THE LURE OF LITERACY:
A CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE ABOLITION DEBATE

DISSEPTION

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Michael Harker, M.A.

Graduate Program in English

The Ohio State University

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Dissertation Committee:
Kay Halasek, Advisor, Co-Chair
Harvey J. Graff, Co-Chair
Cindy Selfe
Louie Ulman
ABSTRACT

“The Lure of Literacy: A Critical Reception of the Abolition Debate” uses the century-long tradition of proposals for the abolition of compulsory composition to uncover pervasive assumptions about literacy. Chapters of this project revisit touchstones in the debate to show how arguments on all sides of the issue depend on ambiguous and contradictory attitudes about literacy as well as exaggerated expectations of the consequences of possessing it. This project re-contextualizes calls to abolish compulsory composition and proposes questions that may be used to inform a new model for first-year writing, one aspiring to complicate students’ attitudes about literacy more generally. In arguing for a different model for compulsory composition programs, this dissertation offers a way out of an unproductive debate that has gripped composition for over a century.

Following a prologue that surveys relevant literature in the abolition debate, Chapter 1 demonstrates how exaggerated expectations of the powers of literacy underline calls to abolish compulsory composition. Using principal contributors of the New Literacy Studies, I reread the first printed calls to abolish compulsory composition. I show how the period of academic specialization (1865-1920) and exaggerated understandings of the ostensible powers of literacy inform these proposals, complicating attempts to bring about lasting reform in the teaching of composition. Chapter 2
supplements existing histories of the abolition debate by incorporating overlooked voices of both abolitionism and reform. I question the validity of a distinction posited by contemporary receptions of the abolition debate; namely, between “abolitionists” and “new abolitionists.” My view is that this division is only possible if we ignore persistent continuities in the debate, especially with respect to the attitudes and definitions of literacy that inform these studies.

In Chapter 3, I challenge dominant narratives of abolitionism in composition by examining proposals that seek not to abolish the requirement but to reform the course on various levels. Taken together, these essays demonstrate that like abolitionists, arguments employing the rhetoric of “cooperation,” “continuity,” and “reform,” rely on problematic attitudes about literacy. Chapter 4, focusing primarily on Sharon Crowley’s call to abolish compulsory English (1998), is situated more specifically in the context of materialist critiques of the conditions of teaching writing. By examining the rhetoric of academic discourse surrounding Sharon Crowley’s call to abolish compulsory freshman composition, I explain how her proposal has gained notoriety in English studies. This chapter argues that her role in the abolition debate deserves greater critical attention.

My conclusion makes two moves: First, I discuss Stanley Fish’s “What Should Colleges Teach?” (2009). Fish’s article demonstrates that complaints about composition continue today. I contend that his study rehearses the same arguments and criticisms that have been levied against composition since its inception in 1874. I turn, in the second part, to a series of questions that may be used to inform a new model for first-year writing, one based on interrogating the very idea of literacy itself.
Dedication

Dedicated to my sister, Elizabeth Hylton.
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VITA

September 8, 1976..........................................................Born, Belleville, IL

1999 ............................................................. B.A. English
Oklahoma City University
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

2005 ............................................................. M.A. English
The University of Oklahoma
Norman, Oklahoma

2005 – 2010 ....................................................Graduate Teaching and Research Assistant
The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio

PUBLICATIONS


“The Ethics of Argument: Rereading Kairos and Making Sense in a Timely Fashion.” College Composition and Communication. 59:1 September, 2007. (77-95)


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Major Field: English
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PROLOGUE

Ranking high on the list of perennial and divisive disputes in composition studies is the debate over whether first-year writing courses should be compulsory. Complaints about freshman composition are numerous and familiar: If acceptable habits of reading and writing have not been attained before students enroll in college, freshman composition will prove ineffective for these students because one or two semesters of composition instruction are not enough to improve students’ writing, reading, speaking, and thinking. Teaching assistants are unprepared intellectually and professionally to do the job. Students enrolled in the course lack motivation because the subject is compulsory, or they feel as though they are repeating high school assignments. The compulsory nature of the course strains English departments’ resources thereby undermining the morale of teachers whose time would be better spent teaching other courses.\(^1\) Taken together, these criticisms aimed at freshman composition form what Leonard Greenbaum calls “The Tradition of Complaint,” a series of assaults against first-year writing that began in the late 1880s and continues in various forms today.

This dissertation uses this century-long tradition of calls for the abolition of compulsory composition to uncover pervasive assumptions about literacy. Chapters of this project revisit touchstones in the debate – including proposals by Thomas Lounsbury in 1911, Oscar James Campbell in 1939, Warner G. Rice in 1960, and Sharon Crowley in 1998, as well as lesser known contributions to the controversy – to show how arguments
on all sides of the debate depend on ambiguous and contradictory attitudes about literacy as well as exaggerated expectations of the consequences of possessing it. Using the New Literacy Studies as a lens, this project re-contextualizes calls to abolish compulsory composition and presents a new model for freshman English, one aspiring to complicate students’ attitudes about literacy and the idea of literacy more generally. In arguing for a different model for compulsory composition programs, one that centers on interrogating the very idea of literacy itself, my project also focuses on students’ and teachers’ own attitudes about literacy. In doing so, my dissertation offers a way out of a stale and unproductive debate that has gripped Composition and Rhetoric for over a century.

Given that the abolition debate, as Robert Connors suggests, seems to “ebb and flow” in response to world wars, perceived literacy crises, and other legislative, economic, and academic pressures, it is understandable that questions and confusion remain about the relationships between this debate and significant moments in the history of higher education and other profound economic, social, and cultural transformations. After all, the theoretical underpinnings and rationales for compulsory composition in higher education take shape along side and in relationship to the complaints and pressures that seek to reform, change, and in many cases, abolish it altogether. Whether these pressures grow out of the emergence of land grant and co-education colleges during the 1860s, the transformation of colleges from the classical curricular model to the elective system during the late 19th century, or the drastic changes that World War II brought to general education courses in the mid-1940s, “The composition course as we know it today,” John C. Brereton notes, “is like the university that teaches it” (3). And although scholars like Arthur Applebee, James Berlin, John C. Brereton, Robert Connors, and Nan
Johnson argue that the course is a product of late-nineteenth-century America (3), even today, it continues to reflect the priorities and goals of the universities that teach it. If this is the case, complaints about and calls to abolish compulsory composition are also linked to the history of the American college. This dissertation aspires to disentangle persistent complaints about the aims and effectiveness of composition from the history of higher education. In doing so, it underscores how the relationship of composition to literacy, language acquisition, formal schooling, and higher education is a fundamentally complex one. Contemporary receptions of the abolition debate have tended to simplify this relationship.

For instance, although no foundational text on the abolition debate exists, Robert Connors’ “The New Abolitionism: Toward a Historical Background” comes closest to this status. This article examines the history of teachers’ and researchers’ dissatisfaction with freshman composition. He argues that, in many cases, such discontent has led scholars in English studies to call for the abolition of the required course in freshman composition. In other cases, disapproval over the aims and effectiveness of freshman composition has led to periods of reform. Connors explains, “We see reformist periods – some of which are called literacy crises – of deep interest in improving composition, and abolitionist periods, when some teachers declare it too hopeless to reform, repeat themselves several times across the last 10 decades” (Petraglia 3). In examining similarities and differences in the positions that constitute what has become known as the abolition debate over composition, Connors posits that emerging complaints about composition are nothing new; such arguments ebb and flow in response to various social and cultural pressures, and they have done so for the past 100 years.
Connors’ study is valuable for my project because it provides structure to a relatively long, untidy, and complex history of critiques of freshman composition. What emerges from Connors’ work is a record comprised of what might be understood as constellations of complaints about freshman composition – each constellation with its own organizing contradictions and implications for the theory and practice of composition instruction. In situating and comparing the details of these calls for reform and change in the teaching of writing, patterns begin to emerge. For Connors, these recurrent themes and patterns suggest significant relationships between what is happening in freshman composition and what is going on in the rest of the world, arguing that “There is a sense in which these arguments about the required comp course are metonymic representations of other more general questions facing American culture” (3). Connors’ study succeeds in insinuating that complaints about freshman composition are symptoms of more general social, ideological, and cultural trends. In addition, Connors’ account of these complaints does, in fact, serve as a record of the complex and sustained history of the debate, but much remains overlooked, especially with respect to attitudes about literacy. How do scholars advocating abolition of compulsory composition characterize literacy? To what extent do definitions of literacy vary across abolitionist and reformist arguments? In what ways do both abolitionist and reformist arguments depend on notions of literacy crisis and decline? How might the abolition debate function as a site for exploring the actual and ostensible differences that grow out of the institutional contexts of literacy among students, teachers, and administrators?

Despite Connors’ efforts to make connections between complaints about the effectiveness and aims of freshman composition and “general questions facing American
culture,” he does not consider these questions specifically. Instead, these relationships are implicit orientations for his study, ones that are addressed in figurative terms. For example, in speculating about connections between reformist periods and attitudes about literacy, Connors notes that during reformist periods, freshman composition is seen as the “thin red line protecting the very life of literacy” (3). Connors’ propositions are compelling, but the implications of such statements often remain unclear because he does not complicate or question his assumptions about the powers of literacy. In addition, Connors does not associate varied attitudes about the uses, abuses, and functions of literacy in the abolition debate. In doing so, the appeal – or lure – of compulsory composition instruction is, in some cases, linked to literary and educational movements like Romanticism, liberal culture, and the politics of English studies, rather than the overriding influence of both English instructors’ and students’ abiding belief in literacy acquisition to realize the aims of higher education more generally.²

Similar shortcomings exist with respect to David R. Russell’s characterization of literacy and the abolition debate. “Romantics on Writing: Liberal Culture and the Abolition of Composition Courses” is less comprehensive than Connors’; it focuses on two proposals for the abolition of compulsory composition: Thomas L. Lounsbury’s in 1911 and Oscar James Campbell’s in 1939. Russell analyzes the arguments that the two abolitionists “used to attack” freshman composition and explores some of their underlying assumptions. For Russell, these assumptions are tied to what James A. Berlin describes as “Brahminical romanticism,” a culture opposed to the “democratic, vocational, and scientific orientation” of universities during the period of academic specialization between 1870 and 1920 (Russell 133). It is important, according to
Russell, to explore liberal culture as an underlying assumption of opposition to freshman composition because these assumptions continue “to fuel the conflicts within English studies” between what he understands to be the “teachers of literature and of literacy, exponents of competing theories of the composing process, and finally, between those who favor and those who oppose wider access to the academic community” (132). Of the abolitionists, Russell contends that “though the personalities and the rhetorical contexts differ, the rhetorical strategies of Lounsbury and Campbell are remarkably similar, and the two men represent the thought of all but a few abolitionists” (135). Although I believe Russell is correct in suggesting that the personalities of the two abolitionists differ and that the debate holds pressing consequences for English studies and teacher-researchers of composition today, I find that he elides significant differences between these calls, especially with respect to the institutional, social, and cultural contexts from which they emerge.

Taken together, Connors’ and Russell’s historical accounts of the abolition debate do not explore how different conceptualizations of literacy, specifically those understandings that exaggerate the powers of literacy, have informed attempts to reform and change freshman composition on both theoretical and practical levels. Also absent from the abolition debate are explorations of the overlapping cultural, intellectual, and social pressures from the history of higher education in the United States. In this project, I argue for a different understanding of the debate than existing histories of writing instruction provide. Rather than add another comprehensive survey of the debate and its principal figures, this projects aspires to expand the conversation by incorporating voices and contexts that have been dismissed, overlooked entirely, or treated in anecdotal terms.
This study is comprised of four chapters. The first establishes a new theoretical and historical perspective from which to consider the abolition debate. It explores, among other things, the extent to which exaggerated expectations of the powers of literacy underline calls to abolish compulsory composition, complicating attempts to bring about lasting change and reform in the teaching of freshman English. Literacy is the most significant, overlooked, and misunderstood commitment in English studies (and perhaps in higher education more generally). This chapter first provides a brief theoretical overview of Literacy Studies and the works from that field that are most relevant to examining the abolition debate. Drawing from Robert F. Arnoive, Harvey J. Graff, Jack Goody and Ian Watt, John Duffy, Mike Rose, Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, I delineate a theoretical lens indebted to the New Literacy Studies. I use this framework to revisit and reread some of the first printed calls to abolish the compulsory composition requirement. Following this explication, and drawing on the lessons of the New Literacy Studies, I show how the period of academic specialization (1865-1920) and exaggerated understandings of literacy’s powers inform these calls.

My second chapter supplements existing histories of the abolition debate by incorporating overlooked voices of both abolitionism and reform. More specifically, I examine Edward Thurber’s “Composition in our Colleges” (1915), Frederick A. Manchester’s “Freshman English Once More” (1917), and Paulus Lange’s “What Price English?” (1938). In addition to supplementing existing histories of the debate, I question the validity of a distinction posited by contemporary receptions of the abolition debate; namely, between “abolitionists” and “new abolitionists.” My view is that this distinction is only possible if we ignore persistent continuities in the abolition debate,
especially with respect to the attitudes and definitions of literacy that underline these studies. The approach I take in this chapter is indebted primarily to Harvey J. Graff’s *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society*. Graff’s study underscores the importance of resisting the tendency to conceptualize the history of literacy as “inseparably linked” to development, growth, and progress (8). By extension, my argument is that we would do well to question similar assumptions made about notions of “development” and perceived change in the abolition debate. At stake, is making transparent assumptions about literacy that perpetuate the cycle of abolitionism in unproductive and cyclical ways.

The third chapter challenges dominant narratives of abolitionism in composition by examining proposals that are generally conceded to be on the “other side” of the debate. These studies seek not to abolish the requirement but to reform the course on various levels. I examine specifically Alice V. Brower’s “Problems of High-School English and College Freshman English” (1942). As a high school English instructor, Brower represents a unique moment in the debate over composition; she argues for greater continuity between secondary and post-secondary English instruction. In her study, we find evidence of an abiding commitment to the idea that education should be aimed toward the “whole child,” a sentiment based on her enthusiasm for education that is rooted in progressive era reforms. Similar to Brower, Warner G. Rice’s “Articulation of the Secondary School and the College” (1940) emphasizes stronger communication between high school and college-level English instructors. Rice’s proposal involves an elaborate consulting initiative in which college composition instructors work alongside high school teachers to articulate more clearly the expectations that colleges possess for
incoming first-year writing students. Taken together, Rice and Brower demonstrate that like abolitionists, even arguments employing the rhetoric of “cooperation” and “continuity” – in the name of reforming composition – rely on problematic attitudes about literacy.

The fourth chapter, focusing primarily on Sharon Crowley’s call to abolish compulsory English, is situated more specifically in the context of materialist critiques of the conditions of teaching writing. It explains how Crowley’s call has gained such notoriety in the field of rhetoric and composition, and why it deserves greater critical attention. I analyze the rhetoric of academic discourse surrounding Sharon Crowley’s call to abolish freshman composition. More specifically, I examine several responses in modern composition scholarship to Crowley’s proposal for the abolition of the universal requirement of first-year writing. As I argue, it is worthwhile to examine discussions of Crowley’s polemic and situate them rhetorically, as tools used to advance various epistemological stances and assumptions about writing, because they literally and figuratively undergird much of historical scholarship in composition studies. By fully articulating the rhetorical end to which each reference is directed, I offer a productive and less divisive understanding of this contentious and frequently misunderstood study. I also hope to delineate tendencies present in these references that call on teacher-researchers in Composition to look more closely at how, when, where, and why we invoke Crowley’s call for the abolition of the universal first-year requirement.

My conclusion makes two moves. In the first part, I discuss Stanley Fish’s “What Should Colleges Teach?” Published in *The New York Times* in 2009, Fish’s article demonstrates how “The Tradition of Complaint” continues today. His study is suitable
for my concluding statement on the debate over composition because it literally rehearses
the same arguments and criticisms that have been levied against composition since its
inception in 1880. Furthermore, Fish’s study also reveals how tenacious and persistent
myths of literacy are. By making these myths more legible and transparent in Fish’s
study, I demonstrate that the “Tradition of Complaint” is not perpetuated by the problems
that critics of composition identify. It continues today because of the way that
assumptions about literacy silently underline attempts at reforming,abolishing, and
criticizing composition. With this in mind, I turn, in the second part of my conclusion, to
a series of questions that may be used to inform a new model for first-year writing, one
based on the interrogating the very idea of literacy itself.
CHAPTER ONE

THE LURE OF LITERACY:

ABOLOLITIONISM, ACADEMIC SPECIALIZATION,

AND COMPULSORY COMPOSITION

Literacy is not the only problem, nor is it the only solution.

--Harvey J. Graff, *The Labyrinths of Literacy*

We want to believe that every American needs to know how to read and write. The result is that no academic topic seems quite so durable a legislative – and media and popular – concern as America’s apparently chronic literacy crisis: the real or imagined breakdowns in the reading and writing that we consider so central to the successful operation of our democracy. With that sort of presence always looming over Composition, anything can happen.

--Stephen North, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*,

In *Writing from These Roots*, John Duffy defines literacy as a “constituent of rhetoric, a communicative modality, a technical contrivance for disseminating the version of reality preferred by a given institution, culture, group, or individual” (200).

Throughout his study he posits a “rhetorical approach” to literacy, noting that such a perspective considers the “ways with words” used “in literacy instruction, especially the imposed and inherited words that shape the ways in which students and teachers think, talk, and write” (201). On the one hand, Duffy sees literacy as a part of rhetoric – one of the means through which one becomes more persuasive or achieves particular ends. In this sense, literacy may be understood as a discrete act, intended to move a particular
audience to a specific type of action. On the other hand, Duffy’s latter statement, speaks
to a view of literacy that sees it as an end in and of itself. In this broader context,
literacy is sometimes characterized as a perspective with complex connections to cultural
and political systems and ideologies. Taken together, Duffy’s definition underscores the
complexity and difficulty of defining literacy and understanding the consequences of
possessing it and providing access to it.

Freshman English is caught in a similar position when it comes to defining its
aims and understanding its history. In various ways and at various times, compulsory
composition is understood as embodying the aspirations of universities more generally.
At other times, it is seen as a gate-keeping mechanism, an instrument through which
educational aims are achieved. Similarly, the proposals to abolish freshman English I
examine in this chapter treat freshman composition as both the means and the end of
higher education. Unlike current understandings of these proposals, which characterize
these abolitionists as elitist and committed to the guiding tenets of a liberal education, I
argue that contradictory definitions and attitudes about literacy and the consequences of
possessing it are their predominant traits. In neglecting the role of these definitions and
assumptions about literacy in the abolition debate, proposals to abolish composition have
been evaluated in terms of their ability to realize their stated aims. This is significant
because, as I mentioned in my prologue, proposals to abolish compulsory composition
have failed time and time again; consequently, although the studies discussed in this
chapter are explicated in both Connors’ and Russell’s histories of the abolition debate,
they have been largely ignored in English studies more generally. It is by demonstrating
how characterizations and attitudes about literacy stand prominently among other
expectations and concerns related to the history of higher education that we may repair a broken and critical connection to composition’s past.

In this chapter, I re-read two proposals for the abolition of compulsory freshman English: Thomas Lounsbury’s “Compulsory Composition in Colleges” in 1911 and Oscar James Campbell’s “The Failure of Freshman English” in 1939. By locating, naming, and connecting the latent definitions and attitudes about literacy that inform these proposals to theories of language, we might better understand how and why literacy has come to, in Stephen North’s and Harvey Graff’s words, “loom” over composition as both “problem” and “solution.” Furthermore, it is by enlarging the historical contexts of existing studies of the abolition debate and by integrating the voices of the New Literacy Studies that we understand better why these calls and polemics foundered. After all, as Michael Moghtader, Alanna Cotch, Kristen Hague reported in a 2001 national survey of the first-year composition requirement, despite predictions of its demise and countless calls for its abolition, the requirement of freshman composition is “a stronger presence today” than it was in the past, certainly stronger than Ron Smith predicted it would be in his national survey completed in 1974. Smith concludes his study by asserting that his findings “point to more schools dropping the composition requirement, more diminishing of the one that exists…” (148). Smith could not have been more wrong. Examining attempts to understand literacy – its meaning, powers, and the consequences of possessing it – in the contexts of calls to abolish compulsory composition instruction, sheds some light on why.

I begin by reviewing principal contributors and tenets of the New Literacy Studies. I do this because particular discussions in this field emphasize perspectives and
definitions of literacy that function as a productive lens through which we might interpret proposals to abolish freshman English. My discussion in this first section is not meant to be a concluding statement on literacy or the New Literacy studies in this project. In fact, I attend to attitudes, uses, myths, definitions, and characterizations of literacy throughout this project. Following my initial discussion of literacy and the New Literacy Studies, I examine Lounsbury’s call in 1911 and Oscar James Campbell’s in 1939. I pay particular attention to the general climate in higher education from which these writings emerge and the perceived consequences that accompanied the trend toward academic specialization in the late 1890s and early 1900s.

**Literacy Studies and The Abolition Debate**

One of the reasons “literacy” presents so many challenges to English studies is because, despite prevailing wisdom, it does not “belong” to English studies or any of its subfields. Literacy is similar to other critical terms like Narrative, Interpretation, or Ethics in the sense that is simultaneously at home and without a home, always traversing the many fields and disciplines that attempt to pin it down, define it, and give it meaning. However what makes it different from these expressions is that more often than not, teacher-researchers respond to this challenge by understanding literacy in terms of the perceived consequences of possessing it. And nowhere are the consequences of these pressures on composition studies more clearly delineated than in Stephen North’s *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field*. In this study, North analyzes an enormous collection of scholarship concerned with the teaching of writing in higher education. North argues that the field of composition is
comprised of distinct communities with incongruent philosophical, evidentiary, and methodological commitments. According to North, such methodological diversity reveals a lack of continuity in research and teaching practices and contributes to an overall feeling of “centerless-ness” in the field. Although many scholars criticize North for the artificiality of the methodological communities he constructs, as well as many of the conclusions he draws from his analysis about the field, North uncovers assumptions about literacy that influence research and teaching in composition.

In the conclusion to his study, North laments the consequences of such assumptions about literacy noting that “We want to believe that every American needs to know how to read and write. The result is that no academic topic seems quite so durable a legislative – and media and popular – concern as America’s apparently chronic literacy crisis: the real or imagined breakdowns in the reading and writing that we consider so central to the successful operation of our democracy. With that sort of presence always looming over Composition, anything can happen” (375). I believe North refers to the field’s commitment to literacy in this way – in terms of “presence” – because he wishes to highlight the nebulous and vague pressures this learning outcome exerts on the field. North suggests that although literacy, broadly defined, is one of the principal ends of composition theory and application, attitudes about literacy’s powers, purposes, and position in the field remain unacknowledged and misunderstood. To understand more clearly how assumptions about literacy may magnify sensations of “centerlessness” that North describes in his study, it is necessary to locate, name, and identify some of the prevailing assumptions that surround literacy and its presumed powers. Again, these assumptions are implicit and unacknowledged orientations for many calls for reform and
change in composition, especially those calls connected to abolitionism. One of the most problematic assumptions about literacy is informed by speculation about the ostensible consequences of possessing it. In such cases, literacy itself is misunderstood, but in this confusion, it gains extraordinary power as a symbol.

Little doubt exists that debates over the differences and similarities between oral and literate cultures have, in part, helped to shape scholars’ attitudes about literacy in English studies more generally. At the center of this debate is Goody and Watt’s “The Consequences of Literacy.” In this often cited article, the authors argue that the invention of the Greek alphabet led to specific consequences for this society; most notably, transformations on the cognitive level that led to a shift from mythical to logical thought. The authors also claim that this cognitive shift produced a host of other social developments: the rise of democratic systems of government; the development of various forms of social and political organizations; the capacity for technological progress.

For Goody and Watt, cognitive capacities in oral societies are best described as lacking objectivity and relying on formulaic and associative systems of meaning making. When describing how oral societies transmit a “cultural repertoire,” they write: “In the first place, it makes for a directness of relationship between symbol and referent. There can be no reference to ‘dictionary definitions’, nor can words accumulate the successive layers of historically validated meanings which they acquire in a literate culture” (29). In other words, because oral cultures depend entirely on “vocal inflections and physical gestures” to communicate, they are unable to obtain distance from words and their referents.
In this claim, we find the assumption (one of many) that supports the dichotomy that Goody and Watt construct between oral and literate cultures. Oral societies lack the cognitive capacity to gain the type of critical distance that allows for a conceptualization of the world that is represented as separate from the moment. Simply put, oral cultures are forever tied to the present. In arguing for the “general differences” between oral and literate cultures, the authors assert, “writing establishes a different kind of relationship between the word and its referent, a relationship that is more general and more abstract, and less closely connected with the particularities of person, place and time, than obtains in oral communication” (44). With this presumption, the perceived ability to represent cognition as something removed from the present – as being able to achieve more objective, critical, and analytical perspectives – becomes one of the defining qualities that distinguishes literate societies from oral ones.

One of the most instructive examples of how this debate from literacy studies informs composition theory and application comes from Mike Rose’s “Narrowing the Mind and Page: Remedial Writers and Cognitive Reductionism.” In this study, Rose attends specifically to the problems posed by both “great divide” characterizations of literacy as well as some of its myths and legacies. Rose’s chief concerns are the “troubling consequences” (346) that stem from applying “strong” versions of literacy (like those relying on “great divide” or “grand dichotomies”) to the theory and practice of basic writing instruction. In so doing, “adolescents and adults are thought to bear cognitive resemblance to (ethnocentric notions of) primitive tribesmen in remote third-word cultures” (346). The tendency, Rose argues, is for composition instructors who subscribe to “great divide” theories to draw generalizations from exceptional cases.
These generalizations lead to disturbing conclusions: basic writers lack the cognitive ability to think analytically; they lack critical distance from their own lives and are thus tied socially and philosophically to the present; they believe printed words are concrete things; they are not capable of thinking abstractly about the world they live in (346). Interestingly, these conclusions are similar to the critiques of freshman composition that have served as the principle rationales for many calls for the abolition of the first-year requirement (See Leonard Greenbaum’s “The Tradition of Complaint” and Graff’s and Duffy’s “Literacy Myths”).

In addition to attending to the orality/literacy debate, Rose’s essay also demonstrates a recurring and significant undercurrent that traverses both literacy studies and composition. When “strong theories” of literacy form the theoretical framework for writing pedagogy, such approaches are often symptomatic of a teaching disposition that is asking too much of literacy. In National Literacy Campaigns, Arnove and Graff write: “To ask of literacy that it overcome gender discrimination, integrate a society, eliminate inequalities, and contribute to political and social stability is certainly too much” (27). Rose is cautious in his treatment of literacy, noting that he does not “mean to deny the profound effects literacy can have on society.” (346) Rather, he aspires to question the extent to which “great divide” theories of literacy can evaluate and describe those effects. As Rose suggests, the most pressing danger for writing instructors teaching with simplistic conceptualizations of literacy and its consequences is the tendency to assume that merely possessing textbooks, classrooms, technology, and a “trained” instructors is, as Graff writes, “fully sufficient for further development of an individual’s literacy and subsequent education, and, of course, for the advancement of that individual” (27).
Many scholars in what Brian Street calls “The New Literacy Studies” take issue with “great divide” characterizations on both theoretical and methodological levels. Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole’s investigation, detailed in “Unpackaging Literacy,” explores the social practices of the Vai people of Liberia, questioning many of the epistemological assumptions that define “great divide” positions. The authors argue that to understand the consequences of literacy one must investigate the specific social contexts in which literacy is used. As such, Scribner and Cole’s methodological approach is significantly different from Goody and Watt’s. By combining anthropological field-work with psychological research methods, the authors conclude that “literacy-without-schooling is associated with improved performance on certain cognitive tasks” (136) and that many of the cognitive consequences (posited by Goody and Watt) are symptomatic of the formal institution of schooling rather than simply the acquisition of literacy alone. In short, Scribner and Cole question characterizations of literacy that position it as a monolithic symptom of social and psychological change. In so doing, they confront accumulated assumptions about literacy – Harvey Graff calls these the “legacies” of literacy – that inform many of the tenets that support “great divide” characterizations of literacy. The implications of Graff’s work for the abolition debate are most clear in his discussion of the literacy myth.

In “Literacy, Myths, and Legacies: Lessons from the History of Literacy,” Graff writes that “Constituting much of what I call literacy’s central contradictions, these legacies taken together constitute ‘the literacy myth’” (324). Relying on the accumulation of many assumptions about the aims and uses of literacy and inextricably linked with perennial complaints of the “decline” and “crisis” of literacy, the “literacy
myth” is a powerful and complex force. Defined broadly, the literacy myth is the abiding belief that merely acquiring literacy guarantees economic prosperity as well as “access to and participation in mainstream institutions” (Cushman et al 12). In *The Literacy Myth*, Graff defines it more specifically. He notes that “Primary schooling and literacy are necessary, it is so often repeated, for economic and social development, establishment and maintenance of democratic institutions, individual advancement, and so on. All this, regardless of its veracity, has come to constitute a ‘literacy myth’” (xxxviii). Using a comparative and social-historical research methodology (examining, among other things, Canadian census data from the 19th century), Graff demonstrates that despite institutionally sponsored efforts to legitimize the myths and legacies of literacy, societies have taken different “paths” toward achieving literacy. Furthermore, they have done so for reasons other than improving their economic and material situations.

