course catalogues, including Harvard’s. Harvard’s 1837-38 catalogue, for instance, lists “English composition of Themes” as part of English Grammar for sophomores (25). Decades later, in their 1874-75 catalogue, theme writing is still present, listing six themes as being prescribed for Prof. Hill’s sophomore rhetoric course and Prof. Child’s junior rhetoric course (54). Other colleges’ course catalogues also listed theme writing as part of the curriculum. Brown University, for instance, describes themes as part of the rhetoric course for the 1836-37 academic year: “Themes are furnished by Sophomores once in two weeks,—by Juniors and Seniors once in two weeks, one half the class every week” (19). Later in the century, Ohio’s Antioch College, for the 1873-74 academic year, lists “Themes and Elocution” as the focus of First Year Rhetoric and English Literature and “Themes and Orations” as the focus of the Fourth Year: “Practice in Theme writing and Elocution is required throughout the College course” (15). With theme writing having been present in
American college courses for much of the nineteenth century, it was firmly entrenched in higher education before Harvard’s implementation of a theme-based first-year composition course.

Responses to Theme Writing

With the widespread use of theme writing in the nineteenth century, many educators lauded the perceived benefits. Earlier writers, such as Brinsley in the seventeenth century and Walker at the beginning of the nineteenth century, emphasized the purpose of themes as being to instill virtue in students. This purpose is reflected in the earlier structure of themes being to prove some proposition on some moral or virtue—what other writers called a complex theme. As the form of the theme evolved, however, educators’ praises for the theme also took a different tone. In 1843, for instance, James Pycroft praised the theme not for its instilling of virtue, but for its role in student learning: “Theme-writing renders our knowledge available, it convinces us of our ignorance, makes us treasure up what we read, for argument and illustration when we write” (143). In 1855, H. Trays sees themes as exercises just for practicing and improving writing skills, citing theme writing as “an important exercise for youth” (84). Citing other benefits to theme writing, G. F. Graham writes in 1842, “Its great effect is, that it teaches the pupil to think correctly. It is not so efficacious in making him write elegantly, as in assisting his mind to arrive at just conclusions upon things in general. That this is an important object no one can possibly deny” (14). Graham’s praise for the theme might be compared to current-day goals for critical thinking in composition courses.
Graham’s acknowledgment of the benefits of theme writing for students’ logic and thinking, however, comes only after his comments on the faults of the theme and the inability of theme writing to achieve the purposes other educators had cited of inculcating good morals and virtue:

This form of composition has long enjoyed a popularity of which it is wholly undeserving, though not so great a favourite with the pupil as with the teacher. It is not an easy exercise even to those who have had some practice in writing, but it presents peculiar difficulties to the beginner; and when we consider the natural reluctance of the young to any sort of composition, it is no wonder that their dislike to it should be confirmed by the very unattractive shape in which it has been first laid before them.

It has been argued that the theme is useful in a moral point of view, as it leads the young to reflect upon the nature and effects of right and wrong, and exercises as salutary influence over their moral conduct. If this were the certain result of such an exercise, no one could hesitate to admit its utility; but I not only entertain strong doubts of the fact, but even think it very questionable whether general disquisitions upon virtue or vice have any practical effect upon the youthful mind. With the young, as, indeed, with those of more advanced age, example is more efficacious than precept, and I do not believe that all the themes that were ever written have contributed to effect the least moral improvement in any one of the children who composed them.
Besides this, it should be remembered that the theme is a form of composition never likely to be of much practical utility in after life. A knowledge of theme-writing will be of no assistance in writing a letter or a description, neither is it indispensable to the construction of a sermon or a moral treatise. (13-14)

Graham’s lengthy and honest critique of theme writing emphasizes what many educators today might say regarding school genres, such as the five-paragraph essay, which students generally dislike and which will be of little use outside school. Despite his criticism of the theme, and his contradiction of previous educators’ views on the value of theme writing, Graham includes a section on themes in his textbook due to his recognition of their possible benefits for thinking and logic.

While Graham’s critique of the theme is not a condemnation, others in the nineteenth century would be harsher. Writing in 1817, W. Shepherd, J. Joyce, and Lant Carpenter view the theme as too restrictive and “feel strong doubts as to the propriety of shackling the minds of young people with those kinds of forms” (239). In contrast, Alexander Bain writes in an 1869 article in *The Fortnightly Review*, “I cannot but entertain great doubts as to the value of essay writing or theme writing, considered as a discipline in style. The finding of the material absorbs half or more than half of the pupil’s attention, so that the consideration of the style is quite secondary and subsidiary: in fact, such essays belong to scientific rather than literary classes” (209). Bain seems to think style is primary, similar to the attention to style and grammar in current-traditional pedagogy, disliking the efforts students must put forth in researching and discovering
what to say. Although such criticisms of theme writing in the nineteenth century should not be surprising, for any form of composition instruction has its critics, such criticism is also instructive of the differing mindsets of teachers regarding the goals and purposes of theme writing. Theme writing changed in response to both viewpoints, for its restrictive structural rules that included five to seven parts relaxed by the end of the nineteenth century, but an emphasis on style, which Bain valued, became an important part of current-traditional writing instruction.

Understanding Theme Writing’s Development

Previous histories of composition have given inadequate attention to the background and history of the writing assignments that would be central to writing instruction of the early twentieth century and current-traditional rhetoric. While this short history of theme writing up to the late nineteenth century helps address that inadequacy, like any history, it is also certainly limited and incomplete. It has focused to a large degree on the evolving form of the theme, with some attention to what was behind the changes and evolution of that form. However, it is impossible to address all the influences on its evolution. Like any genre, the theme has never been a static form. Amy Devitt points out that since genres “reflect their cultural, situational, and generic contexts, and since those contexts change over time, genres, too, must change over time” (89). Further, Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin observe that genres are “inherently dynamic, constantly (if gradually) changing over time in response to the sociocognitive needs of individual users” (481). While this history of theme writing does not offer a clear picture into the “sociocognitive needs of individual users” of the theme, as these
needs cannot be known with certainty, we can still conjecture as to these needs and the reasons behind the evolution of the theme. As Amy Devitt puts it, “Changes in the theme...can illustrate how genres can act as...metaphorical tree rings...—signs that some cultural change must have occurred that merits investigation” (107).

It has already been established that the earlier forms of the theme—those of Brinsley, Holmes, and Walker—were meant to inculcate virtue in students. However, as Graham’s 1842 critique of themes illustrates, some educators saw such a purpose for themes as being unattainable. Rather, they viewed themes as exercises that would encourage correct and logical thinking. After Walker, some teachers such as Rippingham, Jardine, and Russell adopted simpler forms of the theme, beginning to distinguish between the simple and complex theme—a distinction that had been made in logic, though not necessarily for written composition, since at least the seventeenth century. Although explanations of the reasoning behind this distinction are limited, this adoption of simple and complex written themes might reflect educators’ changing needs and goals for the theme in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Rather than using the theme to instill good morals and virtue in students, they desired students’ practice in logic, organization, and thinking, which the different types of themes might better accomplish.

Noting the changing trends in educational theory by the second half of the nineteenth century, Kitzhaber offers some possible reasons for teachers’ changing ideas, which influenced their changing goals for theme writing. He notes that “developments in rhetorical theory and practice were tied quite closely to the changes taking place in educational philosophy” (1). These changes included a decline in the religious influence
on schools and the increasing influence of science and technology (6-12). Earlier goals of theme writing to help inculcate virtue are certainly connected to religion, and so as that influence declined, teachers’ goals evolved. In addition, the rhetorical theory of Campbell, Blair, and Whately and their faculty psychology, which composition’s macrohistories address at length, also had some influence on the changing goals and viewpoints of educators. Berlin notes that societal and economic changes after the Civil War also influenced education. Examining such effects on higher education, he says, “The ‘new’ university had arisen to provide an agency for certifying the members of the new professions, professions that an expanding economy had created” (21). While the old university had been more elitist, preparing privileged students for the law, medicine, and the church, the “new university encouraged a meritocracy, opening its doors to anyone who could meet the entrance requirements” (21). In addition to such changes in higher education, in The Evolution of College English Thomas P. Miller also connects changes in education and in the field of English to changing literacies (4-5). As higher education and writing instruction changed in response to these outside influences, theme writing seems to have evolved along with it to better meet the needs of students and teachers.

As the nineteenth century progressed, teachers also recognized the limitations of the rule-based theme writing. Even with the distinction between simple and complex themes, with specific parts and rules, authors like Jardine saw these rules as limiting, and not needing to be adhered to at all times. As the nineteenth century progressed, with such educators holding such sentiments, the rules for theme writing began to relax, and by the 1880s most textbooks that included themes no longer listed such explicit rules and parts.
By the time Harvard established its first-year composition theme-based course in 1885, the theme had developed a relatively broad meaning that would include almost any short composition exercise for school. Although the distinction between simple and complex themes, as well as the strict parts of the theme, had been largely dropped from most composition textbooks, other forms of themes were emerging, such as the modes of discourse. As the theme evolved by the mid-nineteenth century to include different types of themes, including simple themes, complex themes, and the modes of discourse, theme began to lose its meaning as an individual genre, splitting into multiple forms.

The theme’s development in the nineteenth century, beyond being rooted in the changing needs of its users, is also connected to the theme’s connection with other school genres. Devitt observes that “the history of the theme is a history of its interaction with other genres; the history of the individual genre is still a history of a context of genres” (106). Most notably, the theme’s “interaction” with the essay may be behind the relaxation of the theme’s rules and the tightening of the rules for the school essay. The more traditional literary essay certainly existed apart from school assignments, but in the school setting, with some similarities in the topics of themes and essays, as Michael observes, the genres did not remain separate. Instead, in their interaction with each other, they merged.

With the theme’s definition encompassing most forms of school composition, Devitt observes that “the status of the theme as a genre is, of course, open to dispute” (106). She argues, however, that “judged by the standard of whether a genre is recognized by its users, the theme meets the criteria of a genre” (117). This, however,
would assume a broad understanding of what constitutes a genre, being somewhat equivalent to arguing that a student paper is an individual genre. This short history illustrates that while the early theme was an individual genre, it evolved into multiple related genres which were different forms of themes. By the end of the nineteenth century, when first-year composition was born, the theme writing of the composition course really consisted of a set of genres, or an assignment genre set (see Chapter 3).

This history of theme writing is important background for understanding the assignment genres central to current-traditional writing instruction at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Although composition’s macrohistories have already established the theoretical origins of current-traditional epistemology, particularly its indebtedness to Campbell, Blair, and Whately, knowing the origins of the assignment genres themselves adds to our field’s understanding of its history. The theme assignment genres of current-traditional writing instruction come from a long tradition of theme writing with deep roots in English education and classical rhetoric. Tracing the evolution of theme writing up to the late nineteenth century, this history also demonstrates Tzvetan Todorov’s point that genres come from other genres. “A new genre,” he observes, “is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several: by inversion, by displacement, by combination” (15). The four modes of discourse central to current-traditional instruction, for instance, emerged as theme writing genres as the theme split into multiple forms. This evolution of theme writing, then, is instructive for recognizing the role and place of current-traditional theme writing genres. While theme writing’s evolution was due to many factors, as discussed above, we can recognize that
the theme genres were indebted to theme writing of the past, which also can help us see that assignment genres today must be indebted to assignment genres of the past (see Chapter 5). With this background and history of theme writing now established, Chapters 3 and 4 will examine the establishment of the theme system, its characteristics, and theme assignment genres.
CHAPTER 3: THE THEME SYSTEM

In Chapter 2, I examined the history of theme writing, tracing it from sixteenth-century English education to the late nineteenth century. In reviewing theme writing’s history, I argued that this history of the assignment genres that characterized writing instruction in the early decades of first-year composition is important background to this period of writing instruction, particularly when viewed through the lens of assignments. With this background in mind, Chapter 3 re-examines and revises the Harvard narrative of composition history, focusing broadly on the kinds of writing assignments that characterized Harvard’s approach, which, when imitated by institutions across the United States, formed a theme system. In Chapter 4, I will analyze the specific assignments of Harvard’s English A, as described in Copeland and Rideout’s widely used book-length description of the course.

Writing assignments in composition programs at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, made up primarily of themes, formed a system of writing instruction as first-year composition and Harvard’s approach spread. As I said in Chapter 1, we might accurately call this system of writing instruction a “theme system,” for not only was it the dominant and widespread approach at the beginning of the twentieth century, but teachers and scholars at the time recognized composition instruction of the time as being part of a “theme system.” For instance, in discussing a potential graduate program in rhetoric in 1900, W. E. Mead quotes one report that rejects the idea of such a program including theme writing, as “graduate Rhetoric would be simply an extension of
the theme system now used with undergraduates” (xxix; emphasis added). Others, including J. F. A. Pyre and Bernard DeVoto also recognized the “theme system.”

Distinguishing the widespread approach to writing instruction as a theme system offers an alternative characterization of this pivotal time in composition history. With this lens we can not only gain a more complete understanding of our history, but we can also more easily recognize what current pedagogies and assignments are indebted to this period of writing instruction. Although the early decades of first-year composition have been primarily characterized by the current-traditional focus on correctness, which certainly was central to writing instruction, it is also important for composition histories to recognize other important elements of writing instruction and ways of viewing this period. By reexamining and revising the dominant Harvard-centered narrative in terms of a system of assignments—an assignment genre system—and the way the assignment genres formed and influenced early first-year composition, we can begin to rethink this period of writing instruction and its relation to current practice.

In Chapter 3, then, I argue that despite the recent scholarly trend to focus on local and alternative histories that complicate the Harvard narrative, this dominant narrative needs to be reexamined through the lens of the theme system and its genres and its formation from Harvard’s approach to first-year composition. Rather than only viewing this period through its current-traditional over-focus on correctness, we can recognize how it can also be characterized by a theme-based approach to writing instruction. In making this argument, I first examine Harvard’s role and influence on the spread of a theme approach to writing instruction across the United States and establish that
Harvard’s approach formed what some educators of the time called a “theme system.” I then review responses to this theme system of both students and teachers, illustrating that in addition to their emphasis on correctness, there was also considerable concern with the effectiveness of theme assignments to teach writing and the labor of teachers in grading so many assignments. I go on to examine factors that contributed to the evolution and continuance of the theme system. Finally, I apply genre theory principles to analyze the theme system’s establishment and development.

Harvard, Theme Writing, and the Development of First-Year Composition

In reexamining the Harvard narrative by considering the theme assignment genres that characterized it, this section establishes Harvard’s role in the spread of a theme-writing-based first-year composition and the development of a theme system. Previous macrohistories have recognized Harvard as the originator of first-year composition and the most influential school on writing instruction. According to the Harvard narrative, in 1885 Harvard began its requirement for students to take a first-year rhetoric class focused on written composition. Composition historians Kitzhaber, Connors, Crowley, and Berlin have already clearly established that this implementation of first-year composition courses was largely in response to the poor writing and grammar of most incoming students, which gained particular attention as the result of a growing student body and the results of the implementation of a written entrance examination around 1874. With students’ poor performances on these entrance examinations, particularly with grammar and mechanics, one major focus of the first-year composition course came to be correctness—the current-traditional pedagogy that later came to characterize that period
of writing instruction that many composition scholars now widely condemn. Harvard’s implementation of a first-year composition course requirement influenced other institutions, and so by the 1890s this requirement became the norm at most major colleges and universities. According to Kitzhaber, “Harvard helped establish the pattern that nearly all other colleges would be following by the end of the century. From 1875-1900, the most influential English program in America was Harvard’s” (32-33). Brereton also observes, “Most colleges followed Harvard in replacing the traditional required rhetorical work spread over four years with a single year-long required first-year course; this is the freshman composition course that by 1900 had taken hold almost everywhere” (13). Additionally, many universities adopted what became popular composition textbooks written by Harvard faculty: Adams Sherman Hill and Barrett Wendell. To some degree, then, the field of rhetoric and composition has seen Harvard as the parent of first-year composition and of current-traditional pedagogy. Brereton observes, “[I]t is to Harvard that we must look for the rationale behind the rise of composition” (8).

As I briefly examine in Chapter 1, however, recent scholarship has complicated and challenged this Harvard narrative with local microhistories of writing instruction, most notably Patricia Donahue and Gretchen Flesher Moon’s edited collection *Local Histories*, and David Gold’s *Rhetoric at the Margins*. In *Local Histories* Kathleen A. Welsh emphasizes that Harvard’s model “represents just one configuration among many” (15). Similarly, in her local history of Butler University, Heidemarie Z. Weidner contends, “Butler University compellingly shows that the nation did not always follow

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6 This trend in local histories is also reflected in many dissertations in recent years, including those of Ryan Skinnell (Arizona State University), Nathan Shepley (Ohio University), and Katherine Tirabassi (University of New Hampshire).
Harvard and that composition historians must research a variety of institutions to compose a broader picture of writing instruction in the nineteenth century” (58-59). Such local histories and challenges to the Harvard narrative are valuable contributions to composition history, but there is also more to be learned from Harvard’s role.

While composition histories have recognized Harvard’s role in the establishment of first-year composition, what is less recognized is Harvard’s role in the development of the writing assignments in first-year composition that characterized current-traditional rhetoric and pedagogy. Some scholars, of course, such as Brereton and Connors, have given some attention to this. Further, John Michael Wozniak points out that Harvard’s first-year English course spread rapidly, and “[w]hile some installed it bodily, others incorporated its major features” (128). Harvard’s approach focused largely on theme writing, with “daily themes” and longer fortnightly themes. Although the best-known histories of composition recognize the use of theme writing, it is really little more than an acknowledgment of the fact that students wrote themes and that the “daily theme” became popular. For instance, Kitzhaber observes that around the 1890s, “the ‘daily theme’ became a regular fixture of rhetoric courses on the theory that only constant practice would arrest ‘the growing illiteracy of American boys’” (86). Similarly, Berlin notes that in the 1890s, “paragraph instruction and the daily theme became the center of the classroom” (Nineteenth-Century 73). Despite such recognition of theme writing, however, there has been little attention to the larger curricular context of the theme and its centrality to Harvard’s approach.
When Harvard’s role in the establishment of first-year composition is viewed through the lens of its assignments rather than just correctness, the essential role of theme writing becomes clear. Around 1885, when first-year composition courses began, Harvard’s Barrett Wendell, who authored the popular textbook of lectures *English Composition* (1891), implemented what he called the “daily theme” in his upper-level composition course *English 12*. Unlike the “theme writing” that was already a part of composition pedagogy, these “daily themes” were shorter, perhaps 100 words or less, in which students detailed some idea or observation. It was, essentially, Wendell’s way of making students practice writing daily, with six such themes every week. While the daily theme might not have been adopted in first-year composition the same year, it was certainly not long before it was. In addition to these daily themes, longer fortnightly themes were assigned, which, unlike the daily themes, fit more closely in the tradition of theme writing that had been practiced in composition instruction in some form since at least the sixteenth century.

At the 1893 Meeting of the New England Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools, Wendell described his creation and purpose of the “daily theme” in his Harvard classes:

The daily theme, as it exists at Harvard college, started in one of my courses perhaps eight or nine years ago. It was suggested to my mind by talking with a friend who was connected with a Boston newspaper. . . . Acting on this suggestion, I introduced in my elective course the practice of requiring from every student a daily theme, which consists of a single
page of probably fifty to a hundred words stating, so far as possible, in the broadest sense, what that man has observed during the day. It may be something he has seen, it may be something he has thought about. The only requisites are that the subject shall be a matter of observation during the day when it is written, that the expression of it shall not exceed a hundred words or so, and that the style shall be fluent and agreeable. . . .

