

BEYOND JOHNNY CAN'T WRITE: TRACING THE IDENTIFICATION OF BASIC  
WRITERS AS DEFICIENT, DISABLED, AND FOREIGN OTHERS IN  
DEVELOPMENTAL COMPOSITION TEXTBOOKS

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, SPEECH, AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES COLLEGE  
OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

BY

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DENTON, TEXAS

DECEMBER 2017

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## DEDICATION

To my big homie, Dr. Randall Popken, and my academic momma, Dr. Lou Thompson.

Thank you for believing in a big, awkward black kid from Houston.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The 10-year journey to completing this dissertation has been long and arduous. I could not have completed this degree without the love and support of my family and friends. However, I would be remiss if I did not “acknowledge” and apologize for the last few years.

To late father: I apologize. You passed away before this project was completed. But, I did it! It’s done! Thank you, old man, for teaching me the invaluable skillsets needed to be a functioning adult—dedication, hard work, and self-motivation. I know that I am the living embodiment of your life and values.

To Mama Azard: I apologize. Even when I was a crappy son, you always supported me. When I did not want to go to school, you woke me up and drove me to school. When I brought home failing grades, you were patient and encouraged me to try harder. You are one of the few people who truly believed I could get a college degree. You taught me that everyone needs a cheerleader in life.

To my wife, Rochelle: I am sorry. You have been by my side since day one. This dissertation would not have happened if it was not for your encouragement. But, I have been a bad partner and have been unfaithful, cheating on you with my dissertation mistress. I promise to make it up to you. To my sons, Alex and Tobey, I apologize for spending so much time on the dissertation since most of your childhood memories are of me reading a book or writing the dissertation. Thinking back at my own childhood, I have

transformed into my father. Hopefully these memories will serve as a touchstone of what hard work and focus look like.

Finally, to Andy and Becky: I apologize (we all know what I did).

## ABSTRACT

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### BEYOND JOHNNY CAN'T WRITE: TRACING THE IDENTIFICATION OF BASIC WRITERS AS DEFICIENT, DISABLED, AND FOREIGN OTHERS IN DEVELOPMENTAL COMPOSITION TEXTBOOKS

DECEMBER 2017

The purpose of this study is to explore how contemporary composition textbooks employ writing pedagogy that stigmatizes students and their writing as deviant and inadequate. Specifically, writing textbooks are often founded on a romanticized view of writing instruction, a desire to return to a simpler time where students were excellent writers who adhered to writing conventions. As used within a university, textbooks attempt to bridge the gap between students' lack of understanding of the subject matter and the instructors' familiarity with the educational material; however, textbooks may inadvertently perpetuate long-standing assumptions of basic writers' abilities and limitations of basic writers themselves.

Such beliefs perpetuate assumption of literacy—an unwavering belief that one's acquisition of Western forms of literacy can successfully correct social and economic inequalities. As a consequence, a student's inability to write is perceived as an indication of his or her inability to follow coded rules of "good academic discourse." However, the assumption that writing is the end result of adherence to the "rules" is categorically false. Rather, this inherent disconnect between students' inability to

write and an instructor's desire to teach reflects the inherent complexity of writing.

The study concludes with teaching suggestions that better target student writing issues.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
ABSTRACT .....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	vii
 Chapters	
I SHEILS' "JOHHNNY CAN'T WRITE" .....	1
Responses to "Johnny Can't Write" .....	6
Understanding Composition's History .....	14
Classical Literacies .....	18
Progressive Literacies .....	30
Technocratic Literacies .....	33
II LOCATING BASIC WRITING IN THE UNIVERSITY .....	40
Basic Writing and Open Admissions Policies .....	40
Mina Shaughnessy's Influence .....	52
Issues with <i>Errors and Expectations</i> .....	57
III IDENTIFICATION OF THE BASIC WRITER .....	63
Burke and Identification of the Basic Writer .....	63
Rhetorics of Deficiency .....	79
Rhetorics of Disability and Passing .....	89
Rhetorics of the Foreigner .....	95
IV DECONSTRUCTING BASIC WRITING TEXTBOOKS' ROLE IN THE MYTH OF LITERACY .....	105
Textbooks and the "Myth of Literacy" .....	105
Deconstructing Textbooks .....	112
V CONCLUSION .....	133
REFERENCES .....	144

## CHAPTER I

### SHEILS' "JOHHNNY CAN'T WRITE"

In the now in/famous *Newsweek* 1975 editorial "Why Johnny Can't Write," Merrill Sheils issues a warning to readers regarding the problem of cultural illiteracy: Due to a failing educational system, educational initiatives discourage the "insistence on grammar, structure, and style" and promote an ignorance of traditional and time-tested literacy instruction. Sheils warns that this illiteracy epidemic is systemic—as it exists at all levels of American education. Primary school education no longer required students to read "time tested" literary work that modeled "good" writing in emerging young writers. As Sheils notes, the "evidence" supporting the gradual decline of American literacy is "massive."

The crux of Sheils' argument lies in the finding of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a government-funded program that attempts to measure the "long term trends" within American education through the assessment of "skills, understanding, and attitudes" of basic core subjects (i.e., math, science, history) held by American citizens, in the hopes of extrapolating the information in order to gain an objectified understanding of the educational progress of America (Sheils). Sheils cites NAEP found that most among other things that high school seniors "demonstrate serious deficiencies in spelling, vocabulary, and sentence structure." Even more concerning was that most adults were "reluctant" to write in their daily lives. The future looked no better, as the 1975 NAEP older adults have an increased "awareness," in their writing. Because of this,



those graduating from high school would not have the writing proficiency work entry-level careers, such as “secretarial or clerical work.” Students who attend and graduate from college do not fare much better than their high school peers as there is a strong likelihood that these students, who received education within a broken educational system will graduate college “unable to write ordinary, expository English with any real degree of structure and lucidity” (Sheils).

At a communication conference shortly after the publication of “Johnny Can’t Write,” Sheils states that her article was based on her personal experience hiring potential applicants for *Newsweek*. Sheils states feeling disappointed by potential applicants applying for a job at her publication. The applicants’ writing was “appalling” as their applications contain a number of second-level issues, including nonsensical and “pretentious” language as well as incorrectly used wording (qtd. in Sheils). This experience prompted Sheils to examine the current state of writing instruction in the United States, sending a number of inquiries for those working in education including, professors, administrators, and school employees for more insight on this degradation of young people's writing. Because of this, Sheils notes that both school administrators and corporate interests were at a loss on how to adequately prepare young people for the workforce, leaving many businesses to create “in-house writing classes” to assist incoming employees.

