

## Introduction

The story of basic writing in the United States is a rich one, full of twists and turns, powerful personalities and pivotal events. Framed by historic developments—from the open admissions movement of the 1960s and 1970s to the attacks on remediation that intensified in the 1990s and beyond—this account will trace the arc of these large social and cultural forces.

But this narrative will also capture the insider's perspective. Basic writing (BW) is a field acutely conscious of itself, imbued with a sense of being called into existence to accomplish a mission. Its self-awareness has always been shaped by its vulnerability to social forces that helped to call it up and have since threatened to shut it down. That vulnerability, in turn, helps to explain why this academic enterprise was never fully accepted within the academy. As academic fields go, basic writing has always seemed unusually new, exposed, and challenged to justify itself.

All this creates problems as well as prospects for anyone telling the story—or stories. The plural is necessary, as is the realization that these multiple stories overlap and complicate each other. There are defining characteristics of basic writing (perhaps first and foremost its quest for self-definition) that pull in different directions. It is a field remarkable for deriving so much of its sense of what it is about, at least early on, from one especially forceful seminal figure, Mina Shaughnessy. Yet it is also a field that, in its latter days, is marked by iconoclastic, decanonizing efforts to break that spell. It is a field that, like so many, is to a great extent defined by its research, and yet, because the marginalization of its students is mirrored in the marginalization of its faculty, it is also a field in which teaching practice can seem unusually disengaged from (even oblivious to) research. It is a field with a strong political as well as pedagogical mission, yet one that seems far more buffeted by political forces than capable of effecting political change.

Such tensions and divergences can get their due only if the story of BW is told as a number of overlapping stories, letting what might seem a mere footnote in one assume a critical role in another. Allowing some central concern like teaching or research to come to the fore means traveling the same ground with an eye out for a different emphasis each time. What, then, is the whole picture? It might help to think of the chapters that follow as transparent overlays, maps to be laid upon other maps so that the full topography shows through.

Chapter 1, “Historical Overview,” is the most purely narrative—a brief history of basic writing in which personalities and events are allowed to dominate the stage. Chapter 2, “Defining Basic Writing and Basic Writers,” is a kind of exercise in pop epistemology—a field’s sense of itself and how that changes in terms of actions and reactions as it struggles to define itself. Chapter 3, “Practices and Pedagogies,” traces the evolution of basic writing as it attempted to fulfill its overarching mission—meeting the needs of the students in its classrooms in pedagogically sound ways. Chapter 4, “Research,” surveys the territory through the lens of the scholarly work that informed and described and often critiqued the central teaching mission. Chapter 5, “The Future of Basic Writing,” sums up, as best we can, the state of basic writing—and basic writers—in the early years of the twenty-first century. Finally, we include an appendix, “Basic Writing Resources”: an annotated list of useful websites, listservs, and materials available online.

Do these chapters add up to the whole story? It would be foolhardy to claim that this account of basic writing is, if not the only one, then the one that matters. It would be no less foolish to deny that it is the account of basic writing as it matters to us. And so it is probably wise to engage in some personal (but far from full) disclosure with each of us speaking as individuals for a moment.

GEORGE: Like many compositionists of my generation, I was a self-styled literature scholar in graduate school pulled into composition in the early 1980s not only to teach it but also to administrate a large writing program—and to do that even as an untenured professor. Knowing (at least) how little I knew, I tried to educate myself. A friend, a sociolinguist, told me the book to start with was Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations*. I did not stop there, of course, and the next thing I knew (that next thing being a couple years down

the road), I realized that I was indeed committed to the teaching (and even administration) of writing; what's more, I was determined to pursue that commitment somewhere within the City University of New York (CUNY). So that is where I have been since the mid-1980s, directing writing programs for a decade and a half, chairing the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors for a full decade, coediting the *Journal of Basic Writing* for seven years. In that time, conferences and correspondence (to say nothing of reading published work) gave me so much contact with BW teachers and scholars beyond CUNY that I actually know most of the people named in the stories that follow. That can be as much a liability as a qualification, I suppose, but it does make a difference. Seeing (if only with the mind's eye) the faces of people I am writing about, often ranged on opposite sides of a controversy, has made me want all the more to give them their due. Similarly, as someone who testified for the preservation of basic writing at colleges it was removed from in the late 1990s (including my own), I am acutely aware of the forces behind such changes, though no less aware that such changes have been far from universal.