Despite the growth of literacy studies in recent years, some scholars question many of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this movement. Most notably, in “A Critical Discussion of the ‘New Literacy Studies,’” Kate Stephens reexamines the claims of central figures in this movement. Stephens understands the New Literacy Studies as “exemplified in the work of Street, Heath, Gee, Barton and others, takes a sociocultural view of literacy, emphasizing the description of literacy practices of everyday life, and challenging approaches which emphasize decontextualised basic skills.” Upon reviewing and critiquing the central tenets of this movement, Stephens concludes her article by proposing an approach to literacy that is, in her words, “normative” and “allows the particular cognitive importance of literacy, and a valuation of the teacher’s role in skill development” (11).
Of particular interest to Stephens are Brian Street’s efforts to deconstruct the claims for literacy that constitute what he describes as the “autonomous” model. In “What’s “new” in New Literacy Studies?” (2003), Street explains that his work “begins with the notion of multiple literacies, which makes a distinction between “autonomous” and “ideological” models of literacy” and “develops a distinction between literacy events and literacy practices” (77). According to Street, prevailing characterizations and attitudes are based on the assumption that “literacy in itself” – or autonomously – “will have effects on other social and cognitive practices” (77). This model hides cultural and ideological assumptions, and as a result imposes western attitudes about literacy on other cultures and groups in such a manner that makes literacy acquisition and its consequences appear neutral. “Research in the NLS,” Street reports, “challenges this view and suggests that in practice literacy varies from one context to another and from one culture to another and so, therefore, do the effects of the different literacies in different conditions” (77). This perspective, on the other hand, is consistent with the “ideological” model of literacy. For Street, this model represents a more “culturally sensitive” approach that views literacy as rooted in social practices and varying across contexts. As such, attitudes and understandings of literacy from the ideological perspective begin with questions about its nature and the values that shape these understandings. That is, as Street reports, literacy “is not simply a technical or neutral skill,” (77) and it is “always contested” (38). Stephens and others’ criticisms of the NLS oversimplify the complexity and variability of literacy as it relates to issues of attainment as well as more general expectations that shape both theories of learning and public policy. Much is at stake for English studies in rethinking literacy along the historical and theoretical lines posited by
Street’s ideological conception of literacy and Graff’s research on the perceived “crisis” and “decline” of literacy as well as the myths that make those perceptions possible.

One way of rethinking literacy along these lines is by revisiting calls to abolish compulsory English. Doing so emphasizes the complexity and contradictory nature of the relationship of attitudes about literacy to proposals for abolishing compulsory composition. As I suggest in my prologue, proposals to abolish compulsory composition have been dismissed by scholars in composition because, in many cases, their arguments are perceived as merely elitist. Although this may be a valid assessment of the following studies, I show how these elitist sentiments are inseparably intertwined with what the NLS terms as autonomous and strong theories of literacy. Histories by Connors and Russell overlook this aspect of these essays and represent abolitionists as resolute in their commitment both to the abolition of freshman English and tenets of liberal culture. However, as this next section asserts, these proposals are highly ambivalent and contradictory. They are far from resolute, and the elitist sensibilities associated with them are less significant than the vague and contradictory attitudes about literacy as well as the exaggerated expectations about the consequences of possessing literacy that underline their proposals for the abolition of compulsory composition.

**Thomas Lounsbury – “Compulsory Composition in College”**

1911 is a significant year for English studies and the abolition debate. By the time Thomas Lounsbury makes the first call for the abolition of composition in that year, first-year English as a university subject is over a century old (Bartholomae 1950). Robert Connors marks this time as a threshold moment, suggesting that by 1910 “most
issues in composition methodology were decided, one way or another” (13). James Berlin also sees this period as key, noting in *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* that although the establishment of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in 1883 secured a place for English studies in the curriculum of higher education, it was the development of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in 1911 that signaled a commitment to theorizing and researching the teaching of writing for high school students. However, in the same year that pedagogical methodologies are coalescing around what appears to be the development of professional organizations and some continuity and agreement in methodology in composition, one of the first signs of disagreement and dissatisfaction emerges: *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* publishes Thomas Lounsbury’s article “Compulsory Composition in Colleges.”

An Emeritus Professor of English at Yale University, Lounsbury worked in philology and linguistics and was one of the first (along with Edward A. Allen, William Mathews, and George Krapp) to question English instructors’ “total acceptance of traditional rigid grammar” (Connors 150). In *The Standard of Usage in English*, he opposes absolute conceptualizations of grammatical propriety and the writing handbooks that impose such rules on students, arguing that “in order to have a language become fixed, it is first necessary that those who speak it should become dead” (qtd. in Connors 150). Indeed, Lounsbury’s work on grammar, in part, helped to infuse a “descriptive spirit” into philology and pedagogical practices during the early 1900s (Connors 150). Such a disposition places Lounsbury in the company of specialists who questioned notions of grammar prescriptivism and also sought to reform teaching practices towards an end that conceptualized linguistics and language in a way that predates modern
attitudes about grammar and language. This orientation makes Lounsbury’s proposal for abolishing composition worthy of closer consideration.

Lounsbury begins his proposal by suggesting that the problems of freshman composition cannot be conceived fully without empathy. “There is nothing so certain,” he writes, “to warp the conclusions of the pure intellect working on this subject as actual experience” (866). Unfortunately, his thesis, which appears well into the article, is little help in determining his principal objections to compulsory composition. In what appears to be an attempt to consolidate his doubts about the course, he notes,

Still, none the less am I thoroughly convinced that altogether undue importance is attached to exercises in English composition, especially compulsory exercises; that the benefits to be derived from the general practice in schools is vastly overrated; that the criticism of themes, even when it is fully competent, is in the majority of cases of little value to the recipient; that in a large number of instances the criticism is and must ever be more or less incompetent; and that when the corrections which are made are made inefficiently and unintelligently, as is too often the case, the results reached are distinctly more harmful than helpful. (869)

Although what we have here appears to be Lounsbury’s reasons for a proposal to abolish compulsory composition, this line of reasoning is, in fact, only tangentially related to the themes, evidence, claims, and rationales marshaled on behalf of his position throughout his study. That is, the scope of Lounsbury’s complaints about freshman English is so broad that it is not clear if abolishing compulsory composition is actually something that he sees as a solution or the problem. His position seems inconsistent, at
times, even equivocal, and his ambivalence, I believe, is indicative of an inconsistent and vague understanding of the purpose and value of literacy in compulsory composition.

For instance, one source of Lounsbury’s ambivalence may be found in the attitudes he expresses about the value of literacy, its relationship to rhetoric, and its role in composition instruction and institutions of learning in general. In disputing the “delusive notion” that “institutions of learning have any monopoly of training in composition,” Lounsbury responds with a question: “Why do men who have never had the advantage of any school training in composition so often express themselves with clearness, directness, and force?” For Lounsbury, the tribulations and successes of General Grant and Abraham Lincoln hold some answers to this question. “It is not probable that General Grant ever had much practice in writing in his youth,” he notes, “What little he did have, it is more than probable he did not profit by. But participation in a mighty struggle, the ceaseless pressure of arduous duties and wearing responsibilities furnished him an intellectual training which it was not in the power of the schools to impart. Hence when he came to write his autobiography, he wrote it with a simplicity and consequent effectiveness which no mere drill in English could have wrought” (875).

This passage from Lounsbury is remarkable for several reasons. First, it is perhaps one of the clearest statements of what he finds to be inadequate about freshman English, namely, the drills and other repetitive exercises aimed toward teaching students to write themes. Clearly, Lounsbury finds such assignments to be inefficient and impractical. Second, Lounsbury’s anecdote introduces and bolsters a claim that runs throughout his argument. This is the notion that pain and misery felt through “participation in a mighty struggle” brings about the desired attributes that formal composition instruction only
aspires to provide. We see this idea crop up throughout his study, but most notably in yet another reference to a famous American figure – Abraham Lincoln. Lounsbury notes:

> It is not likely that the direct instruction in composition he ever received took up much of his time, if indeed it took up any of it. But in his profession he found imposed upon him as a condition of success the necessity of clear thinking, with its usual accompaniment of clearness of expression. But the further education which produced the matchless simplicity and majesty of the brief Gettysburg oration was the outcome of the discipline of anxious days and sleepless nights, the never-ceasing pressure of the burden of care which waited upon the long agony of the Civil War. As a matter of fact, indeed, there is nothing like misery to improve the style” (875).

Here Lounsbury presents a tendency akin to what Mike Rose refers to as a “strong” theory of literacy. Lounsbury’s claim is that misery, pain, anguish, and struggle bring about the acquisition of particular cognitive traits and the successful demonstration of “clearness of expression.” For Lounsbury, Grant and Lincoln possessed clear thinking, style, and other desirable traits because they struggled through seemingly insurmountable experiences and achieved a “condition of success” in those situations. As such, they possessed the tenacity and willingness to endure various forms of “misery” and in doing so they gained style and clarity of thought and expression. Lounsbury’s assertions are reminiscent of how some basic writers are sometimes misunderstood by institutions of learning and composition instructors more specifically. That is, composition students are sometimes seen as lacking the ability to think analytically and clearly about complex
philosophical relationships. Because they are unable to demonstrate successfully these traits in academic conventions or other writing assignments, they are sometimes viewed as lazy or similar to cultures lacking literacy. Such understandings misrepresent the cognitive potential and capacities of basic writers as well as non-literate cultures, perpetuating aforementioned “great divide” conceptions of literacy. The presence of such thinking in this proposal to abolish English is significant because it demonstrates a notable consequence of possessing a “strong” conception of literacy or exaggerated understandings of literacy’s powers.

However, some might argue that Lounsbury is not talking about literacy at all. Instead, Lounsbury simply wants students to gain experience, endure hard work, and achieve clarity in thought and expression. After all, by invoking abstractions like “clearness of expression,” “matchless simplicity,” and “style” he is actually (and perhaps unknowingly) discussing tenets of 19th century Scottish rhetoric.\(^3\) One problem with this claim is that Lounsbury is very clear about how he feels about rhetoric specifically, noting, “It has a value of its own; but it has not the kind of value which is often mistakenly claimed for it. For as grammar is nothing but the generalization of the facts of utterance, so rhetoric is nothing but the generalization of the facts of style” (875). On the one hand, the distinction between rhetoric and grammar that Lounsbury draws is clearly a move intended to anticipate rebuttals to his proposal. Given his complaints about freshman English, a reasonable response to Lounsbury would simply propose an alternative to theme-based writing pedagogy, perhaps something grounded specifically in rhetoric (and in many cases this is what happened in universities). However, on the other
hand, when we examine his attacks on rhetoric more closely, we find that literacy and the
ostensible consequences of possessing it are very much at play in his diatribe. He writes:

    I call to mind a young man who before beginning his Commencement
    oration went carefully through the whole of Whately's treatise on rhetoric
    as a preparatory exercise, and was much astounded to discover, after
    finishing it, that he could write no better than he did before. (875)

For Lounsbury, instruction in rhetoric is futile. Only his literary view of literacy
is a suitable means of learning to write and think. In some ways, Lounsbury’s dismissal
of rhetoric represents yet another voice in a long line of critics of the rhetorical tradition,
a line reaching back to classical times and the origins of rhetoric. This is important to
note because by dismissing rhetoric, Lounsbury’s proposal is indicative of an overly
simplistic conception of human cognition. After all, for Lounsbury there is only one way
to achieve clarity of expression and thought – his literary view of literacy. This
perspective coupled with recurrent distinctions between rhetoric and grammar, oratory
and writing, and the importance of pain and pleasure in the process of literacy acquisition
demonstrate a quintessential characteristic of being “in the grips” of the literacy myth:
ignorance of what literacy actually is. Harvey Graff notes, “The point is that we are in
the grips of the ‘literacy myth.’ We do not know precisely what we mean by literacy or
what we expect individuals to achieve from their instruction in and possession of
literacy” (Graff The Literacy Myth 323). When we examine more closely the ways that
Lounsbury articulates the aims and problems of freshman English in 1911, we find
inconsistent understandings and definitions of literacy and unrealistic consequences of
possessing it. When we treat these strong conceptualizations of literacy as evidence used
to argue for the abolition of compulsory composition, it becomes clear that Lounsbury does not know precisely what he expects individuals to achieve from composition instruction.

It is easy to dismiss many of Lounsbury’s claims, especially since so many of his musings on freshman composition are, on the levels of tone, quite cynical and ironic. However, it is precisely Lounsbury’s disposition that caught the attention of Thomas Percival Beyer in 1912 when he published his response to Lounsbury in *The Educational Review*. Appearing in the “Discussion” section and titled, “Anent Compulsory Composition in Colleges,” Beyer is clearly conflicted about Lounsbury’s proposal. On the one hand, he finds it to be “the most readable essay on a technical and polemic theme that I have seen in a long while” (77). Beyer is “grateful to Professor Lounsbury” for putting the “classic argument against English in the most cogent way possible” (84); on the other hand, however, he objects to “fundamental assumptions” driving the essay and the position in which those assumptions put teachers of composition. It is important to examine Beyer’s response to Lounsbury because even though he takes issue with most of Lounsbury’s assertions, the two scholars share much in common when it comes to the assumptions they make about the powers and place of literacy in compulsory composition.

Although Beyer is suspicious of theme-based pedagogies, agreeing with Lounsbury that drills in compulsory composition fail in their aims of creating literary geniuses (he calls such assignments “illogical and absurd”), he questions Lounsbury’s assumption that colleges of the time “retain freshman composition in the required list because they still see the vision of Utopia populated by a nation of Carlyles, Goethes, and
Tolstois” (Beyer 78). He asserts that he has never “heard of a college that set out to produce a race of literary artists.” On the contrary, he knows “of a few, at all events, that are striving to send out men – just men, and perhaps, a leaven of women” (Beyer 78). Indeed, Beyer’s statement points to divergent attitudes about the aims of freshman English as well as opposing understandings of the purposes of universities at this time. However, what he proposes as a solution to the dilemma presented by freshman English is not so different from the ambivalence and assumptions driving Lounsbury’s proposal.

In the end, Beyer seems dismayed by Lounsbury’s critiques and resents the implications of his article. “Since no honest man could continue to draw a salary for wasteful work,” he writes, “the dilemma presents itself that I am either a knave or a fool. I am a fool if I believe in my work; I am a knave if I do not, in which case I think I am a greater fool than ever for not getting out of it” (84). Despite such feelings he concludes that “composition taught in a sensible normal way does not bore the average freshman, and does contribute to the art of living” (84). For Beyer, a “sensible” and “normal” approach to composition instruction is less systematic and opposed to the “state of extreme mental busy-ness” imposed by theme writing:

Start with description. Teach observation a few weeks, hammer home just about three principle: fidelity to nature, selection of detail, and the value of verbs and words denoting action as well as specific instead of generic terms. Then send him out to describe the people on the street-cars, a football scrimmage, a scene in a play, the chatter of blackbirds in the wild rice, or how it feels to swim or row or race, and I defy the dullest teacher in Christendom to prevent a freshman from sitting up and taking notice.
Later he can find delight in narrating some of his own thrilling experiences, or constructing a complication about a young man, his duty, and his sweetheart; and, finally, he can even be induced to tell what he thinks about “College spirit” or “Eligibility rules in athletics” (83).

Although this approach, according to Beyer, realizes one aim of freshman English – to teach students “to describe a person, a picture, a view, with a fair degree of accuracy, and even present a coherent reason for the particular faith that may be within him” (83) – this alone is not enough. What college students need “more than anything else” are “Between-Times” (86) – the “occasional half-hour of real loafing, and inviting the soul.” However, there are limits to this loafing. If students write nothing, “the soul that he gets glimmerings of will remain a spiritual embryo. It will never be fixed, and he will never gain confidence in it” (86). Thus, in one sense, freshman English and the requisite drills and tasks that constitute the course are the problem. “With a daily theme prodding him, he can never wait for an idea, but writes drivel and grows cynical” (86). On the other hand, freshman English is the solution because without the course students remain intellectually and spiritually undeveloped.

Although Lounsbury and Beyer are on opposite sides of the abolition debate – Lounsbury opposes the requirement and Beyer desires to reform the teaching of composition – both arguments are sustained by an abiding belief in literacy to bring about profound cognitive and spiritual transformations. Their exchange highlights the ways in which ambiguous definitions of literacy and exaggerated expectations of possessing it motivate both proposals for and against compulsory composition. Taken together, these essays are an early example of how the debate over compulsory composition involves
much more than disagreements over pedagogy or the aptitude of students and instructors. From the perspective of the NLS, we may understand the attitudes about literacy that underline these studies as linked to a tradition of characterizing literacy in a way that exaggerates its powers. This move is based on simplistic assumptions not only of human cognition but also of the role of cognition in the relationship of literacy to teaching, learning, and educational reforms. In addition to demonstrating that myths of literacy are ever-present in the defining positions of the abolition debate, Lounsbury and Beyer are particularly interesting because of how they reflect pressures brought on by the trend toward academic specialization and other educational reforms of their time.

By 1911, the year in which Lounsbury publishes his essay on freshman English, higher education is entering a time marked by the rise of academic hierarchies, professional associations, unprecedented growth, and other consequences of academic specialization. Although compulsory composition is the focal point of many scholars’ antipathy during this time, the impact of academic specialization underlines and complicates attempts to bring about lasting reform and change in the humanities more generally, not simply in the teaching of freshman English. The historical context from which Lounsbury’s argument grows out of must be considered alongside the central arguments of his proposal. In this next section, I sketch a brief history of academic specialization with Lounsbury’s proposal in mind. I do this to demonstrate that in the case of calls to abolish compulsory composition, exaggerated expectations of literacy’s powers and other myths of literacy overlap with specific institutional pressures and educational reforms from the history of higher education.
Characteristics and Consequences of Academic Specialization

The abolition debate and the proposals that constitute this conversation are compelling in part because they are often spirited in tone and grandiose in scope. However, just ten years before the first proposals to abolish freshman English, we find proposals and calls for larger educational reform that dwarf the implications of calls to abolish compulsory freshman English. For example, in 1891, “Pitchfork Ben” Tillman, a gubernatorial candidate locked in a spirited campaign, wanted more than the abolition of the teaching of freshman English (Veysey 15). As part of his plan to get elected, Tillman promised to abolish the entire University of South Carolina. Of this time, Lawrence Veysey notes, “It was in such an unfriendly climate as this that the American university initially had to make its way” (15). What made the climate particularly interesting for composition was something far more complex than the whims of policy makers. As John C. Brereton notes in The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875-1925, several factors stand out as principal influences on the development of universities at the fin-de-siècle (5). However, the trend toward academic specialization was the most consequential pressures. Veysey’s The Emergence of the American University is a seminal text for the study of the trend toward academic specialization during the period of 1870 to 1920. In it he examines intellectual, institutional, social, and cultural pressures that led to the rise of the modern American university. Veysey’s perspective on this period allows us to understand better the
significance of academic specialization on Lounsbury and other figures of the abolition debate.

Veysey characterizes the trend toward academic specialization as a series of trans-institutional reforms that led to an increase in the variety of subjects and the dividing of departments into an extensive selection of fields and subdepartments. His most striking observation is that this period was marked by considerable confusion, variety, and divergent attitudes about the ostensible benefits and consequences of specialization. As Veysey notes, despite “a sense of burgeoning variety” as academic subjects are taken over by various universities, departments, and subdepartments, “intellectual and organizational evolution” occurs within “a stable, homogenous social context.” One consequence of this is that a “a distinct and ‘cultivated elite’ of professors, schoolmasters, authors, clergymen, and others remain isolated from mainstream American life” (Veysey 51-52). We may understand Lounsbury as one of these “cultivated elite,” who is agitated by the way that academic specialization has attenuated the influence of literary approaches in the teaching of composition. Furthermore, as I have noted, Lounsbury’s essay appears in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*. That his proposal to abolish compulsory composition does not appear in one of the many academic journals emerging at this time is significant. I believe that it is evidence of both his resistance to the trend toward academic specialization as well as his need to articulate his frustrations with freshman English to a wider, more mainstream audience. After all, although many of his colleagues (like Beyer) disagreed with aspects of his proposal to abolish compulsory composition, the Harper’s audience may well have shared something in common with Lounsbury, and that is an abiding belief in the literacy myth.
In sum, especially during the early stages of academic specialization, the direction, purpose, and ostensible function and nature of American higher education was determined by conflicts “first along the lines of competing academic goals, then over questions of academic command” (viii). As such, when Veysey remarks on the “difficult times” from which the American university emerges, he refers to a period marred by confusion and a diversity of perspectives and experiences. As universities transformed in response to the pressure to become more intellectually segmented, writing instruction became “confined to well-defined courses” (Brereton 9). In Lounsbury’s eyes, because freshman English emerges from this period of academic specialization, it was a distinctly “modern” consequence of educational reform. “Work of the sort now implied by it,” he writes, “was then a novelty in American institutions of learning. The attention at present paid to English language and literature is not only modern, it is late modern. Knowledge of it as a requirement for entrance is even more modern” (866). It is revealing that for Lounsbury modernity becomes a matter of degree when it comes to the requirement of freshman English (it is not just modern but “more modern”). Just as important, however, is the fact that Lounsbury shifts his focus away from criticisms about how English is being taught to whether it should be taught at all. His reference to a time when such work is a “novelty” is clearly an attempt at broadening the scope of his argument to account for a history that he feels is being forgotten. This is the history of English studies’ struggle to gain respect and prestige – to become a discipline in the new university.

Nowhere in its history is the attempt at gaining institutional prestige and respect more clear than in the commitment of English departments to the precepts of philology.
English had a difficult time gaining a respected place in the research university. Several notable histories of English attest to this fact. Applebee’s *Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English: A History* and Gerald Graff’s *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* both speak to the challenges that English faced and the ways that philology simultaneously attenuated and magnified the project of gaining disciplinary status. Admittedly, this issue is well-traveled ground, especially in the most cited histories of higher education and writing instruction (see Applebee, Berlin, Connors, Graff *Professing Literature*, Rudolph, and Veysey)⁶. However, in the context of this study, exploring the role of philology in the rise of English departments provides a greater stage for my discussion of literacy. By this, I mean, regardless of whether scholars argue for or against compulsory composition, literacy functions as an aim in both approaches. I emphasize the history of philology here because it is a necessary part of exploring how particular theoretical commitments in the history of English have helped to construct literacy as an aim, end, and foundation for the discipline.

**Pursuing Prestige: Philology and the Rise of The Department of English**

In addressing the influence of philology in the formation of English departments, historians have emphasized several aspects of this process. In *Professing Literature*, Gerald Graff sees the rise of philology and the “professionalization” of the discipline of English as inextricably linked. He notes, “the advance guard of professionalization was a German-trained cadre of scholarly ‘investigators,’ who promoted the idea of scientific research and the philological study of the modern languages” (55). The importance and rapidity of the move to align the aims of English with scientific research cannot be
understated when considering philology’s impact on the field. According to Graff, as early as the first meeting of the Modern Language Association, H.C.G. Brandt (a Hamilton College Professor of German) proclaims “our department is a science, and that its teaching must be carried on accordingly” (qtd. in Graff 68). Motivating Brandt was a concern that if teachers of language failed to understand their departments as science, that “any body” would feel they could teach English (68). “By introducing scientific methods, “ Brandt asserts, “we shall show before very long that every body cannot [teach English], that the teacher must be as specially and as scientifically trained for his work in our department as well as in any other” (qtd. in Graff 68). Brandt’s statements underscore the ways that the scientific underpinnings of philology function to dignify the work of English at this time.

Writing in “Secularization and Sacralization: Speculations on Some Religious Origins of the Secular Humanities Curriculum, 1850-1900,” James Turner explains that philology was cultivated in Germany in the eighteenth century and transplanted to the English-speaking world in the early nineteenth. Providing a “powerful paradigm of knowledge well into the second half of the century,” philology led to a unique approach to college instruction, “belonging to neither the antebellum classical curriculum nor the twentieth-century liberal arts” (83). What is remarkable about the impact of philology on English instruction, despite arguments to the contrary, is the extent to which this theoretical commitment traversed simultaneously multiple subdisciplines. In “Literary Study and the Modern System of the Disciplines,” John Guillory notes that by the 1890s four disciplinary practices – philology, composition, belles letters, and literary history – exist simultaneously in departments of English (35). And while an overarching
influence of the formation of English studies “was driven by the development of a principle of scientificity” owing primarily to precepts of philology, this “arrangement,” as Guillory notes, “did not prevail in the long term” (35).

It was during the period between 1880 and 1920 that “human sciences” such as sociology were effectively distinguished from the natural sciences on the one hand, and from the “humanities” or “cultural” disciplines on the other. Philology was ultimately disadvantaged by this reorganization of the disciplines, because it straddled the new spectrum of the disciplines. It attempted first to claim language as its scientific object; and then, in the form of a positivist literary history, it claimed literature as well, the object that seemed to resist science by its very nature (36).

Ultimately, because philology failed to figure inquiry into literature on scientific grounds, it paradoxically “weakened its claim to scientificity” (36). Moreover, philology’s predicament was compounded by the conditions and consequences of academic specialization, resulting in a more limited “definition of philology as a study of language” (Applebee 26). This narrowed scope and understanding of its aims coupled with increasingly “lofty goals” and “pedantic textual criticism” led, in part, to the somewhat negative image that it possesses today (26).

In many ways, the ostensible failure of philology holds the most pressing implications for my study. Gerald Graff reminds us, that philology “proved a dismal failure only in relation to expectations that few of its early proponents were attempting to meet” (68). What survived of philology was a “larger cultural vision,” a way of thinking about language and the university that aspired to reconcile seemingly incompatible
directions for teaching and research within English departments. It met a desire, a “nostalgia for the past, especially the European past and the Middle Ages,” but it also satisfied a need for “facts, for accuracy, for the imitation of the ‘scientific method’ which had acquired overwhelming prestige” (Wellek qtd in Graff 68). Whereas the rise of philology is evidence of the distinct ways in which departments like English undergo a process of intellectual segmentation during this period, it is important to remember – as Veysey discusses – that behind the conflict of philology’s humanistic and positivistic impulses, a process of bureaucratization and standardization also accompanies academic specialization. This aspect of specialization is also inextricably linked with the fiscal health and unprecedented growth of universities at the turn of the twentieth century.

By 1911, consequences of academic specialization are becoming impossible for professors like Lounsbury to ignore, especially with respect to the number of students attending university (and his own composition class) as well as the amount of money flowing through his institution. In the *Organization of Knowledge in Modern America*, 1860-1920, Alexandra Oleson and John Voss report that in 1899 the thirty-four largest gifts pledged to public causes totaled $80 million; of that amount, more than $55 million was given to institutions of higher learning, more than $5 million to libraries, and almost $3 million to museums (xi). Meanwhile, according to the authors, the number of undergraduates in American universities increased from 52,300 in 1870 to 156,800 in 1890, 237,600 in 1900, and 597,900 in 1920 (xii). The type of university (the nature of its work and demographic of its students) that Lounsbury inhabited in 1911 was almost unrecognizable in comparison to the university he began teaching at 25 years before he made his proposal to abolish compulsory composition. Certainly, the changes he
witnessed in universities influenced his decision to call for the abolition of compulsory composition. However, as has been noted, Lounsbury’s article is highly ambivalent and conflicted about whether abolishing compulsory composition addresses the problem of providing adequate writing instruction for growing numbers of students. This ambivalence might be symptomatic of the fact that support for the trend toward specialization was waning in 1911.

For instance, in *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and The Marginalization of Morality*, Julie A. Reuben investigates how the rejection of the standardized curriculum of the classical college in favor of specialization and free electives, led to a loss of unity and moral purpose in universities (231). Although specialization, as Higham asserts, had almost become “an inviolable law of nature, or at least an inescapable condition of modern life” (7), Reuben suggests that criticisms of the movement never completely subsided. In fact, she writes that although a survey of college and university presidents in 1901 concluded that “the elective system is a fixture” in colleges, by 1920 the trend seemed reversed. According to Reuben, such a shift in attitude toward free electives and academic specialization was “a response to fears that the effect of electives on the college was the fragmentation of intellectual life and the loss of values in education” (Reuben 231). James Turner, in his “Secularization and Sacralization: Speculations on Some Religious Origins of the Secular Humanities Curriculum, 1850-1900,” demonstrates that concerns over the “fragmentation of intellectual life” in universities began much earlier than the 1920s. “Yet in the decades after 1860,” he writes, “this sense of coherence grew thinner and thinner, finally vanishing like smoke” (76).
Prior to the 1860s college curriculums were marked by a strong sense of coherence, a unity made possible, in part, by the belief that God brought meaning to college curriculums. Between 1860 and 1920, specialization and a “weakening consensus on the existence of God” (Turner 76) led to an increasingly fragmented curriculum. Searching for ways to articulate the relevance of their work and to establish some sense of coherence and continuity in curriculums, some professors and administrators in the early 1920s became critical of specialization. In its place, “liberal culture” becomes, as James Turners calls it, the “new buzzword of undergraduate general education” (79). In the following abolitionist argument, we find evidence of the pressures imposed by both the trend toward specialization and liberal culture on general education courses like freshman composition.

**Oscar James Campbell – The Failure of Freshman English**

Unlike Lounsbury’s “Compulsory College Composition,” which was published in *Harper’s Magazine* and taken seriously enough to spark a rebuttal from Beyer in the *Educational Review* in 1912, Campbell’s proposal was met only with reformist arguments and dissent. Despite such criticism, Campbell’s “The Failure of Freshman English” is one of the few proposals discussed by all existing histories of the abolition debate, as well as by most respected histories of Composition. In this section, I discuss aspects of Campbell’s study that have been overlooked by historians of writing instruction. In particular, I show how Campbell’s essay depends on what Jack Goody refers to as a “Great Dichotomy” and Ruth Finnegan calls the “Great Divide” conception of literacy. As I discussed in the first part of this chapter, great divide conceptions of
literacy are indicative of a theoretical assumption about learning that inaccurately elevates those possessing literacy to positions of dominance over those that do not. By attending to the role of Campbell’s attitude about literacy, we understand better how the rhetoric of abolitionism depends on generalizations that accompany the literacy myth.