To support such claims, Sheils cites a multitude of educational studies, academics, and business professionals to present readers with the extent of the damage created by decreasing literacy rates. For instance, she presents evidence that incoming university students (graduating from American high schools) were entering the university ill

prepared for the academic rigors of college. Sheils' argument cites a study from Temple University in Philadelphia in which more than fifty percent of the incoming student population could not pass the school's writing placement exam. Sheils also mentions similar issues at the University of California at Berkeley where more than fifty percent of the incoming freshman were placed in developmental writing courses due to their inability to perform successfully in traditional writing courses (Sheils).

For Sheils, the college graduates fared no better in the workforce after graduating from the university. Those who left the university likely often experienced pervasive writing issues in their future endeavors. Sheils cites law, business, and journalism graduate program administrators who discussed the influx of incoming graduate students who "increasingly [...] failed to master the skills of effective written communication so crucial to their fields..." (Sheils). Moreover, there was a growing criticism from the work sector, with literacy issues (such as issues with spelling and punctuation) slowly creeping into professional writing, oftentimes with recent college graduates unable to compete." As Sheils writes, "Errors we once found commonly in applications from high-school graduates are cropping up in forms from people with four-year degrees."

Sheils' analysis spends the remainder of the article overviewing the various arguments that have contributed to the decline in literacy. Sheils refers to a number of "villains" who have contributed to the decline of literacy in America. For instance, these changes to teaching philosophy that deviate from traditional writing instruction or instruction of expository writing. Instead, Sheils argues that one problem is the burgeoning of Expressionistic Composition pedagogy's lax focus on grammatical correctness, in lieu of writer centered prose that allowed students to showcase critical

thinking and creativity apart from traditional writing conventions. Sheils takes issue with Expressionism's disregard for "traditional" instruction of writing that centered on sentence structure, language conciseness, and grammar, because traditional writing curriculum tends "many of these teachers believe that 'rules stifle spontaneity'" with its overemphasis on structure and form.

However, as Sheils notes, this type of instruction that favors creative conciseness leaves students unable to produce competent prose. The Expressionistic movement, and its adherence for self-discovery through writing, set a dangerous precedent as it neglected previous "time-tested" writing instruction. Sheils cites as an example Dorothy Mathews, director of undergraduate English in Illinois, who argued for "creativity" in the English classroom (the inclusion of popular media) as a detriment to logical thinking. Under this premise, the activity of writing and reading literature prompts the development of logical thinking. According to Sheils, there is a need for print based "text rules" as they encourage a unified structure of human thought to insure true understanding among others. Sheils writes that "things have been bad, but the situation is getting a lot worse [...] as students [have] an inability to write their thoughts clearly," and "there is a lot of impreciseness in expressing thoughts we have" (Sheils).

This degradation of literacy can also be seen as the focus on writing process as self-discovery, and the development of competing alternative literacies of television and radio. The concern for Sheils is that such writing instruction does not focus on structural issues regarding writing. Instead, student prose becomes indecipherable, as the student has not been instructed on the importance of clarity of writing. This is a non-concern for

“creative” English instruction, as “many of these teachers believe that ‘rules stifle spontaneity’” (Sheils).

Implied in Sheils’ argument is that writing instruction, the “code of human communication,” with a strict emphasis on grammar and syntax, serves as a framework for human thought and language practices. Sheils justifies these claims with support from semantics scholar S.I. Hayakawa, “You don’t know anything unless you can write it,” and former Princeton University professor Carlos Baker, “Learning to write is learning to think” (qtd in Sheils). Sheils proceeds to outline a number of cultural and educational initiatives responsible for this declining cultural literacy, from the development and emphasis of non-print based media, writing pedagogies that excluded grammar instruction, to an emphasis on structural linguistics that emphasized language diversity and the English language’s privileged social status. Sheils equates functional literacy to an amalgamation of a number of skill sets that, when taught correctly, produce writers who possess the ability to write concise, error-free prose based on their studies of the “good models” found within the literary canon.

Though Sheils’ editorial is still considered controversial, her text illustrates cultural perceptions that associate writing instruction with learning prescriptive grammar and mechanical rules, and a takeaway from “Johnny Can’t Write” is that Sheils’ text embodies a number of different, and oftentimes conflicting, definitions of literacy and writing. Also, Sheils is responding to a larger national trend and belief that writing skills are in decline. Though Sheils’ text was written roughly 40 years ago, historically, it plays an important role within discussions of composition studies, the function and purpose of

English studies, the (then) state of literacy within 1970s America, and the public perceptions of education.

Sheils' text embodies the relationship shared with literacy, language, and intelligence within the United States. Ironically, this text was meant to bring awareness to the (then) current state of composition and writing instruction. Johnny, then, plays an important role within the narrative of the argument, as he is the "everyday" American student. He is a *tabula rasa*—an unwilling blank slate whose future livelihood (and the health of the nation's education system) is shaped by the social and political changes taking place during the 1960s and 1970s and by academics who do harm from deviating from "traditional" education in writing with untested writing pedagogy. Students, such as Johnny, are at the behest of a shifting cultural landscape who will "never write prose with such poise and fluidity" (Sheils).

### **Responses to "Johnny Can't Write"**

Sheils' *Newsweek* article remains an important historical literacy artifact as it is indicative of mainstream publications and public concerns of educational shifts of the early 1970s. First, Sheils' text represents a shifting concern of the shifting views of "literacy" and its role within American culture. Specifically, Sheils reminisces with fondness for the past when it was perceived Americans were more "literate" in comparison to the current generation. This generation, as Sheils asserts, is lost, and their illiteracy is reflected in a lack of mastery of "fixed rules" of grammar and adherence to writing conventions "however tedious." For Sheils, the danger of this illiteracy is that we are in danger of a fledgling educational field that attempts to usurp generations of valid English instruction (Sheils). Sheils warns, because writing thus unifies American culture

and fosters human thought. “If the written language is placed at the mercy of every new colloquialism,” Sheils writes, “and if every fresh dialect demands and gets equal sway, then we will find ourselves back in Babel.” Just as humans are punished in the story of Babel and are unable to communicate with each other using a common language, for Sheils, linguistics, compositionists, and sociologists are challenging fundamental truths of language.