Throughout the year, of course, in addition to their daily themes, my pupils do ordinary rhetorical work once a fortnight, which is carefully corrected. The daily work is intended to stimulate regular habits of observation in writing. (659, 654)

As Wendell’s description indicates, the daily theme differed greatly from more traditional theme writing of earlier in the nineteenth century. Even with a broader understanding and definition of themes by 1885, whereby almost any school composition was called a theme, Wendell’s “daily theme” was less formal (although still subject to some correction) and could be on almost any topic. As Chapter 2 details, earlier theme writing was meant to instill virtue and then critical thinking, unlike Wendell’s purpose for the daily theme. Despite the daily theme’s difference from more traditional themes, however, it was still considered a theme, and so with the additional longer and more formal fortnightly themes, Wendell’s course became a class in theme writing, which is also illustrated in Harvard course catalogues of the time.7

7 With Wendell being the originator of the daily theme, which would become an important characteristic of Harvard’s influential English A, he has been critiqued as one of the influential figures who, as Thomas Newkirk puts it, “helped usher in the dark night of the current-traditional paradigm” (21). However, Newkirk argues against this vision of Wendell:
Although composition histories already recognize that colleges and universities imitated Harvard’s requirement for first-year composition, it is also important to recognize that many institutions also imitated Harvard’s theme writing approach, including not only the formal longer themes but also the daily theme. Reflecting back on forty years of teaching college composition, Herbert L. Creek writes in 1955,

> *Modern* composition teaching began, I presume, about 1884, when Barrett Wendell introduced the famed ‘daily theme’ at Harvard. Of course there were themes earlier, but the idea of the daily theme was new. It quickly spread throughout the colleges of the country, where it usually took the form of a semi-weekly or weekly essay. How fast it spread, I am unable to say, but probably not fast enough. (4)

It was not merely the introduction of first-year composition that was the start of “modern” composition, as Creek puts it, but the introduction and spread of the daily theme. Robert C. Kelley observes in 1914 that when the daily theme was introduced, it “was then a novelty,” but “has since spread all over the country and is still in force in many colleges and secondary schools” (40). While Creek recalls several colleges where it took some time for the daily theme approach to be adopted, he notes that in his own

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He is, in fact, sharply critical of approaches which reduce writing to technical forms, effacing the personality of the writer. In his criticism of the standard modal approach, Wendell anticipates arguments that will be made eighty years later by Kinneavy and the research team led by James Britton. And in [an unpublished] chapter we see Wendell, again and again, trying to rescue composition teaching from overly elaborate and rigid schemes that might encumber the writer. (21)

Kelley also describes an origin of the daily theme that differs from Wendell’s account, placing it as starting around 1899-1900: “Professor Barrett Wendell was the originator of it. He had previously tried writing daily themes during the summer in order to acquire speed and dash in writing. He liked the experiment so well that he had it introduced into English A” (40). Wendell’s account is almost certainly more accurate.
experience “the theme-writing course was well established in the Middle West by the beginning of the twentieth century” (5). For instance, the 1897-98 course catalogue for the University of Notre Dame describes the rhetoric course as including a focus on the four modes of discourse, daily themes through much of the year, and use of Hill’s *Principles of Rhetoric* as the textbook, much like Harvard’s *English A* course (40). Similarly, a 1907 description of “The New English Course” at Lafayette details a theme course modeled after Harvard’s (113-14). As such schools adopted the daily theme as part of the theme writing course, in addition to longer themes in the four modes of discourse, some explicitly gave credit to Harvard as the originator of this approach. J. F. A. Pyre, for instance, notes that in 1898 at the University of Wisconsin, “the work in English Composition was reorganized” and “the Harvard ‘theme system’ was introduced” (296).

As both Creek and Kelley observe, Harvard’s theme approach was incredibly influential, being adopted by schools across the United States. A 1902 book review in the *Journal of Education* of Copeland and Rideout’s *Freshman English and Theme-Correcting in Harvard College* lauds Harvard’s method and influence on the teaching of composition:

Harvard teaching of English is little short of sensational in its results. The instructors in English at Harvard College have developed a unique system of instruction and training in composition, with results so successful that the Harvard course in daily themes has become widely known, and is

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9 I examine Harvard’s *English A* course in detail in Chapter 4.
copied, so far as possible, by teachers in high schools and colleges all over the country. (143)

Certainly many educators at the time would disagree that Harvard’s approach was “sensational in its results,” but what is clear is that Harvard had a great influence on the approach to composition instruction and that primary sources of the time explicitly name the theme writing assignments as a defining characteristic. Further, in a 1916 article, “The ‘Harvard Spirit’ in English,” Professor T. H. Brewer offers his own narrative of Harvard’s and Wendell’s influence: “Barrett Wendell develops a practical scheme for teaching composition to freshmen, and writing daily themes becomes the method of most of the large institutions of the country. A flood of books on the subject of composition follows, not many of which depart very far from Wendell’s ideas and methods” (10).

In the “flood of books on the subject of composition” that Brewer describes, many would include instructions and reasoning for the daily theme in addition to the types of themes assigned as fortnightly themes. John Quackenbos’s *Practical Rhetoric* (1896), for instance, in addition to including the modes of discourse, recommends the use of daily themes (256). Similarly, Charles Sears Baldwin’s *A College Manual of Rhetoric* includes a section with complete directions for the use of daily themes in a course (332-35). Other textbooks would also reflect this spread of the daily theme. Certainly, the daily theme was not the only characteristic of the theme approach, nor the most significant part of it. The textbooks adopted for these theme courses clearly give most of their focus to longer themes. With so many daily themes being required, however, with up to six every week, the daily theme received significant attention. It was, perhaps most importantly,
something new, credited as Harvard’s invention, and so while there were other central parts of the Harvard theme course, which I examine in detail in the next chapter, the daily theme was seen as a central part of Harvard’s approach into the first decade of the twentieth century.

Perhaps the main reason for the quick spread of Harvard’s theme approach was that educators perceived it to be an effective method of teaching composition. What some would see as grueling drill and an over-focus on form and correctness, others saw as a systematic approach that was the answer to the ever-present problem of students who could not write with correct English. Although I am reexamining the Harvard narrative through the lens of the theme assignments that formed a theme system, I still recognize that a focus on correctness was central to composition pedagogy at this time. According to Crowley, students’ inability to write correctly was one of the primary reasons Harvard moved its required rhetoric from the sophomore level to the first-year, making its central focus the composition of themes (*Composition in the University* 72-73).

Some in higher education, of course, blamed high schools and secondary schools for students’ poor writing, and so it should not be surprising that Harvard’s daily theme and the theme approach to teaching composition gained traction in some elementary schools and high schools, partly in response to such criticism. In his contribution to the 1903 “Report on Courses of Study in English for Public Schools,” Perley Horne, in discussing “The Upper Grammar and the High-School Grades,” enthusiastically endorses the daily theme approach: “[D]aily theme work, properly handled, produces better results than any other method I have tried or have seen others try. . . . I confidently believe that
the day is not far distant when all the better schools in New England will give courses in daily themes” (762). He further asserts, “I should give up any other course of study in my school more willingly than the course in daily themes” (763). Later, of course, as the theme system evolved, many schools would give up the daily theme. The first decade of the twentieth century, when Horne bestows his praises on the daily theme was, as Wozniak phrases it, “the hey-day of the daily theme” (130).10

Others, in endorsing the use of theme writing in early education, note the spread of the theme system beyond the higher institutions. Caroline N. Poole observes in the *Journal of Education* in 1906 that “a successful system of theme writing has been introduced into high schools and colleges” (347). Elizabeth Kemper Adams, writing in 1904, points out that with the adoption of the theme approach in teaching elementary school composition, “A ‘theme’ once a week became the ideal and in most cases the attainment of the schools; while some ambitious institutions, fired by the example of the Harvard ‘daily theme,’ provided for even more numerous written exercises” (391). Reflecting on the adoption of the theme approach, Adams views the previous approach as inferior: “The old system—or lack of system—of long, formal compositions written at infrequent and irregular intervals, of subjects calling for vague moralizing or crude digests of books of reference, of arbitrary and trivial criticism, if any, had given away all along the line to more rational and orderly methods of instruction” (391). Unlike the “old system,” the theme system not only included more frequent themes, but also the abandonment of the “simple” themes that had been used for much of the nineteenth

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10 Although daily themes were declining by the 1920s, they have still not gone completely out of use. Yale continues to offer a course in Daily Themes (English 450) as a creative writing class. The class is not open to freshmen.
century. As Chapter 2 demonstrates, earlier forms of themes required students to apply other elements of their education by including religious, historical, and classical examples. The “more rational and orderly methods of instruction” of the theme system, as Adams puts it, focus more on frequent practice, correctness, and style, which might be both written and graded more quickly.

While there are certainly many reasons for Harvard’s influence on composition instruction across the United States, including Harvard’s reputation and prestige, the spread of entrance examinations and the Harvard Reports may have had some influence on the spread of the theme approach. Even before Harvard moved rhetoric to the first-year, Kitzhaber describes how an entrance examination was established in 1874 that stressed correctness (34-35). Kitzhaber observes, “The prestige of Harvard as a leader in educational reform helped to popularize the Harvard plan of entrance examination. . . . As the 1880s advanced, the Harvard plan spread across the nation” (43). However, with the spread of entrance examinations, secondary schools and high schools began to refocus English classes on theme writing and correctness, essentially teaching to the entrance examinations, which did not necessarily improve the quality of student writing (43). Along with the spread of entrance examinations, Harvard’s establishment of first-year composition in 1885 also spread.

Although I have been calling particular attention to the spread of Harvard’s theme writing assignments, such as the daily theme, a focus on correctness was certainly central to composition instruction, as the macrohistories have established, and it was one factor that led to the spread of first-year theme courses. Harvard’s 1892 “Report on the
Committee on Composition and Rhetoric,” and two subsequent reports in the 1890s, harshly criticized the inability of first-year college students to write correctly in the mother tongue, placing blame on preparatory schools, as theme writing courses were too remedial and labor-intensive to be appropriate for college-level instruction. Attempting to shed responsibility for the problem, the 1892 report concluded that

The work of theme writing ought to be pronounced a part of the elementary training, and as such relegated to the preparatory schools. The student who presents himself for admission to the College, and who cannot write the English language with facility and correctness, should be sent back to the preparatory school to remain there until he can so write it. The College should then, as it should, relieve itself of one of the heaviest burdens now imposed upon it. (qtd. in Brereton 96-97)

Nevertheless, despite Harvard’s reports, theme writing courses continued at the college level, with Harvard’s theme approach spreading across the country. According to Kitzhaber, these reports were “well publicized,” sparking a number of articles in response and an “unprecedented outcry” for attention to correct English (46). Kitzhaber continues, “The Harvard Reports had, in the long run, both desirable and undesirable effects on English instruction. . . . [T]he Reports emphasized only one aspect of composition—mechanical correctness. . . . This emphasis on superficial correctness . . . contributed in no small measure to the ideal of superficial correctness that was to dominate composition instruction for many years thereafter” (47). Berlin also blames the Harvard Reports for pushing composition instruction to focus on correctness:
The larger effects of the Harvard Reports were unfortunate. Knowing nothing about writing instruction, the Committee members focused on the most obvious features of the essays they read, the errors in spelling, grammar, usage, and even handwriting. They thus gave support to the view that has haunted writing classes ever since: learning to write is learning matters of superficial correctness. (*Nineteenth Century* 61).

Berlin’s point that the Committee focused on superficial correctness while “knowing nothing about writing instruction” is notable. The Harvard Reports’ influence on spreading the notion that teaching correctness should be the primary focus in teaching writing was not reflective of pedagogical experience and practice.

It would be inaccurate to claim that Harvard’s theme approach to teaching composition was focused solely on correct writing, although it certainly was a central characteristic of the approach, with attention given to “correcting” themes. Similarly, Kitzhaber’s, Berlin’s, and Crowley’s representation of the period’s writing instruction as dominated by an attention to correctness—current-traditional rhetoric—is also an oversimplification. While it is true that writing pedagogy was primarily characterized by a focus on correctness, examining classroom practice can reveal other elements of current-traditional pedagogy, which I demonstrate further in Chapter 4. As my review of Harvard’s influence on the spread of first-year composition has shown, the theme assignments themselves also helped define Harvard’s approach and the establishment of the theme system—not only the concern for correctness. Viewing the establishment of first-year composition through the lens of the theme system can also make it easier for
scholars to recognize some of the connections of current practice and assignments to the practice and assignments of early first-year composition, which I examine further in Chapter 5.

Theme Goblins Drenched in Red Ink: Student Responses to the Theme System

Student responses to theme writing in the early twentieth century illustrate the generally negative views students had of writing themes. While some of these complaints centered around the over-focus on correctness, many others were responses to the drudgery of writing frequent themes. For instance, in a 1901 theme at Radcliffe College, published in *Radcliffe Magazine*, the famous Helen Keller described her fear of “theme goblins.” Although she excelled in English, she did not enjoy the theme writing (Crawford 671). Of course, as Robert C. Kelley points out in 1914 in reference to the *English A* theme writing course, “There is a certain odium attached the course which is but the natural attitude toward any prescribed course. It is safe to say that fifty percent of the members of English A enjoy it” (41). A hundred years later, composition teachers can confirm that many students still dislike required composition courses, and complain about writing papers.

Aligned with what many composition scholars, such as Crowley, have said in condemnation of current-traditional rhetoric, students disliked teachers’ attention to correctness. For instance, essayist Simeon Strunsky, in reflecting back on his theme-based rhetoric course at Columbia University in the late 1890s remarks, “The underlying idea was sensible enough. But it was disheartening to have a daily theme come back drenched in red ink to show where one’s prose rhythm had broken down or the relative
pronouns had run too thick” (136). This focus on correctness and apparent inattention to ideas is similarly demonstrated in JoAnn Campbell’s account of women’s experiences with theme writing at Radcliffe College. Campbell observes of one student’s themes: “Few comments addressed the content of her writing. . . .[H]er attempts at academic writing were not affirmed, only corrected, and her personal interests and views were totally ignored” (472). The lack of regard for content and the personal ideas and opinions of the student writers is, of course, the greatest critique of current-traditional rhetoric. While the students may have had some freedom and creativity in choosing their topics, the overworked instructors paid little attention to those elements of creativity.

Beyond the focus on correctness, however, many students also felt overworked with writing themes, just as the instructors were overworked with grading them. For instance, a decidedly harsh anonymous editorial entitled “The Young Instructor” in *The Harvard Monthly* complains that each inexperienced and unqualified composition teacher “preaches the gospel as it is written in the Book of Hill, gives a lecture or two on classroom morals and ‘What is Art?’ and empties the souls of his students of every idea by the daily theme system, without putting in any new ideas to fill the horrible emptiness” (180). Other students complained that with the requirement of writing a theme every day, they were running out of ideas for topics, and so some would write about the difficulty of coming up with an idea about which to write.

Students’ complaints at the dullness of daily themes sometimes took the form of satire, as is reflected in a short “recipe” in *Radcliffe Magazine* in 1900, signed by M. V. A., entitled “How to Make a Daily Theme”: 
Take one empty head, and fill with a stuffing composed of indescribably tempting sunsets, five different aspects of Harvard Bridge, and a firm conviction that the writing of daily themes is destined to be the cause of your premature death. Stir this mixture rapidly for about ten minutes with a fountain pen. One of these ingredients, in most cases your opinion on the subject of themes, will rise to the surface. Take this out, flavor to taste with commas, and serve on a sheet of white paper. This receipt may be varied occasionally by substituting for sunsets, electric cars, and for the view from the bridge, small girls with conventional golden curls. (31-32)

Also on a lighter note, William Hawley Davis of Bowdoin College shares some student responses to themes: “A witty satire by one of my students begins: ‘The theme is a form of thought-expression invented by the devil.’ ‘The most pernicious form of them,’ it says further, ‘is the daily theme’” (286). He goes on to share another student’s poem about themes:

I used to say, “I’m overworked,”

And now I know it’s true;

’Cause every time I turn around

I’ve got a theme to do.

I’ve never seen a place called hell,

I never hope to see one;

But if they make damned souls write themes,
I’m sure there need not be one.

If there’s work up there in heaven—

And there must be some, it would seem—

I pray that the saint who portions it out

Has never heard of a theme. (286-87)

Commenting on this student humor, Davis notes, “Of course, if the unpopularity of theme writing always found such expression as this, no one would regard the unpopularity as very real or very serious. You and I know that it is both real and serious” (287). Students’ dissatisfaction with theme writing, however, made little difference. The theme approach continued. Although examining some students’ responses to theme writing confirms their dissatisfaction with teachers’ attention to correctness, my examples of responses also illustrate that the theme assignments themselves and the frequency of assigned themes were also major concerns. Such responses, however, are not necessarily representative of the majority of students’ responses to theme writing. Complaints and satiric examples might be more likely to see print than students’ praises of theme writing.

Pedagogical Responses to the Theme System

Despite a widespread implementation and acceptance of the theme approach to teaching composition, it was not without its critics among educators who recognized some of its shortcomings and made pedagogical adjustments in response. Teachers’ responses, similar to some student responses, also illustrate that the most prominent concerns were whether or not theme assignments were really effective for teaching
composition in comparison to literature-based courses, which many academics valued more, and that grading frequent themes was grueling work for teachers. As early as 1895, as Harvard’s influence on composition was still spreading, Prof. Melville B. Anderson describes how after trying the theme approach, Stanford University abandoned it, citing it as remedial and the job of secondary and preparatory schools:

During the first two years of the short history of the English department here, the professors were worn out with the drudgery of correcting Freshman themes,—work really secondary and preparatory, and in no sense forming a proper subject of collegiate instruction. . . . The Freshman English course in theme-writing has been eliminated from our programme, and has been turned over to approved teachers and to the various secondary schools. Had this salutary innovation not been accomplished, all the literary courses would have been swept away by the rapidly growing inundation of Freshman themes, and all our strength and courage would have been dissipated in preparing our students to do respectable work at more happily equipped Universities. (52)

Stanford’s change, and certainly Anderson’s article, may have been a response to Harvard’s 1892 “Report on the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric.” Other schools would also resist the theme approach, opting instead for a focus on literature.

An 1896 article in The Century Magazine that critiqued the theme approach to teaching composition, and even the very idea of college composition classes, sparked a mixed academic response to the theme writing approach. The anonymous author of the
article, “Two Ways of Teaching English,” argues in favor of a literature-based English class, citing a “specialist” who conducted a study comparing a literature-based class with a theme-based class and concluded that the theme class did not improve student writing—in technical correctness—any more than the literature class (794). A few years after this article, William E. Mead presented a pedagogical report at the 1901 meeting of the MLA at Harvard, published as “The Undergraduate Study of English Composition” in *The School Review* in 1902. The report presented academic responses to the *Century* article, collected under the direction of Fred Newton Scott (318). Although the academic conversation centered largely around the debate of whether or not composition or literature should be the focus of college English courses, most of the critiques and defenses of college composition classes focused on the pedagogy—a theme-writing-based approach. Some responders (who remained unnamed) expressed agreement with the *Century* article, pointing to the problems with theme writing, while others defended theme writing as effective in teaching composition—the teaching of correctness.

