



Continuing the Conversation: A Dialogue with Our Contributors

One of our primary goals for this collection was to begin a thoughtful, wide-ranging discussion about college-level writing. To help promote this conversation—and to make our work on this project more interactive—we established a companion Web site where additional work and discussion about this important issue could be posted.

We asked contributors to post their finished essays there for others to read and discuss, and we invited each contributor to post at least one follow-up response. We are very pleased with the results of this online conversation. Although not every writer was able to contribute, many were, and the resulting dialogue was, we believe, substantive and important.

We are including in this section of the book a brief sampling from this conversation. We invite you to visit our Web site and read the follow-up work of our contributors in its entirety. You may also post your own comments if you wish. Our Web site is located at <http://www.mcc.commnet.edu/faculty/collegewriting/>. We hope that you will find the conversation here to be as interesting and as insightful as we did.

Samples from Contributors' Follow-Up Comments

Reply to: Muriel Harris's "What Does the Instructor Want?"
—Amanda Winalski

This article recalls the struggle undergraduate students endure when painting their prose to appeal to a particular audience. The theory perfectly fits my undergraduate experience; however, I believe the idea can advance one cynical step further.

The anxiety regarding the academic standards for a particular class was often manifested within the first assignment. Who doesn't remember the panicked, urgent question, "WHAT does this teacher expect?" Generally, the apprehension was soothed by the return of that assignment: the students realized whether the professor emphasized grammar, deducted points for page-long paragraphs, or firmly enforced the citation rules. However, there was another prejudice that could not be so easily determined. True, a student understands her audience better after she has received the red-inked feedback. But the process of writing for a particular reader has another layer to it. In college, a student learns to cater her writing not only to a particular audience, but to a particular individual: she may spend the entire semester unpeeling her professor's classroom rhetoric to reveal personal prejudices that affect his role as the reader. When a student pays attention to the specific language of her professor's lecture, or his attempts at humor, she can more clearly understand her job as a writer. For example, a progressive historian might wince if he read a student paper referencing "Viet Cong," while another professor might not consider the term pejorative. Similarly, a professor who espouses traditional grammatical theory might tear apart a student's haphazard or arbitrary use of the feminine or collective pronouns.

But does this mean that successful college writers perform background checks on their professors to determine the particular ideologies that dictate how each will receive a paper? Must a student put on her libertarian hat for one professor, then adopt a socialist perspective for another? Of course not. A college writer must find the balance between knowing her audience and maintaining her integrity. Thus, she needn't pretend to adopt all the biases of her audience; rather, she must have an understanding of these biases such that she will know how her reader will interpret her essay. When a writer can more fully anticipate the reader's response, she can write more persuasively, perhaps more successfully.

Kittle Is on Target **—Merrill Davies**

Peter Kittle's essay first attracted my attention because of the title. I thought that if he did not consider the problem the high school teacher's fault, he couldn't be all bad! His essay brought to mind my own "pilgrimage" in teaching writing. I have come to some of the same conclusions he has, although by a different route. As a teacher at the high school level for 31 years, I have often struggled with teaching students who are unprepared for high school writing as well as how to prepare students for college writing.

I totally agree that blaming the previous teachers serves no good purpose. I decided that if I blamed middle school teachers for the stu-

dents who could not write at the high school level, I would also have to give them credit for the ones who could. That idea did not particularly appeal to me, and it also made me realize that students come to us with all kinds of talents and abilities (and lack thereof) that must be taken into account. In the end it just does no good to try to figure out why they arrived at a particular level of ability when we get them; we just have to teach them. It reminds me of what my neurologist said about my migraine headaches. He said that trying to find the cause of the headaches was such a chore that it was usually better just to treat the symptoms.

I arrived at the idea that “students write best when they have something to say and someone to say it to” as I coached debate, mock trial, entered student writing in contests, and conducted various projects at school. I noticed that when I made writing assignments just to teach a particular mode of writing, such as persuasion, description, etc., I would often get groans, sighs, and complaints, and often not good quality writing. I would also find it hard to get students to help one another. They just didn’t seem to care one way or another.

However, students would spend hours poring over debate or mock trial briefs, arguing over wording, placement of ideas, or effective examples of support. They would also seek my advice and listen to my suggestions. Students learned persuasive technique willingly when it offered them opportunities to earn trophies and recognition in debate and mock trial. They also had an audience other than the teacher.