Campbell is a compelling figure for historians of composition and the abolition debate because of his use of metaphor and the hostility of his rhetoric. He begins his tirade on freshman English by comparing compulsory composition to a monster, specifically a “Frankenstein” which was created by a former colleague (Barrett Wendell) and has gone awry. He chides the course for forcing “teachers of English to attempt what they know is impossible and builds up false ideas and false hopes of the educational process which vitiates undergraduate work in almost the entire curriculum” (178). As contemporary as his assessment might sound to us, such sentiments should not be confused with progressive understandings of literacy; in fact, more than any other proposal to abolish freshman English, Campbell’s study is marked by inconsistent and contradictory conceptions of literacy. For example, Campbell asserts, “Only through the books of ages remote from his own can an individual completely emancipate himself from the provinciality of time and place” (183). Which is to say, without “works of literature” in the tradition of liberal culture, students are like primitive creatures, unable to gain the critical distance and cognitive skills to objectively understand their position in time and space. In this same vein, Campbell is convinced that literature – not compulsory composition (and achieving the sophisticated levels of literacy that literature makes possible) – leads to extraordinary consequences. “Without some modicum of thinking,” he explains, “one cannot write at all, and it is emphatically true that one cannot
ever write any better than he can think” (179). As such, Campbell subscribes to “great
divide” conceptions of literacy in which epistemological assumptions about the
consequences of being literate inform, in part, his position on compulsory composition.

However, unlike Lounsbury, Campbell’s opposition to the requirement is not
completely supported by strong theories of literacy that subscribe to the autonomous
model. In fact, at times, Cambpell seems to question specifically the pedagogical
effectiveness of instruction based on autonomous conceptions of literacy. For instance, in
discussing the methods employed by composition courses of the time he notes, “The
existence of the course and the methods it habitually employs are based on the fallacious
notion that good writing is a Ding an Sich, a separate independent technique. That is,
that it can be engendered and grown in a kind of intellectual vacuum” (178). In a way,
Campbell sees the aims of composition courses as varying from moment to moment; they
cannot be defined and achieved in a vacuum or apart from other contexts. He supports
this position further by drawing on an analogy intended to demonstrate the flawed
thinking behind prevailing approaches to composition at the time. “If the proponents of
this course have any philosophy,” he writes, “it is that one learns to write sentences as
one learns to play scales on the piano and for the same purpose” (178). What Campbell
means by this is that it is assumed if a piano student masters particular skills in both the
major and minor scales, s/he may successfully and equally apply such skills to “the
successful rendition of a Beethoven sonata or of a Franz Liszt rhapsody” (178).

Campbell concedes that his “music analogy is very imperfect” (178) but believes that this
thinking is behind compulsory composition instruction at the time. More specifically,
Campbell senses that composition instructors treat “words, phrases, and sentences” as if
they are notes on a scale that correspond to a keyboard, as if language itself is “external to the process of playing anything and independent of it” (178). Although Campbell fails to offer solutions to this problem specifically, he does speculate as to why such instruction continues, and he lays blame not with composition instructors or students, but with administrators and professors in other departments.

This assertion marks a curious shift in tone in Campbell’s essay. Up to this point, Campbell’s complaints about compulsory composition are not directed at any person in particular. Instead, he seems only interested in aspects of the course that support his claims regarding its ineffectiveness and inefficiency. However, when he speculates about how and why universities have allowed the situation with compulsory composition to continue so inefficiently and for so long, he explains,

Our students, then, do not take seriously our pedagogic pretensions, but the administrators of the universities and the professors in other departments than our own most emphatically do. Presidents and deans continue to say by word of mouth, and by word of pen, that the principal business of an English department is to teach all the students in a university how to write well. Universities spend vast sums of money on that service; in fact, so much that the budget of the English department is commonly about twice as large as that of any other department in the undergraduate college. It is natural then that the administration believes that it is entitled to much more positive results than it is obtaining. We should not be surprised that it keeps insisting that English department must discover new and better methods of doing its main job. (180)
Unlike Lounsbury’s proposal, in which institutional pressures are latent and tangentially related to his argument, Campbell responds directly to pressures from the administrative order of universities. This passage highlights specifically the ways that assumptions about the purpose and powers of literacy overlap with administrative pressures. By this I mean that Campbell’s proposal is motivated largely by exaggerated understandings of literacy’s powers, and he perceives that such attitudes prevail in administrative circles as well. However, he objects to these attitudes if they are originating from deans and university presidents. What lies at the heart of the debate over compulsory composition in Campbell’s argument is not the compulsory nature of the course or its pedagogical methods. Instead, competing definitions of literacy are actually motivating this conflict, and the confusion surrounding these definitions grows out of competing visions of the purposes of universities altogether.

Like Lounsbury, Campbell never articulates specifically how he defines literacy. But when we examine more closely what Campbell believes is ultimately at stake in the mission of universities, a more precise definition of literacy becomes evident. “It is undoubtedly trite,” he asserts, “to say that the success of a democratic state depends upon the sort of life that is lived by the individuals who compose it” (183). Furthermore, these individuals must be “self-reliant” yet “sensitive to the needs of other individuals,” especially when it comes to assessing “the impact of their own personalities” on others. For Campbell, only one type of literacy possesses the power to cultivate the kind of citizens that can sustain his vision of a successful democracy. David Barton calls this “the literary view of literacy” (168). Of its powers Campbell notes, “Literature
cultivates and sharpens this sensitivity by enabling the individual to share, and thus to understand, a great variety of human experiences” (183). According to Campbell, “every work of literature” is an “essential part of the living tissue of the life of every age.” And it is only through this type of literacy or “the books of the ages remote from his own can an individual completely emancipate himself from the provinciality of time and place” (183).

Although Campbell occasionally expresses notions that question autonomous conceptions of literacy, his literary view of literacy clearly subscribes to great divide conceptions. Without great books, students remain tied to the present, unable to gain the cognitive faculties to distance themselves from the moment; thus, according to this theory of literacy, they forever lack the critical perspective necessary to deal with abstract ideals and philosophical problems in sophisticated ways. Thus – and despite Campbell’s many complaints directed toward the shortcomings of theme-based pedagogies – the problems of compulsory composition may be boiled down to a course that is not cultivating tastes and behaviors that literature provides. In this way, Campbell’s literary view of literacy was, on the one hand, a solution to the ostensible shortcomings of compulsory composition. Yet, because this view of literacy was not translating into the type of classroom practices that would meet administrator’s expectations, it was also the problem. Other significant contradictions are apparent in this scenario. Campbell’s essay also shows how incongruent great divide and literary views of literacy can be with the exaggerated, generalized, and universalized expectations of myths of literacy that often inform institutional and administrative pressures. Certainly, as my reading of Campbell demonstrates, competing and contradictory characterizations of literacy complicate
efforts to evaluate the aims and effectiveness of composition. However, it is also
important to remember, that structures of authority and power relations among faculty
and administrators are also at stake in the rhetoric of abolitionism. We get some sense of
these pressures when we examine further Campbell’s tone and his concerns about the
working conditions of composition instructors.

David Russell contends that even though the “rhetorical contexts differ” between
Lounsbury and Campbell, the “rhetorical strategies” of the proposals are essentially the
same. According to Russell, Campbell, like Lounsbury, also uses irony as a trope to rally
his audience around the “cardinal principle of Romanticism” and liberal culture (Russell
135). Certainly, Campbell’s article contains moments of sarcasm. But irony and
sarcasm are not the predominant traits of this proposal to abolish freshman English. On
the contrary, Campbell’s proposal is remarkable for another, equally compelling
response: namely, his concerns over the teaching conditions for instructors of freshman
English.

But, for all that, crowds of young men and women have been lured into
the teaching of English by the great numbers of positions annually open at
the bottom of the heap, and there they stick, contaminating one another
with their discouragement and rebellion. No wonder they are now
organizing, as other proletariats the world over are organizing, to assert
and foster their class interests. In almost every institution in which there is
a chapter of the teacher’s union, instructors in English form its central
core. (181-182)
Campbell’s proposal is interesting because it is a spirited polemic and occasionally sarcastic, but here, he is also speaking candidly about the challenges of composition instruction at particular moment in time. In this passage, Campbell remarks on the exploitative working conditions that many composition instructors experienced leading up to this period. Campbell would have been especially attuned to such conditions and feedback because, just four years earlier, he held a position of influence during a time in which the profession was experiencing a “proliferation of debates” (Roemer et al. 380). In “Reframing the Great Debate on First-Year Writing,” Marjorie Roemer, Lucille M. Schultz, and Russel K. Durst, report that because of “strong divisions among college English instructors” in the 1930s, the NCTE formed a committee to issue a report on the state of College English. Campbell presided over that committee, and according to the authors “he [Campbell] argued strongly against the first-year course in a way that is very consistent with previous abolitionist arguments” (380). This may be true; however, what is more interesting is that Campbell specifically articulates in the report the constraints and demands of his cultural moment, and he does so in a way that never happens in his proposal to abolish freshman English. This is significant because contemporary receptions of Campbell’s abolitionist proposal cast him as a literary elitist frustrated by the way that composition attenuates the “usefulness of literary education” (Connors 285). However, a closer look at the perspective emerging in the following report indicates that Campbell’s position was much more complex. In his “English Monograph No. 3 or The Teaching of College English” he notes:

Adequate mastery of the English language, however, should mean much more than the attainment of mere correctness and literate respectability. It
should imply effective communication of ideas. Many cooperative enterprises essential to the existence of a sound social organization are dependent on a fairly wide diffusion of this ability, particularly among our social and political leaders. President Roosevelt’s skill in explaining to the entire nation the policies and actions of the government, particularly in the banking crisis of 1933, create overnight a new attitude toward our entire economic structure. This, in turn, has contributed largely to its safety and to the revival of its orderly operation. (7)

Certainly, when we proceed beyond the introduction to this report, we find the reductive reasoning and the elitist rationales that typify criticisms of compulsory composition leading up to this period. However, in this passage, for a brief moment, Campbell’s framing of how he understands pressures brought on by the Great Depression and other social developments give us reason to look beyond existing assessments of his role in the debate. Considering the social and economic contexts alongside that latent attitudes about literacy in his proposal to abolish composition, lends perspective and provides greater understanding of the complex pressures that have helped to shape the abolition debate more generally.

Earlier I mentioned that Campbell’s “The Failure of Freshman English” is interesting not so much for his use of irony but for his expressed concern about the teaching conditions that seem to be a consequence of compulsory composition. In his 1938 essay, he actually predicts that teachers of composition would continue to organize and protest the unfair working conditions and drudgery of freshman English as, he writes, “other proletariats the world over are organizing” (182). As problematic as his
comparison is, in noting that such dissatisfaction and pressure is coming from other parts of the world, not just from English departments or universities, Campbell underscores the ways in which many pro-abolitionist proposals are responding to and using to their advantage various cultural, social, and economic pressures and concerns. In Campbell’s case, he warns that if composition is not abolished, “crowds of young men and women” (181) who have been “lured into the teaching of English” (181) will revolt and bring down higher education.

The following chapter explicates arguments that touch on, among other critical issues, the working conditions that surround the teaching of composition. However, unlike Lounsbury and Campbell, the following studies have been overlooked in existing histories of the abolition debate. As I have shown, calls for the abolition of compulsory composition correspond with particular institutional sea-changes, specifically educational reforms like the trend toward academic specialization and the rise of liberal culture. Early calls like Thomas Lounsbury’s and Oscar James Campbell’s should be, as I have done, rhetorically situated. In doing so, significant intersections between the rhetoric of these arguments and the myths of literacy that sustain them become evident. Likewise, in examining the following overlooked proposals through the lens of the New Literacy Studies, we again find that relative pressures to both abolish and maintain the requirement of freshman English are based on exaggerated understandings of literacy’s powers. Furthermore, by supplementing existing histories of the debate with voices that have been left out, the following chapter aspires to provide a more complete picture of the debate over the aims and effectiveness of compulsory composition. My argument is that an important part of providing this more complete history must involve making more
legible the persistent and tenacious attitudes about literacy that function as both solutions to the problems of compulsory composition and perpetuating factors in the debate itself.
CHAPTER TWO

WHAT FRESHMAN ENGLISH CANNOT DO:

CONTINUITIES OF LITERACY IN THE DEBATE

What we know as Freshman English has all the earmarks of a makeshift, a temporary device. When our educational experts have disposed of other things, they will at last turn seriously to the matter of training in the use of English, and the course which now is virtually a mere Sphinx riddle defying solution will disappear altogether or will take a natural and effective place in a rationally conceived and thoroughly organized program of education in the mother-tongue. When that time comes, as ultimately we must believe it will, the present intricately contrived machinery of our courses in Freshman English will be thought of with curiosity and with compassion.

-- Frederick A. Manchester, May 1917

To understand literacy means that contradictions should be expected to result from the ongoing processes and developments within culture, polity, economy, and society. These are neither ironic nor paradoxical, as some call them, but fundamentally historical.

-- Harvey J. Graff, The Legacies of Literacy

Despite numerous examinations of the abolition debate (see Connors; Greenbaum; Russell), many voices, like Frederick A. Manchester’s, have been left out. My goal in this chapter is to supplement existing histories of the abolition debate – to incorporate overlooked voices of both abolitionism and reform to provide a more complete history of the debate over the compulsory requirement. Edward Thurber’s “Composition in Our Colleges” (1915) argues for more relevant methods of freshman English instruction. His study is evidence of the ways that the consequences of academic
specialization extend well beyond the temporal boundaries historians have set for this period. Frederick A. Manchester’s essays “Freshman English Once More” and “Freshman English Once More – Concluded” (1917) proceeds along the same lines, but raises the question as to whether the “problems” of freshman English defy solution altogether. Responding to the economic and educational challenges of his time, Paulus Lange’s “What Price English?” (1938) shows how confiding in the literacy myth leads to exaggerated expectations for literacy and freshman English. His solution, like Thurber and Manchester, is to pass on the burden of literacy instruction to high schools. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that “Sphinx riddle” of freshman English is made even more perplexing by the attitudes about literacy that they share in common.

Recent discussions of the abolition debate construct histories of the argument that distinguish between particular movements; namely, between Abolitionists and New Abolitionists. Connors remarks that New Abolitionists are “qualitatively different from those to be heard in previous avatars of the movement” (24). For him, relatively recent proposals for abolition that emerge from within rhetoric and composition scholarship qualify as “new abolitionists.” Goggin and Miller concur with this distinction, asserting that significant discontinuities exist “between earlier abolitionist calls and recent new abolitionist arguments” (86). In the hopes of articulating an exigency for this chapter beyond simply incorporating overlooked or missing voices in the debate for the sake of doing so, I begin this chapter by questioning specifically the notion of “New Abolitionism” itself. Central to my attempt to uncover and emphasize continuities and similarities in overlooked voices of the abolition debate is Maureen Daly Goggin and Susan Kay Miller’s “What is New about the “New Abolitionists”: Continuities and
Discontinuities in the Great Debate.” Ultimately, they presume discontinuities and differences when they are not present, and they do so, as I will show, for reasons other than documenting the history of this debate.

**What is Not New about New Abolitionism**

In “What is New About the ‘New Abolitionists’: Continuities and Discontinuities in the Great Debate,” Goggin and Miller advocate an alternative conception of the debate over the compulsory requirement. The authors contend that voices of the new abolitionist movement are misunderstood (86), asserting that those in opposition to reformist studies “mistakenly assume a continuity between older calls for abolishing composition” (90) and contemporary proposals for reconceiving writing instruction. From the authors’ perspective, confusion stems from the ways in which the debate itself is constrained by the binary of abolitionism/reformism. “To break out of this space,” they write, “we argue for opening up the discussion beyond the simplistic binary of removing versus reforming composition instruction – the binary that has been and continues to be the great debate” (86). In many respects, Goggin’s and Miller’s essay demonstrates what is wrong with contemporary assessments of the abolition debate. By this, I mean, Goggin and Miller’s argument, that contemporary abolitionism represent “a seismic shift from previous calls to abolish composition,” ignores – among other things – issues of literacy as well as institutional pressures stemming from educational reform. This is not to say that literacy or historical contexts are entirely overlooked by the authors. In fact, their move to construct new abolitionists as “entirely different and unrelated” to their predecessors depends, in part, on suggesting that new abolitionists are opposed to autonomous
conceptions of literacy and instead “profess what Brian Street has called an ideological model of literacy” (93). Furthermore, of presumably earlier proposals to abolish composition they write: “To be fair, many of these arguments [for abolition], especially early on, came at time when those in literature were fighting to hold on to hard-won disciplinary space in the modern university” (92). Beyond these cursory references to literacy and general historical contexts surrounding educational reforms, the authors do not provide specifics. Similar to other existing histories or examinations of the abolition debate, the implications of their assertions about literacy are implied, and readers are left to decide for themselves which aspects of the history of higher education are relevant to abolitionism. It is understandable, however, that Goggin and Miller turn a blind eye to specifics. Doing so would mean recognizing significant continuities and similarities between “early” abolitionists and more contemporary examples.

Goggin and Miller are right when they claim that contemporary proposals for the abolition of compulsory composition are different in terms of where they originate. But they are on dubious ground when they propose that “new abolitionists would be better described by the term reconceptualists” (95). Doing so, they claim, provides a “semantic disconnect between old calls for abolition and the recent calls for systemic change” (95). They conclude:

Although virtually all of the reconceptualists share a deep dissatisfaction with the current state and systems of writing instruction, they are not univocal in their positions. To present all reconceptualists as proposing the same thing is to simplify the diversity of the calls in order to create a convenient dichotomy – “us versus them.” The irony of this
argumentative move is that it not only glosses over the complexities of the many different proposals extended by the reconceptualists, it also unfairly simplifies those who oppose their arguments, for neither are they a univocal group. (95)

I agree with the need to rethink the term abolitionism as it applies to the debate over compulsory composition. This is a point that needs emphasizing and attention since so many scholars are unfamiliar with why the notion of abolitionism applies to this debate, and perhaps why it should not. However, the irony of Goggin and Miller’s move is that in redefining the terms of the debate for the ostensible purpose of representing diversity in contemporary proposals for abolition, they gloss over significant continuities of literacy, and in a sense betray the reasons for refiguring the debate in the first place.

Goggin and Miller desire what they describe as “systemic change.” Although they never explain precisely what they mean by this, we get the sense that by refiguring the scope of the debate – by refiguring abolition as “reconceptualization” – new opportunities and “multiple possible trajectories” for affecting “systemic change” in the teaching of writing become more visible. This is problematic because merely redefining terms and noting differences in proposals for reform or abolition for the purpose of noting a “semantic disconnect” does little in the way of explaining why the debate has persisted for so long, nor does it offer a way out of the cyclical nature of this debate. Refiguring the new abolitionists as “reconceptualists” – as distinct or unique in the century-long tradition of complaint – presumes difference in the face of stark continuities and ignores the historical role of literacy in the debate.
My own view, however, is that earlier and more recent abolitionist arguments are remarkably similar and demonstrate notable continuities, especially with respect to the attitudes and definitions of literacy that undergird their proposals for reform or abolitionism. Along with their exaggerated understandings of the powers of literacy, these overlooked voices – like those that are recognized to constitute the debate – also possess a persistent belief that something must be done about the ostensible problems posed by freshman English, and that something, we are to believe, must be done now. Although the exigency of the issue at hand is often explicitly stated, notions of crisis as well as vague and ambiguous definitions of literacy are unstated but ever present. As such, because each critique of composition is heavily grounded in the literacy myth, the aims and perceived purpose of freshman English becomes curiously vague in these studies. In this way, recommendations for reforming freshman English remain mismatched solutions to a poorly defined problem.

The approach I take in this chapter follows that which Harvey J. Graff takes on the history of literacy in *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society*. Central to his project is the task of emphasizing continuities and contradictions with respect to the place of literacy in the history of Western culture and society (8). The language of continuity, he notes, is useful when discussing literacy because the circumstances surrounding it have involved gradual changes over time. “Concepts of continuity,” he writes, “involve comparisons over time, as well as awareness of the need to determine the relationship between elements of change and continuity simultaneously operating in any historical moment or situation” (8). Graff’s study employs the language of continuity to consider similarities and
differences in varied social and economic contexts as well as rates of literacy, institutional structures of schooling, and the “practical and symbolic uses of literacy” (8). Employing the language of continuity in my examination of the abolition debate allows me to challenge further the tendency to conceive of the abolition debate in terms of change. Similarly, and as Graff notes, “The history of literacy is typically conceived and written in terms of change. The assumption is that literacy, development, growth, and progress are inseparably linked” (8). As such, the legacies of literacy – the series of continuities that constitute the history of literacy – comprise not only the overlooked voices in the debate that I examine in this chapter, but also the existing histories of the debate that have left them out.

For historians of writing instruction who have turned a blind eye to the role of literacy in the abolition debate, the pressure to identify “new” and “distinct” movements – to uncover “evidence” of change – within the debate stems from a desire to transform the way we understand what can be disheartening and cynical statements about the history of composition. Though I concede that the concept of “New Abolitionism” is unique, in that such arguments often originate from scholars who professionally identify as rhetoric and composition specialists, in this chapter, I maintain and demonstrate that myths of literacy traverse a hundred years of proposals and contribute to a sense of continuity in the debate that cannot be ignored.

Overlooked Voices and Continuities in the Abolition Debate

Published in The English Journal in 1915, Edward A. Thurber’s “Composition in Our Colleges” begins by celebrating Lounsbury’s proposal for abolition, which appeared
in *Harper’s* three years earlier. Similar to other proposals of the time, it is a sarcastic essay and the overall tone is dismissive of composition instruction more generally. However, unlike Lounsbury, Thurber offers a solution to the problem of Freshman English; he proposes that the responsibility of composition instruction should fall to all disciplines that constitute universities, not simply English departments. Although more pragmatic and less polemical than Lounsbury, Thurber sees his proposal as an extension of the claims of previous criticisms of compulsory composition. Evidence of this is found in the introduction of Thurber’s essay. He writes:

> And here is where the band begins to play, where Professor Lounsbury, in his article in *Harper’s* some two or three years ago, struck for many a harsh and unwelcome note. The problem, to be sure, is vexing and diverse; when you have broken through a man’s center, you have always turned his flank. It is the flank movements in this discussion that prolong the warfare. (9).

Thurber’s appropriation of military rhetoric is revealing. On the one hand, it may be read as an assessment of the impact of Lounsbury’s study on prevailing thinking about compulsory composition. Thurber states that Lounsbury “struck for many a harsh and unwelcome note.” We know from Connors that Lounsbury’s article “was not followed up in Harper’s” (8), and although it is true that “Compulsory Composition in Colleges” provoked a discussion in the *Educational Review* in 1913, his argument was more notorious than consequential. In a sense, then, given what we know about the reception of Lounsbury’s proposal, what we find in Thurber’s introduction is an attempt at enhancing the impact of Lounsbury’s overall argument. By suggesting that abolitionists
like Lounsbury “have broken through” and provoked a defensive response, Thurber is positioning himself for a more strategic attack on compulsory composition. In this case, his antipathy for Freshman English is more focused and specific than his predecessors, and his efforts are directed specifically toward the pedagogical apparatus and ostensible needs for Freshman English.

Even more provocative than his use of military rhetoric (or the more strategic levels on which his study operates), is his interest in the role of literacy as a learning outcome for composition instruction at the time. Pontificating on the “attitude of the average college” he writes: “The college either yearns for these persons or is timorous that a rival sister will adopt them – so it stretches out its fair arms. And obviously the next thing to do is its duty – to wean them from their illiteracy by giving them the registered milk of articulation” (9). The metaphors Thurber uses to express his views on the relationship among literacy, Freshman English, and “the college” have significant implications for my study. In *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*, David Barton touches on some of these implications when he notes:

…different metaphors have different implications for how we view illiteracy, what action might be taken to change it and how we characterize the people involved. For example, if illiteracy is a disease, then the people involved are sick, it should be eradicated, and experts need to be called in to do the job. (12)

By extension, then, it follows that if students must be “weaned” from their illiteracy, an alternative form of sustenance must be provided. Clearly, from Thurber’s perspective, instruction in what he describes as “articulation” (via belles lettres) is the preferred
“treatment,” but we get the sense that this approach is falling short. However, in what ways and on what levels belles lettres is deficient are not completely clear.

Although it is true that, as with almost all proposals for abolition or reform of composition, learning objectives remain poorly defined and ambiguous, it is important to remember that Thurber’s statement about the ostensible “duty” of colleges to “wean students from their illiteracy” is sarcastic. He seems indignant when he speaks of students, arguing “He has passed his examinations or, amazing to relate, he is from an accredited school. In fact, the only criticism to be made upon him is that he is illiterate” (9). In addition to being suspicious of the role of illiteracy in evaluating the needs of students, he is highly dubious of the “process of accomplishing” this “feat,” which he specifically describes as “peculiar” (9). He is fed up with the idea that freshman English – as it is configured at this time – performs the duty of the larger university. The implications of Thurber’s curious use of metaphor may be made explicit by examining his quotation in the context of other metaphors used to discuss illiteracy.
In *The Social Context of Literacy*, Kenneth Levine provides a table categorizing the various ways illiteracy is characterized. David Barton provides an updated version of this table in his text, *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*.11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Means</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Application</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sickness</strong></td>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>Clinical Intervention</td>
<td>Remittance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Handicap</strong></td>
<td>Rehabilitation</td>
<td>Compensatory aids Instruction</td>
<td>Alleviation</td>
<td>Dyslexia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ignorance</strong></td>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>Mastery</td>
<td>Orthodox literacy tuition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Incapacity</strong></td>
<td>Therapy</td>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td>Adjustment Assimilation Autonomy Rights</td>
<td>Conscientization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Oppression</strong></td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Political organizational/ Legislation</td>
<td>Rights</td>
<td>Conscientization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deprivation</strong></td>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>Reallocation of material resources</td>
<td>Benefit</td>
<td>Positive discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deviance</strong></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Isolation Containment Physical Coercion</td>
<td>Correction Conformity</td>
<td>Negative discrimination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Ways of talking about literacy
Source: David Barton’s *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language* (2009) p. 11

This table is useful because it sheds light on “how much can be achieved by looking at illiteracy through a ‘wide-angle’ lens and by considering the less obvious alternatives and complements to training” (Levine 172). Although it is unrealistic to expect a table like this to anticipate a “one-to-one correspondence” (172) among the
conditions, responses, means, and the policies of particular institutions or the outcomes of particular systems of pedagogy, it does show multiple possibilities for considering the ways that students excluded by one mode or “condition” may find a way of “fitting in” to another category.

In “Composition in Our Colleges,” Thurber’s reference to illiteracy is expressed through a metaphor of sustenance and consumption. In many ways, equating illiteracy with milk (and the process of weaning a child from it) cuts across Levine’s categories in multiple ways and directions. By this, I mean, Thurber’s figurative assessment of the issue at hand characterizes illiteracy as a “sickness,” on the one hand, requiring the “registered milk of articulation” or a “treatment” via belles lettres as the response to the problem. Then again others might argue that Thurber’s statement is consistent with the condition of “deprivation.” That is, the “relocation” of pedagogical materials emphasizing “articulation” may only bring about the desired “benefits” that Thurber and universities of the time seek. However, we might also understand Thurber’s remarks in terms of “ignorance,” in the sense that the process of “weaning students from their illiteracy” should have begun much earlier. In this way, Thurber’s statement may be understood, I think, in the way he intends. To put it simply, he believes his contemporaries should be ashamed – even embarrassed – by how mismatched and inadequate prevailing approaches to literacy “training” are to the perceived problems he identifies and by how slow they have been to react. Regardless of how Thurber’s statement is understood in relation to the aforementioned conditions, treatments, and goals, his statement demonstrates that he is dubious of composition’s ability to provide the type of instruction and training necessary to mitigate what he perceives to be an
illiteracy problem. In some ways, the solution that Thurber proposes, which I turn to now, demonstrates a desire to reorient writing instruction away from solving illiteracy in students and toward facilitating the trend toward academic specialization. Unlike Lounsbury, Thurber is not opposed to the consequences of specialization. In fact, the alternative model for writing instruction that he proposes depends in large part on the segmentation and further development of disciplines. What becomes clear in Thurber’s statement, in a way that Lounsbury does not reveal, is the extent to which he envisions writing instruction as functioning to undergird academic specialization in universities more generally.

This aspect of his argument becomes clear when we examine how Thurber feels about composition textbooks, belles lettres, and the repetitive nature of prevailing pedagogical approaches to composition. After deriding freshman English textbooks for being more appropriate for English instructors than students (10), Thurber proceeds to a critique of belles lettres. He notes: “In our modern college, the teaching of expression appears to be given over almost entirely to a synod of aesthetes. To them, for instance, Plato is not so much a figure in philosophy as a figure of expression” (11). For Thurber, emphasis on the modes of discourse is inconsequential and ultimately gives way to assignments comprised of repetitive drills. “Yesterday the class studied about a steam engine,” he asserts, “today it takes up the history of a piece of chalk; tomorrow it is to examine how well a man gives the impression of the height of a cathedral, or it may not the choice phraseology of a lyric” (10). Although Thurber’s antagonism toward rhetoric, belles lettres, and the repetitive nature of writing pedagogy in the early 1900s is commonplace (and as I noted in my introduction, we find similar frustrations and
complaints levied against rhetorical instruction today), Thurber’s proposed solution is
distinct in at least one way, and it sets him apart from his contemporaries. That is, his
essay may be understood as one of the first arguments for abolishing composition in
favor of an arrangement that divides the responsibility of writing instruction among the
various disciplines that constitute universities.