Ultimately, considerable attention was given to the possibility of another study, similar to the one described in the *Century* article, which might determine which approach to teaching English was more effective: a theme-based course, or a literature-based course, although Mead concludes that both are necessary (331). In fact, many theme courses included reading some literature.

At the time of this dispute on whether or not the first-year English class should be based in literature or theme writing—a dispute that has never fully gone away—there was considerable tension between literature and composition. Richard Ohmann observes that
“literature is the subject that the profession chose, but composition is the subject that created the profession” (93). The university and society valued English departments for teaching required composition courses, but within the departments themselves, the teachers generally valued literature most. With the new elective system in the late nineteenth century and the pressures from outside the university, first-year composition classes were supposed to participate in “the university’s newly assigned task of training American professional and managerial elites” (Ohmann 134). This tension between literature and composition might also be behind some of the critiques educators had for theme writing.

Writing in 1917, with a similar view to that of the *Century* article, Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia University asserts, “The inventor of the daily theme did an almost incalculable amount of damage when he started a movement that rapidly spread all over the United States. The one best way in which to teach students to write good English is to teach them to read good English” (74). Further, with composition instruction’s obsession with correctness and particularly the large number of themes assigned, “The daily writing is obnoxious to students and the inspection and correction of their work is drudgery for the teacher uncompensated by any adequate result” (74). Many other educators were critical of Harvard’s daily theme approach. A. R. Brubacher, President of the New York State College for Teachers, describes the viewpoint of many critics of the dominant approach to teaching composition: “the daily theme is confidently recorded as one of the inventions of Satan” (115). While both Butler and Brubacher are somewhat harsh in their condemnation of the daily theme, somewhat similar to some
modern critics of current-traditionalism, others more politely expressed skepticism. Lane Cooper reflects in 1909, after the daily theme had swept the nation, “To one who from the beginning could have watched the daily theme advance from its home in New England to a gradual conquest of the South and West . . . the sight must have been attended with some misgivings” (422). Recognizing such skepticism and a dissatisfaction with Harvard’s daily theme approach, Cooper further observes that “the tide has begun to drift away from courses in the daily theme and it’s like” (421).

Some teachers in early and high school education also expressed dissatisfaction with the theme approach by the beginning of the twentieth century. Attacking the theme writing system as ineffective, Mary Dowd says in 1909, “The daily theme, that deadly drainer of the wells of thought, should be abolished; likewise the weekly theme, as a hard-and-fast requirement” (434). Additionally, despite Elizabeth Kemper Adams’s praise for the theme approach, she recognizes shortcomings: “But so far the returns have not come up with [the] sanguine expectations, and composition teachers of today are somewhat chastened in spirit, and in many cases actually discouraged and baffled” (392). Further, despite the theme approach’s improvements, such as neater and more correct grammar and punctuation, “these negative virtues seem a slight reward for the sacrifices of time and strength, the gallons of red ink poured out by painstaking teachers upon the papers of industrious and docile pupils” (392). Indeed, the problem of time and labor was one of teachers’ greatest complaints with the theme system. This being the case, the most notable pedagogical adjustments made in response to the theme approach were primarily to ease the burdens on teachers.
With heavy workloads in grading themes, combined with some teachers’ desire for more attention to oral rhetoric, one popular response in both colleges and high schools that began to gain some traction by the second decade of the twentieth century was the introduction of “oral themes” to replace some of the written themes. These “oral themes” would be recited in class, subject to teachers’ oral correction, similar to Brinsley’s description of students reciting themes in the seventeenth century. Orality had, of course, been central to rhetoric courses earlier in the nineteenth century, but with the rise of the modern elective university system after the Civil War and the start of first-year composition courses in the 1880s, rhetoric classes at many universities began to focus more on written than oral communication. In response to this situation, Professor G. S. Hall harshly critiques the daily theme and the composition class’s focus on written rather than oral rhetoric: “Not only has the daily theme spread as an infection, but the daily lesson is now extracted through the point of a pencil instead of from the mouth” (247). Some educators, such as John M. Clapp, saw the use of oral themes as a partial return to oral rhetoric and a benefit to students’ communicative skills.

Beyond reviving oral rhetoric, on a practical level oral themes also helped reduce teachers’ work. John W. Cunliffe of Columbia University, for instance, argues in 1912 that “the practice of oral communication . . . seems to be excellent, and it has the peculiar advantage that it does not leave the instructor’s desk laden with a disheartening heap of themes” (593). By the 1920s, much of the academic discussion regarding oral themes had ceased. In giving the results of a survey of practices in Freshman English classes in the Mid-West in 1928, Ralph L. Henry reports that although some schools continued the
practice of oral composition, most did not (305). Creek observes that “college teachers who got the students trained in speaking still complained that they could not write, and the oral theme more or less vanished—in colleges at least—until communication courses revived it” (8).  

In addition to the oral themes vogue in the 1910s, educators who recognized problems with the theme system, primarily the problem of a teacher’s labor and the quantity of themes assigned, proposed other changes in teaching approaches and assignments, although nothing radical that would displace the theme system. Teachers at all levels of education proposed some changes. Martha Hale Shackford of Wellesley College, for instance, questions the dominant theme system in her 1912 article, “A Partial Substitute for the Theme.” “Dare one ask,” she begins, “in these days of assiduous cultivation of the theme, if we are not becoming too superstitious about its values? . . . No one would question the value of the theme employed moderately as an exercise, but when the ideal becomes quantity rather than quality, danger threatens” (208). Shackford, like many other teachers of the time, recognizes that one of the greatest problems with the theme approach is that it calls for large quantities of themes from students, including both daily themes and longer weekly or bi-weekly themes, giving teachers massive stacks of themes to grade. Still somewhat faithful to the theme system, however, her solution to the problem, similar to the introduction of oral themes, is to substitute a “mere slavish copy of a model” theme for every three themes a pupil composed (210). That is, students

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11 In *Rhetoric and Reality* James Berlin observes that such a revival of oral rhetoric accompanied the rise of communications courses in the 1940s and 1950s, partly in response to the economic, political, and social developments following the Great Depression and World War II (92-119).
would merely copy a model theme in order to learn to imitate a superior writer because “the exercise in copying good English will result in immediate benefit to the pupil” (210).

Also in response to the problem of labor, some textbooks and teaching manuals in the early twentieth century gave some pedagogical recommendations to reduce the work load, such as having students correct each other’s work. In his article on the history of peer response in composition classes, Kory Lawson Ching observes that the practice of peer response at the end of the nineteenth century was “a way for students to share some of the teacher’s burden” (308). Ching’s point is supported by the fact that some textbooks and manuals by the beginning of the twentieth century were recommending this practice to save the teacher time in correcting themes. For instance, in *English Composition* (1908), Charles Lane Hanson states, “The author’s conviction is that it is not necessary for the teacher to criticize all of these themes, but that it is desirable to have the pupils use them as the basis of study. . . . The exercises are intended to relieve the busy teacher at just those points where relief is most needed” (vii). Additionally, Hanson’s text and many other textbooks of the time note that having students correct their own work saves the teacher time and labor.

Even though teachers in the early twentieth century viewed the mainstream approach to teaching composition as a theme system, some of their adjustments in response to the problem of time and labor clearly illustrate that correctness was highly valued, as the dominant narrative of composition clearly observes. One notable and common practice was the use of tables and keys of “correction marks” for students to use to interpret instructor feedback. Many textbooks of the time included such tables. To save
time, the teacher would use abbreviations and symbols in correcting student themes. For instance in their 1915 text *Outlines of Composition and Rhetoric*, Genung and Hanson provide lists of “Theme Correction Marks” and “Proofreader’s Marks” that students are to use. While Genung and Hanson emphasize the real-world application and use of such marks, especially in publishing, these are the marks that the teacher would use in correcting themes (371-75). In *Practical Composition and Rhetoric* (1901), William Mead and Wilbur Gordy acknowledge in their note to teachers that correcting student work is very time consuming, and they give their recommendations for coping with the workload, also considering how best to help the students: “But when all the help possible has been got from pupils, there remains a heavy burden for the teacher. How much correction is desirable or practicable?...[W]e must pass lightly over some errors and fix attention upon a few that are most serious” (xxii-xxiii). While correctness was one of teachers’ high priorities, their use of correction marks and tables was also to save time and labor. By the 1910s, composition handbooks began to grow in popularity for the same reason (Connors *Composition-Rhetoric*).

In addition to the problems with teachers being overworked with the quantity of themes, although the problem of overworked composition teachers is still prevalent today, many schools began to abandon shorter and daily themes in favor of longer less-frequent themes. Writing in 1928, Bernard DeVoto explains these changes:

The theme-system varies with the college. The parent-course began by requiring a short daily theme, the “one-page theme” that has become notorious, on the theory that daily practice was the best means of
acquiring skill. The daily theme is preserved in many colleges, but perhaps a greater number, fearing that the system developed an ability to write a paragraph but left the student helpless beyond that unit, have abandoned it. Instead, they require a longer theme every week and, usually, an ambitious effort of four or five thousand words to be written at the end of the course. Here the weekly theme is the basis of instruction. (207)

With the requirement of longer themes and the abandonment of daily themes, colleges remained committed to the theme approach to composition instruction, and so the theme system, like any system of genres, evolved. With such changes in the system beginning by the 1920s, J. R. Rutland writes in 1923 that following Harvard’s approach, “Freshman composition has been a much battered target for pedagogical sharpshooters outside and inside the profession of teaching” (1). But, he adds, staying faithful to the theme approach, this “method of teaching composition through much writing and self-criticism is still fundamental in our method” (1). The principles behind the theme system would not be so easily abandoned.

DeVoto similarly expresses his own commitment to the theme system. “The theory of instruction in English A,” he writes, “is reasonably sound. . . . It is a drearily mechanical system, but I do not see how it could be improved” (208). Many educators, such as DeVoto, retained the belief that the “drearily mechanical system” was the most effective way of teaching composition, in which grammar, form, and correctness were highly valued. Just as this current-traditional mindset remained dominant in writing instruction, so did theme writing.
Continuance of the Theme System and Current-Traditional Rhetoric

The theme system continued into the mid-twentieth century, evolving with teachers continuing to make adjustments as the century progressed. In this section I will examine some of the factors that contributed to the continuance of the theme system. During this period, as far as theme writing was concerned, few significant changes took place, with both theme writing and current-traditional pedagogy remaining dominant. Robert Connors, making a sweeping generalization, goes as far as to say, “In terms of new insights, the teaching of composition was frozen in its tracks between 1910 and 1930, and despite a few novel treatments and up-to-date appearances, there are few texts (and no successful texts) that are not derivative of the authors of the 1890s in their theory and pedagogy” (226). In particular, Connors is referring to the four modes of discourse—exposition, description, narration, and argument—which dominated composition textbooks of the early twentieth century. While it would be extreme to say that there was no innovation in composition teaching in the early decades of the twentieth century, there was certainly nothing that dislodged the dominant approach to teaching composition: theme writing. Many teachers, such as DeVoto, remained committed to the theme approach.

The system of theme writing that called for frequent themes, based on the idea that drill and frequent practice was the best way to improve one’s writing, was ideally suited to current-traditional rhetoric’s focus on correct writing. When educators would refer to reading student themes, they usually referred to “theme correcting” rather than “theme grading.” Beyond the external pressures to focus on grammar and the cries that
“Johnny can’t write,” other factors contributed to the continuance of the theme system and encouraged teachers to focus mainly on “correcting” student writing, including the more personal topics for themes, the working conditions and labor force, and the large quantities of composition textbooks focusing on correct writing.

As Chapter 2 demonstrates, before the last half of the nineteenth century, most theme writing consisted of complex themes, which were the propositions John Walker described, and simple themes, which focused on more abstract topics. As the theme evolved in the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the more traditional distinction between complex and simple themes was abandoned, with theme becoming a more general term for short school compositions. The topics of many of these themes also changed from the more abstract and argumentative topics to more personal topics.

Connors explains that the more abstract rhetorical writing assignments called for students’ wide reading, especially the classics, but at the end of the nineteenth century, this “could no longer be assumed” (Composition-Rhetoric 308). Many middle class students entering college did not have a more privileged classical education, and so, Connors observes, “By the 1890s, teachers were realizing that the old subjects did not work any more” (314). So, teachers began to ask students to write on more personal topics, calling from their own experience and observations rather than needing to rely on a knowledge of the classics, history, and philosophy. With the more rule-based complex and simple themes being dropped by the 1890s, such themes might be called “personal themes,” although this was not a common name for them at the time.
Beyond an adjustment to more personal topics for themes because of a changing student population, however, with the calls for more attention to correct writing with the implementation of entrance examinations and the results of the Harvard Reports, the content of student compositions diminished in importance. If teachers were to focus on correcting students’ writing, the content did not matter as much. Correcting themes on personal topics was easier. Connors points out that personal-experience writing is the easiest reading a teacher sees. Abstract topics produce writing that is cognitively more demanding and therefore slower to read and grade. Criteria for judging narratives and simple descriptions are easy to set; paper content often suggests itself; and the essay’s organization is usually simple chronology or spatial reference. Personal-experience papers can be read far more quickly and with fewer difficult judgment calls to make than in the older sort of abstract-analysis papers. (141)

With less need for a response to personal topics, teachers could focus on the formatting, organization, punctuation, grammar, vocabulary, and style of students more easily, with fewer cognitive demands. Connors indicates that the change to personal topics might partly have been to help alleviate the workload of teachers—teachers’ dissatisfaction with the work it took to grade abstract topics (141). Connors further observes, “[M]erely scanning a paper for formal and syntactic correctness is a more mechanical act; with practice it can be done with almost as little concentration as riding a bicycle” (142).
Despite the shift to personal topics and teachers focusing on correctness over content, however, the working load for most composition teachers was still monstrous. Beyond the wider societal and institutional view that correctness should be taught, the workload and the labor force employed to teach composition might be among the most important factors that contributed to the continuance of current-traditionalism and the theme system. One important characteristic of Harvard’s approach and the theme system was frequent writing, which also meant that teachers had more to read and grade. In his article “Overwork/Underpay: Labor and Status of Composition Teachers since 1880,” Connors details the abysmal working conditions of most college composition teachers since the wide-spread establishment of a required first-year composition class. According to Connors, at the end of the nineteenth century, composition teachers had to instruct as many as 200 incoming freshmen (perhaps with the aid of one or two teaching assistants), and had to grade weekly, or even daily themes. For instance, Connors describes Barrett Wendell’s workload: “At Harvard in 1892, Barrett Wendell read daily and fortnightly themes from 170 students—over 24,000 papers each year” (113). The number of students each instructor had and the volume of grading was enough to drive serious scholars away from composition and establish composition as an inferior and devalued course. Randall Popken, examining the teaching demands on compositionist Edwin Hopkins in the early twentieth century, describes how Hopkins needed to take a year off teaching to recover from a breakdown caused by his teaching overload (630). Quoting Hopkins, Popken observes that such exhaustion was common: “Typical effects on writing teachers include ‘wearing out, suffering from indigestion and nervous exhaustion, loss of efficiency,
impaired eyesight, shattered nerves, and in certain instances, to complete nervous collapse” (633-34). A survey that Hopkins conducted in 1913 indicated that composition instructors read student papers on average 20.6 hours per week, a truly exhausting task (633). Connors further demonstrates how by the early twentieth century college composition instructors were the lowest-paid teachers in colleges (“Overwork” 119).

With scholars viewing composition teaching as the kind of teaching from which to escape, poorly-trained, and even completely untrained, teaching assistants and adjunct faculty were given the task. Most new teachers were assigned the class, handed the textbooks, and set loose to teach, having to figure it out for themselves. As Connors puts it, “the young instructor emerged blinking from his isolate study into a world that was filled with alien work and dreadful drudgery” (116).

With such teaching conditions and a workforce consisting of many poorly-trained teachers, it should not be surprising that the theme system and current-traditional rhetoric persisted. Poorly-trained composition teachers with large teaching loads are unlikely to engage in drastic theoretical and pedagogical changes. With so many students and themes, maintaining a focus on form and correctness was easier. While some teachers did propose some changes and adjustments to pedagogy and assignments, as discussed above, these changes did not disrupt the theme system. Many of these untrained teachers relied heavily on textbooks to make up for their lack of training and expertise. While examining composition and rhetoric textbooks cannot give a complete picture of composition practices and pedagogy enacted by teachers using those textbooks, they are nevertheless important because of teachers’ reliance on them. Most composition
textbooks at the beginning of the twentieth century focus on correct style and the modes of discourse, and so many teachers, too over-worked to propose major pedagogical changes, relied on the textbooks and the most commonly-used theme assignments. Although a few practices would slowly evolve, such as the elimination of the daily theme, as DeVoto describes, the theme system and current-traditional rhetoric would remain in place for much of the twentieth century.

Understanding the Theme System

In viewing the theme system and the development of first-year composition across the country from Harvard’s model, it is useful to consider Anis Bawarshi’s idea that genres “link one activity system to another through the shared use of genres” (107). The theme writing assignments of first-year composition classes at the beginning of the twentieth century were shared by universities across the country as Harvard’s approach spread, and so it is this shared use of genres that forms a larger theme system. Borrowing Amy Devitt’s idea of genre sets and Charles Bazerman’s conception of genre systems, I view the theme assignments of the composition course as making up an assignment genre set. Although Devitt and Bazerman make distinctions between their terms, with systems being broader and more inclusive than sets, genre sets and genre systems refer to a group of genres that function together within a particular setting. Anis Bawarshi similarly refers to the genres that comprise a first-year composition class—including the syllabus, writing assignments, and student essays—as a “constellation of genres” (105-6). However, what I call an assignment genre set does not include every genre involved in the first-year composition setting, such as a syllabus and course readings. Rather, my focus is on the
theme assignments. Despite the differences between the daily themes and the longer themes in each of the four modes of discourse, the theme assignments are interconnected in serving the larger goals of the course. As I demonstrate more fully in Chapter 4, the assignments of the theme course were not haphazardly assigned with no purpose beyond instilling correctness. As Devitt describes regarding genre sets, which also applies to assignment genre sets, to some extent “the interaction of those genres affect the functioning of each genre” (54). In the composition classroom, as teachers might attest to today, assignments often build on one another, and so changing one can affect the others. More than anything else, these theme assignments were most central to the composition class.

Harvard’s course was the model for many other colleges, and so as institutions across the country adopted Harvard’s approach, either in whole or in part, they became part of a larger genre system with shared genres linking with other institutions. I call this shared interconnection of theme writing genres across different settings an assignment genre system. Devitt’s and Bazerman’s definitions of genre sets and genre systems similarly focus on a particular setting. I see a more pronounced distinction between an assignment genre set and an assignment genre system. While the assignment genre set applies to an individual setting—a particular activity system—the assignment genre system applies to the interconnection of shared genres across different settings and activity systems. The spread of Harvard’s theme approach to other institutions, particularly the spread of the theme genres in the teaching of first-year composition, such as the daily theme, formed an assignment genre system—the theme system.
Although educators at the beginning of the twentieth century obviously did not speak of the theme system in terms of genre theory, they nevertheless recognized the widespread use of theme writing assignments in institutions across the country as constituting a *system*, as I established earlier in this chapter. This system was characterized by theme writing assignments. Understanding first-year composition at the beginning of the twentieth century as an *assignment genre system*—the theme system—complicates the widespread characterization of the Harvard narrative. Despite this period’s current-traditional over-focus on correctness, which I fully acknowledge, the theme assignment system offers a way of viewing this period of composition history that is not focused only on the aspect of correctness, although it certainly is part of it. Viewing composition’s spread in terms of an assignment genre system offers an additional perspective from which to view the birth of first-year composition and could be more clearly applicable to teachers’ current assignment practices, which I examine further in Chapter 5.