In the 1980s one of my friends decided to design and implement a recycling program at our school. He asked me to work with my students in developing a brochure to inform the school and community of the program, and later asked us to design a manual explaining how the program worked which could be used by other schools to replicate similar programs in their schools. I found that my students paid attention to their writing and sought help in wording the brochure and the manual.

In the early 1990s I partnered with the American Literature and American History teachers in our school to lead students in conducting research on our community. Our plan involved interviewing many older residents to learn their individual stories and to publish them in a booklet. We decided to use the format of a magazine article, similar to a profile of a person, for each of the articles. This booklet was to be sold in the community for a nominal fee to cover printing costs. Again, students responded positively and were eager to learn, because they had something specific to say and had an audience.

I continued to seek ways to make “real” writing assignments to students and coach them in the process. In 2002 my students produced a video to promote our school’s service learning program. The intent was to provide the school with something to show incoming freshmen to encourage them to participate in this voluntary program. It turned out to be an impressive statement, written and produced by the students.

During all these projects, not only did students produce better writing, but they also learned to give valuable, meaningful feedback to one another as they talked about how their potential audience would perceive their messages. These projects also helped me to become more of a mentor or coach to the students as they wrote instead of always being the authority figure.

Throughout my teaching career, I encouraged (and sometimes required) students to submit writing for specific writing contests. I also coached them in writing speeches and presenting them for various contests. Although the audience may not have been quite as clear as some of the other projects I have mentioned, there was an incentive and a wider audience than the teacher, so students usually wrote better. I had several students who won cash awards, trips, etc. for their work, and this inspired others to try. Two students (at different times) won a week in Washington, D.C., to participate in the Washington Workshops.

I realize that this does not really address the issue of “What is college level writing?” directly. However, I believe that when students have multiple opportunities to do “real” writing in high school they will be more likely to be successful in college.

Audiences and Ideologies

—*Peter Kittle*

“Writing in college, as elsewhere, happens among people, in real places, over time, for a vast range of purposes. When people writing in college environments write, we see embodied instances of college writing.”

This quote, from Jeanne Gunner’s anti-essay, really resonated with the rich description of a “college writing” experience given by Kim Nelson. Nelson’s piece precisely embodies a kind of college writing that is predicated not simply on an institutional demand (although a class assignment set the ball in motion), but on an explicit desire to engage in an academic, intellectual community. And while Nelson mentions that she considered making a list of skills to define “college-level” writing, her decision instead to take us through her own literacy practices provides a wonderful anecdote in support of Gunner’s adamant desire to resist the reification that simple list-making fosters.

I was struck as well by the similarities between Gunner’s ideological critique of the desire to delineate a somehow always-applicable definition of “college-level” writing and Sheridan Blau’s discussion of the types of communities housed in various educational institutions. While reading his piece, I found myself feeling uncomfortable with the ways that Blau (despite many qualifying statements) seems to essentialize high schools as non-intellectual, even non-academic spaces—but I think that, in part, this is because I simply do not wish to believe that such is the case. The grim reality is that public schools, as institutions subject to

the whims of policy makers, are enmeshed in a system which disembodies learning so that it may be quantified and branded as successful or failing. A grim sadness is elicited in me to think of our school system as being non-academic and even anti-intellectual—even though I know of many teachers who actively resist institutional inertia—but it makes Gunner’s call to resist such boxing of college writing all the more imperative.

A final connection that I noticed was to Muriel Harris’s discussion of the intricacies of audience and writer. I couldn’t help but see that so much of the content of the essays in this collection is necessarily political, having ramifications that go far beyond our disciplinary concerns. In this era of No Child Left Behind, when our professional lives as educators are increasingly under fire, I wondered how we could think differently about an audience for this book. I suspect that, like Harris’s student whose paper didn’t satisfy the engineering professor, our work in this volume would likely be shrugged off by many politicians and bureaucrats who only know the “business” of education from their experiences as students. While I applaud this book, and the work we did as contributors, I think that we need to find a way as a discipline to make ourselves heard beyond the discipline. I thank Harris’s essay for helping me to think about doing something about the serious threats to writing instruction raised in the works of Gunner and Blau.

What Can We Learn from These Essays? —Merrill Davies

Since writing “Whistling in the Dark” a few weeks ago, I’ve been reading the essays and comments by other writers attempting to answer the question “What is college-level writing?” and trying to synthesize the information into something which might be helpful from the viewpoint of the high school English teacher trying to prepare students for college. Despite the fact that it is very difficult for college professors to agree on a specific definition of “college-level” writing, I have come to the conclusion that high school teachers do need more information in order to help students be ready for college writing and that these essays do, in fact, provide some ideas about what could be done.