Sheils’ text is important for its prompting the general public to enter the larger conversation of literacy in America:

[T]he early 1970s were a time when social pressures--in particular, the boom in higher education and the increased access for students from diverse backgrounds (many first-generation college students)--brought about a “writing crisis” in higher education. This perceived crisis was immortalized in a December 9, 1979, “Why Johnny Can’t Write” *Newsweek* cover story on the apparent decline of writing abilities [...] As a result of the new focus on student writing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, student support services for writing became as necessary to institutions as faculty workshops and the development of curricular elements (such as writing intensive courses). (McLeod and Miraglia 13)

Though Sheils’ texts generated responses from the general public, educators, and scholars in composition studies, its text fails to explore *why* such changes have occurred, outside of simple excerpts and partial quotes from many outside of composition studies. Moreover, there is a sense of nostalgia concerning the previous conversations on correctness and writing never experienced similar issues regarding writing and the young. Within the larger rhetorical narrative constructed by Sheils. The innocence of youth (and

the success of American culture) is in conflict with a villainous emerging intellectual elite class of educators, who unlike the previous “old guard” of academia who protected the values of education; attempt to usurp it by disregarding previous knowledge and scholarship.

Though many scholars take aim at the Sheils’ (and others’) perspectives on writing and writing instruction, there is an overall agreement that writing is an important skillset needed within a changing global marketplace. There is also some agreement in which writing does play some role in the development (or at least expression) of thought. Still, unfortunately, Sheils and others argue that such expressions of critical thinking are closely aligned to a current traditional approach to rhetoric that connects conciseness of thought to grammatical correctness.

Though not responding explicitly to the criticisms of Sheils, National Conference of Teachers of English and a number of English scholars including John C. Maxwell, Richard Cramer, and Timothy L. Bergen Jr. responded to the larger criticisms of composition studies. These scholars took issue with the bleak outlook of English studies presented in Sheils’ article as well as larger cultural sentiments the failure of writing instructors to prepare students to write. In similar vein, NCTE responded to the cultural concerns of the NECP regarding declining literacy rates in their Fall 1974 “Special Issues” edition of *College Composition and Communication*. The CCC article argues that students enter into the university as multi-literate individuals with unique and diverse relationships with language and literacy. Moreover, CCC suggests that language is deeply entrenched in their cultural and racial identities, and it is imperative that composition studies does not eradicate and diminish these “othered” discourses in the pursuit of

teaching academic writing. As such, *CCC* declares that composition studies should attempt to respect a student's right to language, a stance that they addressed two years prior in *CCC*. Specifically, the Executive Committee stated that students should be allowed “their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style” (2). The policy was accepted by a vote of 79-20 in 1974.

The answer to the question posed by the *CCC* is a very emotional and controversial one, as many discussions concerning writing instruction fail to acknowledge the complex issues surrounding writing. For instance, many instructors teaching at the time had little-to-no instruction on how to teach writing, instead only on how to appreciate and interpret literature, and not on an “understanding of the nature of language” (“Special Issues”). This issue further magnified the difficulty of discussing a unified vision of writing instruction, as many instructors teaching composition were the representatives of the profession, and thus their position carries weight. This partly explains issues regarding an emphasis on current traditional values embedded within writing instruction. This becomes problematic as such individuals are taking a position “on an aspect of their discipline about which they have little real information.”

In addition to *CCC*'s response, in “National Assessment of Writing: Useless and Uninteresting?” John C Maxwell took issue with the findings from the NAEP report, citing that although it was able to identify performance issues within educational programs that may have greater implications as part of a longer study, that some of the NAEP assessment criteria were flawed. Assessment testing tends to make speculative causative findings based on correlating points that share similar. As such, standardized



testing “[is] scandalous in that they try to measure something by not measuring it” (1254). Such tests assume that identifying well-crafted written prose and demonstrating an understanding of grammar and syntax convention serve as indicators of writing mastery. Specifically, “asking [students] to punctuate, capitalize, and choose from among spelling options is a preposterous measure of ‘language’ arts,” as these markers do not indicate critical thinking. Moreover, the data outlines many obvious points known by those working closely with instructors, mainly which students do struggle with many writing conventions; however, the study does not provide instructions on *how* to better instruct students. In addition, there exists a very overinflated sense of expectation by the public that demands “high skills” of communication from public education (i.e., writing) within the limited resources and time of instructor, “[it is] unrealistic in the one hour per day given over to English” (1256).

Similarly, Richard Cramer, in “Where’s Johnny?,” published in *College English* in 1978, presents a satirical mystery short story, in which he unravels the disappearance of Johnny. During his search, Cramer uncovers a government conspiracy to indoctrinate young Americans into docile citizens unable to think creatively and who are not critically “aware of the unfair balance of power, the propaganda-like nature of present education, the country’s bloody and sordid past, and the availability of alternative lifestyles” (298). Cramer places the blame on education reforms that encouraged a push toward “back-to-basics” writing instruction--rote memorization, sentence diagramming, and grammar instruction--as a means of distracting larger social issues: “By concentrating on grammar, mathematics, and phonics, the system is more likely to produce technocrats and lie likely

to produce thinkers [as well as] ‘draw attention away from injustices in the present system’” (298).

Cramer’s argument is that such “back-to-basics” writing instruction is inauthentic since it does not actually teach logic, reason, or critical thinking, does not encourage students to engage with the world outside of the rules and conventions of the literal text, and does not allow students to discover their own ideas and perspectives by confronting and challenging the ideas of others (302). As Cramer writes, “Education is the means by which people can explore themselves and their environment, even when the exploration causes pain to the student and those in power. Writing should be used to help students reach this desirable goal” (302). Cramer concludes by arguing that to teach students to be independent, creative, and critical thinkers--or ideal democratic citizens--writing must be personal and must encourage students and readers to take action in order to affect the world outside of the text. Cramer writes: “We must motivate kids by teaching them that writing is related to their own lives. We must show them that great literature is related to the way they talk about their friends every day.”