Beyond the linking of colleges across the country through shared classroom genres, the theme system’s spread and development over time also illustrates Berkenkotter and Huckin’s concept that genres are dynamic, which I demonstrated in examining the early development of the theme in Chapter 2. Just as the theme developed over time, largely in response to the needs of its users, the theme genre system also developed in the early decades of the twentieth century, also in response to users’ needs. Devitt states, “As the needs of the group change, the genre set changes to reflect those needs” (54). This dynamism of a genre set also applies to the larger theme assignment
system. As my examination of teachers’ responses to the theme approach illustrates, some pedagogical adjustments were made because of teachers’ needs, particularly the problem of time and labor. Such adjustments included the introduction of oral themes and some reductions in the number of themes assigned, including a widespread abandonment of the daily theme by the 1920s. Despite such changes, however, many teachers remained committed to the theme approach, and so the theme genre system, like the earlier forms of the theme, evolved.

In this chapter I have made a broad examination of the theme system and its development from the end of the nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century. I have largely focused on the Harvard model, arguing that reexamining the Harvard narrative through the lens of the theme system and its genres helps provide a more complete history of the development of first-year composition. While this chapter has taken a broader focus on the development of first-year composition as an assignment genre system, in my next chapter I will further my argument with a close examination of Harvard’s prototypical English A course, which illustrates a theme assignment genre set.
CHAPTER 4: WHAT ENGLISH A WAS REALLY LIKE: COPELAND AND RIDEOUT’S FRESHMAN ENGLISH AND THEME-CORRECTING IN HARVARD COLLEGE

In Chapter 3, I examined the formation and spread of the theme system across the United States in the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century. I argued that my reexamination of the Harvard narrative through the lens of the theme system and its assignments provides a more complete history of first-year composition’s development. This chapter is an extension of that argument. While Chapter 3 focused primarily on the formation of the theme system from Harvard (an assignment genre system), Chapter 4 takes a close look at Harvard’s prototypical first-year composition course, English A, and the specific assignment genres and pedagogical practices of the course (an assignment genre set). As I discussed previously, an assignment genre system consists of the shared and interconnected theme writing genres across different settings, linking different institutions, with the spread and development of a theme writing approach to first-year composition forming the theme system. An assignment genre set, which I apply to Harvard’s English A, consists of the interconnected assignment genres in a particular setting.

In this chapter I argue that a close look at the assignments and practices of English A complicates the dominant narrative of Harvard’s course and current-traditionalism, giving us a far better understanding of how the first-year composition course was structured and the context and approaches to teaching the theme assignments. In making this examination of English A, I rely on Copeland and Rideout’s book-length
description of the course for the 1899-1900 academic year. Before reading Copeland and Rideout, I assumed the macrohistories’ characterizations of *English A* were accurate. However, Copeland and Rideout’s account of *English A* convinced me that there was much more to Harvard’s prototypical class than the histories have acknowledged, and, despite my recognizing the problems and limitations of current-traditional pedagogy, made me think that some elements of Harvard’s design could have merit.

In my examination of *English A* in this chapter, then, I consider Harvard’s use of the daily theme, the purpose and sequence of longer fortnightly themes, the instructor’s role and feedback, and the course readings and examinations. This close look at the course and its assignments reveals far more about *English A* and what first-year composition was really like than previous histories have examined. Although there was considerable attention to correctness, as composition scholars have recognized, I also examine other aspects of the course that are not usually associated with current-traditional writing instruction. Although the “bird’s-eye” view of the formation of the theme system and first-year composition confirms that this period of writing instruction focused largely on correctness, to which the macrohistories have given the most attention, closely examining an individual course—an *assignment genre set*—can reveal how the dominant view of current-traditional pedagogy is oversimplified.

To understand the theme system at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is essential to examine the freshman theme course—how it was structured, what assignments were used, and how instructors taught the course. Composition histories have, of course, given some attention to what the composition course looked like. In
Rhetoric and Reality, James Berlin includes a paragraph summarizing Harvard’s theme course and its assignments, but this treatment is brief, only representing the course’s focus on correctness (37-38). Similarly, Sharon Crowley focuses generally on the course’s emphasis on correctness (Composition in the University 74-75). John Michael Wozniak’s description of Harvard’s course is the most detailed, with four pages dedicated to describing the course, but even this is a general description (125-28).

Overall, composition histories’ attention to the plan of the freshman composition course has been limited, with more attention given to the focus on correctness, specific assignments (such as the modes), or the workload of such courses and the problems with labor. Through a more in-depth examination of how such a course was structured and the assignments involved, we can better understand the theme system and writing instruction at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although recent local and alternative composition histories have pushed back against the Harvard narrative, as represented in Patricia Donahue and Gretchen Flesher Moon’s Local Histories, Harvard and its prototypical English A are nevertheless central to understanding the development of first-year composition and the theme system. As I established in Chapter 3, as first-year composition spread many institutions imitated Harvard’s approach. Although composition classes were certainly individualized to each institution and teacher, for many, Harvard’s English A was the model.

My representation of Harvard’s theme course is primarily based on Charles Townsend Copeland and H. M. Rideout’s 1901 text Freshman English and Theme-Correcting in Harvard College, which gives a detailed explication of Harvard’s famed
English A for the 1899-1900 academic year. As reviews of the book make clear, such as one appearing in the Journal of Education in 1902, the course was highly influential, and Copeland and Rideout’s text was a tool for further imitation:

[The Harvard course in daily themes has become widely known, and is copied, so far as possible, by teachers in high schools and colleges all over the country. Teachers have learned how the work is conducted at Harvard by hearsay, or by taking the course in the college or in the summer school, where the theme courses are among the most popular. To these teachers, and to all who are concerned with English composition work, it will be a matter of interest and help to know that the Harvard methods have been described in a definite and practical manner in a compact little volume...

The book has nothing of the vagueness of theories; it states precisely the actual working of the course step by step, and shows not only the methods, but the results achieved. (143)

Although another primarily positive review in The Harvard Monthly signed R. M. G. complains that Copeland and Rideout “write with colorless correctness” and that the book is “a paragon of correctness and efficiency purged of human interest,” it concludes that the book was invaluable for Harvard imitators (221).

J. Donald Adams, Copeland’s biographer, notes that Copeland and Rideout’s older colleagues at Harvard had nothing but praise for the explanation of English A. Dean Briggs wrote, “I wholly approve the way in which the work has been done. . . . [I]t cannot fail to be suggestive to every intelligent teacher of English composition” (qtd. in Adams
123). Barrett Wendell, the originator of the daily theme, commented in a letter to Copeland that he received great pleasure in reading the book, admiring the “sensible system” it described. “The real question,” he wrote, “is how the method works. This question . . . seems to be conclusively and satisfactorily answered by your documentary evidence. No one can study this without conviction that the plan you have so excellently expounded is a plan which actually succeeds in practice” (qtd. in Adams 124). Concluding the letter, Wendell enthusiastically remarks that the book “would be incalculably valuable to any professional teacher” (124). Finally, Adams Sherman Hill, whose textbook was central to Harvard’s approach, commented, perhaps not surprisingly, that he wished “that every teacher of English in the country was obliged to buy and to study the pages of a work so practical and so sane” (qtd. in Adams 124-25). In alignment with Briggs’s, Wendell’s, and Hill’s opinions of the course, Copeland and Rideout see their text as a resource for other teachers who might want to apply Harvard’s approach (1-2).

Harvard’s *English A*

With the importance and influence of Copeland and Rideout’s text established, in this section I will give a detailed examination of their explanation of Harvard’s course, which goes far beyond composition histories’ current-traditional representations of the course. After giving an overview of the course, I will give more in-depth attention to *English A*’s daily themes, fortnightly themes, and its readings and examinations. This examination demonstrates, far more than previous histories have, what Harvard’s
prototypical *English A* was really like, complicating what the dominant narrative says about *English A* and current-traditionalism.

Harvard’s *English A*, the freshman composition course in theme writing, encompassed the entire academic year from October through June with a break halfway through. It was equivalent, then, to the two-semester sequence we see today at many colleges and universities. For the 1899-1900 academic year, which Copeland and Rideout describe, there were roughly 620 students and eleven instructors, with nineteen sections of the course (1-3). For the course materials, students were required to procure Adams Sherman Hill’s *Principles of Rhetoric* (the 1895 revised and enlarged edition), an English Composition Card, which was a “key to the abbreviated marks of correction,” and “the regular theme paper, which has a margin of an inch at the left of the sheet” (3). In addition to writing six daily themes each week, students wrote twelve longer fortnightly themes over the course of the academic year, many of which “if particularly faulty, must be rewritten, or if fairly successful, revised” (3). Students would attend three lectures or recitations each week, two of which were meetings of their own section of about thirty students. The other meeting each week was “a general meeting of several sections (called the ‘third hour’) to listen to readings and talks by either the instructor in charge of the whole course, or the Dean of the college” (3). Finally, students would meet with their instructor for a conference about once a month and take a three-hour examination at the halfway point and at the end of the academic year (3-4). Copeland and Rideout provide a detailed schedule that shows the timeline of assignments for the course (See Figure 1).
### Daily Themes

- **October**: Subjects taken from observation of surroundings. Translations once a week. "Third-hour" themes. Special exercises in class.
- **November**: As in October.
- **December**: Weekly translations, "Third-hour" themes. Special exercises in class. No restriction as to the subjects of other daily themes.
- **January**: As in December, with the addition of Invitations, Letters of Acceptance, etc.
- **February**: As in December.
- **March**: As in December.
- **April**: As in December.
- **May**: As in December.
- **June**: As in December.

### Fortnightly Themes

- **October**: Oct. 23. Theme I: "Who I Am, and Why I Came to Harvard." Due rewritten or revised, as all other fortnightly themes, within two weeks.
- **November**: Nov. 8. Theme II: "How to Make or Do Something." Nov. 22. Theme III: "Something Learned in a College Course."
- **April**: April 11. Theme X: A Narrative.
- **June**: The final examination (three hours).

### Examinations

- **October**: An examination, one hour long, at the discretion of the instructor.
- **November**: Mr. Kipling: "The Jungle Book."
- **December**: Tennyson: "Pendennis," or (for those who have read "Pendennis") "Henry Esmond," or "Vanity Fair."
- **January**: The midyear examination (three hours).
- **February**, **March**, **April**, **May**, **June**: The final examination (three hours).

### Reading

- **October**: "King Henry IV," Part I, or "Antony and Cleopatra," or "Twelfth Night."
- **November**: "The Jungle Book."
- **December**: "Pendennis," or "Henry Esmond," or "Vanity Fair."
- **January**: The midyear examination (three hours).
- **February**: Macaulay: Life of Clive, or Life of Johnson, or Life of Hastings.
- **March**, **April**, **May**, **June**: The final examination (three hours).

### Meetings and Conferences

- **October**, **November**, **December**, **January**: Every week: Two lectures or recitations in each section of about thirty men; one meeting of several united sections, with lectures and writing of "Third-hour" themes.
- **February**, **March**, **April**, **May**, **June**: Every month: One conference, an interview, for fifteen minutes, between student and instructor.

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1 Throughout the year the students read Professor Hill's "Principles of Rhetoric." They also read one book of "The Golden Treasury," and commit to memory fifty lines from the Fourth Book.

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**Figure 1.** Scan of the schedule of English A from Copeland and Rideout (4-5)
As the previous chapter illustrates, the daily theme was a signature feature of Harvard’s theme course, originating with Barrett Wendell. As Copeland and Rideout observe, the daily themes at Harvard were “the first to begin and last to stop” (6). Although students would write twelve fortnightly themes over the course of the academic year (six each semester), the daily themes made up most of the writing students did for English A, with six daily themes each week (every day but Sunday). On average, students wrote twelve daily themes for each fortnightly theme they produced. It might not be surprising, as the previous chapter describes, that students would complain about the drudgery of the daily themes and that they ran out of ideas for topics. The volume of work and drudgery for teachers, however, was certainly more serious.

Although Barrett Wendell describes his only requirement for the daily theme that it “be a matter of observation during the day when it is written,” it was certainly not so free for the English A course Copeland and Rideout describe (659-60). According to Copeland and Rideout, “For the first month or more, the daily themes . . . are written on subjects the range of which is limited. The writers are not allowed to go their own gait and in their own direction” (7). Four of the six daily themes each week would focus on the new surroundings at college. The other two daily themes each week, though not on surroundings, were also strictly limited. One of these, generally the Saturday theme, was a translation. The other, written “at the class meeting of the united sections,” was “either a review of what the officer in charge has just read or told them, or a comment that shows
some reaction” (7). Most of the daily themes, however, would be either a narrative or description, and restrictions on topics would be loosened about a month into the course.

Students would turn these daily themes in “through the slots in the door of the conference-room,” most of which were dull, colorless, trite, unoriginal, and generally “stock accounts, in stock phrases” (8). Nevertheless, Copeland and Rideout claim, “All this the instructors read with a fair amount of cheerfulness; for they know that these accounts, so inert and meagre, come not so much from natural dulness as from small vocabularies, feeble structures, and other results of insufficient training [sic]” (9). Whether or not all the instructors were cheerful as they read themes, they certainly had a large volume of work just with the daily themes.

Instructors did not just read the daily themes, but they corrected them. According to Copeland and Rideout, “The first effort of the instructors, then, is not to make the daily themes interesting, but to make them correct. In the two weeks before the first fortnightly theme, these daily exercises are the only material from which to teach punctuation, spelling, grammar, the right use of words, the principles of structure, and whatever else ill-prepared youths need to learn” (9). Crowley and Wozniak call particular attention to this emphasis on correctness. With a focus on correcting each daily theme, the instructors employed specific correction marks in order to grade the themes in a short amount of time. The students would then consult the English Composition Card with a complete list of the correction marks in order to decipher their instructor’s markings. Some of the common corrections included,

Cst. Faulty construction.
K. Awkward, stiff, or harsh.

P. Fault in punctuation

R. Redundancy or repetition.

S. Sentence objectionable in form. (10)

Such correction cards, sometimes called “theme cards” were common with instructors needing to correct themes quickly. Some textbooks included such correction tables as an appendix or in a chapter of instructions for writing themes. Some daily themes, especially those deemed “particularly faulty,” would have to be rewritten and revised (3). Such revision usually focused on style and correctness.

Copeland and Rideout supply several sample daily themes to illustrate instructors’ correction marks and how students revised in response to corrections. For instance, Specimen Theme 1 (see Figure 2) is a facsimile of a teacher’s corrections to an “average daily theme in October...chosen almost at random,” including the full color of the bloody red ink. Notably, almost all the marks focus on correctness. “The only comments on substance,” Copeland and Rideout observe, “deal with the vagueness of one passage, and a questionable attempt at being imaginative” (10). The rewritten version illustrates how well the student understood and applied the corrections, although, Copeland and Rideout note, after revision the theme did not necessarily show great improvement:

The day was clear, as few of the days in Cambridge appear to be. We took advantage of the weather and set out for that Mecca of all visitors to Boston—Bunker Hill.
Our first experience in the subway was rather enjoyable because it was something entirely new.

When we had reached the Monument, we sat down for a few moments, to rest. My friend who had been sick, feeling unable to attempt the journey, remained below, while I began the tedious ascent. The winding stairway, on which I counted two hundred and ninety-four steps, seemed interminable, but at last I gained the summit.

As the sun was bright, I was able to obtain a few snap-shots of the city below with my camera, which I, for a wonder, had not forgotten to take. During the descent, weird sounds echoed and reëchoed through the hollow center of the Monument. They sounded to me as though the ghosts of the heroes of the battle, in whose memory the Pile was erected, were resenting the intrusion of the sight-seers.

After signing the register I went forth to join the throng which greets new-comers to Boston with: “Have you been to Bunker Hill yet? Well, you really must visit it before you leave town.” (85)

A comparison of the original theme with the rewritten version shows that the student did not address all of his instructor’s comments, and focused on minimal revision. Beyond written correction, however, some themes would be corrected orally in class and so a student knew “that his theme may come next and be torn to pieces or praised before his classmates” (11).
Figure 2. Scan of Specimen Theme 1 from Copeland and Rideout.
With a focus on correcting themes, it should not be surprising what Copeland and Rideout identify as the four main faults found in these themes: 1) faults in spelling and punctuation; 2) faults in the use of words; 3) faults in construction of sentences; and 4) faults in the construction of paragraphs (11). Beyond the obvious errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar, instructors attempted to instill correct and acceptable language in student themes, which included the avoidance of “flourish, apology, or philosophical reflection,” “cutting out surplusage,” and the improvement and “renewal of the Freshman vocabulary, which is a thesaurus of colorless words and threadbare phrases” (14-15). This avoidance of commonplaces and clichés, however, was not “a question of right or wrong, but of better or worse” (15). While such correction to better choice of words or phrases was partly to help students with style, it was also a reflection of current-traditional rhetoric’s debt to rhetoricians Hugh Blair’s and Samuel Newman’s writing on correct taste, as well as George Campbell’s condemnations of “solecisms” and “barbarisms” in the English language.

Beyond the narrative and descriptive themes that were the objects of correction, students wrote weekly themes in translation. “Every Saturday,” Copeland and Rideout describe, “the writers of daily themes must choose a short passage from the literature of another language and make of it the best English version that they can” (17). The authors students translated included Caesar, Cicero, Virgil, Herodotus, Homer, Goethe, Schiller, Molière, and Dumas. With these translations, the students would ideally benefit from a close examination of a writer’s vocabulary, phrases, and variety of sentences. Although students were to attempt faithful translations, they were not obliged to be completely
literal: “they should rather try to catch the spirit of each author in a particular passage, and to reproduce that faithfully, according to the English idiom” (18). In choosing objects of translation, students were warned against choosing passages that were too simple, as there would be less to learn and imitate from such passages (19).

Beyond the narratives, descriptions, and translations, students were assigned other prescribed forms of daily themes. For instance, some students, not necessarily the entire class, would be assigned an imitation of a great English writer, which was often a difficult task. While these imitations often held little resemblance to the style of the original author, Copeland and Rideout observe that such themes were often better than students’ regular themes and the imitator “will have the best possible chance to see how several different things were said by men who knew how to say them” (21).

Another significant daily theme assignment that is not generally associated with the current-traditional focus of composition instruction at the time was “a summary of each fortnightly theme” (22). Copeland and Rideout describe this assignment and its usefulness to the instructor, which is essentially a paper proposal:

It should give definitely the subject of the long theme of which it is the forerunner, and explain what the general substance and treatment will be. These synopses are useful in three ways: they enable the instructors to reject unsuitable subjects or suggest better methods, they force the writers to plan fortnightly themes at least one week ahead, and they give practice—which is much needed—in condensing. (22)
Such an assignment is, of course, similar to some of the process work instructors assign students today. While Copeland and Rideout describe correctness as being instructors’ first concern for daily themes, especially those written at the beginning of the course, with this summary assignment, it clearly had an important purpose beyond correctness, as Copeland and Rideout state.