For instance, “By my side,” Thurber writes, “is a book entitled Handbook of
English for Engineers. It is compiled by a ‘professor’ of English and with it goes a book
of “specimens” emanating from a department of English” (12).14 Thurber seems vexed
by the fact that the authors (or “compiler”) of the text consider the essay more
appropriate for “Upper classmen” (12). This announcement prompts a series of rhetorical
questions touching on multiple topics, among them the extent to which high schools fail
to prepare students for college (this is a topic I take up in the context of another proposal
later in chapter three). However, this is not his principal complaint. His chief concern
grows out of an interest in whether freshman English courses are relevant to students’
interests. Thurber poses succinctly his central problem with composition:

In many of our colleges, however, perhaps in the majority of them, the
very fact that the average teacher of composition is concerned primarily
with imaginative literature, belles lettres, provokes an endless search for
subjects quite other than those in which the students are supposed to be
engrossed. And to this delusion is responsible in large measure, I take it,
the bankruptcy of the freshman course. (13)

His solution is to impose a “fixed doctrine” so that each group of students would “be
guided in its writing by an expert” (14). For Thurber, agriculture students should be
taught composition by “one who is vitally interested” (14) in agriculture. Likewise, engineers “should be taught composition by instructors interested in “subjects that engineers are interested in” (14). A few months after “Composition in Our Colleges” appears in The English Journal, we find Thurber stating his position even more directly in his letter to the editor in the September 1915 issue of The Nation, asking “Why have the departments of English in our colleges been carrying the entire burden of composition?” Thurber’s statements reveal his frustration with how English departments have come to be solely responsible for “weaning” students from their illiteracy. And in his article in The Nation, he provides a sobering assessment of what will likely follow if expectations of freshman English and of literacy more generally are not reevaluated in relation to the needs of students and universities. He writes: “The department of English is straining to become a forum of discussion of all questions that have assailed human intelligence” (328). If rectifying the ostensible problem of illiteracy is to continue to be the aim of freshman English, then Thurber desires a pedagogical configuration across specialties in universities that will allow “mature minds” and instruction in articulation and “expression” to keep “pace with concern in subject-matter” (14).

In sum, Thurber’s position may be stated quite simply: The problem of illiteracy is not solved with freshman composition, articulation, or instruction in rhetoric or poetics. The course is unable to do its job for two reasons. First and foremost, the thematic focus of freshman English is not relevant to students’ needs. From Thurber’s perspective, prevailing approaches to writing instruction are repetitive and based on antiquated principles of rhetoric. His solution is to reposition the responsibility of writing instruction in universities so that students work with experts in particular disciplines to
learn to write for particular fields and specialties. Second, the course aspires to solve a problem that seems to defy solution; namely, illiteracy. More significantly, because freshman English has taken on the task of solving the problem of illiteracy, Thurber believes it has become a site for “discussion of all questions that have assailed human intelligence” (328). Thurber’s “Composition in Our Colleges” demonstrates how commitments to solving the problem of illiteracy actually served to make more explicit the limits of freshman English, and in so doing made the course less relevant to the emerging needs of universities in the early 1900s.

The following study, by Frederick A. Manchester, demonstrates a similar preoccupation with questioning the exaggerated expectations that surround the aims of compulsory composition. However, as we will see, Manchester questions both the extent to which freshman English may solve the perceived problem of illiteracy, and whether compulsory composition should be responsible for the “moral welfare” of its students.

**With Curiosity and Compassion – Freshman English Once More**

Writing from the University of Wisconsin – Madison in 1917, Frederick Manchester begins his study with a bold statement: “The problem of Freshman English as it confronts us in our large middle-western universities is incapable of a satisfying solution” (295). After remarking sarcastically on the “ridiculously” short amount of time for instruction and the “abundance of wisely selected” readings and texts that comprise the pedagogical apparatus of the course, Manchester proceeds to a series of proposals that are as interesting for their scope as they are for their contradictions. Published six years
after Lounsbury’s “Compulsory College Composition” and four years after Thurber’s “Composition in Our Colleges,” Manchester proposes a series of goals for the course which suggest significant continuities in the Great Debate over compulsory composition. As I will argue below, and as I demonstrated in my previous discussion of Thurber, these continuities reveal the varied ways that myths of literacy underline the abolition debate more generally. When this is the case, the distinction between abolitionists and reformists (one put forth by Connors, Goggin and Miller, and Russell) becomes more difficult to maintain, and raises questions about why it has been necessary to do so.

Manchester’s first proposal for reform is related to the overall “function” of Freshman English. For him, freshman English “can afford” to have one aim, and one aim only: “the cultivation in the student of a mastery of self-expression in English speech” (298). Interestingly, this outcome is achieved by resisting the tendency to generalize the function of the course to other aims and ends. He writes:

> It means that we shall not consider ourselves responsible for the moral welfare of our students, nor for their orientation in college life, nor for their education in citizenship, nor for their enlightenment with respect to the general conceptions of biology, political economy, history, or religion; it means that we shall steadily refuse to be distracted from our particular task by any irrelevant aim whatsoever. (298)

And so, for Manchester, it is by “simplifying the function,” or resisting a penchant for what he describes as “instruction in ideas” (299) that freshman English may come to do its intended duty and achieve its second goal.
The second goal that Manchester proposes is related “at bottom to a question of emphasis” (299). “One of the most baneful of education doctrines,” he writes, “is the doctrine that it is better to teach what is relatively unimportant and be sure of success than to teach what is truly essential and run the risk of failure” (299-300). This inclination, according to Manchester, is one to which instructors are “naturally disposed” because the task of teaching “mastery of expression” is so difficult and complex that aspects of instruction that are more easily teachable tend to occupy their time. For instance, he seems perplexed by the time spent examining “logical structure” and the attention spent on “analyzing essays which exhibit complex trains of thought” (300). Similarly, with respect to grammar, Manchester sees an “acquaintance with grammar” as “indispensable” (300), and he acknowledges that “it is a pity that our students when they come to us are not better grounded in the subject” (300), but he notes instructors of freshman English “cannot afford” to focus on grammar at the expense of instruction in articulation and mastery of expression in the mother-tongue (301). Furthermore, Manchester is unconvinced by preoccupations with both grammar and philology, which he notes belong more to the study of language “as an abstract science than to language as an instrument of expression” (301). To put it succinctly, Manchester’s ideal curriculum in freshman English seems to be constituted by the history, theory, and lesson of Rhetoric. Though, this is an idea he will qualify extensively in the second part of his proposal.

Emphasis in rhetoric specifically is Manchester’s third suggestion, and it is one that reflects the previously noted academic pressures and reforms of the time; namely, academic specialization. For instance, he emphasizes the importance of providing what
he describes as “an intellectual challenge” to students of both biology and chemistry, he writes: “I see no reason why a young man who can be made to understand the formidable abstractions of other subjects should not be expected to assimilate equally difficult conceptions in the art of rhetoric” (302). For Manchester, directing freshman English toward providing students the intellectual challenge of mastery in the art of rhetoric seems to function as a means of preserving the “true spirit” of a university (302). However, in 1917 – when Manchester publishes his study – the “true spirit” and aims of the university are being pulled in multiple directions by proponents of academic specialization on the one hand, and the generalist opposition on the other. According to Gerald Graff’s *Professing Literature*, the generalist opposition defined itself against “specialized investigators” (81), or those in favor of further segmenting universities along disciplinary lines. They emphasized humanism in the development of English studies toward the end of “adapting the old college ideal of liberal culture to the challenges of modern times” (85). Like Thurber, Manchester’s argument in “Freshman English Once More” seems both opposed to and sympathetic to further specialization. One the one hand, he argues for a examining “of our task, and swinging back to the center, re-establishing there and not elsewhere a substantial discipline” (304). Yet, he cautions against the paradoxical tendency of universities “which is by nature selective” and “embraces all the world” (303). He argues for a narrowing of the scope of freshman English to the study of rhetoric, yet he explicitly states “we can surely agree that Freshman English must resist the temptation to minister to all the needs of man, in order that it may concentrate on its particular task; that it must steadily oppose the natural tendency to substitute the simple parts of this task for the whole” (305). Sounding very
much like Thurber when he laments that English departments have become a site for “discussion of all questions that have assailed human intelligence” (Thurber 328), Manchester questions the idea that freshman English should be responsible solely for the moral welfare and citizenship of students. In spite of this, however, the course provides an opportunity to fulfill “a special responsibility,” for “every activity” has its “specific good” (299), specifically “the preservation in its methods of the true spirit of a university” (302). From this perspective, it is easy to see why Manchester characterizes freshman English as “a makeshift” and “temporary device” a “mere Sphinx riddle defying solution” (296). Freshman English, in Manchester’s eyes, is simply trying to do too much.

In a sense, we may understand Manchester as caught in between the two camps of “specialized investigators” and “the generalist opposition.” Gerald Graff notes that by 1915, two years before Manchester’s article was published, “a curious mixture of overconfidence and defeatism” defines scholarship in English studies. “Reformers,” he writes, “whose vision goes no further than making their subject hard” become increasingly susceptible to criticisms of superficiality or simply being labeled as “not knowing what to do with” their proposed reforms. Clearly, Manchester is feeling these pressures. After all, he anticipates such objections when remarking on reforming freshman English toward the aim of the vaguely defined “true spirit of a university,” specifically noting, “I now insist that superficiality or insignificance is farthest from my thoughts” (301). Although, I concede that Manchester’s somewhat contradictory proposals for reform point to the ways in which “the gulf between” specialized investigators and generalists “was never absolute” (Graff Professing Literature 81), I
maintain that Manchester’s ambivalence reflects something of more importance, at least with respect to the abolition debate. As I show in the following section, Manchester’s essay reveals more about the influence of the literacy myth than anything else.

**Freshman English Once More – Concluded:**

The impact of overstating the importance of literacy is evident in the way his essay transforms from an argument indebted to abolitionist rhetoric, to one that reads more like a reformist argument. This is significant because this transformation also parallels a shift in Manchester’s attitude toward literacy. In contrast to the broad scope of part one, which was published only one month before the second part in June, 1917, “Freshman English Once More – Concluded” is devoted solely to Manchester’s fourth and final recommendation: reforming freshman English with an emphasis toward reading. Unlike the first part of his study, which begins and ends with a decidedly cynical characterization of what he describes repeatedly as the “insoluble” problem of Freshman English, the second half is surprisingly optimistic. Nevertheless, I will show that like other voices in the abolition debate, Manchester’s study relies on a rhetoric of crisis that stems from myths of literacy. However, what makes his proposal unique is the way his exaggerated expectations about the consequences of being literate are connected to his tendency to overstate the significance of reading practices. Furthermore, Manchester’s attitudes about literacy parallel a distinctive shift in tone which I also discuss the significance of in the following section.

Manchester’s shift in tone is important to note because it exemplifies his ambivalence about freshman English, which stems from his general frustrations with
composition outlined in the first part of his article. When he remarks on the “adverse conditions” of freshman English he notes, “It is surely no wonder that in large measure we fail; the wonder is, when one thinks of it, that we succeed at all” (295). However, in the conclusion of his second part he finishes on a more affirmative note:

> Freshman English, it is true, is not a very impressive thing in the economy of the world or of the university, but if we study its possibilities on an ideal plane and remember how many thousands and thousands of students come yearly within the scope of its influence, we shall not fail to realize that it has an important claim upon our serious consideration. (398)

Just as important as explicating why Manchester believes that freshman English is not “a very impressive thing” in the world or university, or how the expression “ideal plane” functions in this passage, is explaining how and why his message transforms so dramatically between its two parts. A key part of understanding this transformation can be found in the unspoken assumption that bolsters his entire study. “We can count on a general conviction,” he writes, “among influential men in all walks of life that the ability to use English well is important; and what people consider important they will provide for” (398). Curiously, differences between what Manchester desires and what “influential men in all walks of life” want become apparent when we examine the role that reading plays in Manchester’s proposed curriculum for freshman English.

According to Manchester, freshman English students may be taught how to “use English well” by employing a pedagogy that is “intensive” in “central reading” and “extensive” with respect to “general reading” (384). Intensive reading of Greek or Latin writers is to be prescribed in “limited amounts” toward the end of providing students with
what the “earlier generation obtained from their minute study of the classics,”
specifically, the acquisition of taste and style as well as “an intimate understanding of
what is really involved in accurate and masterly expression” (385). From Manchester’s
perspective, this understanding is not achieved by prevailing methods of pedagogy of his
time. “It will not come to them,” he writes, “from an occasional use of the dictionary,
nor from listening to general discourse on the subject-matter of their reading, nor even, I
fear, from the endless production of “logical outlines.” To be sure, as the first part of his
essay makes clear, Manchester is categorically opposed to the repetitive drills that
comprise writing textbooks of his day. But his fixation on the “ancient classics” is also a
response to educational reforms that have made these works less relevant. He writes:

> There can be little doubt that the ancient classics, especially in this
country, have suffered greatly from the absence in many of their
representatives of a truly humanistic spirit. The study which should have
challenged every faculty, whether of observation or reflection, has only
too often been restricted the narrow dimensions of a linguistic science.

(385)

Manchester is speaking, in part, to the effects of the rise philology in English studies, an
approach to language and pedagogy, which I have previously mentioned, that is linked to
English departments’ struggle to gain a respected place in the university. Although
Manchester is dubious of the consequences of English’s fixation on science, he
recognizes its importance in graduate student education, learning which is directly
connected to his plan for reforming freshman English. “In fixing attention upon the
importance of exact knowledge,” he writes, “and in making a mastery of external fact an
essential preliminary to criticism, the scientific work of our graduate schools has, no
doubt, been of real service, not merely to the future investigator, but likewise to the future
interpreter of literature” (396). In other words, Manchester seems to recognize the value
of philology as a legitimizing force in the development of English departments, but the
essence of his argument is that the “faithful and intimate study of what is excellent” (389)
trumps commitments to science. For Manchester, “facts” are but a foundation for a
“mission” in “another and far more difficult region” (396). For Manchester, further
complicating intensive reading in freshman English is the “cult of the contemporary,” a
movement which he notes “appears to be spreading throughout our schools” at an
“alarming rate” (390). Manchester rejects specifically the notion that “what is produced
in the present has for the student a strength of appeal that does not attach to the writings
of an earlier period” (389). He contends that the cult of the contemporary is motivated by
“superficial” and “utterly false” notions of both students and the classics. Furthermore,
he extends his criticism to instructors as well, noting that if students are not interested in
intensive study of the classics “it is because they have not understood them; and whatever
unusual obstacles appear as a hindrance to understanding it, it is the business of the
teacher to remove” (390). For Manchester the classics – including the English classics of
the 19th century – are ostensibly remote, and it is only through the practice of
“intensiveness” that students may experience “a profound satisfaction in the presence of a
richness of thought” (390). In addition to providing an overview of Manchester’s
argument, I emphasize this aspect of his proposal here because I believe the language he
uses betrays a particular attitude toward literacy. By this, I mean, Manchester’s notion of
“intensive” reading reflects what Street terms a “strong” theory of literacy. That is, when
Manchester advocates “intensive” reading, he presumes inherent qualities – “richness of thought” and “masterly expression” -- of both the act of reading and the written word (Street 44). This is consistent with the ways that “strong” theories of literacy overstate the significance of literacy.15

Interestingly, related in part to the first principle of “intensiveness” is Manchester’s second suggestion for a curriculum in reading. Somewhat predictably, he refers to this approach as “extensiveness,” and without it “intensiveness” alone is an insufficient means of realizing his aims for freshman English (390). Even worse, it may lead to “stiffness and formalism” in student writing (391). It is only by utilizing both reading practices simultaneously that the “natural background for the practice of composition” is established. To put it succinctly, in contrast to intensive reading, which is intended to teach students “what enlightened reading is,” extensive reading is concerned with what Manchester describes as “general reading.” The assumption supporting this notion is that by exposing students to “varying word and phrase and sentence,” students will attain “freedom of expression” (391). However, one curious aspect of this notion is that how extensive reading is employed is not as important as ensuring that it happens. Manchester states specifically, “It matters little what system is employed to secure general reading” (391). This is because, according to Manchester, the “first-year curriculum” is so “crowded” that it is unrealistic to expect students to “read any very great amount during the time we have charge of him” (391). Despite this, Manchester maintains that students must, at least, attempt “general reading.” As I stated earlier, without it “intensive” reading becomes futile, as the “natural background” of freshman English falls away.
What is surprising about Manchester’s description of extensive reading is that it belies so much of what he outlines in his discussion of intensive reading. Intensive reading is supposedly limited to what he identifies as the classics – quantity is not important. In fact, on this point he states specifically: “We shall never remotely approximate the ideal until we are ready to limit the amount of reading which we do to a degree which will at first appear extraordinary, until we perceive that what really matters is not how much we read but how we read” (387). Yet, Manchester never really discusses “how” to read (instead he repeatedly prescribes what to read), and the specifics of his discussion of extensive reading are limited to issues of quantity. After all, he calls it extensive reading, an expression used to emphasize a sum total of reading necessary to realize the goals of his curriculum. For Manchester, the principles of expression are achieved by the “maximum amount” of general reading (390), and it is “only through wide reading, through endlessly repeated contact” with varying words and phrases that the benefits of extensive reading may be experienced by students. Furthermore, the contradictions of his proposal, especially those contradictions tied to notions of quantity, are exemplified in his final recommendation when he suggest that “insoluble” problem of freshman English may be solved – somewhat unbelievably – by requiring more writing. He writes: “Let us require training in English, not for one year only, but in one form or another for two years or even three years” (397). Like so many proposals for abolition or reform (in the case of Manchester he performs both moves) “Freshman English Once More” is a study in contradictions, and there is a sense in which Manchester is caught in the contradictions that constitute his own understanding of the powers of reading and writing. By this, I mean, the contradictions that emerge from Manchester’s essay with
respect to his shifting tone and inconsistent recommendations may be linked to his attitude about literacy, specifically his abiding belief in reading and writing alone to develop the faculties of taste and judgment.

Having reviewed Manchester’s proposed curriculum in reading for freshman English, I want now to turn to a more detailed discussion of how Manchester’s contradictions stem from his attitude about and understanding of the consequences of possessing literacy. Harvey J. Graff writes that “To understand literacy means that contradictions should be expected to result from the ongoing processes and developments within culture, polity, economy, and society. These are neither ironic nor paradoxical, as some call them, but fundamentally historical” (Graff The Legacies of Literacy 10). As I will demonstrate, the inherent contradictions in Manchester’s argument have broader implications for the study of the abolition debate on two levels: First, they reveal the ways that literacy functions as both a learning outcome for freshman English and a participant in the construction of that outcome. Second, they reveal how the promoted value of literacy more generally contradicts the more restricted function of literacy in freshman English.

In Literacy in Theory and Practice, Brian V. Street challenges what he describes as the autonomous conceptions of literacy, a model that defines and presents literacy as separate from the social contexts that give it meaning. In demonstrating that the autonomous model is based on ethnocentric notions of reading and writing practices, Street connects the autonomous model to the Western academic tradition specifically. For instance, of literacy in this tradition he describes how the “distance between addressee and addressee is theoretically at a maximum, and communication is at its most
impersonal” (75). According to Street, this distance between academic texts and students serves to justify one aim of the autonomous model: to understand writing and reading practices as neutral or objective. In the classroom, this model translates into a curriculum that organizes learning in a way where students are asked to make sense of ‘the words on the page’” (75). “Students are taught,” he writes, “to ‘read’ in a different way from that of everyday practice: rather than reading a text from beginning to end in the sequence in which the publisher has ordered it” (75). Taken together, this conception of literacy and its pedagogical application may be understood to constitute “academic language” (75). It is one, he notes, that is burdened by “significant claims,” and these claims “derive from the requirements which brought it into being in the first place” (76). The implications of Street’s assertions for the abolition debate are clear in the ways that Manchester’s essay relies on a distinction between oral and literate discourse.

As I have mentioned, the second part of “Freshman English Once More” is preoccupied with reading practices. The first part, however, is concerned primarily with what Manchester describes as “articulation” and “masterful expression” of the English language. Although the amount of space Manchester allots to both sections seems evenhanded, the powers and claims he ascribes to the practices of intensive and extensive reading are what he emphasizes most. One key characteristic of a strong theory of literacy, which depends on a characterization of literacy based on the autonomous model, is the tendency to conflate speech with writing. For instance, in the first section of his study, Manchester proclaims boldly, “I am ready to maintain that Freshman English can afford to have one object and one only: The cultivation in the student of a mastery of self-expression in English speech” (298). From this perspective, the oral aspects of
rhetoric become the primary emphasis of freshman English. However, when Manchester concludes his essay and presents his strategy for persuading university “officers” to adopt what sounds like a modern-day vertical curriculum for freshman English (in which students are required to take writing courses over an extended period of time) the relationship between his prescribed reading practices and writing specifically become more important. He notes:

> Once the English teachers of this country are agreed that the writing of our students will never be what it ought to be until more time is spent in the reading of literature and in the practice of composition, and once they present their unanimous conclusion to the university officers, I believe they will be heard. We can count on a general conviction among influential men in all walks of life that the ability to use English well is important; and what people consider important they will provide for.

(398)

The various versions that literacy takes (as speech, writing, and reading) as well as the characteristics and powers that Manchester ascribes to each of them, anticipate Street’s notion of the autonomous model. Manchester’s insistence that articulation and expression must be considered separately from reading and writing depends, in part, on the assumption that the primary function of writing is to represent speech. It also presumes that writing does not perform functions or possess characteristics independent of speech (Street 66).

Magnifying this confusion even further is that the type of well-spoken English to which Manchester refers in the above passage is associated with more common usages of
vernacular English, not essayist literacy or composition in the academic tradition. Furthermore, how Manchester uses the expressions “articulation” and “English speech” also suggests, to some degree, that he is simultaneously conflating and distinguishing between speech and writing. Consequently, in Manchester’s study, we find that the promoted value of literacy in his curriculum is consistent with the perceived needs of the university (as articulated by university “officers”), but when we consider his specific suggestions for how to instruct students in speech, writing, and reading in the context of freshman English itself, we see a discrepancy between what universities need and what composition is able to provide. Despite how mismatched Manchester’s solutions are to a problem that he readily admits defies solution, “Freshman English Once More” relies on a rhetoric of crisis that depends on myths of literacy and the ambiguous and inconsistent definitions of literacy that make those myths possible. Ultimately, instead of affecting change on any meaningful level, Manchester’s study actually functions to perpetuate the problems that they seek to address.

In sum, similar to Thurber’s essay, Manchester’s argument is chiefly concerned with spreading out the burden of composition instruction across the university. In the first part of his essay, as I discussed, he advocates an approach to writing instruction that aspired to mitigate the consequences of academic specialization. However, because the “burden” or “problems” of composition in these studies are inextricably linked to inconsistent definitions of literacy as well as the tendency to confide in literacy myths, these studies reveal how the rhetoric of abolitionism is rooted in and responding not just to institutional pressures but also exaggerated expectations for both literacy and freshman English. On the surface, both Thurber’s and Manchester’s proposals to abolish
composition appear to address the many weaknesses that the two authors marshal as evidence of the ineffectiveness of composition. Though, in the end, Thurber’s and Manchester’s suggestions are merely temporary stopgaps for their own unrealistic expectations. With this point in mind and when considered in the context of Manchester’s essay specifically, it becomes possible to understand how the rhetoric of abolitionism does not offer any solutions to the problem of freshman English. Instead, it functions to circulate the myths of literacy that paradoxically perpetuate the cycle of abolitionism itself.

As we find in the following proposal for abolition, one way of dealing with these exaggerated expectations and the inevitable disappointment that accompanies them, is to place the blame and burden of solving the perceived problem of teaching composition on to secondary schools. Although this is an issue I discuss more fully in the following chapter, I introduce it now because it underscores yet another continuity in the debate over compulsory composition. As I have shown, evaluating the relationship of literacy to proposals for the abolition of composition requires an expanded view of the debate, one that resists the tendency to characterize participants in the debate as “new” or “old”, but instead searches for similarities and continuities. In the following study, ambiguous understandings of literacy as well as the tendency to overstate its significance are the most perceptible continuities. However, the implications of these attitudes about literacy are different from previously discussed essays in this chapter. This is because in the following study myths of literacy and exaggerated expectations of the consequences of possessing it underline a proposal that professes an abiding belief in achievement tests to
solve the persistent problem of compulsory composition in post-secondary and secondary education.

**What Price English? The Costs of Generalizing the Literacy Myth to the University**

Like Thurber’s and Manchester’s studies, Paulus Lange’s “What Price English?” (1938) is not discussed by existing histories of the debate. It is interesting that there is almost a forty year gap in the history of the abolition debate with respect to studies that recommend that high schools rather than universities should become the site of composition instruction. Perhaps one reason for this is that the disciplinary memory of the field of Rhetoric and Composition is restricted in ways to promote research in the teaching of writing in universities exclusively. Another reason might be that the argument seems less relevant to practitioners in the field because it seems like a line of inquiry that should be taken up by other specialties in the humanities, namely, education departments. At any rate, although Leonard Greenbaum notes that arguments for greater attention to composition at the high school and preparatory levels are a part of a “Tradition of Complaint,” his history of the debate does not discuss the issue at length. Likewise, Connors and Russell only make glancing references to abolitionists that take up the issue of high schools. For instance, in his study, “The New Abolitionism,” Connors points to B. S. Hurlbut’s “College Requirements in English” as an example of a proposal that seeks to replace freshman English with more effective composition instruction at the high school level. Published in 1896, Hurlbut argues that “The instruction in English which we are forced to give to Freshmen and perhaps to
Sophomores should all be finished in the preparatory schools” (Connors 5). Hurlbut felt it “absurd” that colleges should have to take on the task of teaching spelling, pronunciation, and grammar. From his perspective, only reforms at the elementary and secondary levels would provide students the training necessary to allow students to devote their time to “university work” (5).

According to Russell and Greenbaum, however, the most notable reference to relegating instruction in composition to high schools comes from Warner G. Rice’s NCTE convention address in 1959. Eventually published in *College English* in 1960, and titled “A proposal for the abolition of freshman English, as it is now commonly taught, from the college curriculum,” Rice’s position is quite clear; composition should *only* be taught at the high school level, and once removed from the college curriculum, absolutely nothing should replace it. Greenbaum notes that Rice was familiar with the workings of college administration. As such, this knowledge might have allowed him to anticipate and refute swiftly objections about the changes needed to finance graduate education or other reforms after abolishing freshman English. Nevertheless, although Rice’s argument is well-known in histories of writing instruction, he was preceded by a similar argument over twenty years earlier.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Robert Connors remarks on the decade of the 1930s as a period of “lively discussion of reform and abolition,” more lively than had ever occurred before with respect to proposals to abolish or reform freshman English. He also points out that the nature and tenor of these debates was “incredibly contemporary.” The field saw debates dealing with “proposals for English as training for social experience, for Marxist critique in the classroom, for writing across the curriculum, for
research-based reforms of various kinds, for more or less literary influence on composition, and for better conditions for teachers” (13). Consequently, during the 1930s, composition finds itself in a difficult spot. In one sense, it is mired in debates over its effectiveness and value in the college curriculum, yet as John Guillory notes in *Cultural Capital*, it is also taking on a “new institutional significance,” performing what he describes as “a new social function for the university, the task of providing the future technobureaucratic elite with precisely and only the linguistic competence necessary for the performance of its specialized functions” (264). Another plausible explanation for composition’s enhanced relevance during this time is that the late 1930s are also a period marked by the economic dislocations of the Great Depression as well as the beginning of WWII. These events, as literally every history of English attests, led to increased enrollments in universities, making composition an essential part of the project of keeping up with the demand of increasing enrollments. In *On a Scale: A Social History of Writing Assessment in America*, Norbert Elliot confirms these increased enrollments and noting, “college enrollment had risen nearly 50 percent between 1899-1900 and 1909-1910. In the following decade, enrollment rose by 68 percent. Between 1919-1920 and 1929-1930, enrollment rose by 84 percent” (85).

Interestingly, Paulus Lange’s study is inconsistent with Connors’ findings and challenges, to some degree, Guillory’s claims about composition gaining “a new institutional significance.” Writing in 1938, Lange is concerned with improving the conditions of learning for both teachers and students of English composition, but he is also apprehensive about the rising costs of things in the university, specifically freshman composition. In “What Price English?” he states his position emphatically:
The ultimate elimination of freshman composition will give the English Department an opportunity to devote itself to its proper function, namely, that of offering courses not only in language, literature, and related fields but also in advanced composition to those students who desire to develop the more mature qualities of style which are beyond even the best high-school achievement. (427)

Similar to other proposals for abolition I have examined, Lange is motivated by the “more mature qualities of style,” and he is also responding to a sense of crisis. “Society has grown more and more complex,” he writes, “and the problems arising out of that condition have become distressingly acute” (424). He does not explicate these problems precisely, except to note that the departmentalization of “subject-matter” has had “pernicious effects” on the teaching of spoken and written English (424). Similar to many abolitionists before him, Lange’s quotation indicates that he is responding, in part, to the consequences of academic specialization. However, more significantly, his essay demonstrates a concern with what happens to students before they arrive at universities. Simply put, if students are unable to demonstrate particular writing skills upon application to universities, he does not want them admitted.

The previously discussed studies by Hurlbut and Rice allude to high schools and argue for more rigorous enrollment criteria, but Lange is much more specific when it comes to identifying who is at fault for the “distressingly acute” conditions of freshman English. “Not only do we get from the high schools,” he writes, “what we are willing to accept, but subsequently we put our own stamp of approval on our own negligence” (428). This quotation highlights his uncertainty about where the root of the problem lies.
By this, I mean, in one sense he blames the “departmentalization of subject matter” (424) – or the trend toward academic specialization – for the poor writing of students. Yet, in this passage, the “pernicious” effects he perceives in student writing are also indicative of ineffective instruction at the high school level. This is a point that I wish to emphasize because when we consider passages like these in the context of the solutions Lange discusses, we find that Lange’s essay functions as an early example of how high schools become a scapegoat for the perceived problems of freshman English. Similar to Thurber and Manchester, Lange’s study also relies on literacy myths and ambiguous statements about what counts for being literate. However, unlike his predecessors, whose vague definitions of literacy led them to believe that the problems of freshman English could be resolved through more effective instruction and training, Lange’s confidence in the literacy myth specifically, leads him to have expectations for freshman English that the course, its students, and instructors cannot meet. Unlike Thurber and Manchester, who seek to deal internally – within the university and at the departmental level – with the consequences of confiding in the literacy myth, Lange believes that the problem belongs to someone besides English departments. Furthermore, he is certain that the magnitude of the problem that freshman English poses may be measured and evaluated through testing. From Lange’s perspective, the way for English departments to avoid putting a “stamp of approval” on their own “negligence” is to implement an achievement test that will act as a “prerequisite to unqualified admission” (425).