Similarly, in “Why Can’t Johnny Write?,” Bergen blames assessment practices that focus on speed rather than acknowledgement of student “writing processes.” Bergen argues that Johnny’s inability to write is systemic of the larger educational issues regarding writing instruction. Mainly, there is not a unified agreement regarding what constitutes “good writing,” or at the very minimum, no critical thinking on *what* specifically “are the requirements of good writing” (37). As such, there tends to be a generalization of writing acquisition as a collection of skills that one can master and reproduce on a whim. Though not explicitly stated by Bergen, there appears to be a

disconnect from what universities uses as examination criteria on assessing and teaching writing instruction. For instance, there is the concern that timed writing examinations tend to quantify the student's speed in producing text as indication of writing ability. The assumption is that students who successfully completed writing activities within a timely manner would likely make minimal grammatical and sentence structure issues that would mar their own writing production. According to the "speed test" then, if Johnny cannot write, it is because he cannot think or create a clear and readable prose. Bergen argues, though, that the speed test "rules out respect for the reflective thought that should precede expression" (36). Bergen notes that "good" writing is often marked by an understanding of the writing process, editing, and "line-by-line" revising of text (36). For Bergen, our focus is too often the sterile focus on textual neatness and adherence to specific rules of writing rather than invention and experimentation of student prose. Bergen states that a "composition paper full of corrections and crossed-out lines may be far more valuable to the teacher in apprising a student's awareness of the preciseness of the right word or phrase than an immaculately typed essay" (37).

In turn, we have used writing as evidence of rational thought so that we attempt to access intellect and critical thinking abilities based on writing samples and in turn judge people, particularly students, who write poorly, negatively. This perception of poor writing is built within Western thought of knowledge and education. Much of the problems experienced by poor writers are the consequence of popular metaphors that have developed within the university. This is further complicated when a good portion of composition studies appear to anchor heavily to previous composition pedagogy that views writing from a cognitive standpoint. As a consequence, such thinking perpetuates

cultural myths of language and literacy as being synonymous with intelligence. Sheils and others' arguments assume a moral judgment on the purpose language, and this Eurocentric view of language is often damaging, as it denotes there exists as a Standard or correct form of English that is oftentimes conflated with morally good, with the inverse being similarly assumed (those who write poorly are bad).

In similar fashion, David Russell argues in *Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870-1990: A Curricular History* that such arguments are common in discussing issues of literacy and education during this time and, in doing so, create a host of villains for the American public, who were experiencing an unprecedented education and economic growth, "in 1956 [...] white collar workers outnumbered blue-collar workers for the first time in American history [...] for the first time in any nation, secondary education was expected of all [and for many Americans] a college education came to be thought as a necessity" (239). It is not surprising then that there existed a large public outcry to for public institutions to properly educate students on literacy. Students in the ten years prior to Sheils' "Johnny Can't Write" were excelling in exceeding in both education and the workforce. Those unable to succeed carried with them make sense of shame. The fear at the time was that these poor unfortunate students would be unable to compete with the ever- demanding challenges faced by the 1960s and 1970s job market. Russell argues that for the general public, student illiteracy was a result of popular media, like comic books, television, music and experimental opposition pedagogy (240). Russell argues that publications like Sheils' reflected an increased demand of literacy within the private sectors of business, including "economic and educational systems and raising

expectations, combined with the old assumption that writing was a single skill, independent of specific context” (240).

### **Understanding Composition’s History**

It is important to consider too that the goal of the developmental writing course is to strengthen and develop the writing skills of students who have been identified by the university as needing some form of remediation before entry into a traditional writing course. The job of developmental writing *appears* easy enough: students’ inability to write appropriate academic text stems from a lack of familiarity of writing conventions. However, this viewpoint of writing instruction, though widely accepted, may not provide insight into the issues regarding writing construction by those labeled as “developmental students.” When discussing academic writing, this is important, considering the complex and often problematic history of writing instruction. Much of this conversation is grounded in centuries-long struggles in defining and re-defining rhetoric (i.e., What is invention? Style? Delivery?), cultural intolerance to academic “other,” the shifting definition of the function of education, and writing as a reflection of intelligence.

In a sense, Sheils’ text represents a profound misunderstanding of the historical moments that influence contemporary English and reflect most notably a sense of nostalgia for the past. Though one can, he can blame such criticism as faulty as the language we use *appears* simple enough to understand and convey and that teaching language should be equally a simple task. However, such feelings of the past are not rooted in the realities on how English instruction developed in America. Sheils’ argument is not inherently new, as there has always existed a very tumultuous relationship between the shifts of accepted educational best-practices when confronted with new paradigms

that provide new perspectives of knowledge. The problem is, however, that Standard English is a variation of language practices used and valued within the university and the educated. It is important to place Sheils' argument within the historical framework of English development. Specifically, we must look at her work as a reflection of the educational practices found within the university. Specifically, such arguments neglect the complexity that colleges have gone through in over the past one hundred years. The current state of literary instruction and rise of literacy is part of larger trends in American education, extending well before the twentieth century, and the fault of Sheils' texts (and those of similar perspectives) is the lack of historical connectivity.

Embedded in Sheils' text is a desire to return to the "good old days" where young students excelled at writing masterful prose with little to no "errors" in writing conventions and critical thinking. However, Sheils and her contemporaries' interpretation yearn for a past that is not accurate. This criticism of the erosion of literacy is particularly old. There have been numerous criticisms of American language being fractured and divisive.

This is part of the complexity related to the discussions concerning language usage in the United States. David R. Russell argues that the United States (and other "pluralistic societies") tends to specifically wrestle with this issue of appropriate writing, and correct language. In particular, Russell argues that academic writing is "hopelessly fragmented" partly because of the specialization of management in particular professions. Division subsequently creates exclusion, defines "communities" as being innately unique, and distinguishes "elites" (those with access) from those without it (33). Because of this, Russell argues that such thinking perpetuates myths of literacy--mainly, the act of

becoming literate will correct social, economic, and political ills: “The greatest obstacle to reshaping and rearranging are called current division may well be the myth that they do not really exist or that they would soon disappear if only everyone would learn to write properly (or naturally or critically whatever you will)” (33).