Let’s begin with why we need more guidance in preparing students for college-level writing. It is obvious that most of the time high school teachers have focused almost exclusively on grammar, mechanics, and formulaic kinds of writing, and colleges have increasingly expected students to focus more on content. Generally there seems to be a big gap between what we have often told students they need to know and what they actually have to do in college level writing. The fact that more and more colleges are refusing to fund remedial programs means that parents are expecting high schools to get their kids ready for college. Some

school systems (like the system I taught in) are now starting accelerated programs and “guaranteeing” college readiness. If the system promises that its students will be ready for college, English teachers need to know what that means in terms of writing.

But it’s difficult even for college professors to define college-level writing. There are several reasons for this as mentioned in many of the essays. First of all, we have to determine whether we mean entry-level college writing, writing during college, or exit requirements. For the purpose of this discussion, I think we’d best stick with entry level expectations if it is to mean anything to the high school teacher. I say this because many of the essays talked about whether students were ready for college-level writing or not. But then we also have to deal with college-level writing in other ways. The student who has been praised for his/her flowery writing in creative writing classes may be sorely disappointed when a science professor reads a lab report. College-level writing differs greatly according to the task, and unfortunately, many students enter college with the idea that he/she only needs writing skills in the English class. They have little idea about different kinds of writing except the sense of modes of writing (i.e., descriptive, narrative, persuasive, etc.). Another difficulty in defining college-level writing has to do with different expectations at different colleges and/or universities. Some prestigious private colleges may expect much more than others and some areas of the country have differing requirements.

But even with all these difficulties, we see some common ground among the different essays regarding what college-level writing is. This common ground gives us a starting point and could lead to some helpful insights for the high school teacher who wants to get students ready for college. First of all, the high school teacher has not been totally wrong—college-level writing does assume a competency in grammar and mechanics, as well as organization of thought. Although the college professor may not be as tough on these areas as the high school teacher thought, it is still evident that college writing demands a good command of the language, including accuracy in usage, as is evident in Patrick’s essay and several others. Beyond accuracy in writing, another rather common theme in many of the essays is an assumption that students will have developed some critical thinking skills. This idea was mentioned or implied in most of the essays in some way or another. Audience awareness is a definite expectation in college writing also, according to most of the essays. Unfortunately, many high school students are quite oblivious to whoever might read what they have written. Some other elements of college-level writing were mentioned, but those mentioned above were the most common.

So how can we make use of what we have learned? Assuming that one of the goals of this discussion for me would be to learn how to better prepare secondary students for college-level writing, I would suggest four things: (1) Secondary teachers should read these essays; (2)

Area college professors and high school teachers should engage in dialogue to better understand what students need to do to prepare for college; (3) Both high school and college teachers should study College Board writing expectations on the new SAT; (4) High school teachers should work with students to learn specific expectations in writing at colleges, especially those out of the area where they live.

*A Response to Peter Kittle, Sheridan Blau,
and Milka Mosley*
—Kathleen McCormick

When read together, your three essays intersect so well to help to establish a clear distinction between teaching writing in high school and teaching it in college. The bottom line is that regular high school English classes and college-prep courses are not college courses, nor should they be. I think that these three essays should be given to the kind of faculty Peter discusses at the college level who complain that freshmen students are “unprepared for college writing.” As Sheridan notes in relation to those college faculty who find their students unable to synthesize, analyze, etc. to their satisfaction, “if students could do all of these things at the time they entered your class, why would we need you to teach them?”

All three of you demonstrate clearly why high school writing may well need to be largely “formulaic” and show that this is not necessarily a negative—high school students frequently lack the experience to write well without explicit guidance or formulas from their teachers. You show us that high school writing under most circumstances necessarily seeks to conform—and why wouldn’t it, given the material conditions of standardized testing, pre-determined curricula under which students and teachers are working, and large class sizes. You explain how class size usually prevents the assigning of more complex writing. Most high school English teachers clearly work hard to teach literature and writing while inserting PSAT, SAT, SAT II, and AP prep into their lessons. But what they are teaching about writing must often be different from what college teachers emphasize.