Other prescribed daily themes might include practice in established written forms, such as invitations or letters, in which students would learn “the necessity of obeying convention,” not only in the form of the genre, but also in their word choice (23). Copeland and Rideout provide a sample schedule for ten days of themes, which illustrates how such daily themes might be connected and build on each other:

- **Friday, January 12**: A formal invitation to attend an evening party.
- **Saturday, January 13**: Translation.
- **Monday, January 15**: An acceptance of the invitation of January 12.
- **Tuesday, January 16**: An informal invitation to dinner.
- **Wednesday, January 17**: An acceptance of January 16.
- **Thursday, January 18**: Translation.
- **Friday, January 19**: A letter of introduction.
- **Saturday, January 20**: Translation.
- **Monday, January 22**: An application for a position addressed to a person with whom you are not acquainted.
- **Tuesday, January 23**: A letter of congratulation. (22-23)
On January 17th, one half the class would write a regular “third-hour” theme, and the other half would write one January 18th. These “third-hour” themes were essentially responses to the weekly lecture of either the Dean of Harvard College or the instructor in charge of the course (24). These themes ranged “from hurried, inaccurate, and incoherent reports, through brief comments that say little, to thoughtful and often original developments of some suggested idea” (24). Unlike many of the narrative or descriptive daily themes, the responses were largely reflective, containing the students’ thoughts concerning the lecture. Contrary to popular assumptions about current-traditional writing instruction, Copeland and Rideout indicate that student thinking in such reflections was valued: “Each shows too, we hope, that when a Freshman sits down to meditate he can arrive at having—not much, perhaps, but something to say for himself” (26).

Daily themes in different genres, such as invitations, letters of introduction, and application letters also contradict the characterization of writing instruction at this time as being focused merely on correctness. Unfortunately, Copeland and Rideout do not discuss these daily themes at length; however, they indicate that in grading these themes, instructors can give attention to the appropriateness of the style and language for the genre being written, which includes students’ need to consider the imagined audience. Among the complaints against current-traditional instruction, of course, are that no attention is given to audience and that students do not write in “real-world” genres. The variety in the types of daily themes for English A indicates this might not always have been the case.
Finally, acknowledging that each instructor might prescribe different kinds of daily themes unique from other instructors, Copeland and Rideout describe several such miscellaneous forms of the daily theme that illustrate the range of exercises the daily theme might also include. Such daily themes might include a critique of another student’s fortnightly theme (30), a short description of a student’s “nearest neighbor in the class” (31), and one-page dialogues (35). Frequently, of course, students would write a narrative or descriptive theme on a topic of their choice. Notably, Copeland and Rideout observe that while the daily themes might be good practice with narrative, description, and exposition,—three of the four modes of discourse—argumentative daily themes were less successful, as “one page has not proved a convenient space” (36).

The most important value in the use of daily themes, Copeland and Rideout note, “lies in the continuity of practice” (37). As the year progressed, they say, instructors would “comment less and less on form, and more and more on substance,” which seems contrary to the reified image of current-traditional rhetoric. Finally, if properly used, the daily themes would attain their main purpose and “break their writers of much that is undesirable, and will develop, if not firmer technique, at least a tendency toward good habits in writing” (37). The practice of daily writing is still valued by many instructors today. Frequent writing is not one of the condemned elements of current-traditionalism, yet it was central to Harvard’s approach.

*Fortnightly Themes*

Although the use of daily themes was a signature feature of the Harvard freshman theme course, according to Copeland and Rideout the twelve longer fortnightly themes
over the course of the academic year were the most important themes the students wrote. These themes, most of which ranged from three to six pages, were exercises in the four modes of discourse: exposition, description, narrative, and argument. However, the fortnightly themes were not distributed evenly among the four modes. Rather, the first six fortnightly themes, which took up the first half of the academic year, were all expository. Even today, over a century later, many colleges and universities with a two-semester sequence in freshman composition classes list the first semester class as focused on expository writing. Then, in the second half of the academic year, the longer themes of the Harvard course included two descriptive, two narrative, and two argumentative.

According to Copeland and Rideout, the reason for half of the longer themes being expository relates to the main purpose of English A. The course’s objective was “to train a number of young men in the use of correct and readable English” for everyday use in real life (38). This being the case, themes in exposition encompassed the first half of the year because “it is exposition that nine men out of ten will have to deal with later in life, perhaps nine times out of ten when they sit down to write at any length” (38). For description and narrative to share equally with exposition, Copeland and Rideout caution, would be “unwise” (39). They view argumentative writing as more important than narrative and description, and although it also only is the focus of two themes, it makes up the final culminating paper for the English A course. Figure 1 depicts the timeline for these fortnightly themes.

Beyond the clear difference between a fortnightly theme’s length and importance in comparison to that of a daily theme, Copeland and Rideout emphasize a significant
difference in the way instructors approach the fortnightly themes. The instructors read these longer themes “much more slowly and thoroughly” than the daily themes and “employ more time in suggesting better words or phrases, cutting out passages or filling them in, recasting clauses, sentences, and paragraphs” (39). Although much of this feedback was in correcting students’ faulty grammar, structure, and punctuation, much of it was focused on developing style, such as in encouraging practice in periodic constructions “because those forms are new or rare with them, and because their style will be the better for a decrease in the amount of looseness” (41). Perhaps most important, beyond the more thorough reading and correcting, for each longer theme an instructor “writes on the back of each composition a general criticism, from fifty to seventy-five words in length” (39). These general criticisms were largely negative and unfavorable, as the sample fortnightly themes Copeland and Rideout provide illustrate, “because the encouraging criticisms are generally given in conference” (40n1). For instance, the instructor’s comments on Specimen Theme 7 include, “This is discreditable work. Your spelling is weak, your sentences are a mere slop of ‘and’ and ‘but,’ and your paragraphs are bunches of words without any organic relation to the whole composition. The progress of the whole theme is careless and erratic” (93). In preparation for their fortnightly themes, students were required to read the relevant sections of Hill’s Principles of Rhetoric and write daily themes that might relate to the longer assignments.

An examination of Copeland and Rideout’s descriptions of the twelve fortnightly themes can give us not only a clearer understanding of the Harvard course, but also of the pedagogy, which includes more than what is generally associated with current-traditional
The first fortnightly theme, for instance, which would be titled “Who I am, and Why I Came to Harvard,” was to serve a purpose beyond practicing correct writing. Copeland and Rideout explain that in such a large class, this first theme helps instructors get to know something about each of their students, “and if useful for nothing more, these first personal themes may, and often do, contain hints as to the special needs of this or that man” (42). Although these themes were certainly subject to correction, as all themes were, their larger purpose in helping instructors know and understand the needs of their students is significant, as in some ways it is more akin to more modern pedagogy and unlike the reified image of current-traditional pedagogy that supposedly focused entirely on form and correctness with little regard for the students opinions and experiences.

Many instructors today might assign a personal essay to begin a freshman composition course, whether as an informal in-class writing or as a more formal assignment, such as a literacy narrative.

Beyond the instructors’ purposes for this first theme, Copeland and Rideout say, the students would find the autobiographical element of this three to six page theme simpler to write, thus beginning the course with an easier assignment. Like the daily themes, the fortnightly theme would be slipped “into the theme box” (42-43). “When corrected,” Copeland and Rideout continue, “this article is returned to the author, who must revise or rewrite it within two weeks. Thus the routine of the fortnightly themes is begun, simply enough” (43).

The second fortnightly theme would be an explanation of “how to do or to make something” (43). Preparing students for this second theme in exposition, Copeland and
Rideout contend, the instructor would need to clearly differentiate between exposition and narrative and description in order to avoid students’ confusion. Although ideally these compositions would be “entertaining, or perhaps original,” most were incredibly dull (44). The third long theme’s subject was “something learned in a college course,” which might focus on a topic from any course, from “some mathematical or chemical process” to topics in politics or history, such as “Livy as an Historian” or “The Rise of the Church in the Middle Ages” (44). This theme was expected to require more planning, and so instructors would need to teach students principles of planning and “give as much help as possible in matters of general plan” (45). The fourth expository theme called for students to “express their opinion on some question that has lately interested them,” although it was not to go so far as to make an argument (45). Similar to the previous theme, this composition would be challenging for students in its organization, since it lacked a chronology of events, but with “rewriting and a conference with the instructor,” students could succeed (46).

Unlike the previous themes, the fifth theme had no prescribed subject, and so students were free to write on anything so long as the composition remained expository. It was recommended, however—not required—that students write a theme “connected with the prescribed reading” (46). While the first theme for the course was an autobiography, the sixth and final expository fortnightly theme was a biography of “a well-known man—a hero worshipped in boyhood, perhaps, or merely some figure conspicuous at any time in the world” (47). This biography should include, along with facts about the person, “an estimate of the man’s character,” and “an individual opinion
as to his place and meaning in the history of the world” (47-48). By the time students would write the sixth fortnightly theme, Copeland and Rideout report, most pupils demonstrate “a creditable improvement in technique, and an ability, gained through considerable practice, to work out more complicated problems in the presentation of fact and ideas” (48). This sequence of six expository themes had gone from easy to more difficult. At this half-way point, students would take their mid-year examination, which was on some of the content of Hill’s *Principles of Rhetoric* and the required literature they read for the class, before returning to the course to take up the other three modes of discourse: description, narration, and argumentation.

The seventh and eighth fortnightly themes that began the second half of the academic year were descriptions. For both descriptive themes, students were free to choose their topics. These two descriptions were essentially the same, although, Copeland and Rideout note, the first “is apt to be much the more elementary in form” (50). As many of the daily themes might be descriptive, these exercises were a form of practice and preparation for the longer descriptive themes. Additionally, students were assigned corresponding pages on description in Hill’s *Principles of Rhetoric* and would hear the instructor’s lectures and modeling in class.

The primary focus instructors had in reading the descriptive themes was to help students develop a strong descriptive style. Students who might have a good expository style might write “in a fashion surprisingly stupid” for the descriptive themes (51). Regarding this descriptive style, Copeland and Rideout observe that many students fail to understand “the descriptive mood” and lack “specific or un hackneyed words” (52). Some
students were “seized with an epidemic of adjectives and would overuse a device of giving adjectives in pairs (52-53). With an overuse of adjectives and unimaginative verbs, instructors would also emphasize the use of specific verbs. In developing a descriptive style, students would need to “learn to steer the middle course,” which was between the evils of “absurdity and dulness” (55). Although students would not necessarily display striking descriptive skill in such themes, a comparison of the two descriptive fortnightly themes shows “a general advance from bald and literal enumeration toward description that had color, motion, a semblance of reality, and perhaps a tinge of the imaginative” (55).

Two fortnightly themes in narration followed in which students “must tell two short stories, true or fictitious” (56). Just as with the descriptive themes, the instructors focused largely on style, as the assignments served “to develop the students’ range and versatility” (56). In addition to reading relevant parts of Hill’s *Principles of Rhetoric*, students read model narratives, such as excerpts of *Robinson Crusoe* or *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. The instructors would also read such models aloud in class. Just as with previous assignments in the course, Copeland and Rideout express little confidence in the students as great authors, reporting that although “a plot was good occasionally” students rarely gave it a good treatment (58). Making Kiplings and Thackerays of students was, of course, not the aim. Rather, Copeland and Rideout argue, “The greatest benefit derived from the practice in narration—as from that in description—is its tendency to make a writer’s style unbend,” which included a more varied vocabulary and less “prim and
conventional” sentences (58). Copeland and Rideout remain somewhat vague on this, however, providing no examples of this improved style.

The focus of themes XI and XII was the last of the four modes of discourse: argumentation. Perhaps more than any other assignments in the Harvard theme course, the two longer argumentative themes illustrate that what has been represented as the prototype of current-traditional composition classes was not merely focused on form and correctness. Rather, the argumentative themes were centered on rhetoric, with process work preparing students for their final culminating project for the course. Unlike the previous fortnightly themes, the two argumentative themes built on each other with the first being a Brief, which was essentially an outline of the argument, and the second and last being a six to twelve page argument. This final theme resembled the more traditional proposition theme—the complex theme—which John Holmes and John Walker described in 1739 and 1801, as I discuss in Chapter 2.

In preparation for these themes, students read Hill’s chapter on Argument, which was focused on rhetoric and principles of argumentation. In this chapter, students studied proposition, proof, evidence, some principles of logic, arrangement, and persuasion (Hill 327-400). Just as with other fortnightly themes, one of the daily themes served as a proposal, being a “careful statement . . . of the question which he means to argue” (Copeland and Rideout 59). So in their study of argumentation, each assignment built on the previous one, with a daily theme serving as a proposal for the Brief (Theme XI), and the Brief serving as preparation for the longer formal argument (Theme XII).
Hill’s *Principles of Rhetoric* supplies no directions for writing a Brief, and so Copeland and Rideout point out that students are referred to Harvard professor G. P. Baker’s *Principles of Argumentation* for directions and sample Briefs. The Brief was unlike any other theme students wrote for class, particularly in that it took the form of a detailed outline. Baker describes the Brief as a clear summary and plan:

A student of Argumentative Composition . . . draws up these plans that he may make a clear and forcible presentation of his case, and that his outline may be criticized by his teacher before the forensic, the written argumentation developed from it, is handed in. His plan must, therefore, be something that will make a person who has not given any special thought to the case in question see exactly what is to be discussed and exactly what the student wishes to do with it. (84)

With the need for the teacher to see a student’s full argument and exactly what would be discussed in the long argumentative theme, the Brief might be quite lengthy. Some of the sample Briefs Baker provides, for instance, are up to four pages in length. Students’ hand-written Briefs in the composition course might be almost as long as the final argumentative theme of six to twelve pages.

Baker describes the Brief as having three parts: the Introduction, the Brief Proper, and the Conclusion (86). The Introduction would concisely introduce the question to be discussed, including how it arose, the different sides of the argument, and the “exact point at issue” that the student wishes to examine (86). The Brief Proper would take an outline form with headings and sub-headings and “very concisely make clear to any
intelligent reader the development of the argument” (86). This would include all the evidence and examples the writer planned on using. Finally, the Conclusion would simply sum up the argument.

In writing the Brief, and eventually the final argumentative theme, students were not expected to do much research. Rather, Baker recommends that students take their topics from their courses, which would not require much research. “As a result,” Baker states, “he can give nearly all of his attention to the preparation of his matter” (375). The sample Briefs Baker provides include such topics as “Should Capital Punishment Be Abolished?”, “Is the Principle of Prohibition Right?”, and “Was Lincoln’s Plan of Reconstruction Superior to the Congressional Plan?” (377-398). The only example Copeland and Rideout provide for the proposition or thesis of an argument theme is “Christian Science should be Restricted by Law” (60). Their appendix of sample themes does not include any examples of Briefs or argumentative themes. However, with the argumentative theme closely resembling the more traditional “complex theme” of the early nineteenth century, almost any proposition might be used as the topic for the final argumentative theme.

In Harvard’s theme course, just as Baker suggests, the Brief was the focus of students’ individual conferences with the instructor, which Copeland and Rideout note, was essential, as “some of the briefs make their first appearance in a hopeless state” (61). Copeland and Rideout go on to describe the conferences for this eleventh theme:

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12 Although students were not required to do much research for their final argumentative theme, by the 1920s the traditional research paper developed from these kinds of themes. In Chapter 5 I examine this in more detail.
Most of them, indeed, have to be gone over thoroughly with their authors in conference, as the corrections usual in other fortnightly themes would not suffice here. A talk together enables an instructor to show a pupil more plainly and more quickly in what respects the brief should be changed. . . .

The instructors, in conference, try to help each pupil toward making the chief arguments form the main heads of the brief, arranging them in proper sequence, and supporting them, not by mere assertion, but by sound evidence and reasoning. (61-62)

The focus of these conferences, as Copeland and Rideout describe them, is particularly noteworthy when we consider that such one-on-one attention is not part of the dominant conception of current-traditional pedagogy. In describing the conferencing on the Brief, Copeland and Rideout emphasize that the focus is on making a sound argument, which seems to be a clear indication that rhetoric was an important element of the class. In addition, just as with the use of some of the daily themes to plan and prepare for longer themes, the fact that the Brief was a long outline that prepared students for their final themes demonstrates some clear attention to the writing process, with assignments used as scaffolding, building on one another. This is not unlike some of the scaffolding and process work composition teachers require today.

After the Brief, students would write their twelfth and final long theme for freshman composition. This final theme would closely follow the outline of Theme XI, but “should of course be put together in such a way as to conceal the framework, the angles, of the brief” (62). When students wrote their argument, then, their outline needed
to be put into sentence form, with their ideas and arrangement already planned from their Brief. This being the case, students could focus on putting into practice what they had learned the rest of the academic year concerning correctness and style. Beyond this, however, they were expected to implement what Hill discusses regarding argumentation in *Principles of Rhetoric*. Copeland and Rideout emphasize that the last longest theme should be a culminating project, very much like the final paper students in freshman composition courses might write today. As Copeland and Rideout put it,

> Each writer is urged to make the argument a masterpiece, as if it were to be a final test of what he can accomplish after the year’s practice; out of the dry bones of the eleventh theme he is to create, if he can, a body that lives and moves. The argument should be, in other words, not an enumeration of reasons, but an interesting, spirited discussion, with the triple cogency of logical structure, persuasive temper, and thrust of phrase.

(62)

Although the final argumentative theme was certainly expected to be written in correct English, the assignment involved much more than a current-traditional focus on superficial correctness with several steps built into the assignment and an emphasis on the implementation of the principles of argumentation from Hill’s textbook. In discussing students’ preparation and planning for the Brief and Argument, Copeland and Rideout stress, “The first and most evident necessity is that the men learn how argument—the art of making the mind of some one else not only receive ideas but believe them—how this process involves the principles already learned in exposition, plus the new processes of
convincing and persuading” (59). More was expected than correctness and style. In addition, Copeland and Rideout emphasize how students should avoid logical fallacies and consider opponents’ objections, both of which are still emphasized today (see Chapter 5).

Composition histories’ representations of English A, such as those of Berlin, Crowley, and Wozniak, have given superficial attention to details of the course, which has only contributed to an oversimplified understanding of Harvard’s role in first-year composition and the notion that the class was merely the perpetuator of correctness. My attention here to the details of the course goes far beyond what previous histories have done in examining English A, giving a fuller elucidation of the structure of the course and its assignments and how first-year composition was really taught. Copeland and Rideout’s discussion of the assignments in the class, the reasoning behind their sequence and their connections to other course assignments, including daily themes, also illustrates how together they formed an assignment genre set. In seeing how the assignment genres function within this set, we can recognize the structure and logic of the design of the course that composition histories have missed and can also more easily recognize the parallels between Harvard’s English A and first-year composition courses today. For instance, although we have seen many pedagogical innovations since the early twentieth century, the structure of current two-semester sequences of first-year composition is similar, with the first semester still often described as expository writing and the second semester focusing on research writing and argumentation. In addition, as I demonstrate in
Chapter 5, we can see connections between these early twentieth-century writing assignments and assignments used today.