For instance, an 1892 *New York Times* article, “Deficient in English,” warned of the intrusion of remedial education on Harvard’s campus. The Committee on Composition and Rhetoric bemoaned allocating additional resources to “remediate” incoming students, who needed additional courses to cover “a vast amount of elementary educational work which should be done in the preparatory schools” (10). The committee’s statements center on the previous year’s writing assessment survey of incoming freshmen students attending the university. The study found that forty-seven percent of incoming freshmen passed unsatisfactory and “20 percent failing wholly” (10). The Harvard Committee on Composition and Rhetoric bemoaned allocating additional resources to “remediate” these incoming students:

It would not seem unreasonable to insist that young men of nineteen years of age, who present themselves, for a college education, should be able to not speak, but to write their mother tongue with ease and correctness. It is obviously absurd that the college--the institution of higher education-- should be called upon to turn aside from its proper functions, and devote its means and the time of its instructors to the task of imparting elementary instructions, which should be given even in ordinary grammar schools. (10)

Similar concerns for student writing errors appear twenty years later in C.H. Ward’s *What is English: A Book of Strategy for English Teachers*. In 1917, Ward, the

chair of the English department at the Taft School, observed, “From every college in the country goes up the cry, ‘Our freshman can’t spell, can’t punctuate.’ Every high school is in despair because its pupils are so woefully ignorant of the merest rudiments [...] our failure to teach decent English is so scandalous that men point the finger of scorn at us” (Ward 19-20). Once again, there has always existed a pervasive belief that students cannot write.

Furthermore, the difficulty in discussing education during the nineteenth century is that there is a tendency to romanticize the past (as demonstrated in Sheils’ text). Rolf Torstendahl agrees and warns that we must be cautious when we talk about concepts of professions:

It is not possible to write an article on professional education in the nineteenth century. There are not one single type of professional education, nor was there any single profession that we could label “archetypical.” Many different routes lead to professional standing: apprenticeship, university courses, and specialized technical institutes all played a role in creating a professional society. (109)

When discussing issues regarding literacy, it is important to note the social and historical context in which literacy operates within the United States. Though literacy is ubiquitous within a highly literate culture, it is oftentimes difficult to ascertain the many ways which culture has defined and redefined the purpose and importance of literacy. For instance, scholars Suzanne de Castell and Allan Lake argue that contemporary American education subscribes that literacy is a “context neutral, value-free” skill grounded within reason and scholarship and as a skill can be transmitted to anyone (87). However, this is far from the reality as, historically, literary instruction has been imbued with various



cultural ideologies, and social values that complicate definitions of what is and is not literacy. As a consequence, de Castell and Lake argue that the definition of literate “mastery over the processes by means of which culturally significant information is coded. The criterion of significance has varied historically and with changes in the kind of information from which power and authority could be delivered” (88). Pedagogy associated with literacy oftentimes frames the importance of literacy as a neutral skill and commodifies literacy as valuable for personal and cultural good. When discussing American literacy, de Castell and Lake argue that three historical contexts construct contemporary perceptions of literacy: Early nineteenth century perceptions of literacy as an extension of national identity and morality; early twentieth century views of literacy as a form of social mobility; and Infancy of “technocratic” movement developed after World War II (100). These three perceptions are significant to this discussion when the perception of writing instructions in the United States. de Castell and Lake’s text provides perspective on how cultural trends shape social definitions of writing.

### Classical Literacies

de Castell and Lake argue that much of nineteenth century literacy instruction adheres to neo-Platonic perceptions of knowledge and understanding (95). Specifically, Platonic thought on Truth and Beauty and idealized concepts can be extracted through dialectic and observation of the real world. Moreover, the “texts” constructed by those who were able to ascertain truth (such as the philosophers and scholars) are invaluable and infallible and function as monuments of human understanding circulating through the academia and “passed down by each generation of elite literati” (de Castell and Lake 95). In regards of literacy during this period, the act of being literate is to be in communion

with Platonic truth and thus the act of being literate is akin to being morally and intellectually actualized individual, “the experience of becoming literate was to be an imitation into an ongoing cultural conversation with exemplary texts and human models” (95).

Ultimately, literacy during the late nineteenth century was “inextricably bound to the transmission of a national ideology and culture” (de Castell and Lake 95). It was through the rigors of practiced writing and grammar instruction associated with Current-Traditional education ensured the intellectual improvement of American citizenry as well as cultivated an emerging a uniquely American “high culture” (95). Similarly, Deborah Brandt argues in “Drafting U.S. Literacy” that considering Jeffersonian ideals regarding social mobility and nineteenth century religious views on order, cleanliness, and reading of the biblical scriptures, literacy developed as a mean of religious devotion and civic engagement: “Literacy was both a privilege and a confirmation of social legitimacy: you are standing in a religious or civic universe established your rights and responsibilities towards literacy” (489).

de Castell and Lake argue that these views manifested themselves at various levels of American culture (95). Platonic ideas of functions as part of the “underpinnings” of American education, specifically that platonic truth (beauty and morality) is “immutable” and abstract constructs that comprises the world. As these constructs are ideal, human understanding struggles to grasp their complexity. It is only through the cultivation of human faculties (like memory). As consequence, literacy instruction centered on Platonic mimesis and imitation to cultivate the mind and develop critical thinking skillsets of nineteenth century youth. Literature offered the ideal medium to

develop such skillsets as it was accepted that the physical act of writing (i.e., rote memorization, repetition, and the transcription of “good” poetry and literature) demonstrated a mastery of literacy (95). For instance, writing instruction of elementary-aged students attempted to develop their “finger style” physical dexterity and improvement of their writing by transcribing the provided texts. Such exercises thus served as a prerequisite to more rigorous writing theory (94). The intended goal was to eradicate immorality and other undesirable behaviors through mental rigor and discipline. The uneducated, mainly students, are thus the uncivilized intellectual savages or “a bundle of unruly impulses needing to be brought under the control of the faculty of ‘right reasons’ and moral judgment—that is morally informed rational judgment” (93).