At the moment, all three of you argue that Writing Projects are the best way that English teachers in the schools can find support for more creative ways of teaching writing—teaching revision, teaching ownership of one’s writing, etc. But, as you point out, these methods require more work and cannot be embraced by everyone. There are times when it seems that Sheridan’s essay was written to provide further evidence for Peter and Milka’s essays. He astutely notes in reference to those teachers who collaborate with Writing Projects:

Of course, smart, experienced, professionally sophisticated high school teachers, who are themselves writers, know the advan-

tages of helping student writers learn to be guided more by the shape of their reflective thought than by a prefabricated outline. But such teachers will be the first to admit that their instruction generally runs counter to the culture of their school and even the culture of their department and certainly to the current national culture of assessment.

If the teaching of writing in most high schools will ever truly become more obviously “college preparatory,” we would need a thorough overhauling of the material realities of high school English teaching—class size, testing, textbooks, and of course a change in how writing is addressed in schools of education. In the absence of all of this, we should adopt more realistic assumptions about the relationship between writing in high school and writing in college. Your three descriptions of how different students are in high school and college—something that doesn’t seem to get addressed enough in the literature—should help all of us to recognize that, under the current conditions of public schooling, we cannot and should not expect students to have a seamless transition from high school to college.

What’s Missing from This Conversation?
—Muriel Harris

As I read the essays in this collection, enjoying the insightful ideas, the voices from various corners of the campus and types of educational institutions, and the variety of lenses through which we all think about college-level writing, I realized we’re missing an adjective to qualify that term “college-level writing.” As the scholarship of contrastive rhetoric and my own experience as a tutor in a writing center have convinced me, we’re discussing “American college-level writing.” As we know, the rhetorical ideals we teach are based on those that are valued in American academic writing. But other cultures value other ideals that some of our students bring along with them to college composition courses.

In our Writing Lab, I’ve seen drafts of papers that would appear to be not well written but that in the writer’s mind qualifies as good writing. What I see might be the endlessly long sentences that meander through what to us would be a paragraph or two. But some Spanish-speaking students, especially (in my experience) those who grew up in Puerto Rico and had an excellent high school education were encouraged—even rewarded—for those endless sentences. At other times it’s the seemingly monotonous sentence pattern that marches like a drumbeat across the page. To my ear they need variety in structure and length. But some languages stress (or are almost restricted to) parallel structure, and that limits the writer’s interest in using subordinate sentence structures. When I ask such a writer to read the paper aloud (a standard

tutorial practice to let the student hear her own text) and ask how it sounds, the student often looks pleased by what she heard.

Less obvious are those vague papers that just don't have a clear-cut point because, to me, they are stuffed with gauzy metaphors that don't help to move ideas forward. And here we meet up with a student from another language group where metaphor is an excellent vehicle in which to couch ideas. A straightforward declaration of the point (what we would term "the thesis sentence") might sound overly direct, even rude. When students learned to write in that culture, they also learned to move gently to the point, not to announce it overtly at the beginning of the paper.

A major issue that comes up when students from other cultures write research papers is the fact that in some cultures it is an insult to cite a source from an authority in the field or to offer a reference to a literary source. To do so implies that the reader is less than literate, not well-read, or not acquainted with what is known about the subject. American emphasis on citing all sources is a concept that is difficult to grasp for some of these students.

I could go on and on citing examples of student writing that simply don't fit in the standard mold of American academic writing. These influences are embedded in the culturally derived values that accompany the students' instruction in writing. Whereas conciseness is preached in American business and technical writing, some cultures value copiousness. Organizational patterns in American academic writing don't encourage digressions, but digression is acceptable in the rhetorical values of some cultures.

The problem with such differences in rhetorical values is that most are never verbalized to the student or to us as these students write for us. The disconnect is when we would assess the writing as inadequate while such students see their writing as incorporating standards instilled in them in previous classrooms (classrooms, that is, outside the United States). Once we recognize this divergence in students' papers, we can help these writers understand that in American classrooms, they need to learn to write prose that is acceptable by American standards. In my experience, this isn't as obvious as it sounds. I remember a series of tutorials with a charming Asian woman who simply couldn't bring herself to compose a thesis statement, much less insert it in the first paragraph of her paper. "I am not such a bad-mannered person," she would say quietly, but adamantly. I never won her over to my attempt to argue that she would not be giving up her writing preferences, just adding a new one adapted to a different audience.

So, just a final plea to us all that we keep in mind in this conversation that we are discussing *American* college-level writing, not *all* college-level writing. We know this, but just as it's problematic when some students aren't aware of the standards by which they view their writing, so too can some instructors overlook the possibility that when some

writing doesn't meet their standards, they may need to take a second look in order to figure out what is causing the difference.