Readings and Exams

Beyond the daily and fortnightly themes, Harvard’s English A course included assigned readings and written examinations. As I discussed briefly in Chapter 3, at the beginning of the twentieth century one debate regarding freshman English was whether or not it should be composition-based or literature-based. Although the Harvard course was certainly composition-based, it also had an important literature-based element. As I mention above, beyond reading relevant sections of Hill’s Principles of Rhetoric as they wrote their themes, students were also required to read English literature. This literature included works by Shakespeare, Rudyard Kipling, William Thackeray, Thomas Macaulay, and George Eliot. Copeland and Rideout observe that these authors serve primarily as models: “Outside’ reading is prescribed because these beginners—like all beginners—need to see how other and better persons have done the kind of work which they are trying to do” (63). In addition, the reading might help stimulate interest in literature.

Copeland and Rideout point out, though, that the authors the students read for class were intentionally unequal. This variety in the quality of the assigned literature was meant to help students practice distinguishing between levels of good writing: “[B]y reading several unequal and unassorted writers, about whom they must collect something intelligent to say in an examination, they may learn to distinguish the good, the better, and the best” (65). However, they do not specify which authors were good, better, or best.
The literature in *English A*, then, primarily served two purposes. First, it served as a model of good writing. Second, it served as the subject of analysis on written examinations.

The written examinations were an important element of the course. Although students practiced their writing in their daily and fortnightly themes, these were generally prepared outside of class. The timed in-class examinations tested a student’s knowledge of rhetoric and grammatical principles and required students to write about topics from the required reading in literature, which might involve some degree of literary analysis. The mid-year examination and the final examination at the end of the academic year were each given three hours. In addition there might be a one-hour mid-semester examination, at the instructor’s discretion.

Copeland and Rideout provide several sample examination questions with representative answers that students wrote in their “blue books.” These questions included,

I. “Clearness is a relative term.” Discuss.

II. Define and illustrate the following terms: “barbarism,” “solecism,” “trope,” “euphemism.”

III. The Character of Beatrix Esmond

IV. Explain fully the uses of “shall” and “will” in direct and indirect discourse to express futurity.

V. Discuss the principles of construction whereby emphasis may be secured,—emphasis not merely of words and of sentences, but of larger
portions of the composition. Show how emphasis in this larger sense is illustrated in any one of the plays or the stories you have been asked to read.

VI. Discuss the tests of Good Use which should govern a writer or speaker in the choice of words. (66-74)

Some of the sample student answers to these questions are quite lengthy and demonstrate that some students were certainly reading and applying the ideas from Hill’s *Principles of Rhetoric*. Other sample questions, to which Copeland and Rideout do not provide sample answers include,

Discuss the principles of narrative writing, and show how these principles are illustrated in “Adam Bede.”

Define and illustrate the following terms: “unity,” “pathetic fallacy,” “deduction,” “trope,” “ease,” “periodic sentence,” “*argumentum ad hominem*,” “good use.”

Discuss the principle of Unity and its application to sentences, paragraphs, and whole compositions.

Is the following sentence (in italics) periodic or loose? Why?

Rewrite the sentence so that it shall be the kind of sentence, periodic or loose, which in its present form it is not:

“*And with all that, and with the certainty that those things were gone forever, arose the great longing for one more breath of liberty, for one more ride over the boundless steppe, for one more*..."
draught of the sour kvass, of the camp brew of rye and malt.” (75-76)

Although many of the questions on the examinations seem to call for definitions that might require rote memorization of sections of Hill’s textbook, Copeland and Rideout emphasize that the textbook “is not to be learned by rote,” but, rather, “serves as a code of suggestions . . . in which a reader may get many a starting-point for his own thoughts” (65).

Interestingly, and contrary to the reified notion of a current-traditional pedagogy of the time, Copeland and Rideout emphasize that teachers would place great value on students’ opinions in their examination answers: “What the man himself has thought about this or that rhetorical principle, is the real gist of a good answer in an examination” (65). They explain further, “[I]t is the man’s own ideas and phrasing that make an answer valuable. It is hardly necessary to add, as qualification, that an answer has no value if it be not couched in good English; substance goes for nothing without form” (66).

Certainly, what Copeland and Rideout say the teachers valued in student answers might differ from the reality. Common assumptions about the suppression of student ideas and creativity in writing pedagogy of the time would contradict Copeland and Rideout. But, if we can give some credit to Copeland and Rideout for describing the Harvard course accurately, we might conclude that perhaps students had more autonomy than previously assumed.
English A and Current-Traditional Rhetoric

The composition histories that have examined Harvard’s English A course and Copeland and Rideout’s text have stressed those features of the course that related to correctness. In particular, Crowley and others call attention to Copeland and Rideout’s statement at the beginning of their book that “the habitual use of correct and intelligent English, is what the instructors try to drill into the Freshmen” (Copeland and Rideout 2). In addition, Crowley focuses on the other aspects of English A that emphasized grammar and correctness, including the initial focus on correctness in daily themes, the fact that teachers used abbreviated correction marks, and those aspects of the final examination that related to correct English (Composition in the University 74-75). Crowley points to the instructor comments on the sample student themes that Copeland and Rideout provide, which are highly critical and largely focused on correctness (75).

Finally, Crowley, Norbert Elliot, and others highlight the one negative student response to the course that Copeland and Rideout provide in their examples of student responses to the course. In this response the student complains, “In an endeavor (and a not very successful one) to conform to certain rules, I have lost all originality,—everything has a sort of labored rehashing, which makes whatever I have to say, dull and uninteresting” (Copeland and Rideout 80). Although Copeland and Rideout describe this comment as one of “very few complaints,” providing several positive student responses that were “average comments,” scholars like Crowley have emphasized the negative comment (80-81). As any composition teacher might attest today, some negative student responses to composition classes is to be expected. However, the negative student
comment Copeland and Rideout provide is aligned with some scholars’ condemnations of current-traditional pedagogy as restrictive and stifling student creativity, and so perhaps it should be no surprise that scholars like Crowley would emphasize this student comment. Of course, scholars like Crowley are not wrong in recognizing Harvard’s *English A* as focusing on correctness, as a close examination of the course certainly demonstrates that it did include the main characteristics generally associated with current-traditional rhetoric. The instructors emphasized correctness and often focused on “good use” over the content and ideas. In addition, the Harvard theme course devoted significant attention to style. Of course, scholars like Crowley would condemn current-traditionalism’s theory of style. In Crowley’s view the current-traditional theory of style that characterized much of writing instruction at the beginning of the twentieth century, including Harvard’s course, was too prescriptive, with correctness including not just grammar and punctuation, but also style and choice of words (“Current-Traditional Theory of Style”). Current-traditionalism, then, viewed style as part of correct writing, aligned with Hugh Blair’s and George Campbell’s views of style in the eighteenth century. While the theme course certainly seems to approach style prescriptively, with style being part of correct writing, Copeland and Rideout contend, “It is not . . . a question of right or wrong, but of better or worse” (15). Of course, the teachers and students might still really have viewed “better or worse” in terms of correct or incorrect.

However, as my examination of the Harvard theme course demonstrates in this chapter, there were many important characteristics of the course that were central to instruction that are usually not associated with current-traditionalism. These
characteristics of the course include the monthly one-on-one conferences students had with instructors, a focus on process—some daily themes functioning as proposals, Theme XI being a brief on which to build the final argumentative theme—and a focus on revision, with students being required to rewrite many of their themes. Although the course’s conferences and revision might still have focused to some degree on correctness, these aspects of the course do not fit common perceptions of the Harvard course. Composition histories have given little attention to these essential aspects of the course, focusing instead on teachers’ attention to grammar and correctness.

Beyond Harvard

My examination of Harvard’s theme course does not represent all freshman composition courses. However, as a snapshot of a theme course at the beginning of the twentieth century, Harvard’s English A is informative of trends in composition teaching, which composed the theme system. Other universities imitated the Harvard model, and most composition textbooks of the time are focused on the four modes of discourse, which was Harvard’s focus for the longer fortnightly themes. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Wozniak, commenting on the influence of Harvard’s course, contends, “This freshman English course at Harvard spread rapidly to many of the eastern colleges. While some installed it bodily, others incorporated its major features” (128). The examination of Harvard’s course in this chapter, then, while only representative of what one university’s theme course was like, is also an indication of what many other universities at the beginning of the twentieth century may have been doing in freshman composition courses.
An understanding of what freshman composition was like at other colleges and universities can only be understood fully with an examination of the local histories of individual institutions. However, in addition to the knowledge that many institutions were following Harvard’s lead, an examination of the most commonly used composition textbooks at the time can, at least, give some indication of the content and assignments of other courses across the country. The textbook used for Harvard’s theme course, for instance,—Hill’s *Principles of Rhetoric*, which was also popular at other colleges—gives some indications of what Harvard’s course was like. Hill’s text does not give any attention to the daily themes that Copeland and Rideout describe, but it gives considerable attention to correct grammar and style and the four most common types of longer themes at the time: the modes of discourse. As Copeland and Rideout’s description of *English A* indicates, teachers gave considerable attention to marking student themes for both grammar and style. Hill’s textbook values these, with Book I dedicated to grammatical purity and Book II dedicated to “Rhetorical Excellence,” which largely addressed style, including clearness, force, ease, and unity. Current scholars, of course, reject Hill’s current-traditional view of rhetoric. In addition, just as the longer fortnightly themes in *English A* consisted of exposition, description, narration, and argument, the second half of Hill’s textbook focuses on these modes of discourse.

However, if we depended entirely on the textbooks used in composition courses to indicate what the classes were really like, such as Hill’s *Principles of Rhetoric*, we might come to the same conclusion that some composition histories have come to regarding the focus of first-year composition courses, including Harvard’s: that they were
only characterized by a focus on correctness and the four modes of discourse. Although these were certainly central elements of the course, my examination of *English A* demonstrates that such a characterization is an oversimplification. Composition textbooks can only give a partial picture of what was emphasized in the classroom. Even though Copeland and Rideout’s description of *English A* is by no means exhaustive, it clearly illustrates essential aspects of first-year composition that composition textbooks cannot show, including the structure of the course, its schedule, the assignment sequence, instructor’s practices in teaching and grading, the role of the daily themes, an explanation of the design of the course, and elements of the course not usually associated with current-traditional rhetoric’s focus on correctness. Previous composition histories, even when citing Copeland and Rideout, have not given attention to these details of *English A*.

By making a detailed examination of Harvard’s first-year composition course in this chapter, I have given a far clearer picture of what writing instruction was like in Harvard’s prototypical *English A* than previous histories. By understanding the theme writing assignments in the context in which they were taught, we can see that there was much more to composition instruction and Harvard’s influential course than previously acknowledged. Although the “bird’s eye” view of the theme system and its development shows a considerable emphasis on correctness, as Chapter 3 demonstrates, by “zooming in” on a particular course—an *assignment genre set*—we can discover the details of classroom practice. We learn from Copeland and Rideout that teachers had regular one-on-one conferences with the students; the daily themes helped prepare students for the longer themes, some even acting as paper proposals; students frequently revised and
rewrote themes, although much of this was focused on correctness; the course was carefully planned, with expository writing taking up the first half of the year and description, narration, and argumentation taking up the second half of the year; the course and assignments included attention to principles of argumentation, as addressed in Hill’s textbook, with the two argumentative themes building on each other for a final culminating argument. Many of these features of the course should sound familiar to composition teachers today, for these practices have not gone away. In Chapter 5, I will connect these features and assignments of the theme system to more current practices and assignments in English composition, arguing that such assignments and practices descend from the theme system.
CHAPTER 5: THEME WRITING ASSIGNMENTS AND CURRENT PRACTICE

In Chapter 4, I closely examined the assignments and pedagogical practices of Harvard’s prototypical *English A* course, as described in Copeland and Rideout’s *Freshman English and Theme-Correcting in Harvard College*. I argued that such an examination complicates the dominant narrative’s characterization of Harvard’s course and current-traditional pedagogy and gives us a far better understanding of the course and assignments. Having established the spread and characteristics of the theme system in Chapter 3, and the details of *English A* in Chapter 4, revising the dominant Harvard narrative of composition history, in this chapter I argue that despite a widespread condemnation and dismissing of current-traditional writing pedagogy of the beginning of the twentieth century, many current writing assignments are rooted in the assignments of the theme system. Understanding the connections between current assignments and those used in current-traditional writing instruction of the early twentieth century is important for both rethinking and understanding current practice and how we view current-traditionalism.

Genres generally originate in other genres, and so the assignment genres popular today have developed and evolved from the past. In making my argument, I first examine three current popular composition textbooks, connecting many of their writing assignments directly to assignments in the four modes of discourse from the theme system. I then give a detailed examination of the research paper’s evolution from theme writing to its various current forms, demonstrating how tracing the development of some
assignments can reveal additional connections of current genres to those of the theme system.

The Modes of Discourse in Current Composition Textbooks

As I demonstrate in Chapter 4, the longer fortnightly themes of Harvard’s model *English A* course were centered in students’ practice of the four modes of discourse: exposition, description, narration, and argument. Copeland and Rideout even describe how the daily themes of Harvard’s course were in practicing the first three of these four modes. Most composition textbooks of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century also ascribed to the four modes. In his famous 1981 article “The Rise and Fall of the Modes of Discourse,” Robert Connors notes that “the modes were ignored to death after 1950” (452). He further observes, “In rhetoric texts today, the modes are still expiring. . . . Stripped of their rhetorical validity and much of their practical usefulness, the modes cling to a shadowy half-life, in the attic of composition legends” (453). Although this “fall” of the modes of discourse might be the case for the classification of discourse, it is not true in relation to current writing assignments. Genres might certainly decline and fade from use, but the four modes of discourse, which were central to the theme system of the early twentieth century and current-traditional rhetoric, have not faded from use, clinging to “a shadowy half-life.” Rather, they have evolved, just as theme writing evolved over time. An examination of some of the most popular composition textbooks in current use can illustrate this, including *The Norton Field Guide to Writing, 3rd edition* (2013) by Richard Bullock, Maureen Daly Goggin, and Francine Weinberg, *The St. Martin’s Guide to Writing, 10th edition* (2013) by Rise B.
Axelrod and Charles R. Cooper, and *The Bedford Guide for College Writers, 10th edition* (2014) by X. J. Kennedy, Dorothy M. Kennedy, and Marcia F. Muth. Many of the writing assignments in these textbooks come from assignments of the theme system, based on the modes of discourse.

The four modes of discourse, as central elements of current-traditional rhetoric, have been the object of much criticism since the rise of the process movement in composition studies. James Berlin and Sharon Crowley critique the modes as epitomizing current-traditionalism’s managerial view of invention. As Berlin puts it, “The invention of discovery of classical rhetoric is replaced by a managerial invention, taking the shape of the forms of discourse—description, narration, exposition, and argument. Rhetoric, it is asserted, cannot teach the discovery of the content of discourse, but it can teach students to manage it, once found, so that it appeals to the appropriate faculty” (*Nineteenth-Century* 64). Perhaps the most important criticism of the modes, however, beyond managerial invention, is that they are rhetorically problematic as a means of classifying discourse. Crowley observes in her response to Connors’ article on the modes, that such a classification of discourse does not account for all the components of communication: it includes the writer and text, but not the audience (90).

However, most composition scholars no longer classify discourse into the four modes.\(^{13}\) In that sense, Connors is right that the modes have fallen out of favor as a way

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\(^{13}\) Although most composition scholars have rejected the four modes of discourse on a theoretical level, some composition teachers who ascribe to current-traditional pedagogy still embrace the modes. In the field of Linguistics, some scholars continue to classify discourse in a similar way, such as Carlota S. Smith, in her 2003 book *Modes of Discourse: The Local Structure of Texts*. Smith recognizes five modes: Narrative, Description, Report, Information, and Argument. Unlike the current-traditional rhetorical modes, Smith’s classification is based on her analysis of linguistic forms and so, she states, the modes are “linguistic categories” (1). Interestingly, Smith says she determined her five modes independently, before
of classifying discourse. However, in focusing on assignments and strategies that continue to hold a prominent place in current textbooks, it becomes clear that many of the assignments of the theme system associated with the modes are still in use. Many of them have evolved to some degree, as all genres do over time, but the fact that so many current assignments are rooted in assignments of the theme system is important. Although current composition scholars generally reject current-traditional rhetoric and the four modes of discourse that epitomized it, the field still values many of the assignments that were used in teaching the modes a century ago. So, despite the ways that composition teaching is different today in comparison to composition teaching during the reign of the modes and the theme system, if we look at current and past assignments, we can see that we have more similarities than we have realized.

Richard Fulkerson observes that one of the approaches to teaching writing that has emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century is the study of genres. Many of the most popular composition textbooks in use today take such an approach, including the three textbooks I shall examine here. However, Fulkerson goes on to state that “‘Genre’ is also the contemporary incarnation of what we (properly) disparage as a ‘modes of discourse’ approach” (674). If we understand the four modes of discourse as not merely means of classifying discourse, but as assignment genres, Fulkerson’s statement rings true, with the modes retaining life in current textbooks in various forms as genres and strategies for writing. Fulkerson cites The St. Martin’s Guide for Writing, which I shall knowing about the four modes of nineteenth-century rhetoric: “I found to my surprise that the Discourse Modes have counterparts in rhetorical tradition. The Modes correspond to ‘text types’ which have been recognized as important in discourse but not analyzed before, I believe, in terms of their linguistic properties. This correspondence is independent validation of the idea of Discourse Modes, I think” (2).
examine further, as a “classic” of this type of genre-based textbook: “It shows a sort of transitional link between the old modes pedagogy and a contemporary genre pedagogy, as well as the shift from the C/T product orientation to extended process” (676). Fulkerson notes, and my own examination of the current edition confirms, that some chapters of *The St. Martin’s Guide to Writing* “are just EDNA modes in process dress” (676). The same may be said for the other two textbooks I examine in this chapter: *The Bedford Guide for College Writers* and *The Norton Field Guide to Writing.*

Although neither *St. Martin’s* nor *Bedford* explicitly connects their chapters to the modes of discourse, *Norton* does. In its Preface, listing the different ways in which teachers might use the textbook, *Norton* states, “If you want to focus on modes, you’ll find chapters on narration, description, and so on. The chapters assume these to be strategies that a writer might use for many writing purposes, and also include links that lead students through the process of writing an essay organized around a particular mode” (ix). Despite the presence of the modes in *Norton* and other textbooks, they are not presented as a means of classifying discourse, which was at the root of most critics’ problems with the modes, but as strategies and genres for students to learn. If we consider the assignments of the theme system as reflected in Harvard’s *English A* course and popular textbooks of the time and compare them to the assignments in current textbooks, it becomes clear that despite current scholars’ rejection of the modes as a means of classifying discourse, the assignments associated with teaching the modes are still valued, although many current educators and scholars may not realize it. The writing assignments in *The Norton Field Guide to Writing, 3rd edition* (2013), *The St. Martin’s Guide to*
Theme System Assignments in Current Textbooks

In my examination of assignments in current textbooks in comparison to assignments of the theme system that follows, I categorize them according to where they might fit as assignments in the four modes of discourse. While neither I nor the current textbooks ascribe to the four modes as a means of classifying all discourse, textbooks of the theme system do, also classifying theme writing assignments according to the modes. For this reason, in this section I have organized my analysis according to the four modes, reflecting the presentation of assignments in current-traditional textbooks. For a brief comparison of assignments in current textbooks to sources of the early twentieth century, which I discuss in more detail below, see Table 1.