Moreover, the writing textbooks of the nineteenth century came to aid in the facilitation of writing instruction. Joseph Lancaster argues that these books were reflective of new educational pedagogy that focused on educational assessment of the classroom and student learning. Connors cites Joseph Lancaster’s *Improvements in Education* as influential in shaping the educational practices of the time. Specifically, Lancaster’s educational practices were important as the educational focus shifted to student centered learning, in which older students would “monitor” and educate younger pupils: “Lancastrian teaching, which had its heyday between 1810 and 1835, took the sole responsibility for classroom activity off the teacher and put much of it on classroom monitors, students who frilled other students on the lessons” (Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy* 75). Moreover, as Connors argues, the monitors who lead class instructions were often unfamiliar with the subject matter. As such, the teaching materials were often structured in such a way that it information was

accessible to the monitor “usually the new texts contained catechetical questions that untrained monitors could easily use, and thus in rhetoric we can see the growth of question-and-answer abridgements of Blair” (Connors 75).

The shift of educational pedagogy of the nineteenth century university was in response to a number of cultural and technological reforms occurring. As such, the development of current composition theory in the United States is a story of the transformation of the university as it attempted to meet the change of the technological advancements spurred on by the Industrial Revolution, the development of a (then) intellectually-minded middle class who found upward mobility through education (and particularly mastery of “proper” modes of writing) as well as an emerging “new” student body desiring specialized education appropriate science-related fields developing at the nineteenth century. Specifically, Connors argues that composition studies as a field evolves in step with culture and is “driven by potent social and pedagogical needs, and running on the rails of an ever cheaper, ever quicker, and more competitive printing technology” (Connors 7).

Additionally, the passage of the Morrill Land Grant served as one important contributor to the shifting cultural views of literacy in America. Signed into policy in 1862, the Morrill Land Grant allowed sale of federal land to fund the creation of engineering and agricultural focused universities (Williams 79). Robert Williams writes in *Origins of Federal Support for Higher Education*, “the colleges called into being by the educational demands of a rapidly expanding and democratizing nation. This growing nation, they averred, had been badly served by the antebellum college, which they

depicted as unresponsive, inflexible, retrogressive, and—worst of all—undemocratic” (2).

A second issue to consider is the development of the so-called “market revolution” in Jacksonian America and the challenge it posed to capitalism and privilege of American culture. Historian Frederick Rudolph in *The American College & University: A History* argues that Jackson’s views greatly impacted how much of the nation view issues regarding systemic inequalities: “In an atmosphere of expanding universal manhood suffrage, of unlimited belief in the inevitability of material and moral progress, the Jacksonians were overwhelmingly persuasive. When they were finished, almost everyone either was a Jacksonian or sounded like one” (201). The Jacksonian movement reflected a cultural zeitgeist of what Thein refers to as “reckless individualism” (201). As Rudolph argues, the Jacksonian movement fully embraced the concept of the equality of man, equality as a form of access to education that has tangible and pragmatic uses in the lives of citizenry, equality in regards of labor abuse by captains of industry and business monopolies: “In both these moods, Jacksonianism harbored a fundamental hostility to privilege. The eastern workingman who sought a larger share of the results of his own labor [...] Kentucky banker who suffered from monopolistic privilege of the United States banks in Philadelphia” (202).

In turn, the university became a central point of contention for the Jacksonians and served a social good, in preparing citizens to be self-sufficient individuals. Robert Williams argues that the advent of emerging technologies were disruptive in nature as they provided pathways for those typically not afforded educational opportunities. This trend reflected an anti-elitism against colleges as people wanted a utilitarian type of

education (Williams 23). Thein argues how this movement represented a rejection of collegiate elitism since under the Jacksonian movement there was a push to create equal education for all Americans as well as a move away from European influences (23).

Finally, the professionalization of writing instruction served as an important factor in the shifting cultural views of literacy in America. scholar Robert Kitzhaber argues in his work *Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900* that prior to 1850s, there was no unified discussion on grammar and punctuation as part of a larger, liberal arts education nor in textbooks, as there was an assumption (as is today) that rules and conventions of grammar was delegated to previous educational schools, and not the university (187).

Moreover, English instruction of the nineteenth-century university was unrecognizable, when compared to contemporary composition pedagogy—mainly, there was not an emphasis on teaching the skill of writing. Writing served as a foundation to transmit knowledge. There did not exist exclusive instruction on writing. As such, foundational skills (like grammar and sentence construction) were the responsibility of earlier schooling. Instead, university instruction centered on recitation, a skill necessary for public debate. Writing thus served as a mechanism to aid in the student's ability to memorize, critic, and recite (Russell 40). Ultimately, the purpose of nineteenth-century English instruction was to enhance students' ability to manipulate language: "indeed, college freshmen typically took no intro course but instead concentrated on language study--translation and memorization of the torn tax--to provide them with a fund of material for [there are public oration to demonstrate rhetorical skills]" (41). Russell argues that students would often rely on notebooks to generate passages which they

would recite in class as part of an oral presentation or as a study guide to help assist with written examinations (including “note-taking on spoken and written materials, translation paraphrase, historical and philosophical commentary”) (Russell 40).

For instance, 1892 the Committee of Ten, a consortium of educators and college presidents (including Harvard President Charles W. Eliot), published a report titled *Report of the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies* that outlined best educational practices and recommendations for public schools in order to better prepare students for higher education. In their recommendation for English, the committee agrees that English instruction should strive to cultivate “good English” in students. For example, the committee argues that grade school English education (an ability to analysis and appreciate literature and literary forms as well as formal grammar instruction) is invaluable as it fosters positive habits of literacy in the student. Failure to acquire these skills will have impeded the student, “It should not be forgotten that in these early years of his training the pupil is forming habits of reading and of thought which will either aid him for the rest of his life, or of which he will by-and-by have to cure himself with painful effort” (80).

High school education should be a further refinement of these skills. Ultimately, the committee argues that English instruction influenced by “belletristic assumptions” of English instruction as a means of developing critical thought. Specifically, good English instruction should impart strong reading and writing skills on students, they must first cultivate a “taste” for well-regarded, canonized literature that students should then mimic in their own texts. Grade school instruction encourage students “be kept [...] away from the influence of bad models and under the influence of good models” (87). Ultimately,

English instruction thus should provide students with “an acquaintance with good literature and to furnish him with the means of extending that acquaintance” (86).