REBECCA: My story within CUNY also reaches back many years. In 1974, with the qualifying credential of a master's degree in literature, I accepted a part-time position as a writing tutor at Brooklyn College's New School of Liberal Arts, a discipline-based preparatory program developed to deal with the vast influx of open admissions students. With the budget cuts of the mid-1970s, I was "promoted" from writing tutor to adjunct instructor of writing workshops for this same student population—a population that captivated my interest as a teacher and beginning researcher.

In 1980 I moved on to CUNY's Hunter College, where I taught (still as a part-timer) basic writing courses for native speakers and later for English as a Second Language (ESL) students, a growing demographic at CUNY at the time. My fascination with and respect for the writing of my BW and ESL students eventually resulted in a coauthored textbook, *In Our Own Words: Student Writers at Work*, featuring essays by these students rather than the usual professional samples.

In 1989 I began doctoral studies at New York University, focusing on the challenges and rewards of working with basic writers—both native speakers of English and multilingual students. In 1993, having completed the PhD, I accepted a full-time, tenure-track position in

the English Department of CUNY's Kingsborough Community College, where I have worked ever since as a classroom teacher and writing program administrator. In 2007 I also became a Professor of English at the CUNY Graduate Center, where I work with PhD students in the Rhetoric and Composition area group. Since 2003 I have served as coeditor of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, and so, like George, I often feel a personal as well as a professional connection with the ongoing story of basic writing in America.

We hope that this book, with its historical perspective, will be of use to a wide audience of readers including scholars and practitioners of basic writing as well as students enrolled in graduate courses in composition and rhetoric or writing studies—particularly those in the growing number of master's degree programs in BW but also doctoral students in seminars focusing on the history of pedagogy and research in composition. Because some of the most influential research in composition since 1970 has related to basic writing, the extensive review of the literature contained in this book will be of interest to a diverse audience concerned with the important trends that have shaped the teaching and researching of composition in the United States. Since basic writing began—and continues to exist—in a highly politicized climate, the book is also relevant for leaders in education, college and university administrators, and elected or appointed state and federal officials.

Available in multiple forms, this book is designed to be used in multiple ways. Professors of graduate courses in composition may choose to assign just one chapter (available without charge to their students in PDF form through the WAC Clearinghouse). University administrators may want to skim through a chapter or two while traveling to attend a meeting focused on the future of basic writing at their institution; they might choose to store the book on their laptop as an Adobe e-book (available from Parlor Press). Doctoral students doing research in basic writing may want to purchase a hard copy of the entire book (also available from Parlor Press) for current and future reference. Our treatment of the subject here, looking at the field of basic writing through different lenses in different chapters, recognizes that the book will be read differently—in part or in its entirety—by different readers.

Ultimately, the onus on a guide like this is to seem both comprehensive and concise. And so we have attempted a delicate balancing act: between fidelity to the past and present relevance, between local and (presumptively) global knowledge, and between personal judgment and (apparent) objectivity. Our chief means of finding balance is to circle back on the same general story, being on the lookout for different themes or seeing the same themes from different perspectives. What we hope emerges is a gestalt of basic writing that will give people interested in its history or self-definition or pedagogy or research a sense of the important trends and patterns. In this exercise of mapping, we have tried to make directions clear (if not simple) without denying the undeniable blurring and dissensus and differential development that characterizes the field, always mindful of its greatest irony: that something called basic writing should so often find itself snagged on the complexities it uncovers.