Expository Assignments

Most popular composition textbooks today, including *Norton, Bedford, and St. Martin’s*, no longer use the term “expository writing” to describe types of assignments. However, many assignments in current textbooks would fall under the modal category of exposition. In his 1895 edition of *The Principles of Rhetoric*, the widely popular textbook used in Harvard’s *English A*, Adams Sherman Hill defines exposition as dealing with “whatever admits of analysis or requires explanation” (247). As my examination of

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14 The term “expository writing” still survives in the course descriptions for first-semester first-year composition courses at colleges and universities across the United States, including Ohio University. However, this does not necessarily reflect the content of the courses, but is likely a carry-over from first-year composition courses of the theme system that ascribed to the four modes of discourse, including Harvard’s model *English A*. As I demonstrate in Chapter 4, the first half of the academic year for *English A* was dedicated to themes in exposition. Since many institutions imitated Harvard’s approach, also ascribing to the four modes, a first-semester course in expository writing was common.
"English A" in Chapter 4 demonstrates, such expository themes could take many different forms. The longer expository themes for the class included an autobiographical introduction (similar to a literacy narrative), how to make something, something learned in a college course, an expression of opinion on a topic, a criticism of one of the course’s required books of literature, and a biographical portrait. “Theoretically,” Hill states, “exposition treats the matter in hand with absolute impartiality, setting forth the pure truth,—the truth unalloyed by prejudice, pride of opinion, exaggeration of rhetoric, or glamour of sentiment. Except in words of a technical character, exposition in this strict sense is comparatively rare” (300). Such ideal absolute impartiality would certainly be absent from the expository themes of Harvard’s "English A", which call for students’ opinions and overlap with the other three modes. Overlap, Hill admits, is unavoidable, with the four modes being absolutely distinct only in theory (247-48). Although the four modes of discourse would overlap, writing assignments were categorized by mode. Exposition, then, really consisted of different theme assignment genres.

Types of expository themes from the early twentieth century that are still clearly present in current composition textbooks include assignments in explanation, definition, comparing and contrasting, cause and effect, analysis, evaluations, profiles, and literacy narratives. Genres, of course, evolve over time, and so current forms of such assignments might not be exactly as they were a century ago, but they are similar enough to make tracing their evolution unnecessary for my purposes here.
Table 1

A comparison of assignments appearing in current textbooks and theme system sources.

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<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Current Textbooks 2013-2014</th>
<th>Theme System Sources</th>
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| Explanations or Reporting Information | *Norton* Chapter 39 “Explaining Processes”; Chapter 9 “Reporting Information”  
*St. Martin’s* Chapter 4 “Explaining a Concept” | *English A* Fortnightly Theme II: “How to Make or Do Something”  
Brooks & Hubbard (304)  
Genung & Hanson “Definitions” (294-5) |
| Definition             | *Norton* Chapter 36 “Defining”;  
*St. Martin’s* Chapter 16 “Defining”;  
*Bedford* section on “Defining” in Chapter 22 “Strategies for Developing” | Brooks & Hubbard (319-20)  
Genung & Hanson (290-92)  
Scott & Denny “Assignments on Development by Comparison and Contrast” (75-85) |
| Compare and Contrast   | *Norton* Chapter 35 “Comparing and Contrasting”;  
*St. Martin’s* Chapter 18 “Comparing and Contrasting”;  
*Bedford* Chapter 7 “Comparing and Contrasting” | Brooks & Hubbard (323-24)  
Genung & Hanson (290-92)  
Scott & Denny “Assignments on Development by Cause and Effect” (100-6) |
| Cause and Effect       | *Norton* Chapter 32 “Analyzing Causes and Effects”;  
*St. Martin’s* Chapter 9 “Speculating about Causes”;  
*Bedford* Chapter 8 “Explaining Causes and Effects” | Brooks & Hubbard (323-24)  
Genung & Hanson (290-92)  
Scott & Denny “Assignments on Development by Cause and Effect” (100-6) |
| Analysis               | *Norton* Chapter 8 “Analyzing Texts”;  
*St. Martin’s* Chapter 10 “Analyzing Stories”;  
*Bedford* Chapter 13 “Responding to Literature” | Curl’s Expository Writing Chapter 4  
Hill’s definition of expository writing |
| Evaluations            | *Norton* Chapter 13 “Evaluations”;  
*St. Martin’s* Chapter 8 “Justifying an Evaluation”;  
*Bedford* “Evaluating and Reviewing” | Curl’s Expository Writing Chapter 5 |
| Profiles               | *Norton* Chapter 16 “Profiles”;  
*St. Martin’s* Chapter 3 “Writing Profiles” | *English A* Fortnightly Theme VI: “Biographical Portrait”  
Genung & Hanson “Character Sketches” (303-5)  
Nutter, Hersey, and Greenough’s *Specimens of Prose Composition*: “Biographical Portrait” |
| Narrative              | *Norton* Chapter 7 “Writing a Literacy Narrative”;  
Chapter 38 “Dialogue”;  
Chapter 40 “Narrating”;  
*St. Martin’s* Chapter 14 “Narrating”;  
*Bedford* Chapter 4 “Recalling an Experience” | Hill’s *Principles of Rhetoric*, Part II, Chapter 2 |
| Description            | *Norton* Chapter 37 “Describing”;  
*St. Martin’s* Chapter 15 “Describing”;  
*Bedford* Chapter 5 “Observing a Scene” | Hill’s *Principles of Rhetoric*, Part II, Chapter 1 |
| Arguing a Position     | *Norton* Chapter 10 “Arguing a Position”;  
Chapter 33 “Arguing”;  
*St. Martin’s* Chapter 6 “Arguing a Position”;  
Chapter 19 “Arguing”;  
*Bedford* Chapter 9 “Taking a Stand” | Hill’s *Principles of Rhetoric*, Part II, Chapter 4: “Argument” |
With *exposition* usually defined as “explanation,” it is appropriate to begin with explanatory assignments. Currently, *Norton* includes a chapter on “Explaining Processes,” such as how to make French fries, and *St. Martin’s* has a chapter on “Explaining a Concept,” which includes more complex explanations of ideas and theories. There are certainly different types of explanations, but in current-traditional textbooks such assignments would all be presented as assignments in the expository mode of discourse. *Norton’s* explanatory assignment, presented as a writing strategy, is exactly like the second fortnightly theme assigned in Harvard’s *English A*, which was on “How to Make or Do Something.” Other assignments and exercises in current-traditional textbooks had similar purposes of merely explaining.

Similarly, a definition assignment is another good example of a writing assignment common in both current and current-traditional textbooks. Both *Norton* and *St. Martin’s* include a chapter on “Defining,” presented as a writing strategy. Comparing these textbooks’ presentation of definitional assignments to its presentation in a textbook of the early twentieth century is instructive. Stratton D. Brooks and Marietta Hubbard’s 1904 textbook *Composition-Rhetoric*, for instance, presents definitional writing in the same way that *Norton* does, with a comparable description of what this type of writing includes, and a similar illustrative table to that presented in *Norton*. Such similarities might not be surprising. Beyond this, however, Brooks and Hubbard suggest a theme assignment of a paragraph-length definitional theme, very much like the “simple” theme of earlier in the nineteenth century (308-9). John Franklin Genung and Charles Lane
Hanson’s *Outlines of Composition and Rhetoric* (1915) also includes a section on
definition themes (294-5). *Norton* and *St. Martin’s* also give strategies for writing
“Extended Definitions,” which would include additional details and examples to
illustrate. *Norton’s* extended example of a definition of “meme” and *St. Martin’s* example
of “cyberspace” are strikingly like definitional theme writing of a century earlier.

Many current composition textbooks, including *Norton, St. Martin’s*, and
*Bedsford*, give assignments in “Comparing and Contrasting” and “Cause and Effect.”
These, too, can be found in current-traditional textbooks of the early twentieth century as
forms of expository writing. For instance, in their chapter on exposition, Brooks and
Hubbard include sections on “Exposition by Comparison or Contrast” and “Exposition by
Cause and Effect” (319, 323). They provide examples of such writing and suggest short
theme assignments to compare and contrast and on cause and effect (320, 324). Similarly,
Genung and Hanson, as well as Fred Newton Scott and Joseph Villers Denny’s *The New
Composition-Rhetoric* (1911) include such sections. Today, *Norton, St. Martin’s*, and
*Bedsford* all include chapters on “Comparing and Contrasting” and “Cause and Effect,”
giving similar assignments as those in early twentieth-century textbooks. Detailing such a
compare and contrast assignment, *Bedsford* instructs students, “Write a paper in which
you compare and contrast two items to enlighten readers about both subjects” (125). If
one were to substitute “theme” for “paper,” such an instruction might come from a
textbook of the early twentieth century. While these current textbooks include additional
strategies and ways to compare and contrast that current-traditional textbooks do not, it
clearly continues to have a strong presence today. In the same way, modern textbooks’
treatment of assignments in cause and effect are essentially the same as those described in current-traditional texts like Brooks and Hubbard.

Some of the most popular kinds of writing assignments today as evidenced in current textbooks are forms of analysis, such as literary analysis, visual analysis, and rhetorical analysis. For instance, Norton includes a chapter on “Analyzing Texts” that discusses textual and literary analysis (52-86). St. Martin’s also includes a chapter on “Analyzing Stories,” while Bedford includes chapters on literary and visual analysis. In addition, these textbooks all include evaluation assignments, which also involve some form of analysis. Certainly, the forms of analysis proposed in current textbooks are not identical to what was included in early twentieth-century textbooks, but it is important to recognize that some of the forms of analysis valued in assignments today were also in use in some assignments of the theme system. As stated above, Hill defines exposition as “whatever admits of analysis or requires explanation” (247). Many other textbooks of the theme system similarly define exposition as including forms of analysis. In his 1919 textbook Expository Writing, Mervin James Curl sees analysis as an important kind of expository writing and dedicates a full chapter to this (115-56). The forms of analysis Curl describes—informal and formal analysis—involves textual, literary, and cultural analysis, similar to some assignments in use today. In addition, he includes a chapter on criticism, similar to modern evaluation assignments and literary criticisms, in which he further stresses the use of analysis (190-230).

Other expository assignments of the theme system are also still in present use, including profiles and literacy narratives. Both Norton and St. Martin’s include chapters
on writing profiles, which might often take the form of a biographical portrait. Although these current textbooks include more detailed explanations of this assignment than older textbooks, the profile or portrait was certainly another popular expository assignment of the theme system. As described in Chapter 4, the final expository fortnightly theme assigned in Harvard’s *English A* course was a “Biographical Portrait.” Also, in Charles Nutter, Frank Hersey, and Chester Greenough’s 1906 edition of *Specimens of Prose Composition*, which was for classroom use, they include the Biographical Portrait as an important form of expository writing, illustrating with a sample student theme. Similarly, Genung and Hanson include a section on “Character Sketches” as expository themes (303-5). Another popular current assignment is the literacy narrative, which is present in some current textbooks, including *Norton*. The first fortnightly expository theme in Harvard’s *English A*, and other courses mimicking Harvard’s, was really a literacy narrative: “Who I Am, and Why I Came to Harvard.” Obviously, it participated in more than one of the traditional modes. Further comparison of expository assignments in current textbooks to those presented in textbooks of the theme system would certainly show additional assignments still in use today.

*Description and Narration Assignments*

It should be no surprise that description and narration are still common in composition textbooks today. *Norton, St. Martin’s*, and *Bedford* all include chapters on description and narration. Of course, these were two of the four modes of discourse in older composition textbooks, and so received significant attention in current-traditional texts. With assignments of the theme system ascribing to the modes, students naturally
wrote descriptive and narrative themes in first-year composition, including Harvard’s
*English A*, as I describe in Chapter 4. The current editions of *Norton* and *St. Martin’s*
include chapters titled “Describing” and “Narrating” while *Bedford* includes chapters on
“Observing a Scene” and “Recalling an Experience,” which give instructions to students
on writing descriptions and narrations.

Both *Norton* and *St. Martin’s* present description and narration as “strategies”
rather than genres, but they still include exercises and writing assignments that bear
similarities to the descriptive and narrative themes of current-traditional textbooks.
Composition textbooks of the time, including Hill’s *Principles of Rhetoric* presented
description and narration not as individual genres, but as modes of discourse. In rejecting
this classification of discourse today, composition textbooks have merely changed the
way they are presented: as strategies rather than modes. So, although description and
narration are not presented as distinct genres in both current and current-traditional
textbooks, they include assignments in description and narration, which, as assignments,
are distinct genres.

Older textbooks and current textbooks give similar instructions for writing
descriptions and narrations and their purposes. To illustrate, we can compare Hill’s text
to *Norton, St. Martin’s*, and *Bedford*. Hill and these current textbooks define *description*
the same way, essentially as a composition to paint a picture for a reader to see what the
writer sees. Both give instructions regarding details and organization and distinguish
between artistic and scientific descriptions. The main differences between Hill and
current textbooks is that Hill’s examples are primarily drawn from fiction, while current
examples are drawn from non-fiction. Norton, St. Martin’s, and Bedford also emphasize the importance of details from the all the senses—how something feels, sounds, smells, tastes—while Hill does not address the senses. With narration, Hill and current texts give nearly identical definitions, which should be no surprise: a composition that tells a story. Both also give particular attention to the importance of a clear chronology and the movement or pace of a narrative. Although Hill’s text has a more authoritative tone, coming across at times as though his ideas are absolute rules, both Hill and modern textbooks present their ideas as advice for novice writers, from which experienced professional writers might stray.

Many composition classes today, as well as creative writing classes, assign descriptions and narratives, whether as shorter exercises and assignments or as longer papers, just as textbooks and classes of the theme system. As Chapter 4 describes, Harvard’s English A assigned shorter narratives and descriptions as daily themes, as well longer narrative and descriptive fortnightly themes, which are comparable to the writing exercises and assignments described in Norton, St. Martin’s, and Bedford. The most important difference between the current-traditional assignments and current assignments is that one generally ascribes to description and narration as modes of discourse and the other does not.

Argument Assignments

Perhaps more than any of the current-traditional modes of discourse, arguments have the strongest and clearest presence in current textbooks and assignments. Argument is central to current composition pedagogy and textbooks, and most writing assignments
in first-year composition courses call for some kind of argument. Current textbooks then, also give significant attention to argumentation and specific argument assignments. *Norton* and *St. Martin’s* both dedicate chapters to “Arguing” and “Arguing a Position,” and *Bedford* includes a chapter on “Taking a Stand.” These chapters all lead up to an argument assignment and focus on rhetoric and persuasion. Although argumentative assignments and teachers’ and textbooks’ approaches to them have evolved somewhat from a century ago, just as with writing assignments of the other three modes of discourse, the argumentative assignments in current textbooks are still strikingly like those of the theme system. A comparison of *Norton, St. Martin’s*, and *Bedford* to theme system textbooks can illustrate this.

*Norton, St. Martin’s*, and *Bedford* all include an argument assignment in which students should argue for their position on a controversial topic. All three textbooks emphasize the same ideas and strategies for making effective arguments: the student should make a clear and arguable claim, give sufficient background on it, give good reasons and evidence for the argument, consider objections and other viewpoints, and have a logical organization. In addition, all three textbooks consider the rhetorical situation and *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* in their discussions of how students can make logical arguments, gain the trust of readers, and appeal to readers’ emotions and common values. Finally, all three textbooks define and discuss lists of logical fallacies to avoid and review the steps students should take in planning, writing, and revising the argument.

Hill’s chapter on Argument in *The Principles of Rhetoric* addresses many of the same ideas about argument. Hill emphasizes the importance of a clear and strong
proposition (claim), the role of expository writing in establishing background on the topic, strong evidence, logical reasoning, and effective arrangement (organization). Just as current texts teach *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*, Hill also addresses these, although without using these terms. His treatment of evidence and reasoning is focused heavily on logic, in which he addresses common logical fallacies. In Section IV on Persuasion, Hill addresses appeals to a reader’s feelings and emotions. Hill, like other textbook authors of the time, separates argument from persuasion, with argument addressing the intellect (*logos*), and persuasion addressing the feelings (*pathos*). In examining argument and persuasion, he also gives some attention to an author’s credibility (*ethos*). Hill’s chapter on Argument certainly does not address everything about argument assignments that current textbooks do, but there are more similarities than dissimilarities. Most other composition textbooks contemporary to Hill’s address argument the same way. As Chapter 4 illustrates, in classroom practice Harvard’s *English A* also emphasized planning and process for students writing their fortnightly argument themes.

Argument, however, might be viewed as the least current-traditional of the modes, and so, according to Crowley, the least important in current-traditionalism: “[A]rgument became gradually less important as current-traditional rhetoric matured, partly because of its presumed difficulty. But of all the genres included in EDNA, argument is the least amenable to the epistemology that undergirds current-traditional rhetoric” (*Methodical Memory* 110). It is certainly true that current-traditional writing instruction in the early twentieth century gave more attention to exposition, but to say that argument was least important may be an overstatement. As Chapter 4 discusses, the final two fortnightly
themes of Harvard’s *English A* were a Brief and extended argument, which was meant to be a student’s final culminating masterpiece for the class, just as a longer argumentative research paper is a common final paper in first-year composition courses today. The final culminating paper was certainly not unimportant.

*The Five-Paragraph Essay*

In addition to the assignments in current textbooks that are clearly rooted in theme system assignments, another assignment with such obvious connections is the five-paragraph essay. If classified according to the current-traditional modes, this assignment could be expository and/or argumentative, although textbooks of the first few decades of the twentieth century do not name it as a type of assignment in any of the modes. Composition scholars today, however, condemn the five-paragraph essay as too current-traditional, and so most college-level composition textbooks leave out this assignment, which is now used more in middle to high school education than in college. Scholars such as Marie Foley, Sharon Crowley, and Lil Brannon have strongly condemned the five-paragraph essay as too restrictive, stifling student creativity and freedom, and stunting development, doing more harm than good.\(^\text{15}\) Until my *Rhetoric Review* article that traces the five-paragraph essay to the tradition of theme writing, scholars acknowledged that its origin was unknown. Nevertheless, they condemned it as the epitome and instantiation of current-traditionalism, particularly Crowley.

Even beyond the five-paragraph essay’s tendency to emphasize form over content, it is not difficult to see its connection to the theme writing assignments of the

\(^{15}\) To acknowledge my own bias, I am more inclined to value the five-paragraph essay as a building-block rather than to condemn it, as some scholars have done. For a more detailed review of what I see as a circular academic conversation on the five-paragraph essay, see my 2013 *Rhetoric Review* article.
early twentieth century. Also called the five-paragraph theme, it is the most obvious use of theme writing still in current practice. Of all the academic genres in use, the five-paragraph essay is certainly among the most widely known, defined by its clear and rigid structure: an introductory paragraph that ends with the thesis, three body paragraphs, each making a point in support of the thesis, and a concluding paragraph that begins with a restatement of the thesis. I observe in my article that theme writing of the late nineteenth century was strikingly similar to the current form of the five-paragraph essay. As I discuss in Chapter 2, earlier forms of theme writing were governed by set rules for organization. Although the five-paragraph essay’s structure is not identical to the seven-part structure of Walker’s propositional “complex” themes, they are certainly related.