The achievement test that Lange has in mind, he remarks, is “necessary” and “by no means untried” (425). He points specifically to Brown University as an example of an institution that has adopted his plan. Of this test, “The Reporter” section of the Journal
of Higher Education (1937) wrote:

The requirements for the B.A. degree have been changed by Brown University this fall. Proficiency tests will be used so that students who show sufficient ability in English composition and in a reading knowledge of a foreign language will not be required to take these subjects. (445)

But Brown is certainly not the only university experimenting with achievement tests in the late 1930s. In fact, on June 21, 1937, one year before the publication of Lange’s essay, 7,000 college applicants “from Maine to California in the United States, and in such foreign cities as London, Paris, Berlin, Geneva, and Shanghai” sat down to complete a 190 minute writing examination (Noyes and Stalnaker quoted in Elliot 108). The test these candidates completed was based on a new system developed by William Merritt Sale, Jr., of Cornell University and H.E. Joyce of Dartmouth. At stake in the new approach was the issue of how to assess essay examinations in a way that would increase reader-reliability and consistency of results of essay examinations, but would not be divisive to scholars in the humanities and the sciences.

To take a case in point, writing in the English Journal in 1936, John Stalnaker, a professor of psychology at Princeton University, remarks on the “antagonistic feelings” between those in the sciences and humanities about the test construction (quoted in Elliot 103). And although he believes that an “English examination which is sound from every point of view” (133) is possible, he critiques current methods (specifically, the College Board’s English essay examination) for lacking reliability. Part of the problem, was the “psychology” of the readers (103), which was made worse by the fact that the topics available in the 1936 examination were thematically flawed. For instance, “wise”
students would choose topics like “Something in contemporary music, sculpture, painting, or architecture that you have tried to understand” (quoted in Elliot 103). What we were considered “less able students” would select topics that deal with athletics. A typical writing prompt selected by these students might read: “Some forms of athletics develop character better than others.” Elliot reports that results were predictable: “The predictions held true: only one student in one hundred who wrote on athletics obtained a score of “B” or better. Seventeen students in one hundred, conversely, achieved a grade of “B” or better who wrote on art” (103). Quoting Sir Philip Hartog in his article, “Question VI – The Essay,” John M. Stalnaker summed up the situation best, asserting that the approach of having students “Write anything about something for anybody” was not sustainable.

Following this report, several of Stalnaker’s recommendations for improving reliability were considered, and they were apparently effective. Only two years later, Stalnaker declares a victory over his testing dilemma in his study, “Essay Examinations Reliably Read.” Using results from the 1937 College Board report, he asserts that reforms on the levels of uniformity and revisions to writing prompts led to reliability of reading in examinations for “biology, chemistry, English, German, history, Latin, mathematics, physics, and Spanish (Elliot 104). However, while Stalnaker appears confident that his reforms have yielded desired results, he also points to something else as key to his victory over the problem of assessing essays: creating a sense of cooperation between scholars in the sciences and the humanities. In his “Essay Examinations Reliably Read,” he notes:
Many means are available to improve the reliability of reading, but the results suggest that accurate reading is already being obtained. Cooperation between technician and reader will result in improved procedures which should raise all these reliabilities to even higher figures. However, the present figures indicate consistent reading and should dispel the notion that essay papers can not be read reliably. (672)

The aspect of this passage that is most salient for my discussion is Stalnaker’s statement about the importance of creating and sustaining “cooperation between technician and reader.” Similar to Stalnaker, Lange is also interested in the notion of cooperation. In “What Price English?” he writes: “If we really expect our students to grow in wisdom and in stature as far as the mastery of the language is concerned, all the instructors in all classes will have to get behind the project. They will have to get behind it, furthermore, by insisting on “good” English in all oral discussions and by providing ample opportunity for written work” (426). Although Stalnaker desires cooperation between technicians in the sciences and readers in the humanities, he does not see the ends of these two camps as mutually exclusive. In fact, as Elliot notes, Stalnaker specifically anticipates this objection when he remarks on the antagonistic feelings between both camps. “The intensity of these protests,” he writes, “makes the groups forget that they are both working toward the same end – an English examination which is sound from every point of view” (quoted in Elliot 103). From Stalnaker’s perspective, the desire for an accurate and reliable assessment of student writing is an end to which all specialties in the university can commit. Likewise, Lange is convinced that “all the instructors” from “the most inconspicuous half-time laboratory assistant up to the
“president” may cooperate to enact the project of enforcing the “standards for both written and spoken language” (426). Together, the two scholars demonstrate that although the means of writing assessment may become ostensibly more reliable, and the suggestions for reforming freshman composition more specific, the ends toward which these methods are directed remain vague, poorly defined, and invested quite heavily in the literacy myth.

In sum, for Thurber, literacy is the aim for composition, one to be achieved in service of the trend toward academic specialization. Manchester’s vague understanding of literacy in the contexts of writing, speech, and reading serves to complicate further the very “Sphinx riddle” of composition that he sets out to solve. Finally, Lange believes literacy, and the consequences of possessing it, may be measured and quantified with reliable methods toward indisputable conclusions. His attitude about literacy and assessment leads him to seek “cooperation” at all levels of the university, a consensus about literacy that is unattainable for students and instructors of composition.

Thurber, Manchester, and Lange have in common an abiding belief in the literacy myth. Although it is a belief restricted and complicated by varied and gradually changing circumstances in universities, the solution proposed by each represents a continuity or legacy of literacy that is endemic to the abolition debate specifically. That is, in one way or another, Thurber, Manchester, and Lange each propose a solution to the problem of freshman English that, in essence, shifts the consequences of confiding in the literacy myth away from composition – the course that seems to be the most invested in the myth. Thurber’s solution to the “vexing” (9) problem posed by composition involves sharing the responsibility of writing instruction with various disciplines in universities. As such, the burden of meeting the exaggerated expectations of literacy that Thurber possesses
becomes the problem of the entire university, not just English. Manchester’s insistence on the importance and powers of “extensive reading” – reading that students perform on their own accord and outside of the university classroom – shifts the responsibility of the most critical component of his solution away from the composition course and into the hands students, not their instructors. Furthermore, Lange’s proposal to eliminate freshman English altogether, in favor of a greater emphasis on composition at the high school levels, is the clearest example of shifting the burden of composition instruction to anyone besides those charged with the task of teaching it at the university level. In all cases, regardless of where the burden of freshman English is shifted, the literacy myth remains, and so, too, the perennial problems and complaints about composition.

In my next chapter, I continue my examination of the abolition debate, but I do so with an eye toward essays that are generally conceded to be making “reformist” rather than “abolitionist” arguments. Similar to Thurber, Manchester, and Lange, the studies discussed in the following chapter have been left out of existing examinations of this debate. Central to my discussion of these studies will be pressing questions about the role of the literacy myth in general and compulsory education more generally: To what extent did the literacy myth specifically play a part in exaggerating the grand rationales that supported compulsory education after the 1930s? In what ways did proposals for reform draw on these exaggerated claims about the consequences of compulsory education and, somewhat paradoxically, contribute to the failure of general education programs? John Guillory notes that “Although general education constitutes the curriculum that students supposedly have in common, the effects of that curriculum tend to be exaggerated or misidentified” (“Who’s Afraid of Marcel Proust? 36). In the
following section, I demonstrate how the abolition debate may function as a laboratory to explore in more detail the implications of Guillory’s statement for proposals that suggest that the compulsory requirement is too important to abolish. Not unlike the abolitionist arguments that they are ostensibly opposed to, these reformist studies rely on similar tendencies to exaggerate the claims and consequences of possessing literacy.
CHAPTER THREE
THE OVERLOOKED VOICES OF REFORM:
INTERSECTION OF PROGRESSIVISM AND ARTICULATION WITH
COMPULSORY COMPOSITION

Here are several voices for reform of freshman English from the first half of the twentieth century: “Cannot English departments do something to encourage practical realization of what every teacher admits in theory – that English is fundamental in all studies and in all professions?” Fred A. Dudley poses this and other questions in The English Journal in 1929 in an attempt to clarify the purpose of English instruction. He asks: “Can we not convert other teachers to the policy of rewarding well-written and rejecting crudely written papers?” (832). Ten years later in “Articulation of The Secondary School and The College,” Warner G. Rice notes, “It was during the early thirties, in the blackest of the depression years, that many of us teaching English in the colleges and universities first became actively aware of the need for making a closer connection between our work and that of the secondary schools” (136). Along similar lines and only two years after Rice in 1940, Alice V. Brower writes in “Problems of High-School English and College Freshman English,” that “It would seem that the teacher of college freshman composition should be one of the most superior in the department. So much may be done through this course to help bewildered youth make a better adjustment to college” (730). Finally, in 1961, twenty years after Brower, and in a
time marked by what Robert Connors describes as a resurgence of reformist attitudes toward compulsory composition, Thomas S. Kane argues in “Rhetoric and the ‘Problem’ of Composition” that, “What the ‘problem’ of the writing course finally comes down to, it seems to me, is this: too many of us simply do not know our business. Both in the high school and the university we must begin to take the teaching of composition seriously; in short, to learn the trade and work at it” (505).

These quotations from reformist essays demonstrate that reformists, like abolitionists, hold complex attitudes about literacy, students, and the aims and effectiveness of freshman English remain at stake in their proposals for reforming how the course is taught. In this chapter, I turn to this group, what historians of writing instruction, like Robert Connors, have described as the other side of the debate: those interested in reforming freshman English, rather than abolishing it. As in my previous chapter, I am interested here in supplementing existing histories of the abolition debate by Greenbaum, Connors, and Russell by examining voices that have been left out or overlooked. However, unlike the previous chapter, I am less interested in discussing why particular voices have been left out than I am in explaining what can be gained by including them and exploring, to some extent, the historical contexts from which they emerge. For example, as I will demonstrate, both reformist studies that I examine in this chapter depend on a rhetoric of “cooperation,” one that is directed toward creating more continuity between high school English and freshman composition. Although this rhetoric represents a shared aim for these studies, what I show is that the emphasis placed on cooperation and continuity is more about persuading students and teachers to ascribe to a particular theory of literacy than it is in developing meaningful reforms of
composition instruction. It is a better understanding of this specific theory of literacy that is to be gained from examining these overlooked voices of reform.

In this chapter, I examine Alice V. Brower’s “Problems of High-School English and College Freshman English” (1942). As a high school English teacher, Brower represents a unique moment in the debate over compulsory composition. Her perspective is not one that is discussed at length by existing histories of this debate. In Brower’s argument, we find evidence of an abiding commitment to the idea that education should be aimed toward the “whole child,” a sentiment based on her enthusiasm for education that is rooted in scientific findings, the influence of psychology, and progressive era reforms. In addition, in her study we also see evidence of the consequences of the rise of private regional associations and committees, both of which gained increasing influence in the 1930s and 1940s because of population growth in the United States and increased enrollments in universities. Accompanying these increased enrollments were calls for greater cooperation and continuity between high schools and colleges. I show how Brower’s study relies on this rhetoric of cooperation and continuity as a way to popularize the relevance of progressive reform movements to college composition instructors. I emphasize this aspect of her article because to show that one unintended consequence of her rhetoric is that it constructs the freshman English course as a site of realizing exaggerated expectations of the consequences of possessing literacy.

Following Brower, I examine Warner G. Rice’s “Articulation of the Secondary School and the College” (1940). Similar to Brower, Rice is also interested in reforming freshman English by emphasizing cooperation between high school and college level English instructors. However, the reforms he proposes involve implementing a
consulting initiative in which university representatives work with high school instructors to comment on and critique samples of high school essays. Rice’s study is significant for my project for several reasons: First, Rice’s argument was published in 1940 and precedes his well-known abolitionist sentiments published almost twenty years later. By examining the earlier statements of an abolitionist, I hope to provide some sense of the trajectory of thinking that leads to abolitionism. Second, like Brower’s, Rice’s study also relies on a rhetoric of cooperation and crisis, one directed toward persuading his audience of the effectiveness and viability of his consulting initiative. Although the ends toward which Rice and Brower direct their appeals for cooperation and continuity differ, they share a desire for reforming freshman English rather than abolishing it. By examining how the rhetoric of cooperation functions in these studies and by attending to the historical context that created the need for cooperation in the first place, I demonstrate that both Brower and Rice are ultimately working toward preserving a view of literacy, one that translates into an easily teachable and efficient pedagogy.

In this chapter, I aspire also to show that reformists have much in common with abolitionists, especially with respect to the assumptions they make about literacy and the solutions they provide to the ostensible problem of compulsory composition. In doing so, I question the effectiveness of conceptualizing the debate in terms of a reformist/abolitionist divide. Others, like Goggin and Miller, have raised similar questions about the terminology used to discuss the debate, but they have done so in ways that lead to further divisions (e.g. abolitionists/ “reconceptualists”). We can better understand why reformists and abolitionists have so much in common with one another
by expanding the scope of our examination of these proposals to include larger social, economic, and institutional pressures.

Problems and Remedies for High School and Freshman English

One of the first reformist arguments in the 1940s comes from Alice V. Brower, head of the department of English at Davis High School in Mount Vernon, N.Y. Published in *College English* in 1942, “The Problems of High-School English and College Freshman English” grows out of a presentation Brower gave at the twenty-ninth Annual Meeting of the College Conference on English in the Central Atlantic States. That year the conference met in Atlantic City, and on November 22, 1941, Brower addressed an audience of college teachers of freshman English in hopes of persuading them to see the value of composition at both the high school and college levels.

Brower begins her article by asserting that high school English and college composition teachers have co-existed but lack both a sense of purpose and means to articulate differences in a productive way. “Seriously,” she writes, “this is a very wise step that is being taken today. For so long we have felt a difficulty; now that together we are doing something about it, it would seem a hopeful sign. How much better to be talking to and with one another instead of at and about” (725). Brower’s use of italics betrays her feelings of frustration with the tendency of both high school and college instructors to blame each other for the poor writing of freshman English students, a tendency which I discussed at length in chapter two. Although she is unwilling to accept, on behalf of high schools, the entire burden of the problem, she is motivated by key developments that she perceives as endemic to high school instruction, ones that if
communicated clearly to college instructors will function as “remedies for the good of us all” (725). More specifically, Brower’s entire proposal for reforming the teaching of freshman English is based on an abiding belief in “practical psychology,” which she states is “being applied to the teaching of these high-school girls and boys (726). From her perspective, developments in psychology yielded approaches to instruction with specific consequences, ones that college instructors are apparently overlooking. She writes:

The factors of age and growth do make for problems of the early years of adolescence that require some techniques and attitudes foreign to the teaching in college years. These must be taken into consideration in any fair discussion. These early years are those of awakening interests on which the high-school teacher must capitalize. (726)

The confidence with which Brower makes her point about the influences of psychology is remarkable, and it is rooted more in the influence of progressive era education than anything else. In addition, her specific reference to “practical” psychology is further evidence that her instructional methods are devoted to ideals of progressive reform. Contemporary historians of this period have remarked on the connections between practical psychology and progressive era reforms. For instance, in American School Reform: Progressive, Equity, and Excellence Movements, 1883-1993, Michael R. Berube asserts, “Progressive education was on the cutting edge of intellectual progress of its time. It was based on rising scientific discoveries, such as biological evolution and the ‘new’ science of psychology” (14). According to Berube, Margaret Naumberg, a progressive educator and founder of New York’s Walden School, would also claim that
progressive reforms grew out of “the most recent findings of biology, psychology and education” toward the end of discovering “ways of redirecting and hammering this vital force of childhood in constructive and creative work” (15). The earnestness with which Brower makes her case for college teachers to recognize the importance of “these early years” is evidence of her own belief in the “vital force of childhood.”

The progressive era is marked by many books devoted to the idea of the whole child and her psychological development. For instance, in 1902 John Dewey wrote *The Child and the Curriculum*; in 1910, Nathan Oppenheim published *The Development of the Child* and in 1928 *The Child-Centered School* by Harold Rugg and Ann Schumacher as well as Margaret Naumberg’s *The Child and the World* appear (Berube 14). Of particular interest to progressive era reformers was persuading educators to characterize and understand children as possessing an insatiable longing “to know and be” (Cremin 211). For John Dewey, perhaps the most influential of progressive era reformers, the perspective presented in Rousseau’s *Emile* gave a new meaning to the idea of childhood altogether – as the “time of growing, of developing” in a natural manner (Dewey quoted in Berube 16). In this way, we can think of the progressive era of educational reform as a time when the notion of childhood possibilities may be considered among other touchstones of the movement: namely, self-expression, creativity, individualism, and pragmatism. However, at the same time, it is also important to acknowledge the repressive and bureaucratic sides to progressive era educational reforms, which are also perceptible in Brower’s essay.

For Brower, childhood, or what she repeatedly describes as “these early years” of students, are a critical time of development because “these years are those of awakening
interests on which the high-school teacher must capitalize” (726). Although she does not
go into detail about what aspects of psychology shed light on the cognitive or intellectual
development of children, she is clear about what role English instructors have in this
process. “An intense awareness of himself,” she writes, “his vocation, his social life, his
religious experience, his devotion to his group’s activities – all these are paramount in the
pupil, and they become an integral part of the high-school teacher’s thinking about the
pupil” (726). We find evidence of these aims of secondary education in Brower’s study,
especially when we turn to her discussion of the importance of literacy and, more
specifically, the benefits that may be derived from reading.

Brower presents her initial discussion of literacy in the context of the qualities a
teacher of English must possess, a disposition that must be maintained in the face of a
strenuous and taxing teaching load. “With all this,” she notes, “one must admit, also,
that the daily preparation for teaching these five English classes requires more time and
thought to plans and paper-work than do many other subjects” (726). In addition to the
responsibility of “sponsoring school clubs, producing the school paper and magazine,
planning assembly programs, and commencements,” the “good teacher of English” must
remain a “most flexible, versatile teacher, always adapting methods and materials to each
new” student as well as the “needs and the affairs of the world” (726). Clearly, Brower
sees staying abreast of “favorite radio hours,” contemporary movie stars, columnists, and
theater as critical. She writes: “They are the medium through which the pupils are taught
to think, read, write, and speak” (726). Inextricably linked to learning how to do each of
these things appropriately is the importance of teaching students to realize the role of
reading in this process of thinking, writing, and speaking well. Brower asserts:
Through the study of poetry, experience is gained in associative thinking and reading. The pupil soon realizes that one gets out of reading what he takes to it. One cannot bring back the wealth of the Indies unless he takes the wealth of the Indies with him. He learns to read for “more than meets the eye” by considering the threefold appeal of poetry to the senses, the emotions, and the intellect. (727)

From Brower’s perspective, then, the task of the high school English teacher involves more than just teaching students how to read for the purpose of facilitating students’ taste and judgment. Drawing from scientific methods of teaching based on the influence of psychology, progressive education was child centered and emphasized critical thinking above all else. Reading for “more than meets the eye” may be evidence of Brower’s interest in critical thinking. I emphasize this aspect of her study here because of the image of students she constructs in this passage. Unlike many of her predecessors, Brower advocates a teaching approach that emphasizes more than rote memorization and drills in writing technique. As such, her essay constructs an image of students that is consistent with progressive era education; however, as we will see, it is one not held by her contemporaries at the college level.

In the second part of her proposal for reforming freshman English she draws on a report by the Westchester County Association of Teachers of English (WCATE), of which she was the chair. “For several years,” she writes, “this group has been seeking acquaintance with college methods in the hope of effecting smoother articulation” (728). With the aim of “perfecting the preparation of high school pupils in English,” the WCATE examined reports from former high school students as well as professional
publications. Brower’s conclusions, and the tone with which she presents them are provocative:

I shall have to say that as a group you, too, show a wide range of individual differences – so wide that you create for the high-school teacher an almost impossible task. We could not begin to satisfy all of you. We could never expect 100 per cent uniformity, but we do wish that you had some small semblance of it, some organization that voiced more of your policies. With all of our good intentions and attention to detail of techniques of reading and composition, pupils return with varying tales of experience. (728)

The WCATE reaches these conclusions about instruction at the college level based on interviews and reports of multiple students.

The report is relevant for my study because Brower uses it to highlight how little continuity exists at the college level with respect to the type of instruction students receive in composition. For instance, Brower reports that two former students – one with an “above-the-average rating” and the other with a “below-the-average” rating – attended the same university, but ended up in two different English classes. To the committee’s surprise, the below average student received a higher grade than the above average student. Dismayed by this report, and with “no other motive than to learn,” Brower notes that the committee then began asking “for samples of corrected Freshman papers” (729). “I am embarrassed,” she writes, “to tell you what the committee found on some of those papers. They did not help us much; in truth they confused and disturbed
us” (729). As an example, Brower includes the following excerpt from a comment by a college-level instructor on one of these papers. It reads:

The preparation in English sounds good; but I know those small New York high schools; they are nothing but Regents’ machines; and once the syllabus is covered, to hell with anything else! Her judgment is very bad, e.g., she thinks she was well prepared in writing but read a page of this and you will see why she gets D’s all the time. The poor girl will never do better. Incidentally, she wants to major in English. God help us! (729).

Although Brower is concerned that college English instructors seem to lack a continuity of teaching practices as well as reliable and consistent methods of assessment, she seems most disturbed by the characterization of students that may be evinced from such comments. Brower advocates an alternative approach. The freshman English instructor must possess a “love of youth itself” (730).

This view of students – and of youth more generally – is a quintessential part of progressive era approaches to education. And without this predisposition, according to Brower, the course in freshman composition fails to achieve its ultimate purpose. The importance of valuing and characterizing students as children “in a state of grace” is most evident in the conclusion of her article when she presents, as evidence, the letter of a first-grade teacher, who at the end of the first week of classes wrote letters to the parents of his students. He wrote:

My Dear Mr. Armstrong:

I thank you for lending me your little child today. All the years of love and care and training which you have given him have stood him in good
stead in his work and in his play. I send him home to you tonight, I hope a little stronger, a little taller, a little freer, a little nearer his goal. Lend him to me again tomorrow, I pray you. In my care of him I shall show my gratitude. (734)

Brower closes with this anecdote to emphasize the importance of the progressive ideals of childhood and youth in her vision for reforming freshman English. She uses the letter of the first-grade teacher to elementary school students’ parents to appeal to her audience on an emotional level. Rightly sensing that the letter from a first-grade teacher alone will not be enough to persuade her audience that progressive ideals are relevant to instruction at the college level, she extends the anecdote even further, making strong connections to issues of literacy. “But they are the same boys and girls,” she writes, “children of parents who for longer years have loved and nurtured them and looked with proud anticipation to the years of their college fulfillment with you…Yours is the final chance to equip them with that mystic power of utterance, of communication…that may give tongue to philosophies that will transform the chaos of today into a livable world for their tomorrow!” (734).

I emphasize this statement because it constructs the freshman English course as a site of realizing exaggerated expectations of the consequences of possessing literacy. The notion that the course creates the conditions and the type of students who can “transform the chaos of today into a livable world for their tomorrow” raises the possibility that for reformist arguments, the need to exaggerate the claims of literacy is similar to that of abolitionists. As I demonstrated in my second chapter, Thurber, Manchester, and Lange all overstate the significance of literacy in their proposals to
abolish freshman English. For abolitionists, one effect of exaggerated expectations of the consequences of being literate is that such a view translates into unreasonable expectations for composition as well. In Brower, we see a similar tendency, and the consequence for her study is the same: confiding in myths of literacy leads her to develop unattainable learning outcomes and expectations for freshman English. Furthermore, Brower’s exaggerated expectations are indicative of something equally as complex as her attitudes about literacy. In many respects, her belief in composition to “transform the chaos of today into a livable world for their [students’] tomorrow” (734) is reminiscent of concerns articulated by nineteenth century school promoters supporting compulsory education.

In Reconstructing American Education, Michael Katz notes that, “nineteenth-century school promoters argued that public education would alleviate five problems: crime and poverty, cultural heterogeneity, poor work habits, “idle youth,” and the anxieties of middle-class parents about their children’s future” (115). If this is the case, we may understand Brower to be appropriating, to some extent, the rhetoric of nineteenth-century public school promoters to persuade college English teachers to realize the import and relevance of compulsory composition. Although she does not argue that composition will reduce crime or poverty, she clearly possesses apprehension about the future for her students. This is significant to note because as Katz asserts, overstating the significance of compulsory schooling did not help it realize its aims. “Despite school promoters’ rhetoric,” he writes, “public education had very little effect on crime, delinquency, and poverty, which did not disappear or even significantly diminish” (115). In fact, little to no connection was perceptible between the amount of
public education and the extent of “distress and disorder in social life” (115). We know from Connors, Greenbaum, and Russell that the “Tradition of Complaint” – comprised of attempts to both reform and abolish composition – began with composition’s inception and, as I will show in my conclusion, continues well after Brower’s proposal. When we consider Brower’s essay in the context of this long line of proposals for reforming and abolishing composition, we may understand her proposal as a response to what she perceives as the “chaos of today,” and also, to some extent, as a means of coping with the failure of high schools and colleges to live up to the expectations that she has set for them. However, Brower was not alone in holding such high expectations for high school and freshman English; in fact, historians like Michael Katz contend that this is a trait endemic to American educational reforms more generally.

In *Reconstructing American Education*, Katz asserts that “exactly why Americans have placed such a trust in formal schooling remains far from clear and a central question for educational historians. Whatever its sources, however, one consequence is clear: the disillusionment that periodically arises when a new generation discovers that schools cannot fulfill the mission with which they have been entrusted” (124). Educators have responded to this disillusionment by developing what Katz describes as a “repertoire of strategies for coping with failure” (124). In some cases, educators have blamed learning problems in students. In other cases the fault was placed with particular methods or the “quality of instruction” (124). In Brower’s case, we find her placing blame with the process by which students articulate from high school to college composition as well as the failure of college English instructors to prioritize pedagogical approaches that are consistent with progressive era educators. Her article is remarkable for how the rhetoric
it employs demonstrates that exaggerated attitudes about literacy are ever-present in attempts to reform composition. Furthermore, these attitudes inform her tendency to overstate the significance of composition at both the high school and college levels.

In the following section, I examine another proposal for reforming freshman English: Warner G. Rice’s “Articulation of the Secondary School and the College.” Like Brower’s study, Rice’s essay speaks to the tendency of composition reformers to rely on the rhetoric of cooperation in the hopes of creating some sense of continuity between high school and college English courses. Given that this reformist study is followed twenty years later, by Rice’s own proposal to abolish composition, it is especially important to examine the rhetoric of this study. In doing so, we get some sense of the development of Rice’s thinking about what he perceives to be at the root of the problem with freshman English.

By this, I mean, in Chapter Two, I briefly discussed Rice’s 1959 NCTE address, a presentation that was eventually published in *College English* in 1960. Titled “A proposal for the abolition of freshman English, as it is now commonly taught, from the college curriculum,” Rice argues that composition should only have a place at the high school levels. In this article, his complaints about freshman English are numerous and familiar, especially when considered in the context of the abolition debate: students are inept; instructors are intellectually unprepared to the course; the writing and reading skills necessary for college should be acquired before admission. Because his objections and critiques of composition are so consistent with other abolitionists, it is not surprising that he plays a prominent role in Greenbaum, Connors, and Russell’s histories of the abolition debate. However, twenty years before his NCTE address, Rice articulates a different
opinion on the problem of freshman English, one he expressed in an argument that is clearly reformist in nature.

Articulation of the Secondary Schools – A “Silver Lining in a Very Dark Cloud”

In “Articulation of the Secondary School and the College,” Rice is explicitly interested in persuading readers to become “actively aware of the need for making a closer connection” (136) between colleges and high schools. Ultimately, Rice’s study deals specifically with the “new demands” placed upon the freshman English course, demands that grew out of increased enrollments during the 1930s. During this period, Rice remarks that English instructors are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of how students articulate between secondary and post-secondary institutions (136). What triggered this epiphany among the faculty at the University of Michigan were “very badly prepared” freshman English students coming from high schools. The opportunity to deal with the problem of freshman English at its perceived source – poor instruction at the high school level – leads Rice to proclaim optimistically: “Very likely this is one of the patches of silver lining in a very dark cloud.” This statement suggests that Rice holds some hope for reforming the course. To understand why this is and to have some sense of the pressures that Rice is responding to, it is necessary to explore the historical context from which his study emerges.

Although the Great Depression led to many negative externalities (including declining birthrates and reduced expenditures for local initiatives) one of the most remarkable developments of the 1930s was the increase in enrollments at the college and
high school levels. Lawrence Cremin reports that secondary enrollments rose from 4,800,000 in 1929-30 to 7,100,000 in 1939-40 (274). With increased enrollments came an increasingly diverse student body, one “readily receptive to reform” (274). In such a climate, Cremin writes, “it was almost inevitable that the polyglot system of ideas, assumptions, and practices called progressive education would continue to exert profound influence” (274). The influence of progressive education was perceptible in a number of ways: In addition to increased enrollments in high schools, kindergartens and nursery schools also experienced growth (Cremin 306). As such, curricula were reorganized at all levels, creating opportunities for work in agriculture, home economics, as well as the arts (306). Reforms on the curricular level created opportunities for “cocurricular” or “extracurricular” involvement, so that by the 1930s and 1940s student clubs and other activities were mainstays in American schools (306). Related to some extent to curricular reforms, classroom practices changed on several levels. Cremin reports that “students and teachers alike tended to be more active, more mobile, and more informal in their relationships with one another” (307).