Similarly, English instruction was, as Robert J. Connors outlines in *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*, inspired by classical rhetorical instruction in which the instructor relied on writing drills that targeted the “memory, judgement, and will” of students (36-37). The eighteenth century university students’ academic lives were wildly different from their contemporary counterpart, with much of university’s educational curriculum founded Classical Greek educational instruction. Connors states that instructors teaching in the eighteenth century university lacked the same specialization in writing instruction as contemporary professors. Rather than a professor whose educational expertise would center on a singular topic--like teaching writing-- professors often “could and shift subjects” in which they taught: “It is not uncommon to see [...] vistas of early professors [have specializations] in rhetoric, then logic, then Hebrew” (Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy* 174). Ultimately, the goal of the eighteenth century university was not to instruct students with skill necessary to enter into the workforce, but followed closely to traditional liberal arts education as well as the strengthen the mental faculties of students through the various branches of knowledge.

Ultimately, nineteenth century American higher education was highly confrontational, with a strong emphasis and debate in argumentation. Students attending the university at this time were highly competitive, both with their peers and with faculty. The mark of a good student was in their ability to be ever diligent in their ability to argue and demonstrate their intellectual worth, “All in all, this was [the university consisted] of



rigorous and demanding curriculum, one requiring that good students be perpetually ready to pick up a challenge, answer a point, refute a claim, [and] protect their vitals from one another and from the master” (Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy* 46).

Connors argues that this conflict is, in part, anchored to educational pedagogy popular during this period--rhetorical argumentation through oral debate. This is not to claim that students did not receive writing instruction; however, classical rhetorical holdovers that prioritized oral argumentation (worthy of academic interests that centered on “Truth” in the acquisition of knowledge over writing instruction often overshadowed its importance. With such an emphasis placed on traditional rhetorical discourse, it was not uncommon for instructional time to consist of a forty-five minute lecture and then to take “the last quarter-hour to examine students through recitation. [Moreover,] in the practical instruction ‘fortnightly rhetoricals’ (carefully staged persuasive orations), all of which were opportunities for personal display of talent, for contest, and [humiliation]” (Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy* 8).

Concerning writing instruction, writing served only as a mechanism of communication that operated apart from the writer. Concepts such as writing as means of self-expression or personal experience were not the concern of composition instruction. In line with classical rhetoric instruction, which explored abstract concepts of the human experience (Truth, morality, goodness), writing instruction followed similarly: students would draft an argumentative treatise over popular topics. As such, “English composition was devoted, as rhetoric had been, to teaching the received ways of handling public topics by deploying gleaned knowledge mixed with common held beliefs” (Connors,

*Composition- Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy* 303). Typically, such topics would be relatable to the academic focus of the class; for instance, a student in a rhetoric course would be expected to write argumentative texts regarding morality or goodness.

Connors invokes combative training metaphors to describe experiences of the nineteenth century student, equating the university to basic military training gain from army boot camps to martial arts training teaching one to defend themselves from attacks. Connors' metaphor is particularly apropos as it conveys the intentionally grueling experience of composition instruction of the time: its purpose was to fortify rhetorical skillsets (critical thinking and argumentation) in the pursuit of students' successful transition into their professional lives. As consequence, college education (including composition) of the late 1850s was an attempt to foster such abilities: "Education in all-male institutions was set up as a struggle for dominance; one had to wrest authority from the teacher by proving one could 'master' the subject was proof of the ordeal [...] for most college before 1850, the faculty had one clear definition. Students were the enemy" (Connors 47). Similarly, scholar David Russell notes that English faculty of the time were implicit in students' lack of mastery of English prose as there was little value in teaching writing instruction as it was not considered relevant to the profession, "faculty [not only] had a license to complain about poor student writing but an institutionally sanctioned excuse for not devoting time to their undergraduates' writing" (Russell 63).

However, by the end of the nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth century, in response to the education shift of the population, the university, likewise, adjusted their curriculum to address the needs of the increasing "commercial

industrial” citizens attending the university. In doing so, the university eventually moved away from classical teaching of Greek and Latin in favor of writing instruction.

Ultimately, composition rhetoric separated from oral communicating and became its own branch of rhetoric. It became apparent that the desire of “belletrism” and eloquence soon fell out of favor and was replaced with standardized composition theory--the current traditional movement--and the focus of appropriate and correct writing, as it is more applicable to the technical writing that is found within the university (Russell 63). As such, late nineteenth century English instruction concerned itself with efficiency and delivery of written composition discourse in a concise practical manner.

Blair’s rhetoric ties style and correctness to individual morality. Belletrism assumes that the “foundations of civilization,” in this case morality and goodness, are interwoven in the individual’s development of genius or ability for natural aptitude. Rhetoric also cultivates “taste” or the ability to judge the quality of what is “good” based on observation and common sense (Blair 43). Blair states in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres: In Three Volumes* that “taste consist in the power of judging; genius, in the power of executing” (46).

As such, Blair argues that in order to improve or cultivate is to being in “proper pursuit of the good.” Though individuals may be born with a varying degree of “genius,” they can always sharpen their ability of “taste” through study. Blair argues that in order to become a “Creator of beauty” one must have a familiarity with of oneself as well as one’s innate skill and ability (45). Moreover, although one may be born with an innate skilled, clever, and intelligent, one must not assume the same individual can truly pursue and

contributes to knowledge and truth. To be a “genius” is to have an aptitude for knowledge as well as the ability to envision and create. However, they lack the power of judging”--the ability to identify classifies “the good.” Blair states, “One may have a considerable degree of taste in poetry, eloquence, or any of the final arts, who has little or hardly any genius for composition or execution in any of these arts” (45).

In regards to rhetoric, Louis Agnew notes in “The Civic Function of Taste: A Re-Assessment of Hugh Blair’s Rhetorical Theory” that stylistic correctness is important as promotes “social interaction” among others and the accumulation of a collective knowledge and thus “refining” societal “taste” or the ability to collectively ascertain Beauty and Truth (Agnew 30). In “Authoring Elitism: Francis Hutcheson and Hugh Blair in Scotland and America,” Dottie Broaddus argues that Blair warns that taste is not an inherent ability (unlike genius), as such there is the tendency toward personal failing or lack of proper instruction that “become[s] perverted either by prejudice, ignorance, or lack of cultivation” (46).

