



INTRODUCTION

PATRICK SULLIVAN

Manchester Community College

HOWARD TINBERG

Bristol Community College

We welcome you to a cordial, wide-ranging, substantive, and challenging discussion about one of the most important questions in our profession: What is “college-level” writing?

Just what defines college-level writing is a question that has confounded, eluded, and divided teachers of English at almost every level of our profession for many years now, and when we began this project, we set ourselves a deceptively simple task. We invited a group of professors, college students, high school teachers, and college administrators to consider the question carefully. We believed that the question at the heart of this book could only be meaningfully explored with broad representation from a variety of constituencies, and we sought to provide that representation in this book. In fact, this may be the first time such a diverse group of teachers, students, and other interested parties have been gathered together to discuss this important question.

We say “deceptively simple” because this project blossomed into something more complex, more richly nuanced, and more intriguing than we imagined possible. As it turns out (and this will probably come as no surprise), there are no simple answers to the question, “What is college-level writing?” But for those with the patience and the willingness to thoughtfully engage the complexities inherent in this question, there are certainly very satisfying, if rather complicated answers to be had. It is, after all, a question that is much more layered and multidimensional than first appears. It is a question, in fact, that ultimately requires us

to consider a whole range of interrelated and interdependent skills associated with reading, writing, and thinking.

To speak very practically for a moment, we believe that this question deserves careful, patient attention because it is a question that *matters*—to us and to our students. It helps shape, in one way or another, so much of what we do: teaching reading, writing, and critical thinking at virtually every grade level; preparing students to be successful writers in middle school, high school, and college; addressing the needs of our many under-prepared students on college campuses; developing composition programs at colleges and universities; engaging the important work of training a new generation of English teachers; and doing all of this within the rich context of rhetoric and composition theory. This book is designed to provide the careful attention this question deserves.

There are very different ways that teachers, scholars, and students can engage the central question this book asks, and we believe that a major strength of this collection is that it honors those differences. Of course there are certainly important commonalities here as well. In fact, as we worked on this volume together as editors, reading the essays brought a number of vitally important issues and concerns into sharp focus. It seems clear to us that strong writers develop only over a long period of time and only with considerable support from their teachers and their learning communities. As Sheridan Blau argues in his essay, this process is complicated because we find ourselves at a historical moment when the culture itself seems to have become hostile to any conception of education that is not traditionally and narrowly defined—a culture that has, it appears, become hostile to most forms of serious intellectual inquiry. We also found very real and worthwhile connections between Ronald Lunsford’s discussion of attitude, Alfredo Lujan’s focus on voice, Susan Schorn’s comments about the need for college students to move away from the “self-centered focus of youth,” Chris Kearns’s argument about how meaning “*unfolds* in the shared space of acknowledgment between the reader and the writer,” and Muriel Harris’s discussion of reader-based writing. We thought Kim Nelson and Kathleen McCormick both had important things to say about college-level writing *assignments*, a variable that certainly needs

to be considered when we talk about college-level writing. We also found great wisdom in Peter Kittle's essay, which invites our profession to move beyond "the blame game."

But there are also disagreements—splits, contradictions, fissures—that offer us much to consider as well. We think these disagreements are at least as important as the commonalities. Jeanne Gunner argues, for example, that any attempt to define (and therefore to contain and commodify) *college writing* is necessarily problematic. Ellen Knodt examines the wide disagreement among composition programs and faculty concerning the goals to be achieved in college writing programs. Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Ellenmarie Wahrab explore the structuring effects of socioeconomic differences in the academy, especially as those differences are translated into debates over standards and the kinds of writing curriculum that are designed for students. Contributors to this collection have certainly brought issues to our attention that frustrate our desire for easy answers, but they are important issues that deserve careful consideration from our profession. We think one of the strengths of this collection is that these perspectives are given clear and eloquent voice.

Taken in aggregate, we believe the essays in this book offer educators an extraordinary opportunity to engage the central question we explore in this book with renewed rigor and fresh perspective.

Our goal when we began this project was simply to begin a thoughtful, scholarly dialogue about what constitutes college-level writing—and then to see where that conversation might lead. We had no fixed end point in mind, and we were certainly not endeavoring to privilege any particular ideological or theoretical agenda. In fact, we did not know what our group of contributors might finally conclude about this most contentious question for teachers of English. But we are very pleased with the result.