As educators began to draw on the latest research in psychology, learning, and other theories of childhood development, the materials used for instruction also transformed (textbooks became more attractive, and teachers began incorporating other devices and heuristics like flash cards, local flora and fauna in the classroom) (307). In general, state certification requirements became increasingly popular, leading to “better educated” (307) instructors and professional courses that reflected the aims of progressive education. In addition, the architecture of schools was adapted to account for increased enrollments and the influence of curricular reforms with progressive aims.
Among other things, schools were modified to include assembly rooms, playgrounds, miniature tables and chairs, movable furniture and partitions, as well as more improved lighting and ventilation (307). Cremin suggests that such architectural modifications to schools lent progressive reforms “a measure of permanence” (307). In sum, these changes point to a period of reform marked by considerable variations in teaching approaches with a gradual shift in pedagogical focus from teacher-centered classrooms to more student-centered instruction.

It is in this context of diverse educational reforms and in a culture marked by conflicts over competing visions of the function of schools and students more generally that Rice argues for stronger cooperation between high schools and colleges. On the surface, this argument makes a lot of sense for Rice in terms of its timing and given his position as elected chairman of the College Section of the National Council of Teachers of English. However, the type of cooperation that Rice has in mind does not involve curricular reforms in the college English classroom. In fact, Rice is not really interested in cooperation at all. Instead, he is arguing for “greater continuity and effectiveness” (137) and “something like uniform preparation” at the high school level.

Working from a publication titled *Preparation for College English* (1935) by the Michigan Committee on the Articulation of High School and College English, Rice extends the committee recommendations in service of the assumption for his entire argument. “Prepared on the assumption,” he notes, “that a high-school student who is looking forward to college has a right to know all that can be known of the standard of attainment to which he will be asked to measure up when he enters his freshman classes” (137). Rice’s framing of this point, in terms of a student’s “right to know,” underscores
the level of importance that he places on the Michigan Committee recommendations, but it also indicates a persuasive appeal that reveals the challenges complicating the process of implementing their recommendations. He writes:

This project, under the general direction of Professor C.D. Thorpe, was carried on vigorously in 1935-36, in 1936-37, was suspended for two years because of lack of funds, and has been revived in 1939-40. It now operates on the departmental budget, where, in a time of financial stress, money has been found for it because of its obvious usefulness and importance. (139-40)

Under the proposed plan, high school teachers submitted papers of their students to members of the Department of English at the University of Michigan. Rice refers to the readers of these high school essays as “consultants” (139), and under this proposal they were charged with the task of analyzing and evaluating any written work submitted, “in terms of its fitness to meet University standards for entering freshman” (140). That this initiative was able to find funding “in a time of financial stress” is indicative of how confident the Michigan department of English was in its own “standards for entering freshman.” Even though the perceived need for the plan indicates that there was little or no continuity between high schools and colleges for evaluating student writing, there is, in this case, some semblance of continuity and certainty at the college level. In fact, Rice suggests that oversight of the process indicated that comments and criticisms of consultants “adhered to standards that are remarkably constant” (140).

These standards inform specifically the recommendations for writing that the department provides for incoming students; namely, that students in the eleventh and
twelfth grades “should be warned away from fine writing, extravagant fantasy, high-flown rhetoric” and restricted to subjects that they have some familiarity with so that they may “write clearly, accurately, and logically” (141). The committees’ recommendations speak to the possibility that the essays they read informed the suggestions they provided – that their standards were not in place before they began evaluating essays from high schools. Rice repeatedly suggests that the point of the consulting initiative is to inform high school instructors and students of the “standards” (140) universities have in place to evaluate writing. Yet, he admits that the criteria used for evaluating student writing was “developed largely through careful consideration of the evidence that came in the high school papers read – that is, they were not established on a priori considerations” (141). If this is the case, then the conclusions drawn by Rice about the effectiveness of the consulting initiative are important because they reveal more about why the program was in place, than about the quality of writing being submitted for review.

The type of evidence that he provides to support his claim is similar to the type of evidence that Brower presents in her study to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of consulting programs like the one Rice has implemented. For instance, he presents letters and feedback from high school teachers and administrators attesting to the effectiveness of the program. “The work of our consultants,” Rice writes, “has been rewarded by grateful and (to us) gratifying letters from many of the high schools which sent in student themes.” One letter, written by the principal of a secondary school, reads:

I am indeed favorably impressed by the co-operative experiment conducted by the English Department at the University. I was greatly pleased with your analysis of the samples of composition which we sent.
Your plans for conducting the project another year meet with my hearty approval. (141)

And another letter, written by a high school teacher not only testifies to the usefulness of the program but also seeks feedback for further curriculum development. It reads as follows:

Your careful criticism of my 11th grade papers proved so interesting to my 12th grade classes that they begged me to send you some of their work. . .

For several years we have tried to give our seniors some experience in thesis writing. They follow a procedure outlined in their text, with drill on hunting down material, taking notes on cards, organizing an outline, etc., the teacher checking the work at each stage. I allow them to correlate this work with that done in other courses, if they wish, and I permit any who use a typewriter to type the final draft. We should like your opinion as to whether this is a useful type of assignment for those preparing for college. (141)

These letters indicate that from Rice’s perspective the consulting program was a resounding success, so much so that he recommends that the correlation plan be “extended to the work of other departments – mathematics, history, foreign languages” (144). Though he does concede that such a suggestion “is no part of our responsibility,” the feedback from high schools coupled with the fact that project was able to gain funding during difficult times leads him to attempt to articulate the relevance of the project for every part of the university, not just English departments.
The success and excitement with which Rice discusses the consultant plan is curious given Brower’s experience with a similar initiative. After all, Brower’s article is concerned primarily with the ineffectiveness of a consultant plan that is similar to the type of initiative that Rice proposes. For Brower, instructors at the college level possess a regressive view of students. Despite their differences, Brower and Rice parallel each other in a significant way. Both of their proposed reforms are linked directly to the University of Michigan publication *Preparation for College English*. In the conclusion of her address to college composition instructors, Brower notes: “I do believe that much could be done to help a larger number of teachers throughout the country if more concrete material were published by your organization, similar to that prepared by the University of Michigan, entitled *Preparation for College English*” (732). In the end, then, despite her reservations and concerns about the articulation of students from high schools to colleges she is, like Rice, convinced that the University of Michigan has figured something out with respect to the problem of freshman English. In the following section, I explore the findings and recommendations of The Michigan Committee on The Articulation of High-School and College English.

When Brower and Rice’s studies are compared and contrasted, the vocabulary and language of progressivism is perceptible. As I mentioned, Brower holds an abiding belief in the value of educating the “whole child,” and it is one that she desires freshman English instructors to possess. Rice is responding to a period marked by conflicts over competing visions of the purpose and value of progressive era reforms. In both studies, the authors identify the ideals of cooperation and continuity as solutions the problem of freshman English. However, what is also clear when we examine the evidence that they
have in common is that inclinations toward social order and control are also present. In
the following section, I argue that these impulses overlap with attitudes about literacy and
freshman English instruction. Recognizing this is key to understanding why reformist
arguments in the 1940s failed, and why it may be unrealistic to expect that educational
structures may be reformed to serve very different goals from those they were originally
intended to achieve.

**Preparation for College English: Continuity, Attainment, and Decency**

*Preparation for College English: An Interpretation of College Entrance*

*Standards in English* was published in 1935 and revised in 1942. The latter version, “a
revision,” represents a more comprehensive statement of the Michigan Committee’s
recommendations for preparing secondary school students that were bound for college. It
is a relatively short statement of a little over a hundred pages and includes specific
recommendations, examples, and ideas for teaching English in high schools. More
specifically, the text is broken down into four sections, including a “General Statement,”
a section on “Language and Composition,” “Reading and Literature,” and finally a list of
“Reference Books for Teachers of High-School Literature.” Almost thirty post-
secondary institutions participated in the “Michigan Project on The Articulation of High-
School and College English.” The project included many colleges and consultants, and
participants were placed on two subcommittees, one for Language and Composition,
and the other for Reading and Literature.

The authors begin the bulletin with a statement about the purpose of education. It
is to “be a continuous process and that in fairness to our boys and girls and in the interests
of personal and social welfare the institutions concerned should provide a framework of
continuity” (7). Continuity may only be achieved through “cooperation and mutual
understanding – with intelligent and systematic effort to bring about its realization in
practice (7). Similar to the 1935 edition, the updated and revised bulletin
is also “prepared on the assumption that a high-school student who is looking forward to
college has a right to know something” of the standards he will be asked to meet when
“he enters his freshman classes” (9). This interpretation of the purpose of English
instruction at the high school level– as fulfilling a student’s outstanding “right” –
emerges throughout the report and underscores the significance of the notion of
“continuity” in their recommendations.

In addition to stressing continuity, the committee also emphasizes what they
describe as “attainment.” This is “the distinguishing feature” of their report, one that is
meant to stress “attainment rather than the coverage of given materials” (10). Instead of
being concerned with what types of books students have studied, the committee is
interested in whether students possess “a reasonable mastery of the essentials; how well
can he speak and write?” (10). Like continuity, the idea of attainment also manifests
itself throughout the bulletin; however, it serves a different function in the report. As the
“distinguishing feature” of their findings, it represents the authors’ attempt at
reformulating prevailing wisdom on the problem of English instruction. In their
introduction, they challenge established and widespread “attitudes” about preparing high
school students for college.

The first is that the colleges shall arbitrarily dictate, in both general outline
and detail, what this preparation shall be. The second is that the high
schools shall decide what training they will give their students, and at the end say to the colleges, “Here are our products; you must take them as you find them.” Both of these views are fallacious… (7).

As an alternative to prescribing arbitrary methods of preparation and training, the committees’ emphasis on attainment denotes a high level of interest in assessment. Admittedly, questions about how to evaluate student performance underlie proposals for abolition and reform well before the 1940s. What counts as good writing, effective instruction, or methods of assessment varies considerably in the Great Debate over freshman English. However, what is unique about the Michigan committees’ report is how transparent and explicit they are about what precisely they expect students to attain and how instructors should go about assessing student performance.

It is important to remember that this text is ultimately in service of the idea of establishing cooperation and continuity between high schools and colleges at a time when progressive reforms are perceptible in scholarship pertaining to secondary and post-secondary education. More significantly, however, is the fact that the way the Michigan committee defines standards for attainment and the specific examples of student writing they provide are evidence the unintended consequences of progressivism: namely, its conservative ideological underpinnings and impulses toward social control. For instance, from the authors’ perspective, training for students at the high school level is incomplete, and should be reformed with attention to “the pupil’s entire school life” (11). “Only by constant, heedful, intelligent application,” they write, “through a period of years can any American boy or girl hope to attain proficiency in oral and written composition” (11). Brower, no doubt, would be supportive of such a statement, as it is reminiscent of
progressive preoccupations with educating the “whole child.” Yet, when we examine more closely what precisely the committee believes students lack, we find recommendations that betray ideological tendencies that demonstrate a concern for students as well as aims for composition that denote a class effort. For instance, the authors write: “In stating ideals in language and composition the Association report makes both competence and decency important” (12). Borrowing from the 1935 version of the report, the authors define competency and decency in the following ways: “Competence means such control and direction of expression as to insure successful communication. Decency means such a mastery of acceptable forms as not to offend the taste of cultivated people” (12).

In one section of the 1935 report, Clarence D. Thorpe elaborates on these two terms. In “Language and Composition: A Suggestion for an Improved Program,” he notes, “Competence relates to the capacity of writing or speech to do its work. On the one hand, it has to do with the organization of ideas, with thinking in a straight line, with putting words together in sentences and paragraphs in such a way as to convey meaning easily and clearly” (12). Decency, on the other hand, may be understood “as the manners of discourse, and bears the same relation to speaking and writing that good table manners have to eating. “ Although the discussion of competence and decency, as well as Thorpe’s take on the matter, appears as a footnote in the 1942 bulletin, the example provided by Thorpe to illustrate the distinction between these two terms can not be ignored. He writes: “The schoolboy who declares, ‘We ain’t goin’ to have no baseball team this year’ is using language with competence, for his meaning is perfectly clear, but he is not using it with decency” (12).
I emphasize the bulletin’s attention to attainment and decency because the classroom practices and recommendations they provide for instructors – the pedagogy meant to put these ideas into action – constitute the majority of the publication. The authors note that “in order to make its interpretation more concrete” the committee offers sample themes written by entering freshman (18). These themes are rated according to their “acceptability, with an analysis showing the bases upon which the ratings were made” (18). From the perspective of the bulletin’s authors, because the themes they analyze “are the work of freshman in their first week at college,” the samples exemplify the quality of student writing for pupils just finishing high school. Given the number of schools involved in the articulation project as well as the number of themes analyzed in the publication, we may understand the ratings and analysis of these essays to represent with some accuracy the nature of writing instruction being provided for students at this time. “The ratings and the analyses,” the authors write, “which appear with the various papers may therefore be regarded as reflecting pretty well the standards upheld by the English departments of representative institutions of the state” (19). In the following section, then, I explicate two of the seventeen sample essays discussed in *Preparation for College English*. One is rated “Very Bad” and the other “Acceptable.” The committees’ analysis of these themes sheds light on the way attitudes about literacy overlap with overarching principles of attainment and decency, which previous studies of reformist arguments do not address. Furthermore, these essays, as well as the ratings and analysis provided by the committee, also point to how the outcomes of attainment and decency influenced the project of building continuity between high schools and colleges.
Measuring Up to the Standards of Post-Secondary Education

The authors note that most themes discussed in the bulletin were “written as impromptus.” Pupils chose from a list of topics provided by the instructor and were given one hour to complete the assignment. The readers of themes were asked to mark and evaluate themes based on a list of eleven criteria, touching on everything from “development of argument” to “acceptable English.” Finally, readers were asked to evaluate each paper as “Excellent,” “Acceptable,” “Not Acceptable,” or “Very Bad” (20).

The following paper received a rating of “Very Bad” and is quoted in full below:

Radio, Best Source of News

The radio, one of our more modern inventions, is the best means we have for securing news. Now take the war over in London, if it (weren’t) wasn’t for the radio we could not receive our news as rapidly as we do. For the accuracy of the radio it may be said it is as good as our other means of news, for it is all censured before it comes to us. Then to in reporting the news, the reporter can be right at the seen of the news happing, he can put more “unph” into the story whereas if one were writing it for the paper “we” would have to wait until they had set up type, possible for an extra. This goes to show that speed is the thing in this modern day and age.

The radio has helped in more (cases) ways then one to save the (life) lives of some people. Take for instance thee airplane, it is a means of radio, it contacts people who are involved and helps to give us news when on of our modern passenger planes are in trouble, it to helps to save
the people who are in trouble, it passes on to the receiver the location of its misshap and away goes help to the people, and more news for the people who are home waiting to hear if there beloved ones is are safe or injured. This goes to show the importance of the radio in relationship to man and its troubled ones or I might say to man and its public through out the world. There is no end to the possibilities the radio has in making this world safer to live in. (21)

According to the analysis provided by readers, the essay is “hardly competent” and indicative of a writer who is “plainly lacking in the essential means of organizing his ideas for communication” (21). The first paragraph “dismisses summarily points of enough importance” (21) that warrant more complete explication in separate paragraphs. The second paragraph introduces ideas of “doubtful relevance” (21). And the third paragraph proceeds to a conclusion unrelated to the idea articulated in the beginning of the paper. To be sure, readers identify other “major weaknesses” (21). “Errors and faults of style abound,” they write, “They include violation of concord, bad diction, awkward and occasionally incoherent sentences, and more than one example of plain obscurity” (21). In sum, the evaluative comments and criticisms by readers may be described as concerned primarily with formal aspects of composition with particular interest in grammar, organization, and style.

The emphasis placed on the finished product as well as the complete disregard for the writing process of this pupil are classic indicators of what contemporary composition and rhetoric scholars have regarded as Current-Traditional Rhetoric. Robert Connors connects English instructors’ penchant for fixating on the formal features of composition
to a “single-minded enforcement of standards of mechanical and grammatical correctness in writing” (“The Rhetoric of Mechanical Correctness” 72). In her entry for “Current-Traditional Rhetoric” in the Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient Times to the Information Age, Sharon Crowley connects the practice to the British rhetorical tradition “located in Lockean empiricism but tinctured with a dose of Scottish commonsense realism” (156). In a similar vein, Nan Johnson’s Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric in North America traces the progenitors of current-traditional thought and its influence on “formal instruction in oral and written communication” (3) to George Campbell’s Philosophy of Rhetoric (1776), Hugh Blair’s Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (1783), and Alexander Bain’s English Composition (1866).

Whereas Connors, Crowley, and Johnson offer convincing arguments for current-traditional impulses in formal writing instruction, the Michigan committee’s concluding remarks about “Radio, The Best Source of News” leads me to believe that attitudes and implications of literacy are also significant. Of the essay’s style and organization, they assert: the “most serious” faults of the paper “are the numerous and frequently inexcusable misspellings” (21). According to the authors, these indicate “fundamentally bad attitudes” (21) and contribute to a “total accumulation of errors, toward producing an impression of illiteracy” (21). Above all, then, what is at stake in embracing and implementing the suggestions and views of the committee is instructing students in a way that allows them to avoid the appearance of illiteracy. During the 1940s, this is a task made increasingly difficult by growing enrollments and an increasingly diverse student body.
As mentioned earlier, Lawrence Cremin reports that secondary school enrollments rose from 4,800,000 in 1929-30 to 7,100,000 in 1939-40. Post-secondary enrollments increased significantly during this time as well, with roughly 1.5 million students attending universities in the 1940s (Bureau of the Census 1). In the context of these institutional pressures, we may read the motivations and recommendations of the Michigan committee in a different light, especially when we remember that their plight was nothing new in the history of composition. For instance, Sharon Crowley remarks in *The Methodical Memory: Invention in Current-Traditional Rhetoric*, “The composition course was invented out of whole cloth in response to late nineteenth-century hysteria about the low levels of literacy manifested by entering college students” (141).

With the increased interest in the articulation of students from high schools to colleges, the authors of *Preparation for College English* are responding to similar concerns. Rising enrollments coupled with perennial complaints about low levels of literacy and a demand for a cadre of instructors devoted to the teaching of composition created a need for instructional materials that could be delivered to students and instructors in the most efficient way possible. In the *Preparation for College English* bulletin, we find evidence of this approach. The committee presents it in the spirit of cooperation and innovation; however, it was actually a restatement of precepts and heuristics that reach back to the origins of freshman English. Again, it is important to remember, that *Preparation for College English* is evidence that both Brower and Rice employ to support their arguments for reforming freshman English. Furthermore, the Michigan committee’s bulletin is itself a reformist study directed toward the same end: establishing a sense of continuity and cooperation between high schools and colleges. In
the early 1940s World War II imposed significant pressures on universities. Between 1941 and 1945, the government would put 16,354,000 men in uniform, and almost 10 million entered the draft (Elliot 117). In 1942, the same year that *Preparation for College English* was published, the *Forty-Second Annual Report of the Executive Secretary* of the College Entrance Examination Board announced that, “Broad plans for greater co-operation in the future between school and college need not be discarded, but these should be put in the background. Every effort must now be centered on the present with help for the war effort as the paramount concern” (quoted in Elliot 117). Evidence of this growing concern for the war effort is clear in both the thematic focus of the following essay and, as I argue, in the analysis provided by the Michigan committee. The following sample and analysis by the Michigan committee is also indicative of their commitments toward building greater cooperation between high school English and college composition. The theme received a rating of “Acceptable” and is quoted in full below.

A Freshman Looks at Conscription

Conscription comes to America in a time of dire need. Out of the chaos in Europe is rising a powerful military machine threatening the remaining democracies with absolute ruin. Between us and immediate invasion stands the power and might of the British – their fleet and air force.

It need be said that we are not prepared in this case of threatened invasion. Americans are altogether too sure of our military strength, which in reality is a mere nothing to what it should be.
It’s true that there is not equipment enough to service all of the men that will be trained in military tactics though conscription. But is it not infinitely better to have the training with which to use the equipment when it is ready?

The people in America today who best appreciate the need of military training for our men are the army experts, who know what may happen and grant that it is very possible. Their job, of course, is to impress this into the minds of the people.

Conscription is a very necessary thing to the Army and Navy. It is the only way that our military weaknesses can be filled in and strengthened.

Many, many women (most of them mothers) are forming anti-conscription leagues, nor can you blame them for not wanting their sons endangered by war. But which is better, sacrificing democracy or making human sacrifices to save that democracy?

Now you enter the field of violent argument. The plea anguish mothers on one side, and the plea of democracy for rescue on the other. It is merely a measure to insure our safety and to protect ourselves in case any foreign military power threaten us.

Can conscription really hurt us? Will it send out manhood to its death? No, at this time it can be but a preparatory measure for such a time when it’s needed. Conscription does come at a time of dire need, the need of bolstering our democracy at its most critical period.  (28)
Although the final judgment of the committee is favorable, it is difficult to discern from their comments what precisely should be replicated by students and instructors. In fact, the explanation of their “acceptable” rating begins with a discussion of the principal shortcomings of the essay. “The chief fault,” they write, “is overparagraphing” (28). They assert that the “loosely connected paragraphs indicate slipshod thinking” (28), and that the paragraphs comprising the “body of the paper are presented in a sketchy and desultory manner” (28). For instance, readers were particularly critical of the pupil’s claim about the American military lacking strength. They write: “Instead of presenting evidence and developing the point, the writer leaves it as a mere assertion and makes a new start in a third and only remotely related paragraph which attempts to answer one of the early objections to conscription” (28). From the readers’ view, the overall lack of development and “slipshod thinking” contribute to an essay that “No reader is likely to be convinced” (28). Consequently, the authors advocate a thorough revision of the essay, one that would transform the pupil’s work into a single “well-developed paragraph calling for conscription as a military necessity” (28). Such a revision, they argue, would be more convincing to readers than the “four feeble and poorly connected paragraphs” (28).

Given the bulletin’s statement about how the purpose and function of these sample essays is to provide acceptable models of college level writing for high school students, the analysis begs a critical question: If the essay is indicative of poor thinking, lacks development because of poor paragraph construction, and is ultimately unconvincing, why did reviewers give it a “acceptable” rating? Although the student
needs “training in paragraph and organization,” they write, “In terms of mechanics, the paper is acceptable” (28). According to the readers the essay demonstrates facility with “grammar, sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, idiom, and matters of a like nature” (28). Similar to the previous student essay, then, concerns about formal aspects of writing are the most important to readers, and even though “A Freshman Looks at Conscription” misses its mark entirely, offering an unpersuasive and underdeveloped argument, the essay is still held up as an acceptable model for high school students to imitate and for instructors to teach. One reason for this, I argue, is that an underlying motivation for Preparation for College English is to provide a solution to the problem of overworked composition instructors. This solution comes in the form of a pedagogical approach to writing instruction that emphasizes mechanical correctness above all other concerns.

In Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy, Robert Connors demonstrates that at the post-secondary level, pedagogies emphasizing mechanical correctness have long been a solution to increased enrollments and the ostensible problems imposed by illiteracy. In fact, Connors connects the rise of “mechanical-correctness standards in Composition” to the 1880s when the first freshman English courses emerged. “Most teachers,” he writes, “were responsible for teaching between 140 and 200 students” (140). At Yale’s Sheffield Scientific School, for example, one professor and instructor were responsible for correcting the themes and compositions of over 250 students; in addition, English instructors at this institution were also responsible for grading the compositions for three upper-level courses for a total of over 300 students (140). At the University of Chicago, Connors reports, “which prided itself on its small
classes, the course in ‘required theme-writing’ averaged over 65 students per class” (140). Certainly, the rise of and obsession with mechanical correctness was a response to the perceived illiteracy crisis created by new college students in the 1880s, but it was also a means for teachers to “deal with their huge stacks of student themes” (142). Histories of writing instruction by Applebee, Brereton, Berlin, Connors and Crowley all attest to the fact that by the 1940s the focus placed on mechanical correctness dominates prevailing approaches to writing instruction at this time. As I have demonstrated, not much is novel or innovative about the Michigan committee’s recommendations or their motivations for reform. Concerns about the illiteracy of incoming freshman English students and the fixation on mechanical correctness as a solution to the problem of illiteracy have, in many respects, defined composition pedagogy since its inception.

We may view the rhetoric of cooperation and continuity in these reformist arguments as representing a shared interest, not so much in developing meaningful composition instruction, but in persuading teachers and students to ascribe to a theory of literacy that translates into easily teachable and efficient pedagogy. Sharon Crowley remarks in *The Methodical Memory*, “current-traditional rhetoric,” which is precisely the type of writing instruction that the Michigan committee is advocating, had “very little to do with learning to write.” She asserts: “Just as its initial success was stimulated by institutional needs, its continued maintenance by the academy has a good deal more to do with institutional circumstances than it does with the appropriateness of its theory of discourse for writing instruction” (147). Taken together, Brower, Rice, and *Preparation for College English* are supported by an abiding belief in Freshman English to realize the promises of the literacy myth, yet because of institutional pressures, their
recommendations for reform are merely restatements of antiquated precepts intended to preserve the status and place of the literacy myth in post-secondary education. As Michael Katz notes in *The Irony of Early School Reform*, the implications of developing educational reforms along the lines of shared interests are significant. He writes: “Here, then, is another danger. When educational reform becomes too bound up with personal and group interests, it loses the capacity for self-criticism. It can be a dazzling diversionary activity turning heads away from the real nature of social problems. It can become a vested interest in its own right, so pious and powerful that it can direct public scorn to anyone who doubts” (217). The reformists discussed in this chapter are “too bound up” with a shared interest in the literacy myth. Furthermore, Brower’s belief in the importance of constructing students as children “in a state of grace” blinds her to the normative and conservative impulses of progressive era reforms. Similarly, Rice and Brower’s confidence in the recommendations outlined in *Preparation for College English* reveals how unaware they were of the fact that the reforms espoused by the committee were not reforms at all, but were restatements of mainstays of composition pedagogy intended to function as temporary stop gaps for coping with increased enrollments at both the high school and college levels.

Taken together, these reformist essays are examples of scholars pursuing poorly defined problems with mismatched solutions. In “Reforming Again, Again, and Again,” Larry Cuban notes, “It is important to policymakers, practitioners, administrators, and researchers to understand why reforms return but seldom substantially alter the regularities of schooling. The risks involved with a lack of understanding include pursuing problems with mismatched solutions, spending energies needlessly, and
accumulating despair” (11). Existing histories of the abolition debate demonstrate that proposals for abolishing composition happen again, again, and again. However, as I have shown, it is also worthwhile to examine the chief rationales and motivations that constitute the rhetoric of composition reformers as well. What we find is that arguments on both sides of the debate demonstrate a tendency both to overstate the significance of literacy – specifically the literary view of literacy – and to formulate unattainable expectations for the composition course. Recognizing that these expectations are inextricably linked to vague definitions and characterizations of literacy as well as literacy myths specifically is a critical part of understanding why both abolitionists and reformists have failed. It seems that both Brower and Rice simply expected too much of literacy and of freshman composition.

Understanding why particular proposals for reform in the past failed is important because, as Larry Cuban notes, “such questions about why reforms failed in the past and why they return go to the heart of present policy debates…” (3). With this in mind, I turn, in my next chapter, to a more contemporary example of debate over compulsory composition: Sharon Crowley’s 1998 proposal to abolish the “universal requirement” of composition. In turning to a contemporary example of abolitionism, I do not mean to suggest that the composition reformist era extends from Brower and Rice in the 1940s to Crowley in the 1990s. As Norbert Elliot and Robert Connors indicate in their histories of writing instruction, proposals both for reforming and abolishing composition subsided during the late 1940s, as scholars turned to support the war effort. However, by the late 1950s we see a resurgence of abolitionism with the publication of Warner G. Rice’s “A Proposal for the Abolition of Freshman English” in 1959 (Connors 287). With the slow
growth of composition studies as a field in the early 1960s, we entered another period of
reformism in which composition scholars worked enthusiastically to explore connections
between the precepts of classical rhetoric and composition pedagogy. Robert Connors
notes that we see a slight increase in abolitionism in the late 1960s and early 1970s
(Regina M. Hoover published her “Taps for Freshman English?” in 1974); however,
between 1975 and 1990 we find no proposals for the general abolition of the composition
course. Certainly, Crowley’s proposal for abolishing compulsory composition is
noteworthy because it emerges after a relatively prolonged and quiet period in the debate
over compulsory composition. More significantly, however, when Crowley asserts her
position she is doing so, in the words of Robert Connors, as a composition “insider”
(292). Of composition insiders, Robert Connors writes, “they can make their case from
within the discourse of the field rather than complaining scornfully from without, as most
abolitionists have done in the past” (292). If this is true, then Crowley’s abolitionist
position strikes at the heart of contemporary debates over composition in unique ways.
At stake in examining Crowley’s position in the debate over the effectiveness and aims of
compulsory composition, is gaining a better understanding of the arguments that have
helped to delineate the boundaries of contemporary composition studies.
CHAPTER FOUR

“IN THIS SPIRIT”:
THE RHETORIC OF CITING A CURRENT AND TRADITIONAL COMPLAINT

A writer cannot simply present another’s words without valuing them, valorizing or denigrating them, even in direct quotation. Every act of reporting discourse—relating another’s words as “direct,” “indirect,” or “quasi-direct” discourses in Volosinov’s terminology—carries with it stylistic, rhetorical, and ideological consequences.