The Research Paper’s Development from the Theme System

When compared to early twentieth century assignments, many of the assignments discussed above have obvious roots in the theme system, at least in that tracing their evolution is unnecessary to recognize the connections. Assignment genres, however, also evolve at different rates and degrees, and so other assignments popular in textbooks and classrooms today have less-obvious connections to theme system assignments. As I illustrate in Chapter 2 regarding the evolution of the theme over time, genres are dynamic and change over time in response to users’ needs and cultural changes. This concept of dynamism applies to current practices and assignments that descend from the theme system. They have evolved over the past century. While some genres, such as many of the assignments discussed above, have not evolved much, others are less obviously from the theme system because in their evolved state we might not recognize the connection or
know where a genre came from. Nevertheless, applying the principle that genres are
dynamic, we can begin to recognize some of the connections between practices and
assignments of the theme system and those in use today.

One such assignment that is not as obviously rooted in the theme system and
current-traditional rhetoric is the research paper. In examining its emergence and
evolution over time, however, we can see this connection. Although the five-paragraph
essay might not be used as much at the college level, the research paper is still widely-
used in one form or another. Most composition textbooks today, including Norton, St.
Martin’s, and Bedford, dedicate significant attention to research writing, with instructions
for developing topics and research questions, finding sources, using library databases,
synthesizing ideas, quoting sources, avoiding plagiarism, and citing sources. Forms of the
research paper are among the most common types of writing assignments in current use
in first-year composition, often being the final culminating project that students write at
the end of a course.

The more popular histories of David Russell and Robert Connors have given
some attention to the history of the research paper, but without drawing a direct
connection to the theme writing assignments of early first-year composition. According
to Russell, the research paper began to have a widespread presence in first-year
composition courses in the early decades of the twentieth century. By the 1910s,
composition textbooks began including sections of research methods as the research
paper genre began to cement itself in the composition curriculum (90). Connors suggests
that the research paper was part of the solution to students’ growing ability to plagiarize
work from secondary sources, which, by the end of the nineteenth century, were more widely available with more free public libraries (321). Ambrose Manning points out, however, that it is unclear exactly how the research paper came to be adopted in first-year writing (73). Understanding the origins of most genres, of course, can be difficult, since there is never a set moment that marks the birth of a genre. Rather, applying the principle of dynamism, one can understand that a genre, including the research paper, evolves and emerges over time, often with roots in other genres. With this in mind, one can see how the research paper, as well as its various forms today, emerged from the theme writing of early first-year composition.

The theme writing at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century generally did not require research. As Chapters 3 and 4 describe, the short daily themes were usually about something a student had observed. Similarly, many of the longer fortnightly themes in the modes of discourse also relied on a student’s experiences and opinions. As I mention in Chapter 3, Connors describes how by the end of the nineteenth century, topics for student themes were increasingly personal, which required no research and were also easier for teachers to grade. Even for students’ longer argumentative themes, Harvard professor G. P. Baker recommends in 1895 that students take their topics from their courses, which would not require much research. “As a result,” Baker states, “he can give nearly all of his attention to the preparation of his matter” (375). It was Baker’s textbook *Principles of Argumentation*, of course, that students were referred to in Harvard’s *English A* course as a supplementary text for preparing argumentative themes. Such argumentative themes were very much like the complex propositional
themes of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, which also called for students to
draw from knowledge from other parts of their education for topics and examples.

The argumentative theme was likely an important forerunner of the research
paper. Just as today a long argumentative research paper is a popular final project in
many first-year composition classes, a longer argumentative theme was the final
culminating project in Harvard’s widely-imitated *English A* course, which I describe in
Chapter 4. Even the topics of such argumentative themes might be similar to what some
students want to write about today for argumentative research papers. For example, one
of Baker’s topic examples for an argumentative theme is “Should Capital Punishment Be
Abolished?”

The research paper’s roots, however, are not merely in argumentative themes, but
in the increasing use of longer themes. Many early forms of the research paper did not
always make an argument, sometimes being expository and informational. Connors
points out that the typical topics of such research papers might include “The early history
of football,” “The Canning Club movement in the United States,” “Helium Gas and the
Dirigible,” and “The Beginnings of Chain Stores in America” (*Composition-Rhetoric*
322). In the early twentieth century, students would use similar topics for some of their
longer themes, but rely on their own knowledge and experience from other classes. With
the understanding that genres dynamically evolve and emerge based on users’ needs, it is
easier to see the connection between the emergence of the research paper and the
pedagogical adjustments teachers made in the theme system, which I discuss in Chapter
3. I note earlier that Bernard DeVoto observed an increasing emphasis on longer themes
as teachers adjusted assignments to meet students’ needs. According to DeVoto, by the 1920s many colleges abandoned the daily theme, “fearing that the system developed an ability to write a paragraph but left the student helpless beyond that unit. . . . Instead, they require a longer theme every week and, usually, an ambitious effort of four or five thousand words to be written at the end of the course” (207). With longer themes being required, there was more need to include a research element for students to write so extensively.

Earlier forms of the research paper were also more aligned with current-traditional epistemology than its current forms. While today teachers value critical and independent thinking and analysis in addition to research skills as goals in assigning research writing, from the 1920s to the 1950s, research and citation skills were primary. Although these are certainly still valued, the focus was primarily on form. As Connors puts it, the early research paper “presented teachers with a grateful mass of practical formal material for which they could hold students responsible—the minutiae of formats, footnotes, bibliographies, citation forms, and so on” (Composition-Rhetoric 322).

However, the genre began to evolve as teachers saw problems with the research paper and recognized goals beyond research and citations skills. By the 1970s, alternative forms of the assignment began to spread, as scholars called for research writing that involved different forms of critical research, civic engagement, and data analysis. In 1972, Donald Larmouth calls for students to research outside the library in their communities on real community issues (383). Similarly, in a 1985 article Richard Bullock endorses an approach involving research on local community problems. In 1986,
Thomas Trzyna recommends that students collect their own, up-to-date data for research papers through interviews. In 1989, Ingrid Daemmrich similarly argues that students can be taught social science research strategies. Similar approaches continued into the 1990s. Finally, in the last decade the research paper has continued to develop into multiple alternative forms, at a greater rate than before, including forms that involve community research or advocacy, and civic engagement.

In their 2000 article, Robert Davis and Mark Shadle advocate for other alternative forms of the research paper, including the “research argument,” and the “personal research paper,” which was more exploratory. Most notably, Davis and Shadle argue for a “multi-genre/media/disciplinary/cultural research project,” in which students “explore topics of interest or fascination and use a variety of sources to inform projects that combine multiple genres, in some cases, different media, disciplines, and cultures” (431). Jody Shipka similarly argues for multi-modal research projects. Over the last few decades, although the traditional research paper remains, alternative approaches have become more popular and even dominant, as Carra Leah Hood’s 2010 study suggests, and so the more traditional form of the research paper genre has evolved into multiple forms. Teachers’ goals and purposes in assigning the research paper—beyond learning research skills and being a service for future classes—is likely one important reason for such changes and developments, illustrative of how genres dynamically evolve according to users’ needs.

Understanding the research paper’s evolution from its earliest forms in theme writing is instructive for understanding current forms of the research paper assignment, as
well as other writing assignments. The multi-modal research project that Shipka
endorses, for instance, bears little resemblance to the writing assignment genres of the
theme system. Similarly, other writing assignments today do not have obvious
connections to theme system assignments. However, tracing the evolution of the research
paper from theme writing demonstrates that some current writing assignments do have
roots in assignments of the theme system that are recognizable when one traces the
history and evolution of assignments to their current forms.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that many common writing assignments in current
use are rooted in assignments of the theme system. Some assignments have not changed
much, which my examination of assignments in current textbooks demonstrates, while
others have undergone a greater evolution, such as the research paper and its various
forms. Certainly, composition pedagogy has changed a great deal since the beginning of
the twentieth century, with many innovations and a widespread rejection of current-
traditional pedagogy coinciding with the rise of the process movement from the 1960s to
the 1980s. However, despite the innovations in composition teaching and widespread
rejection of current-traditional pedagogy, many of the assignment genres of the theme
system have remained, although teachers might not realize it. Yet, realizing this and
understanding the roots and history of the writing assignments we use can affect what we
do as teachers, as well as our discipline’s self-identity. In the conclusion of this project, I
will examine the implications of my argument for composition history and pedagogy.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION: REVISING HISTORY AND RETHINKING CURRENT PRACTICE

Many composition histories have given attention to the early decades of first-year composition in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. However, the macrohistories, including those of Connors, Crowley, Berlin, and Kitzhaber, have focused largely on the manifestations of current-traditional rhetoric’s over-focus on superficial correctness and the theory and history behind it, and have given insufficient attention to the writing assignments central to composition instruction. While recent alternative and local composition histories have challenged aspects of the dominant Harvard-centered narrative, they too have not sufficiently examined the role and history of writing assignments in early first-year composition. In order to address this gap in the academic scholarship, this project has reexamined the history of composition in the United States and formative decades of first-year composition through the lens of the writing assignment genres central to instruction. I have argued that examining the history of writing instruction through the lens of its writing assignments can reshape our understanding of our field’s history, and that such an examination is significant for understanding the role and history of many writing assignments still in use today, and so can influence our current teaching and future developments in our discipline and our classrooms.

In making this argument, in Chapter 2, I reviewed the history of theme writing, arguing that the background of current-traditional rhetoric and writing instruction in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century is incomplete without an
understanding of the history and development of the assignment genres, which are based in theme writing. In Chapter 3, I examined the rise and development of the theme system, arguing that the Harvard narrative should be reconsidered through the lens of the theme system and its genres. In Chapter 4, I closely considered the assignments and design of Harvard’s *English A*, challenging the macrohistories’ incomplete representations of this prototypical course and current-traditional writing instruction. Finally, in Chapter 5, I argued that despite a widespread condemnation and dismissing of current-traditional writing pedagogy of the beginning of the twentieth century, many current writing assignments are rooted in the assignments of the theme system.

**Revising Composition Histories**

Given the limitations of any history, it is important to rethink and reexamine our field’s histories. Although scholars have recognized the need to revise composition history to include marginalized voices and include what has been overlooked and excluded, it is also important to reexamine the Harvard-centered narrative. This project has meant to revise that dominant narrative of composition history by examining the writing assignments that the macrohistories have under-examined. The movement in rhetoric and composition studies in the last two decades to explore alternative histories and rhetorics has partly been a response to a dissatisfaction with the dominant narrative. This dissatisfaction has largely centered around the problem that the Harvard narrative cannot fully represent the history and development of composition at all institutions. My own motivation in undertaking this project has also partly stemmed from a dissatisfaction with the Harvard
narrative’s exclusion of alternative narratives—although I am certainly dissatisfied with this—but with the dominating negativity surrounding it.

Composition histories have not presented the Harvard-centered narrative of the development of first-year composition in a very positive light. Rather, it has come to be practically synonymous with current-traditional rhetoric. Its most prominent characteristics include an over-focus on grammar, correctness, and form, adherence to the four modes of discourse, and overworked and undertrained composition teachers. In some sense, the move to look for alternative narratives and voices is also one way of finding more positive narratives to counter the dominant one, which is generally presented as a dark time in composition teaching. Yet, the birth of first-year composition in the late nineteenth century is also the beginning of the development of our field of composition. Despite our field’s rejection of what we now recognize as the negative or less effective elements of current-traditional pedagogy, we still owe a great deal of our current practice and pedagogy to those early years of first-year composition. This project has shown this by closely examining the assignments and assignment system of the early twentieth century—the theme system—and its connections to writing assignments still in use today.

In reexamining the beginnings of first-year composition through the lens of writing assignments and the spread of the theme system of assignments, this project has revised the prevailing Harvard-centered narrative. My intention is not to offer an “alternative” narrative, as many other recent histories have done, but to make additions and changes to the dominant narrative itself. By recognizing that in addition to the
current-traditional focus on correctness, the early decades of first-year composition were also characterized by a system of theme writing assignments, to which we owe many of the assignments in use today, we might no longer view that dominant narrative in merely negative terms. Rather, we can better recognize how that period of writing instruction has shaped what we do in our classrooms.

Goggin observes that a field’s history helps shape its disciplinary identity. Knowing our history, then, not only helps us see where our field has been, but it also shapes our understanding of where our field is in relation to that history and how it might develop in the future. If our perception of the field’s history changes, then it can also change our perception of the present. Scholars and teachers align themselves with ideas, theories, and pedagogies of the past as they introduce, contextualize, and justify new ideas and pedagogies. An accurate understanding of the field’s history, then, is important for scholars in rejecting and aligning themselves ideas of the past. An incomplete history, however, is not a fully accurate history. One of the premises of this project has been that the dominant Harvard-centered narrative as represented in the macrohistories has been incomplete, viewing the early decades of first-year composition through the current-traditional correctness lens. Changing our understanding of this period in our history, recognizing the significance of the theme system and the development of our current assignments from that system, we might more positively recognize what our field owes to this period rather than just what it rejects.
Rethinking Current Practice

*Current-Traditionalism and Current Assignments*

Many composition teachers and scholars today have rejected current-traditional pedagogy, and anything associated with current-traditionalism is seen as bad. But, while holding such positions, teachers are, perhaps unknowingly, teaching assignments that have evolved from the writing assignments of the current-traditional period or assignments that are almost identical to those of a century ago. As scholars, we value new ideas and contributions to our field, and so in our scholarship, we must present our ideas as new and our pedagogies as new and different and better than what came before. Paul Kei Matsuda’s and Susan Miller’s suggestions that the popular negative conceptions of current-traditionalism were constructions of the process movement might certainly have merit. The tendency is to value what is new and devalue older practices. In the 1960s and 1970s, the process movement was new, and so the older current-traditional pedagogy was devalued. Of course, with current-traditionalism’s over-focus on superficial correctness, compositionists had good reason to look for more effective approaches to teaching writing that go beyond grammar and form. However, while on a theoretical level we have come to understand writing and effective pedagogy better (hopefully), we should not assume that the ideas and pedagogies of the past, particularly the current-traditional period, are without merit. While we may have rejected the current-traditional idea that focusing almost entirely on grammar and form is the most effective way to teach writing, we have not really rejected correctness and we have certainly not thrown out all the practices and assignments associated with current-traditionalism.
As Chapter 5 demonstrates, many popular writing assignments today come from assignments of the “current-traditional” theme system. But, is that really a bad thing? That’s how genres work. An important element of my examination of writing assignment genres is the idea that genres are dynamic and evolve and adapt over time according to users’ needs. That is what happened with current forms of theme system genres, with some evolving more than others. If so many of our assignments today, however, are so clearly connected to current-traditional modes-based assignments, shouldn’t we reconsider our perception of current-traditionalism? As I establish in Chapter 1, the term “current-traditional” is problematic, but it has nevertheless become inseparable from early twentieth-century writing instruction, and central to writing instruction are writing assignments. If our current assignments owe so much to these assignments of the theme system, however, perhaps we might try to look beyond the reified notion of the “evils” of current-traditional rhetoric and rethink and reexamine our condemnations of it and what really counts as current-traditional.

At the same time, with the knowledge that many of our assignments are rooted in the theme system, we might consider what we really value in the assignments we give our students and why we assign them. As I note in Chapter 1, Dan Mezler, having done an analysis of writing assignments across disciplines, observes, “Instructors’ writing assignments say a great deal about their goals and values, as well as the goals and values of their discipline” (W240). If so many of the assignments used today are similar to those of a century ago, then, following Mezler’s reasoning, we might also share some of the same goals and values as teachers a century ago. Genre theory tells us the same thing.
Berkenkotter and Huckin demonstrate that genres can reflect a discourse community’s norms and values. Recognizing what current assignment genres share with theme system genres might not cause us to change the assignment genres we use, but it should at least make us consider our goals and values in using such assignments.

*Considering an Assignment Genre System Today*

If the theme system was an assignment genre system, then we might also consider whether or not we have an assignment genre system today for first-year composition. As I demonstrate in Chapter 5, some of the most popular composition textbooks today share the same genres. Although these textbook genres cannot represent every assignment used in first-year composition classes, they certainly are a fair representation of the kinds of assignments most commonly used. In that sense, just as the various themes in the modes of discourse formed a large part of the theme system in the early twentieth century, the most popular writing assignments today, as represented in current textbooks, might also form an assignment genre system. These are shared genres across different colleges and classroom contexts. Certainly, first-year composition varies from institution to institution and from classroom to classroom, but broadly speaking most first-year composition writing assignments are drawn from a repertoire of genres, as represented in current textbooks, forming an assignment genre system today that has evolved over time from the theme system.16

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16 My conception of a “repertoire of genres” is drawn from Wanda J. Orlikowski and JoAnne Yates’ idea of a *genre repertoire*. Introducing and defining this idea, Orlikowski and Yates note that members of a community “tend to use multiple, different, and intersecting genres over time. . . . We designate such a set of genres a community’s ‘genre repertoire’” (542). Amy Devitt notes that a *genre repertoire* is broader and more inclusive than *genre sets* and *genre systems* (57). In my own application of this idea to assignment genres, the repertoire of genres refers to those assignment genres that composition instructors across different institutions and settings can draw from in designating which assignment genres
Anis Bawarshi has already applied genre theory as a way of understanding the first-year composition course, focusing on the course as a “micro-level activity system” and its “constellation of genres” (105-8). On a broader level, though, what can understanding first-year composition’s assignments as participating in an assignment genre system change about how teachers view and approach first-year composition classes? While the answer to this question depends on each individual teacher, I offer a few ideas from my own perspective as a composition teacher, which also can raise additional questions:

1. If I understand the assignment genres of the early twentieth century—the hey-day of current-traditionalism—as forming an assignment genre system, which has since evolved as the genres evolved, then the assignment genre system in use today is more closely connected to early first-year composition than I previously thought.

2. If the most common writing assignment genres today, reflected in composition textbooks, form an assignment genre system that connects first-year composition courses across institutions through shared genres, then my own classes participate in this genre system, are connected to other first-year composition classes, and can both sustain and influence the genres of that system through my use of them.

3. If the first-year composition courses I teach and the assignments in them are part of a larger assignment genre system, then how does this genre...
system influence and even control what assignments I give my students?

Why do I fall back on the established genres, without knowledge of their history and evolution within the assignment genre system?

4. If genres, and even genre systems, are dynamic, evolving and conforming to users’ needs and purposes, then my own use of these assignment genres in the classroom can participate in the dynamic evolution of such genres as I make changes to the assignment to conform to my own purposes.

I cannot say with certainty how my understanding of the theme system and its influence on writing assignments today will influence and change what I do in the composition classroom, just as I am unsure exactly how it will affect other teachers’ classroom practices. However, I can say that it has changed my perspective and the way I view the assignments I give my students. To me, it matters where an assignment genre came from, just as it matters where I got my ideas of what makes effective pedagogy.

Although this project has been limited to an examination of the theme system of writing assignments and its relation to some current assignments, it is important for future histories to give additional attention to the overlooked details of the dominant narrative of composition history, particularly the composition pedagogies and theories that have influenced current practice and might influence it further. Additional work in writing local and alternative histories is certainly still valuable, but there is still more to be learned in reexamining the dominant narrative. If we look beyond what the macrohistories say in presenting an incomplete and largely negative view of the dominant narrative of writing instruction in the early decades of first-year composition, and instead
look further at the primary sources of that time, we can discover additional aspects of our field’s history that have been ignored or overlooked. We can reconsider what composition histories have already told us, viewing that history through different lenses and viewpoints. What we find might surprise us.
WORKS CITED


Lanham, Carol Dana. “Writing Instruction from Late Antiquity to the Twelfth Century.”  