We believe that our contributors have, indeed, come to some important conclusions about what college-level writing should be, and how we might move forward nationally as teachers of English to advocate for curriculum, standards, and protocol changes that will begin serving the interests of our students more effectively. We believe that this collection also offers a new degree of clarity to our profession about a variety of important and

interrelated issues that help shape the daily contours of our working lives—both in the classroom and in our professional and scholarly discourse. We hope you will feel the same way.

We were lucky in this endeavor on a number of accounts. Teachers and scholars from across the nation and from a great variety of institutions responded enthusiastically to our invitation to contribute to this collection. We were fortunate as well in the quality of the contributors who agreed to participate. Many are nationally known, and all bring important teaching or research experience to this project. We also invited contributors who we knew would challenge us to think carefully and critically about this question. In addition, we also invited high school teachers, college students, and college administrators to contribute, and we think the addition of these voices and perspectives enriches our discussion immeasurably. We would like to thank all of our contributors for their eloquence, their candor, and their willingness to engage the questions we set before them in good faith.

We have a number of special features in this book, and we would like to draw your attention to them briefly:

- ◆ *Very strong variety in terms of perspective and experience.* This collection includes perspectives from college students, high school teachers, college teachers, academic scholars, adjunct faculty members, an English Department chair, a Writing Center director, a Writing Program coordinator, and a college administrator. We also have representation from a wide variety of academic institutions: high schools, community colleges, state colleges and universities, and private universities.
- ◆ *High school teachers are welcomed.* High school English teachers are among our most important professional colleagues in the grand enterprise of teaching writing at the college level—but more often than not we talk *about* them rather than *with* them. This book addresses that problem directly by inviting high school English teachers to discuss college-level writing with us. We asked our high school contributors to be as candid as possible and to “tell it like it is.” As we think you will see, their essays offer us much of great value to consider.
- ◆ *A very strong focus on student perspectives.* College students in this collection are given the opportunity to speak in detail with-

Introduction

out mediation in full-length essays—not just in snippets or excerpts.

- ◆ *Inclusion of the administrative perspective.* There are many administrative issues that help to shape our definition of college-level writing, and we think it is vitally important that these issues be acknowledged and explored. In this collection, they are.
- ◆ *Interactive discussion among contributors about the essays in this book.* When contributors finished writing their essays for this collection, they posted them at an online discussion Web site and then as a group we discussed this body of work. This interactive discussion is rare in scholarly collections like ours, and this is something that we believe adds a great deal to the value and usefulness of our book. We have included samples from this discussion in our final chapter. The full discussion is available online at our book's companion Web site, along with a number of additional essays and the opportunity to post comments and questions. (Information regarding the Web site is included in the appendix.)

As you will see from our table of contents, we have grouped the essays into four sections. We begin with Patrick's essay, which is a version of an essay that was originally published in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, and which is where the idea for this project began. Patrick's essay is followed by groups of essays from high school teachers, college teachers and scholars, college students, and college administrators. The appendix offers readers a sample of the dialogue we conducted online among contributors about the essays in this book.

One final note: A project of this scope could not have been completed without the generous support of friends, family, and colleagues. We would like to thank Kurt Austin, our editor at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the anonymous field reviewers at NCTE, whose support and constructive criticism were invaluable. We would also like to thank our production and publicity team at NCTE, especially Bonny Graham, Lisa McAvoy, and Cari Rich. Patrick would like to thank his colleagues in the English Department at Manchester Community College for their inspiring example, their commitment to excellence, and their daily warmth, graciousness, and generosity. He would like to offer special thanks to Professors Kim Hamilton-

Introduction

Bobrow and Ken Klucznik for their ongoing and enthusiastic support. He would also like to thank his wife, Susan, and his two children, Bonnie Rose and Nicholas, for their support, understanding, and love. Howard would like to thank the many colleagues who have sat around the table with him over the years to talk about what constitutes good, college-level writing—at venues such as Advanced Placement readings, department meetings, and staff meetings at the writing lab that he directs. He would like to thank his family—Toni, Miriam, and Leah—for their loving support.

We hope that you will enjoy this book and find it useful in your work. It has been an enormously gratifying project to work on.