-- Kay Halasek, A Pedagogy of Possibility (163)

In this chapter, I examine several citations in contemporary composition scholarship to Sharon Crowley’s proposal for the abolition of the universal requirement of first-year writing. In Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays, Crowley delineates many reasons to abolish compulsory composition. One of her most salient points grows out of her concern about the relationship between composition and myths of literacy. Specifically, she believes that popular conceptions of the powers of literacy and the pedagogical capabilities of composition are exaggerated. “The myth of the academic essay,” she writes, “continues to nurture massive Freshman English programs for reasons other than its salience to writing instruction” (233). For Crowley, freshman English “fosters and supports” what she describes as the “American belief” in universal standards of literacy (233), standards that Crowley believes are unattainable. She asks: “Can we impart literacy in a quarter or a semester or a year? What is literacy, anyhow? And whose literacy do we teach?” (234). Questions like these demonstrate how
unique Crowley’s abolitionist stance is in the “Tradition of Complaint.” Not only is her study distinct (as Robert Connors notes) because it is written by a composition insider, but it also deals directly with concerns about literacy’s definition and fundamental nature. Consequently, in this chapter, I am less interested in explicating the assumptions that Crowley makes about literacy. After all, she readily admits that the field of composition needs to address assumptions about the powers of literacy and its role in the teaching of freshman English. Instead, I argue that we must look more closely at how, when, where, and why scholars in composition refer to Crowley’s polemic. It is important to examine more closely citations to Crowley’s proposal. At stake is the opportunity of gaining a more complete understanding of how and why her abolitionist stance has come to stand in for the entire “Tradition of Complaint” in contemporary composition scholarship.

What follows, then, is a rather lengthy discussion of both the subtleties of Crowley’s position on first-year requirement as well as an overview of how citation systems function in academic inquiry more generally. These topics warrant extended discussions for different reasons. First, Crowley’s call for the abolition of the first-year requirement has a somewhat controversial status in composition, a position achieved by numerous references to her work. In fact, a search using the ISI Web of Knowledge Science Citation Index reveals that Crowley’s Composition in the University was cited in 44 journal articles (for a total of 70 citations) between 1989 and 2009. When issues related to the abolition debate arise in contemporary composition studies, we do not find scholars citing Lounsbury or Campbell. Instead, we are asked to “See Crowley” on any number of issues, arguments, and positions directly and indirectly related to the abolition of the universal requirement. Consequently, scholars have constructed Crowley’s
abolitionist stance in such a way that her perspective has come to stand in for an entire tradition of abolitionism that stretches back to the inception of composition in the 1880s. Second, I consider how particular references to Crowley’s polemic function rhetorically in various composition studies, specifically those that are concerned with the working conditions that typify composition instruction. Because the rhetorical nature of citation systems is discussed less in composition studies, I explain how these writing practices underline the project of academic inquiry more generally.

The Particulars of a Powerful Polemic

In this section, I clarify the particulars of Crowley’s polemic. Because citations to Crowley tend to generalize about her role and the specifics of her argument, I will, in this section review important subtleties of her position. In Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays, Sharon Crowley outlines a very specific polemic. She writes:

In this spirit, I offer a modest proposal. Let’s abolish the universal requirement. Let’s just stop insisting that every student who enrolls in a two-year college or four-year university must take a required composition course. Please note that I am not proposing the abolition of introductory-level writing courses. (242 )

In this, we have the basis of her position as well as a quasi-rebuttal, one anticipating confusion or misreading. It is because she anticipates confusion that I think we have reason to delve deeper into her assertions. After all, “In this spirit” suggests that her proposal grows out of previous claims and evidence, an argument that is more complex
than the issue at hand. This distinction is also important to note because it indicates that Crowley is aware of the history of the abolition debate, and she clearly believes that her audience is as well. However, even more striking is the implicit rhetorical strategy in the expression, “I offer a modest proposal” (242). The sincerity and obvious commitment to students and Composition, in which the entire work is grounded, is a far cry from the ironic and satiric disposition of Jonathan Swift, to which the language, “a modest proposal” presumably refers. In his review of Composition in The University, Raul Sanchez notes that the irony of this subtitle cannot be overlooked, and that understanding the ways in which “Academic-ideological forces” (Crowley 229) support the claims of Crowley’s argument might be more important than considering counter-arguments in support of compulsory composition. She articulates how these forces are at play in compulsory freshman English by recounting an incident at the University of Texas at Austin in 1990.

Crowley reports that at this time the committee responsible for managing freshman English at the University of Texas at Austin designed and put into place a new syllabus, “Writing About Difference.” The syllabus included several court cases, which according to Crowley, were selected for a couple of reasons:

First, there were associated documents in each case that took a variety of positions with regard to its merit – majority and minority opinions from several courts along with law review articles; second, each case raised the issue of what it means to be defined as different from mainstream American culture. (230)
Drawing from Stephen Toulmin’s “data/warrant/claim model of argumentation,” students were asked to perform “traditional” writing tasks like summaries and also to write in “small and large groups” (230). What Crowley describes is a quintessential “process” oriented approach to freshman composition pedagogy. For the early 1990s, apart from the emphasis on court cases, which were used as primary sources for this syllabus, the UT pedagogy was not ground breaking, certainly if you consider the use of Stephen Toulmin as a theoretical methodology which dates back to the mid 1960s.

Despite this, Crowley reports that a “very public uproar followed the English Department’s adoption of this proposed syllabus” (230). This discord led to the “permanent postponement” of the use of the syllabus at Texas. Crowley asserts that on one level, criticisms of the syllabus seemed politically motivated. “Conservative critics,” she writes, “…who included the Texas branch of the National Association of Scholars and commentator George Will, interpreted the focus on “difference” as a politically correct indoctrination in racism and sexism” (230). Though, more interesting to Crowley is the fact that faculty members outside of the UT English department and members of the press were equally disturbed by the syllabus. In Crowley’s eyes, these outsiders were people “who literally had no professional or financial stake in the design of the course” and possessed little to no knowledge in the history, theory, and teaching of freshman English. These critics were outsiders in another regard; they were also unfamiliar with the growing field of composition studies. Nevertheless, Crowley concludes that this incident demonstrates the ways we might think about freshman English as a public utility, or in her words, as cultural capital (229), “as the mutual property of all persons who conceive of education as a site for transmission of a received dominant culture” (231).
And she determines that the source of people’s frustration with the syllabus was not as political as some might expect. Instead, she concludes that “correct” English – a commitment deep within “America’s cultural imagination” (231) – was at the heart of this dispute.

Inextricably linked to American universities’ discriminatory practices based on race and class, is the desire for “correct” and proper English, which Crowley characterizes has having a long and complex history that extends to attitudes about literacy more generally. Although Crowley broadens her analytical framework to include concerns about literacy, she eventually narrows her scope both to the idealist notions of “correct” English and also the “idealist notion of ‘the academic essay’” (233). Of the five-paragraph essay she notes, “it fosters and supports the persistent American belief that universal standards of literacy exist, and it legitimizes and covers over the social and institutional functions of Freshman English” (233). The “social and institutional functions” of first-year writing are intertwined with and affected by a penchant to either embrace the myth of the academic essay or reject it, replacing it with what might be best characterized as the grand narrative of literacy and empowerment. Not surprisingly, for Crowley, both moves, in their own way, replicate the discourse – the political, social, and institutional semiotics – as well as the conditions that valorize the aforementioned idealist myths of composition. Overall, this leads to discriminatory and unfair conditions for both students and instructors and necessitates the type of change that Crowley has in mind; namely, the abolition of the universal requirement of freshman English.
Crowley and The Rise of New Abolitionism

As mentioned earlier, in addition to accounting for some of the overlooked particulars of Crowley’s proposal, another aim of this chapter is to examine the ways that and reasons why Crowley’s call is so popular in contemporary composition studies. One way we can gain some insight into this matter is by examining how her proposal was initially received by the field of Composition studies.

In his history of the abolition debate, Robert Connors notes that Crowley’s polemic and criticism of the universal requirement is so significant that it marks a critical turning point in the debate. For Connors, Crowley’s study marks the beginning of what he terms the “New Abolitionist” movement, a period marked by calls for the abolition of compulsory English from the ranks of “composition insiders” (21), not literature faculty, as had been the case in the past. Without a doubt, Crowley is a composition insider, as she has received considerable acclaim within the field of rhetoric and composition for her study *The Methodical Memory: Invention in Current-Tradition Rhetoric*. In addition, *Composition in The University* won the 1998 Mina Shaughnessy Prize which is “presented for an outstanding scholarly book in the fields of language, culture, literacy, or literature with strong application to the teaching of English” (MLA). Certainly, this professional status coupled with the “deliberately provocative” (Connors 21) diction and tone of her text has contributed, in part, to the notoriety of this particular proposal to abolish freshman English. When we turn to reviews of the work we find dramatically conflicting statements with respect to the value of the text for the field of composition and rhetoric.
In his review of Crowley’s work in *The Journal of Advanced Composition*, Raul Sanchez thinks quite highly of the text. Above all he appreciates the study’s methodology, which he describes as a version of “postmodern historiography.” Although we get little sense of what this term means to him, what counts as history for Sanchez are the many topics that Crowley touches on in her revisionist history of freshman English: namely, the rise of Arnoldian humanism; the ascent of literary study at the expense of composition (see also John Brereton, James Berlin, Susan Miller, Steven North, and David Russell for accounts of this narrative); the privatization of the rhetorical canon of invention (which Crowley also discusses in her text, *The Methodical Memory* 1990); the influence of the trend of toward academic specialization in universities; and, finally, pressures brought on by World War II, the General Education Movement, and responses to fascism and communism. Sanchez is right when he mentions that most in composition are familiar with aspects of this narrative, one that pits freshman English in a power struggle against these aforementioned pressures and developments. However, what is most interesting about his reception of Crowley’s study is that his *only* criticism of the work is precisely what he admires most about it:

Given that humanism has been under attack for some time now – from within both composition theory and literary theory, as Crowley notes – its role as scapegoat in this narrative will make quite good sense to many readers. But precisely because assent is so easily achieved on this matter—because terms like “Arnoldian humanism” are now familiar pejoratives in the lexicon of English studies – it merits more careful scrutiny than Crowley offers here and throughout the book. While she does offer a discursive footnote that addresses humanism’s various definitions and applications in education, one is left,
nonetheless, with the impression that a revisionist history of composition requires a similarly revisionist account of humanism, if the two are as intertwined as Crowley suggests. (Sanchez)

Sanchez seems to value the work because it provides a historical context for the claims and criticism that Crowley makes in earlier criticisms of compulsory Freshman English. In fact, somewhat surprisingly, he notes that it is this attention to historical context (not her proposals, polemical tone, or agonistic disposition) that drives the study. He notes, “Composition in the University uses history to advance its argument, to make its case – not to tell what happened, not to tell the truth.” And this move specifically qualifies Crowley for an ironic status (given the matter at hand). Sanchez feels so strongly about Crowley’s methodology that he thinks the book itself should be *compulsory* for graduate students in composition and rhetoric. “Thus,” he writes, “the book is an example of the kind of empirical/archival/theoretical work that is possible in composition studies, and for that reason alone it should be *required* reading in our graduate programs” (emphasis added). If Sanchez’s study is an example of the type of reception that has contributed to Crowley’s polemic gaining currency and credibility in the field of rhetoric and composition, then the following essay points to how divisive Crowley’s work is.

Two years later, writing in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Jacqueline Rhodes stops well short of recommending that Crowley’s proposal be required reading for graduate students in English studies. In fact, instead of advocating a wider reception for the text, she cautions readers that Crowley’s “prognosticatory” (98) essays are not for everyone. “The book is not for the faint of heart,” she writes, “nor for those unwilling to question
just what it is we do as rhetoricians and/or composition specialists” (98). Despite her reservations she is, like Sanchez, interested in Crowley’s methodology, which she describes as a “recasting of the history of composition” (96), allowing Crowley a strategic “place from which to argue for the abolition of Freshman English” (96). Rhodes criticizes Crowley for her “loose” and “interweaving” history (which might lend some insight into what Sanchez means by “postmodern historiography”), and she notes that “the book seems to rush at the issues from all sides” (96).

In addition to these concerns about her methodology, Rhodes has reservations about Crowley’s proposal to abolish the universal requirement of freshman English specifically: However, by the end of this cogent exploration, I was still waiting for the “what then?” of Crowley’s argument. That is, if contemporary rhetoricians, compositionists, teachers, and administrators do all eventually agree on Crowley’s course of action, what are the intellectual and material consequences? What happens to those rhetoricians and compositionists, the adjunct instructors, the graduate teaching assistants, and—importantly—the students themselves? (98). It is important to note that Rhodes’ misgivings should not be confused with a common trope of the genre of book reviews. Indeed, Rhodes is engaged in an act of speculation, but she is not speculating about how Crowley’s work will be received by the field of rhetoric and composition more generally. This is, without a doubt, a move that characterizes most reviews of scholarly publications in English studies. Instead, I argue that what we find here is a symptom of the rhetorical power and influence of Crowley’s proposal to abolish freshman English. Simply put, Rhodes is frightened by the implications of Crowley’s proposal. She seems legitimately concerned about what will happen if the field acts together to abolish the universal
requirement, and the fact that she strings together rhetorical question after question points to how uncertain and anxious Crowley’s text leaves her. In addition to worrying about the intellectual and material consequences of abolishing the universal requirement, Rhodes is also apprehensive about how the field will be perceived. She expresses her most serious concerns with one last rhetorical question: “However, it is not my intention,” she writes, “to buttress the composition empire against which Crowley argues; rather, I wonder who it is we would be without that structure. What would composition offer as its public rationale?” (98).

Certainly, Rhodes’ response highlights the ways that the image or public identity of the field of rhetoric and composition is linked to the universal requirement. However, for now, I want to stress how Rhodes’s response is indicative of just how polarizing and divisive Crowley’s proposal is. On the one hand, we have Sanchez’s review, which more or less advocates the canonization of Crowley’s call to abolish compulsory freshman English, despite his expressed ambivalence about her methodology. On the other hand, we find Rhodes cautioning readers, restricting the scope of the essay’s reception, questioning the ends toward which Crowley’s proposal is directed, and, in a sense, reacting unfavorably to its influence.

Unfortunately, what I suspect has occurred is that over time both scenarios have played out. Because Composition in the University is cited so frequently and in other compulsory studies (as we will see in the next section), the text has become required reading for graduate students in rhetoric and composition seminars and programs. Consequently, graduate students, sometimes at very early stages in their studies, are forced to experience many of the same anxieties and doubts expressed by Rhodes when
they first learn that there is an undercurrent in their chosen profession that seeks to abolish the requirement for freshman English, the very topic of study to which many of them have committed their professional lives. This was certainly the case with me when I first encountered Crowley’s study as a graduate student at the University of Oklahoma and, after reading Rhodes’ review of her work, I know that I was not alone. The consequences of this situation are impossible to evaluate fully, but we can learn even more about how Crowley’s study has come to stand in for the entire tradition of abolitionism by examining more closely the ways that Crowley’s study functions on evidentiary levels in rhetoric and composition scholarship.

The Rhetoric of Citations -- Explicating Typographical Ends

To this point I have discussed the particulars of Crowley’s polemic, but now I turn to a discussion of annotation and citation. More specifically, I discuss the rhetoric of citation systems. In many ways, the following discussion aims to pin down a language to discuss the function of citations in scholarly inquiry. I do not aspire, however, to give voice to every contributor to this lengthy and expansive line of inquiry on the nature and function of footnotes and other forms of annotation in scholarly research. Although in the first chapter, I was interested in expanding the scope of my research to account for perspectives outsides of the field of rhetoric and composition, here, I am interested in the ways that scholars in this field have attempted to account for their own evidentiary practices. In so doing, I aim to lend some support to a critical assumption at the heart of my argument in this chapter: citation systems and other references function rhetorically
both because of the substantive content they contain and because of the forms in which they appear.

In this next section, I review Shirley K. Rose’s discussion of citation practices in the context of metaphor, extending the discourse of economics to account for prevailing understandings of how citation systems function in writing. Robert J. Connors provides a history of citation systems and emphasizes what is implied by Rose; namely, annotations are directly linked to social and rhetorical concerns. Finally, Kay Halasek demonstrates what is at stake in any inquiry directed toward delineating a rhetoric of citation systems. She suggests any discussion of reported speech – in any form – must involve rhetorical concerns to some degree.

In “The Role of Scholarly Citations in Disciplinary Economies,” Rose hopes that by extending “economic metaphors” to examples of citation practices, she may provide insight into how various citation systems function to limit participation in and distribution of knowledge within communities.22 Rose describes how citation systems contribute to the sense of a continuity of practice in scholarship. For instance, in examining references to Mina Shaughnessy’s Errors and Expectations, she delineates eight types of “coherence relationships” (246) that may be evinced from examining a “grammar of citations” (244). In her sixth example, which is most applicable to my study, Rose analyzes Maxine Hairston’s reference to Shaughnessy in a passage from “The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing.”

[Shaughnessy] was the first to undertake a large-scale research project whose goal was to teach the new students of the seventies to write. Her example, her book, and her repeated calls for new research in composition
have undoubtedly been important stimuli in spurring the profession’s
search for a new paradigm. (Hairston qtd. in Rose 246)

Here, Rose identifies this citation (as she does with the other categories) in terms of a
relationship between the text cited and the text in which the citation appears in. For
Rose, this type of citation suggests a “sequential relationship,” one that is, “especially
significant” (246). However, Rose stops short of articulating precisely why this
relationship is so significant, though she does state, “Ordering texts chronologically
makes very specific claims about their significance to the orderly development of a
discipline” (246). I suppose, to some extent, Rose’s efforts yield significant insights, but
she also confirms what many teacher-researchers already know about footnotes; namely,
because citations often contain names, titles – and of course, dates – they contribute to a
sense of temporal continuity in scholarship thereby providing participants in a specific
discourse community a sense that their research constitutes various positions in a
narrative directed toward certain ends. In other words, footnotes often function to order
scholarly and deliberative inquiry – to situate research and scholars on a timeline.

Robert Connors’s study of citation systems interrogates footnotes and other forms
of annotation from a perspective highly sensitive to time. In addition, he demonstrates
that when discussing the nature of citation styles, we find ourselves deep in matters of
rhetoric. In part I, “The Development of Annotation Structures from the Renaissance
to 1900” Connors presents an intriguing historical overview of the development of
citations in Western culture. However, behind his attempt to recount this curious history
is another project – and, certainly one just as curious – to foreground his study of citation
in rhetorical matters. As he begins his study he notes,
The field of rhetoric, especially in its written forms, where citations had to be visible and reproducible, inevitably evolved the most formalized conventions for signaling ethical use of others’ work. The gradual formalization of written citation systems should not, however, blind us to their essentially rhetorical nature. Every formal structure declares allegiances and counterallegiances. (338)

Indeed, for Connors, the act of reporting others’ work – of footnoting, annotating, and citing – begins with rhetoric. That is, the essences of persuasion – logos, ethos, pathos, and kairos – already inform the formal structure of citations; consequently, rhetoric and ethics underline citation systems and structures even before they are deployed. As Ede and Lunsford note in the preface to part I of “The Rhetoric of Citation Systems,” the title of Connors’ article ends with an asterisk that points readers to Connors’ own rather lengthy footnote, one that fully demonstrates the essential rhetorical nature of citation systems (338). Connor states:

Readers will notice that this essay violates Rhetoric Review’s own citation style, which follows New MLA in asking for endnotes rather than footnotes. I specifically requested this change of the editor, and she has graciously assented. […] I have simply found footnotes a more precise system, allowing for a text/note dialogism that endnotes kill completely. And given the fact that the only footnotes still allowed by New MLA are discursive, that dialogism is even more important. (337)

Here, Connors demonstrates that a violation of an audience’s or an editorial staff’s expectations of citation formats requires a rationale – the requisite conditions of rebuttal.
Simply put, his citation style demonstrates the “inescapably social” (338) and rhetorical nature of annotations more generally.

Still, a significant part of the rhetorical nature of citation systems involves the extent to which annotations and references rely on, among other things, assumptions about what knowledge readers possess. By that, I mean, at times, the effectiveness of citations partly depends on whether readers are familiar with content referenced in the citation. For instance, as Connors details in his study on The 1582 Rheims New Testament, which used a system of “endnotes glosses” (351) after each chapter, this version of the New Testament assumed a great deal about its audience – and for good reason:

The work assumes familiarity with a body of commenting literature; it uses specialized Latinate “insider” terminology to direct readers around within its field of interlocking claims and support; it uses these citations to support specific textual positions recognizable within a discourse community; and it backs its positions by careful reference to accredited masters working previously within that community. (351)

Connors’ assessment is all the more remarkable because it is in reference to what he deems an “overtly polemical” work. As Connors remarks on the role of citation formats during this time, the “glossings” and references present in The Rheims New Testament were, in part, a response to a dispute over annotation styles specifically. In the sixteenth century, the Geneva Bible of 1560 and the Bishops’ Bible of 1568 – both Protestant publications – demonstrated the extent to which typographical methods had advanced, as each used “textual letter citations – a, b, c, d – to refer to glosses printed in
small type in the margins and at the foot of the page” (351). Such sophisticated citation methods allowed for filling of the vast white space surrounding blocks of text with marginal comments and specific translation or explanation remarks. Most importantly, however, these citation systems were couched in “typological precedents,” standards that virtually guaranteed a consistent and “coherent Protestant reading” (351). Not surprisingly, and as Connors explains in his study, the Catholics had an innovative response of their own: the Rheims New Testament. In contrast to the Geneva Bible and the Bishops’ Bible, the presence of endnotes (rather than simply marginal or interlinear annotation) guaranteed, as one might expect, a biblical reading in opposition to the type of “coherence” emphasized by Protestant versions. In fact, the Rhemish form of citation – which used endnotes – aspired not to achieve a state of coherence but “to minimize the rhetorical effect of extensive notational apparatus” (351). What is most interesting, I think, is that, contrary to what we might expect, it is not the momentous task of translation or quarrels over doctrinal paradigms that motivated new versions of the Bible during this time. Instead, it was a dispute over annotation styles. More specifically, the rhetorical potential implicit in these citation styles galvanized participants of this debate. As such, by demonstrating the essential rhetorical nature of citation systems, I suppose I anticipate potential objections to my claim that the citations I examine are directed to rhetorical ends.

Beyond such disputes, the Rheims New Testament introduced other citation styles that, according to Connors, “would ever after exist” (351): the dialogic note and the citation note. The dialogic or discursive note literally undergirds the main text, providing related commentary for the purpose of establishing relationships between elements in the
text. The citation note, on the other hand, communicates precise information to provide access to particular text quoted by an author. Not unexpectedly, and as I argue, it is precisely when we begin drawing distinctions within citation systems that we find ourselves very much in matters of rhetoric. This is, I think, because the distinctions we draw often reveal the ends we aspire to achieve. And in many ways, Kay Halasek demonstrates how social, cultural, and political underpinnings specifically inform these aspirations and our annotations as well.

Throughout *A Pedagogy of Possibility*, Halasek provides readers with a theory of composition pedagogy that privileges dialogic explanations of learning over monologic – dynamic conceptions of students’ relationship to discourse rather than static. She foregrounds this theoretical paradigm – as well as a reconceived notion of writing instruction – in principles of heteroglossia and dialogue, terms that serve as cornerstones of Bakhtinian language theory. A critical facet of her thesis is most clear in a discussion of the forms and significance of reported speech; however, her position on the “politics” of citation systems differs slightly from Robert Connors’ and, to some extent, Shirley Rose’s.

In Halasek’s analysis of representations of “summary and paraphrase” in composition textbooks, she takes issue, as Connors and Rose might, with the notion that “summary and paraphrase alone and not direct or indirect quotation are capable of reporting another’s discourse in a critical manner” (162). Such an argument, she asserts, overlooks the dialogic relationship reported discourse shares with the main text of a written composition. Most striking, however, near the end of this discussion, she argues that “it’s not the *form* that the reporting discourse takes that determines its orientation
toward the reported discourse but the *style* of that reporting discourse” (163). This assertion, in part, contradicts the assumption that is at the heart of Connors’ and Rose’s claims about the rhetoricity of citation systems; namely, that the descriptive category of a citation – its *form* alone – presupposes rhetorical matters. As we have seen with other authors’ attempts to make sense of the rhetorical underpinnings of reported speech, Halasek offers a new articulation to distinguish between types of citations. Nevertheless, it is this tendency, I think – to name, locate, and distinguish – that articulates the stakes in this discussion of the rhetoric of citation systems, and in my analysis to identify the rhetorical purpose of scholars’ citations to Crowley’s abolitionist polemic.

**See The Material Conditions of Composition Instructors**

The epigraph from Kay Halasek, which begins this chapter, touches on the degree to which rhetorical concerns and consequences permeate discussions of reported speech. I am interested in considering the rhetorical consequences of referencing Crowley’s polemic in the context of materialist critiques of composition studies. However, I am also interested in the degree to which citations rely on assumptions about the knowledge readers possess to realize these rhetorical consequences. The scholars I treat in the following section all refer to Crowley’s polemic in various ways. Delineating these different ways and the tendencies implicit in each citation serves to improve how we report the speech of others in composition scholarship and our understanding of how Crowley’s call has come to eclipse an entire tradition of complaint.
In “Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss: Class Consciousness in Composition,” Joseph Harris’ chief concern is to call attention to conflicts of interest brought on by the varying and, arguably, unethical material conditions many composition instructors work. More specifically, however, he is concerned with how members of English department discuss this issue. He demonstrates that when questions explicitly concerned with the material conditions of composition instruction arise, various members of the field (e.g. part-timers, graduate assistants, tenure-tracked faculty and administrators) often elide matters involving class consciousness by situating such discussions in terms of “professional and disciplinary” (46) contexts. Although Harris seems transfixed by the idea that conflicts of interest due to positions that people hold in English department, lead to misguided perceptions of the value of work, he is less concerned with the disciplinary status of composition than he is with improving the material conditions of instruction for composition instructors and the quality of that instruction for undergraduates. He explains:

But while I, too, am concerned with how scholarly work in composition gets valued (or not), the crucial questions for me are still these: Who does the actual teaching? What institutional structures best allow us to shape how writing gets taught to undergraduates? I am less worried, that is, about the status of composition as a discipline than about whether composition programs treat instructors fairly and teach undergraduates to write well. (56)

He suggests that teacher-researchers in composition have “succumbed to a professional logic” (56). For Harris, this logic holds that if composition studies is considered a
“research field,” the teaching of writing will improve. Of course, the claims of this logic are bolstered by many assumptions, some of which Harris details: most notably, this logic assumes that tenured faculty constitute all research fields and that opening more lines of tenure in composition studies improves the quality of writing instruction and the intellectual merit or status of the discipline. Predictably, as most materialist critiques do, Harris eventually crunches the numbers of this quandary and accurately concludes, “But there will never be close to enough tenure-stream compositionists to teach all the sections of first-year writing offered at US colleges and universities each year…” (56). It is with this deconstruction of a particularly tenacious theme in composition scholarship that Harris proceeds to in his conclusion. Specifically, he outlines suggestions to improve the material conditions for composition instructors.

He begins this section alluding to “an inexact and yet telling analogy” (62) surfacing in discussions of staffing of required first-year writing courses. Harris offers an analysis of a discourse pointing to the economic dependence of composition studies on a “subordinated workforce” (62). Harris is referring to what Connors touches on in the epigraph of this study; namely, the abolition debate in composition studies. In Harris’ discussion of this debate, as in his discussion of the materiality of composition programs more generally, he situates the analogy as part of a depth of inquiry, one with its own narrative, history, antagonists, and – dare I say – heroes. His seventh footnote reads:

See Crowley’s Composition in the University and also the essays in Joseph Petraglia’s Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction. For a powerful counter to the “New Abolitionism,” see Roemer, Schultz, and
Durst’s recent essay on “Reframing the Great Debate on First-Year Writing.” (66)

This footnote is particularly revelatory for my study: it is a glancing reference to a complex debate, one that, as I have suggested in my first chapter, is defined by assumptions about the purpose, viability, and future of writing in universities. On the surface, Harris’ footnote functions to bolster his legitimacy, in so far as it appropriately acknowledges principal contributors to the abolition debate. However, it also relies on an assumed body of knowledge. By that, I mean, for readers to navigate the debate—and arguably, evince the significance of this footnote— they must have, in the least, a sense of what part of Composition in the University Harris specifically refers to; an idea as to what extent Petraglia’s selected essays comment on what Harris finds so salient in Crowley’s proposal; how “New Abolitionism” differs from the original version of abolitionism; and finally, knowledge as to what characteristics—in composition scholarship specifically—constitute “powerful” responses.

It is striking, in my opinion, how Connors’ assertions on the function of citations in the Rheims New Testament account for what is happening in Harris’ citation of Crowley. As I mentioned earlier, Connors states that many citations in the 1582 Rheims New Testament—like Harris’—assume familiarity with a body of commenting literature, relies on “insider” language or jargon to “direct readers around within its field of interlocking claims and support,” and deploys citations to bolster “positions recognizable within a discourse community” (351). Most notable and revealing in the context of this study, however, is Connors’ last point: citations in the Rheims New Testament back recognizable positions by referencing the previous work of “accredited
masters” in a particular discourse community. Based on my readings of her work and previous explications of reviews of Composition in the University, it is safe to assert that Crowley is an “accredited master” in composition studies. Although this might be an unsettling position for her to hold, she might agree with the assertion that citations that reference her work as Harris does, partly construct her position as a master narrative within the abolition debate. But as I have demonstrated, this privileged and valorized position comes at the cost of not fully representing critical facets of her argument – in a sense, silencing Crowley in a reference intended to give her a voice.

The question, then, becomes to what extent do the inherent assumptions in Harris’ footnote allow him to achieve a particular rhetorical purpose in his study? Earlier I remarked that Harris explicitly states that he less interested in interrogating the status of composition than he is in offering an alternative to this established line of inquiry. What I think is most interesting about this qualifying language is that while Harris argues that the category of status is not a principal concern of his text, the issue is ever-present; it is implicit – as I have shown – simply by referencing Crowley’s position in the abolition debate. However, as Connors shows us, it is possible that the argument over the status of composition is understood in Harris’ reference to Crowley. Like the understood “you” in the language of Harris’ citation ([you] See Crowley) or the assumed body of knowledge at play in citations in the Rheims New Testament, her unique historical methodology and discussion of the relegation of composition studies are understood in Harris’ citation, or they should be. Nevertheless, it seems, while concerns over the status of composition are not a principal orientation for Harris, they are important undercurrents at the most
critical moment in his study. In the conclusion to his study, he makes recommendations for improving the material conditions of composition studies.

Harris’ citation to Crowley suggests some of the consequences that stem from relying on an assumed body of knowledge in citations, concerns outlined and remarked on by Connors. The following citation seems linked to the ideas expressed by Shirley Rose. Here, Horner’s reference to Crowley emphasizes the importance of sequence and the significance of the relationships that comprise such sequences.

In *Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique*, Bruce Horner, like Harris, is concerned with denying the materiality of academic scholarship, suggesting that many scholars in composition studies turn a blind eye to the social and material conditions that underline the daily operations of their work. Much of his text deals with how teacher-researchers construct student identities and roles based on perceived intellectual and performative potential. Such moves, according to Horner, can serve to elide the fact that more than anything, students often signal the significance and presence of the materiality of our work in composition. To this end, then, Horner marshals an understanding of the “political” as “an inescapable dimension of all human life” (74) rather than as a condition of the intentionally naïve. In this vein, “Academic,” the fourth chapter of Horner’s study, continues his examination of the functioning of contradictions in academic representations of work. Here, Horner’s study begins to take its intended shape as an exploration into why teacher-researchers perceive divisions among academic, professional, and political discourses, and how specific interpretive moves serve to replicate consequences of conceptualizing such differences. This is most clear, I believe,
in Horner’s treatment of the abolition debate in composition studies. Interestingly, it is in his discussion of Crowley’s polemic that Horner’s argument gains traction. He writes:

Sharon Crowley, for example argues that the “heart” of the problems of “Freshman English” arises from its “unusual origin” “as a response to perceived deficiencies in students’ literate skills, rather than as an arena in which to study a body of received knowledge.” Thus, “the course has never appropriated an area of study for itself that would bring order to its teaching.

While Horner’s reference to Crowley differs from Rose’s example (using Shaughnessy) in the sense that it does not explicitly demonstrate a sequential relationship. His reference does, however, more fully point to the significance of how we perceive the origins and outcome of the abolition debate – the significance of what Rose calls “sequential relationships.” Here, Horner is setting up for an important distinction that provides two implicit orientations that, I argue, drive the rest of his study. Horner distinguishes between functionalist and situated explanations.

Functionalist explanations confuse effects with function -- outcomes with origin. Conversely, situated explanations, insofar as they somewhat paradoxically aspire to make sense of functions, account for the contingency-laden underpinnings of institutions and communities. That is to say, situated explanations allow for complexity and the possibility that institutions sometimes perform functions that seemingly contradict their intended purpose. As such, we can better understand the rhetorical consequences of situated references by turning to what Horner finds so problematic about Crowley’s role in the abolition debate. He writes:
The same confusion obtains in debates over the abolition of freshman composition. The arguments for abolishing freshman composition typically attribute to the course the performance of some function, whether praised or condemned, in relation either to non-academic social needs or other academic work. (126)

For Horner, a fundamental flaw of the abolition argument is that it presumes that the origin narrative of the institutional form “inevitably functions to realize that potential” (133). That is, because the abolition argument partly depends on Crowley’s conception of a “unique origin” narrative, functionalist explanations tend to assume that the same reasons for that narrative inform the actual work of composition today. As Horner notes, Charles Bazerman articulates a significant dilemma at the heart of this mode of thinking: “Just because we have been funded with a reductionist notion of our task has not meant that we have been bound to follow through in a reductionist way” (130). By advancing an “authoritative” origin narrative for composition studies, we blind ourselves “to aspects and effects of such forms outside the ken of such ‘norms’” (130).

Horner’s reference to Crowley is important, then, because it allows him to articulate a significant consequence of advancing an “authoritative” origin narrative or a hero that is not necessarily one. Taken together, Rose and Connors suggest that, on the one hand, references that assume sequential relationships establish a sense of continuity and linearity that may not actually exist. On the other hand, taken in the context of Horner’s larger project, his reference to Crowley allows him to propose a language and marshal a way of thinking that accounts for a dialectical and more situated explanation of composition’s unique history. This is relevant for this chapter because, as Horner
demonstrates, Crowley’s polemic grows out of her understanding of composition’s unique history. What Horner demonstrates is that a situated explanation of the abolition debate seem less likely to replicate reductive interpretive moves that confuse the origin of composition with its potential (i.e. confusing why composition was originally needed with its contemporary aspirations to engage in a deliberative, intellectual inquiry). In this case, we might argue, that because Horner’s reference to Crowley does not rely on assumed knowledge, resists the tendency to valorize Crowley’s position in the abolition debate, and accounts for some of the particulars of her position, his method of making sense of Crowley’s role in the abolition debate is more nuanced and, consequently, more productive.

If Horner’s reference to Crowley aspires to articulate the significance of better situating Crowley’s role in the abolition debate, then a final reference most fully models what Ede describes as a situated reference. In the following section, I introduce a final reference to Crowley’s polemic. I return to Halasek in this section because her work on reported speech provides orientations from which to discuss the significance of Ede’s reference to Crowley.

(Re) Situating Sharon Crowley

In Situating Composition: Composition Studies and the Politics of Location, Lisa Ede details many of the assumptions that are at play in composition studies. She dovetails historical and theoretical critiques with personal experience to provide productive rereadings of chief contributions to the scholarship of composition studies. Not surprisingly, in her attempts to delineate consequences of particular assumptions for
the professionalization of the discipline, she discusses the debate over the universal required first-year writing course.

Indeed, in *Composition in the University*, Crowley argues that “The traditional function of the required first-year course is increasingly hard to reconcile with the professionalization and specialization that now characterize the American academy” (10). This limitation is hardly the primary reason why Crowley calls for abandoning the required first-year writing requirement. Crowley is much more concerned with the failure of the writing process movement to constitute itself as “a truly paradigmatic alternative to current-traditionalism” (212) and with the “disciplining function” (10) that the first-year requirement exerts on students. (Crowley qtd. in Ede 108).

In this passage, Ede directly quotes and accounts for some of the reasons that sustain Crowley’s position on the elimination of the universal first-year requirement. Yet, Ede suggests that even a direct citation from *Composition in the University* does not fully represent the complexity and dimension of this issue. She notes that the “limitation” identified is “hardly the primary reason” motivating Crowley’s polemic. Interestingly, it is the limitation identified by Horner’s study – the seemingly irreconcilable consequences that grow out of the disconnect between origin narratives and the ostensible purposes of modern composition – that Ede finds to be insufficient. More striking, however, is that while Ede recognizes Horner’s concerns, she emphasizes something completely different from both Harris and Horner as a motivating concern for Crowley: the apparent failure of the writing process movement to take hold as a something consequential.
Kay Halasek provides a language to discuss the rhetorical purpose and significance of Ede’s reference to Crowley. Her chapter titled “The Politics of Reported Speech and the Ideology of Form,” draws many distinctions between the varied ways that writers report the speech of others. Most applicable to this study, however, is the distinction Halasek draws between linear and pictorial styles. Drawing on Valentin Volosinov’s, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Halasek suggests that linear and pictorial styles are each, in their own way, symptomatic of varied aspirations – conscious and unconscious signals that reveal more about how environments construct writers than the particular characteristics that surface in an individual’s composition. More specifically, Halasek explains that “Linear styles of reporting discourse” are “centripetal, conservative, and present dialogue *in absentia*, with heteroglossia as a dialogizing backdrop absent from the actual text” (166). Conversely, rather than aspiring to maintain the “original intention of the reported discourse” (166) – as linear styles do – pictorial styles of reported discourse, “incorporate heteroglossia – with its clashing and mixing of alien languages – directly into the utterance” (166). In other words, pictorial discourse (which Halasek also terms as *ludic*) provides the opportunity for readers “to question, interrogate, or even dismiss the reported discourse” (167).

I want to emphasize that I am not drawing on Halasek to suggest that the categories she delineates apply perfectly to the reported speech of Harris, Horner, or Ede. In fact, I would argue that Halasek’s definition of linear discourse might be revised to account not only for the desire to preserve the “original” authorial intention of a work but also the *ostensible* intention. As such, it becomes quite difficult to argue that any reported discourse falls completely under the theoretical framework of either the linear or
ludic style. Nevertheless, Halasek’s distinction allows us to uncover both similarities and differences in reported speech, both of which – as I speculated earlier – point to the rhetorical purpose and significance of citation forms. For this reason, we might read Ede’s reference to Crowley as both linear and ludic. Doing so, I think, brings us closer to a situated understanding of how Crowley functions in Ede’s reference and perhaps why Ede’s style of annotation leaves readers with more to work with – more opportunities for productive and generative deliberation on the abolition debate.

Although direct quotations from Crowley constitute much of Ede’s reference, Connors would likely describe Ede’s reference as “allowing for a text/note dialogism” (337) that an endnote and even a footnote does not allow. The fact that the reference to Crowley is intertextual maximizes the rhetorical effect of the citation and minimizes the disruption that footnotes would create. We see little in the way of maintaining what Rose terms as a “sequential relationship;” however, by reading the citation from both the linear and the ludic orientations, we do uncover what Rose might deem to be “especially significant” (246). If we assume that linear citation forms preserve authorial intention, then the most obvious symptom of the linear form in this reference is that Ede strings together two direct quotations from Crowley rather than, say, paraphrasing. Furthermore, in keeping with Halasek’s definition of linear citations, the structure or citation form betrays the rhetorical purpose of the reference. By that, I mean, the point of Ede’s citation– to both reference Crowley’s role in the abolition debate and provide an alternative to generally conceded motivations for her role in that debate – is, in part, undermined by the citation form, which Halasek calls centripetal. This form obfuscates dialogue by presenting artificial resolutions and associations. Doing so, as I argue,
presents and preservers what the writer – in this case, Ede – determines to be the authorial intention – the perceived intention of Crowley.

Conversely, in order to read Ede’s citation as pictorial or ludic, we must uncover the tendency to retort and parody reported speech, a centrifugal quality that leads to the smearing of the boundaries “between authorial, or reporting, and reported discourse through commentary and evaluation” (Halasek 166). We do not find examples of parody in Ede’s reference to Crowley; however, we do find language that indicates a sort of stepping out, an analytical and evaluative move that lends perspective on Crowley’s role. For instance, Ede notes, “This limitation is hardly the primary reason why Crowley calls for abandoning the required first-year writing requirement” (108). Here, in essence, we find Ede speaking for Crowley. When she writes, “This limitation is hardly” she seems to suggest that what is to follow has been overlooked; moreover, that this point is not buried in an endnote, or setting below a horizon of inquiry at the bottom of the page, indicates the level of importance of this matter for Ede; she is maximizing the rhetorical effect of this reference by accounting for a commonly overlooked reason of Crowley’s polemic. In so doing, Ede effectively models a situated reference to Crowley’s polemic. Additionally, she provides readers with a reference to the abolition debate that attempts to account for one of the most overlooked and notorious voices in the debate; namely, Crowley’s voice. As Halasek writes,

The measure of an effective discourse, then, is neither in the level of its originality nor in the extent to which it says something new, but rather in the extent to which it recognizes, entertains, manages, and contends with
those “off-stage voices,” the extent to which it effectively reports others’ discourses in a ludic style. (170).

In this passage, Halasek articulates important characteristics that situated references might reflect. Interestingly, however, it is by reading Ede’s reference as both linear and ludic that we come to see what is at stake in this discussion more generally.

Although the power and notoriety of Crowley’s call for the abolition of the first-year requirement beckons researchers to valorize her, it may also provide the invitation to generalize about her role and influence in this debate. By this, I mean, contemporary composition scholarship tends to employ Crowley in ways that cause her to stand in for what Leonard Greenbaum calls a “tradition of complaint,” one that, as I have demonstrated, reaches back to the early 1900s and is constituted by many calls, each responding to specific pressures and times. Generalizations like these, as well as the formal structure of references and the presumptuous tendencies that grow out of these concerns, erase Crowley from her own polemic – in a sense – silencing her in citations intended to give her voice.

Scholars in composition studies will do well to examine more closely the reasons and rhetorical consequences of references to Crowley’s call for the abolition of the universal first-year requirement. By not accounting for these reasons and by allowing Crowley’s proposal to stand in for an entire tradition of abolitionism, we might indeed valorize Crowley’s role in this debate, but we also paradoxically silence her, eliding the particulars and nuance not only of her position but also of other important voices in the abolition debate.
One criticism that be made of my study is that the general topic is, as one member of a hiring committee put it, “well-traveled ground” in rhetoric and composition scholarship. This may be partly true. However, if it is, I argue that it is perhaps the most compelling reason for continued research into proposals for abolishing and reforming first-year English. I say this because the metaphor of understanding the history of the field of composition studies as a journey – with a certain starting point, common “ground” that has been traversed, and a clear destination – is a little misleading.

What my investigation of the abolition debate demonstrates is that the significant assumptions about literacy that inform both abolitionists and reformist positions have been overlooked. In most cases, these assumptions are based on frail and ambiguous conceptualization of literacy. These conceptions often emphasize the “strong, uniform, universal, unitary, unwavering nature and impact” of literacy (Graff “Literacy, Myth, and Legacies” 19). Regardless of what position scholars take in the debate – as reformists or abolitionists – they share much in common when it comes to confiding in conceptions, or as Harvey Graff terms them, the “continuities and contradictions” of literacy. Consequently, although many have participated in and examined the great debate over composition – while this ground is in fact “well traveled” – as a field, because we have not acknowledged the role of the myths and legacies of literacy in the debate over
freshman English, we know little about why the ground we have traveled looks the way that it does. At stake in making these myths more transparent, as I do throughout this project, is finding a way out of a stale, unproductive, and cyclical debate that returns us time and time again to the same starting point: criticizing composition instructors and students for not achieving the impossible and pursuing the ostensible problem of illiteracy with mismatched solutions.

Not surprisingly, the debate continues today, and with it, the questions, continuities, and myths of literacy that have perpetuated the argument since the inception of the composition course in the 1880s. In fact, as recently as 2009, Stanley Fish published a three-part article in the *New York Times* titled, “What Should Colleges Teach?” What is striking about this article is the extent to which Fish echoes the sentiments of more than a century of abolitionists and revisionists. Like Lounsbury in 1911 and Campbell in 1939, Fish begins his article by lamenting the declining writing and reading skills of his students. This realization leads him to perform an investigation in which he “asked to see the lesson plans of the 104 sections” of composition at a university. What he found confirmed his suspicion: “Although the other 100 sections fulfilled the composition requirement, instruction in composition was not their focus. Instead, the students spent much of their time discussing novels, movies, TV shows and essays on a variety of hot-button issues — racism, sexism, immigration, globalization” (Fish). Fish’s review of syllabi (not “lesson plans” as he previously noted) leads him to conclude that courses that do not focus on “writing” specifically are a “sham.” Like Brower and Rice in the 1940s, he blames, in part, high schools, noting, “I cannot see, however, why a failure of secondary education relieves college teachers of a
responsibility to make up the deficit. Quite the reverse. It is because our students come to us unable to write clean English sentences that we are obligated to supply what they did not receive from their previous teachers” (Fish). The blame that Fish places with both high schools and post-secondary composition instructors is certainly reminiscent of reformist arguments that have come before him. However, Fish’s cursory and injudicious methodology represents an even more significant continuity in the Tradition of Complaint, especially when he remarks on what is at stake in composition: namely, how the writing of students is indicative of cognitive aptitude and quality of thinking.

From Fish’s perspective, an important part of understanding the role of composition in developing and representing cognitive skills is realizing that the “content” that students write about is less important than learning the “forms” of composition. “Writing is its own subject,” he writes, “and a deeper and more fascinating one than the content it makes available. Content just sprawls around; forms constrain and shape it.” To support his position, he does not draw from the findings of his investigation of lesson plans, nor from research in the teaching of writing, instead he makes use of comments left by readers online. He asserts: “As Jamakaya says, ‘good writing skills instill good thinking,’ not the other way around. Robin T. agrees: ‘Young people who can’t write can’t think.’” On the one hand, Fish’s article – and the evidence he marshals – represents a unique moment in the debate, in that the participation of his readership (in the form of comments left online) become an increasingly important part of his argument as it develops over its three parts. However, it also demonstrates how invested his readership is in the debate over the aims and effective of composition (the second part of his article alone received in excess of 450 comments). What we find luring both readers and Fish
into the debate are exaggerated expectations about the consequences of possessing a particular type of literacy, as well as the unreasonable expectations of composition to consistently deliver these qualities and characteristics in students. Both Stanley Fish (and the commentators he uses to support his position) depend on what Brian Street, Ruth Finnegan, and others from the New Literacy Studies call strong theories of literacy. As I show throughout my project, these theories inaccurately presume that “good” writing alone is indicative of sophisticated and complex processes of thought. The irony of Fish’s position is that one of his chief aims is to criticize contemporary approaches to composition for emphasizing content at the expense of instruction in form. Yet, because Fish himself is unaware of the role of myths of literacy in his own formulation of composition, he does not realize that his pedagogical approach has its own content and aim: namely, instructing students in the literacy myth itself.

I do not take up Fish in the conclusion of this project to discredit entirely his article. To be fair, I believe he rightly questions the relevance of some “orthodoxies that have take hold in the composition world.” For example, he is particularly dubious of the 1974 Conference on College Composition and Communication statement that affirms students’ “rights” “to their own patterns and varieties of language — the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style.” (CCCC). Not surprisingly, after all he is a law professor, he points out that “as a matter of law students have the right to any dialect they choose to deploy.” In questioning the CCC committee’s use of the word “right” to discuss literacy instruction in composition, Fish unintentionally underscores the importance of challenging and criticizing the language we use to talk about composition and literacy more generally. After all, one danger in
characterizing literacy as a “right” is that it throws into relief many of the other fundamental rights we have been unable to provide: namely, the right to shelter, food, and clean drinking water.

Characterizing literacy as right also positions it as an independent variable in culture, in essence, setting the stage for the abstractions, vague definitions, and assumptions that allow the literacy myth to maintain such a strong hold on post-secondary English instruction. In the context of the debate over the aims, institutional significance, and effectiveness of composition, presuming that the benefits and consequences of literacy acquisition are directly related to the rights that students possess, exaggerates the expectations that we have for both literacy and the institutions that provide instruction in it.

My project raises the possibility that there may not be any viable positions to take in the debate over the compulsory requirement if the terms and issues that have constrained and perpetuated the discussion for over a century are not questioned and complicated. By this, I mean, if myths of literacy are not dealt with directly, that is, if they are not identified, complicated, situated historically, and debunked, we can only expect more failed proposals for abolition and reform. As my study demonstrates, whether scholars are proposing that composition be reformed or abolished, the “Tradition of Complaint” seems sustained by a lack of understanding of the role of literacy myths in composition. Tragically, because of this lack of understanding, many proposals for reform that are based on these myths unknowingly function to create the conditions that make reform necessary, causing scholars to “pursue problems with mismatched solutions,” spend their energy needlessly, and accumulate despair (Cuban 11).
One way out of this stale and unproductive cycle is to develop approaches to composition instruction aimed toward interrogating the very idea of literacy itself. What I envision is something very much like what composition has been engaged in with respect to definitions, attitudes, and understandings of the term, “rhetoric,” for the past forty or fifty years. As a discipline, composition has worked actively and enthusiastically to challenge pejorative attitudes and characterizations of rhetoric. We have explored at length the history of rhetoric and made significant steps toward appropriating the most relevant aspects of this history in order to apply them in the composition classroom.

Literacy deserves similar critical attention by the composition and rhetoric community. At stake is finding a way to create a language and understanding that will allow compositionists to have productive discussions about what is actually possible in the writing classroom and, more importantly, what is realistic to expect from our students possessing particular literacy practices. However, making more legible the critical role of attitudes and characterizations of literacy in our relations with those interested in composition – namely students, administrators, policy makers, and the general public – raises difficult questions:

- If composition instruction is disentangled from the abiding belief in literacy to provide cognitive enhancement as well as social and economic advancement, how then does composition articulate its relevance to its institutional sponsors and critics?
- In what ways might developing curricula that emphasize understanding literacy in its specific historical, social, political, and economic contexts provide
opportunities to challenge the field’s persistent obsession with mechanical correctness and grammar in more effective ways?

• How might critiquing and redeveloping learning outcomes and methods of assessment to engage with various forms of communication allow compositionists to teach students to question the centrality of literacy in higher education and in their everyday lives?

Given how invested English studies and higher education are in myths of literacy, some might argue that it is unrealistic – even impossible – to expect writing programs to formulate approaches to composition instruction around such questions. However, my view is that questions like these have the potential to function as compelling points of departure for constructing learning outcomes for writing programs that aspire to take seriously the project of contesting the myths and attitudes about literacy that have sustained complaints against composition since its inception. I argue that because composition and rhetoric is in the midst of an intellectual and pedagogical shift toward developing learning outcomes and methods of assessment around digital forms of composing, now is the time to interrogate, on programmatic levels, the idea of literacy itself.

In a March 2009 “Writer’s Talk” interview with Doug Dangler (hosted by the Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing at The Ohio State University), Harvey J. Graff (Ohio Eminent Scholar in Literacy Studies & Professor of English and History) notes that, “despite the proliferation of many proclaimed literacies today we really know surprisingly little about how they relate to each other” (Writer’s Talk). Graff asserts that digital literacy is “at once undersold and oversold.” It is undersold in the sense that we
know little about the fundamental nature of digital literacy, but at the same time, we
sometimes seem quick to make grandiose claims, overselling significant differences
between digital literacies and textual or alphabetic literacies. One disadvantage of doing
so is that we might be missing the opportunity to understand what digital and alphabet
literacies have in common. In my view, our current pedagogical and cultural moment
provides an opportunity for first-year writing to become a site for both students and
instructors to explore how digital and alphabetic literacies relate to each other. Inquiry
and pedagogy aimed toward identifying similarities among alphabetic and digital
literacies will foster conversations and research that demand new perspectives. At stake,
is not just identifying similarities across various modes of communication, but it is also
finding a way to articulate the relevance of composition to universities, instructors,
students, and the communities that sponsor its development in a fashion that disentangles
it from the literacy myth. Myths of literacy rely on grand dichotomies, perceived
differences between cultures and people that possess literacy, and other unproductive
(and often ethnocentric) distinctions about cognitive enhancement and social affluence.
Questioning our tendency to overstate differences and distinctions among alphabetic and
digital literacies is a critical step toward complicating the persistent influence of the
literacy myth on composition and English studies more generally.

As my examination of abolitionists and reformists demonstrates, composition has
been inextricably linked with myths of literacy since its inception. As I have shown, this
relationship creates unattainable expectations for its students, instructors, and the course
more generally, resulting in a perpetual cycle of abolition and reform that is both stale
and unproductive. Scholars in composition and rhetoric will do well to formulate
approaches to writing instruction on programmatic levels that employ simultaneously both digital and alphabetic modes of composing. Doing so, will position composition as site of inquiry that both expands how we characterize and understand the fundamental nature of literacy, but will also provide opportunities for critiquing that expansion.
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APPENDIX A: ENDNOTES

1 Warner G. Rice touches on each of these complaints in his article, “Proposal for the Abolition of Freshman English, As It Is Now Commonly Taught, from the College Curriculum.” It was published in College English in 1960. See pages 361-362 for Rice’s more complete discussion of each complaint.

2 Although much remains overlooked in Robert Connors study of the abolition debate, it is important to note that Connors never had the opportunity to expand his study into a prolonged investigation of the topic. “The New Abolitionism: Toward a Historical Background” began as a conference paper and was presented at the 1993 conference on “Composition in the Twenty-first Century: Crisis and Change.” A condensed version of the presentation appeared in the volume of papers for that conference. Then, a slightly longer version appeared in Petraglia’s Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction. Following Connors’ tragic death in June of 2000, his study was revised and anthologized in the Selected Essays of Robert J. Connors and renamed, “The Abolition Debate in Composition: A Short History.” As such, studies of the abolition debate in composition specifically have always been restricted by both space (no more than twenty or thirty pages) and time (no more than the 15-20 minutes a conference presentation allows).


4 See Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg’s The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to The Present. New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001.
However, it is important to note that Veysey's interpretation of "the rise" of the university has been criticized. There is now a more nuanced understanding that draws less on notions of "revolutions/revolutionary change." Class, gender, culture as well as ethnicity and race, all in relationships to education and social change, are among the historical dynamics shaping the changes and efforts to respond to them driving this history of higher education. However, Veysey's discussion of academic specialization specifically is the most pertinent aspect of his work for my study.

6See also: Donaghue, Carnochan, Renker, Rudolph, Shumway “Creating,” Ohmann, and Veysey,

7 See Robert Connors “The New Abolitionism” for a discussion of these responses (pp. 8-9).


9 An example of Campbell’s sarcasm: “Never mind,” we answer, “say your nothing anyway, and mind that you say it in perfectly punctuated sentences, phrases, clauses, and paragraphs. If you continue thus to express your vacancy, by the end of the year you will know how to write anything and everything” (179).

10 An example of Campbell’s candidness: “A student comes to college with a pitifully meager intellectual equipment. He has almost no knowledge and very few ideas. And what happens? He is given a course in speech or public speaking before he has anything to talk about, and a course in English composition before he has anything to write about” (179). This passage is also quoted in Russell’s “Romantics on Writing.” Leonard Greenbaum’s “The Tradition of Complaint” also references Campbell to support the central claims of that study.

11 Levine’s table does not contain a row for “Oppression.” Barton’s revision of the table presumably accounts for Paulo Freire’s theory of literacy delineated in The Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1972).

12 In “The Rise and Fall of the Modes of Discourse,” Robert J. Connors remarks specifically on the influence of Scottish rhetoric on composition. He writes: “Most short histories of the modes of discourse (which for brevity’s sake will hereafter be called simply “the modes”) trace them back to George Campbell’s “four ends of speaking” and to Alexander Bain, the Scottish logician and educator whose 1866 textbook English Composition and Rhetoric made the modal formula widely known” (The Braddock Essays 110).
For a discussion of classification discourse and the ways the modes of discourse have influenced changes in the history of writing instruction more generally see Robert J. Connors’ “The Rise and Fall of the Modes of Discourse.” See also: Nan Johnson’s Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric in North America; Golden and Corbett’s The Rhetoric of Blair, Campbell, and Whately.

The American Library Association Publishing Board’s A.L.A. Booklist: The Guide to the Best New Books contains the following entry for this text (Thurber’s essay contains no bibliographic entry for it): “A classed list of books and periodical articles, covering the importance of good English to engineers, the teaching of English to engineering students, and the composition of engineering papers. Appended is a list of recommended engineering books. Includes no titles later than January, 1916. The compiler’s Handbook of English for engineers (Scott, Foresman, 1913, 314p., $1.50 net, 13-1625) is on of the best of its type.” The text is cross-referenced as “Rhetoric – Bibliography” and “Engineering – Bibliography.”

See also David D. Hall’s Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book (1996) as well as Robert Darton’s “What is the History of Books?” (pp. 107-135) and “First Steps Toward a History of Reading” (pp. 154-190) in The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History (1990).

See Applebee, Berlin, Brereton, Connors, Gerald Graff for a discussion of the impact of WWII on the development of composition.

It is important to note that in this context freshman English becomes a remedial course, one taken only by students who do not demonstrate a defined level of proficiency on the achievement test.

Elliot writes: “Consistency of the reading is critical, Stalnaker told his readers, but from 1933 to 1936 that consistency was lacking: no reader-reliability coefficient above .60 was recorded; indeed, a reader reliability of around .90 was desirable” (103).

Representatives from the following colleges participated on the committee: Adrian College, Albion College, Alma College, Aquinas College, Bay City Junior College, Central Michigan College of Education, Emmanuel Missionary College, Flint Junior College, Grand Rapids Junior College, Highland Park Junior College, Hillsdale College, Hope College, Jackson Junior College, Kalamazoo College, Marygrove College, Michigan College of Mining and Technology, Michigan State College of Agriculture and Applied Science, Michigan State Normal College, Muskegon Junior college, Nazareth College, Northern Michigan College of Education, Port Huron Junior college, Siena Heights College, Spring Arbor Seminary and Junior College, St. Mary’s College, University of Detroit, University of Michigan, Wayne University, and Western Michigan College of Education.
Students chose from the following topics for the writing assignment: “1. One reason I believe in American democracy. 2. It isn’t what you learn in college that matters; it’s the people you meet and the pleasure you enjoy. 3. Around the bonfire. 4. My job this past summer. 5. Best movie of the summer – and why. 6. A freshman looks at conscription. 7. The radio is the best source of news. 8. “This is London. . . . “ 9. A process of technical method (in agriculture, industry, cookery, etc.) I know well. 10. The movies give a twisted version of life. 11. Flag waving is not enough. 12. Labor unions – first-hand knowledge. 13. Why I expect to major in science (or music, or history, etc.) 14. Why I regularly read Time (or The Saturday Evening Post, Harper’s, Life, etc.) 15. A square deal for the alien in America means . . . . .” (18-19).

See Thomas Miller’s 1993 review of this work in Rhetoric Review.

Rose’s essay appears in an anthology titled, Perspectives on Plagiarism and Intellectual Property in a Postmodern World edited by Lise Buranen and Alice M. Roy. For Rose, an economic metaphor would the use of expressions like capital, distribution, and resources in reference to the flow of scholarship within the university.

In A Rhetoric of Motives, Kenneth Burke suggests something similar of timing and persuasion. He notes: “Now, when you begin talking about the optimum rate of speed at which cultural changes should take place, or the optimum proportion between tribal and individualistic motives that should prevail under a particular set of economic conditions, you are talking about something very important indeed, but you will find yourself deep in matters of rhetoric: for nothing is more rhetorical in nature than a deliberation as to what is too much or too little, too early or too late; in such controversies, rhetoricians are forever “proving opposites” (45).