However, Blair’s belletrism is problematic when discussing cultural definitions of writing as it elevates the canon of style to aesthetics, redefining as aspect of individual morality: “In Blair’s rhetoric the use of language is subordinated to and judge by taste” (48). However, they lack the power of “judging”--the ability to identify classifies “the good.” Blair states, “One may have a considerable degree of taste in poetry, eloquence, or any of the final arts, who has little or hardly any genius for composition or execution in any of these arts” (45). Though individuals may be born with a varying degree of “genius,” they can always sharpen their ability of “taste” through study: “Everyone is

born with potential taste and genius, but these faculties must be cultivated” (“Authoring Elitism” 46).

Consequently, such thinking does subscribe a sense of individual responsibility and moral consideration to the ability to write concisely. Most often, those with developed mental faculties and advanced sense of “taste” were also, as luck would have them, a select elite with access to educational facilities that help cultivate their tastes. As Broadus argues, “Unless people possess virtuous affections, [...] they can neither understand art and literature [...] because] to be eloquent, one must study polite literature, must use the best authors [and] form habits of application and industry” (48). It is no wonder that Blair’s text finds success in the nineteenth century America as “because his rhetorical theory demonstrated how to make practicable those values already present in an elitist Federalist-Unitarian culture [...] whose existence depended on establishing its hegemony over the minds and emotions of the masses” (48).

Is it at the start of the twentieth century that writing instruction radically transforms, and begins to resemble much of contemporary conversations about writing (i.e., the role of “remedial” writing courses in higher education, remedial courses as a form of assessment and tracking). Specifically, writing instruction becomes progressive—responding to business pressures that desired a literate workforce, an increasing prevalence of science in addressing social ills, as well as the hope that general education could bring about social reform.

### Progressive Literacies

The Progressive movement from the 1900s to 1940s marked a second significant influence to this discussion of the perception of writing instructions in the United States

that provides perspective on how cultural trends shape social definitions of writing. During the 1900 to 1940s, composition instruction emerged from a continuation of cultural transformation of literacy. Specifically, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, while public school student population increased 150% from 1900 to 1914 (de Castell and Lake 95), many of public and private educational programs still held firm to nineteenth century “high culture” views of literacy and classical literature as means of cultivating social critical thinking in America’s populace; as such, literacy had value as it “was seen as a vehicle for expression, social communication, and vocational competence, rather than an improvement of the soul” (100).

The twentieth century was an interesting time for writing instruction, as there were a number of social, business, and political interest in encouraging mass literacy for American citizens. At this time, schools began to increase in size and expand to urban areas of the US. And as a consequence, was an increase rise of taxes to help fund these institutions. Because of this, there was pressure on schools to justify the cost of funding higher education—with many arguing for educational initiatives mirroring cost efficient management found in business (de Castell and Luke 96). However, de Castelle and Lake argue that such sentiments are temporary as there was a growing concern for the costs of paying for a public education that did not promote pragmatic instruction in-line with emerging interests of scientific fields. de Castell and Lake note that “the legitimization potential of classical literacy in a developing industrial democracy was rapidly eroded as the public was nurtured on scientific ideals and evolutionary theory by intellectuals of the day, and on scientific management and cost accounting by intellectuals of the day” (96).

For instance, there is an increased demand for public education to assist in training specialized workers as well as creating an efficient workforce. During this time, there was an unwavering belief that sciences could, in effect, address social ills and fix widespread illiteracy. David Russell argues that public education was viewed in much the same way as a hierarchical management found in business. Educational pedagogy became mechanized and impersonal--with the express goal of efficiently and formally mass-producing individuals who could work in specialized careers. Russell suggests that this “social efficiency” was pro-business as it radically transforms the assumptions of writing. No longer was writing connected to content but is the accumulation of specific skills mastered through rote memorization: “Social efficiency sought community through differentiation, on the analogy of an efficient machine and its parts” (138).

Ultimately, Russell that the social efficiency movement codifies current traditional views of writing within higher education administration. Writing is divorced from content and critical thinking, “a way of demonstrating learning, not of acquiring it” (138). Russell writes, “writing would be a low-level mechanical skill, unworthy of attention at the higher levels of education--except through a remedial measures” (138). This separation of content and writing is further exacerbated by the prominence of private industry need of a science minded workforce as well as the growth of science-related fields within the university.

At this time, composition pedagogy was considered subservient to other fields of knowledge. Composition was seen as a fledgling field, foundational instruction that taught the skill of writing. It was not a premier field of inquiry that contributed to the advancement of knowledge (i.e., mathematics aids in the technological advancements in

industry). As consequence, composition pedagogy and instruction centered on writing as a collection of universal skills (i.e., grammar conventions) “of reading and writing, transferable to a variety of social and vocational contexts” (de Castell and Luke 101). de Castell and Luke argue that “was concede of according` to a behaviorist stimulus—response model. The linguistic and ideational features of the text, the similes, could be structured and manipulated to evoke the desire skill-related response, ranging from rudimentary ‘decoding’ to more advanced skills of ‘comprehension’” (de Castell and Luke 101).

### Technocratic Literacies

A third influence on the perception of writing instruction in the United States that provides perspective on how cultural trends shape social definitions of writing would be the emergence of technocratic literacies. By the beginning of WWII, progressive education began to experience a decline, replaced with a growing sentiment that literary education must be codified and must yield to scientific inquiry, or as de Castell and Luke explain, literary instruction must move toward “a refinement of the scientific strand of progressivism” (101). de Castell and Lake note that scientific minded education was partly in response to public concerns and Anti-American sentiments after WWII, which assumed the “child-centered” progressive education as containing “Communist influences” and thus harmful to American youths (100).

Though occurring roughly sixty years ago, this period is important as it conceptualizes contemporary literacy, a skill that can qualified and quantified through academic examination, or as de Castell and Lake coin as elements of a “technocratic,”



“literacy was thus scientifically dissected into individually teachable and testable subset skill units” (101).

In the same vein as Graff, Michael W. Apple makes a similar charge against culture and education in his book *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age*. Specifically, Apple claims that literary trends are oftentimes set by social concerns; for instance, economic pressures ensure the importance of literacy within our culture. As literacy is not an economic power, it creates a twofold issue in regards of the teaching of literacy. One of the biggest issues is of the responsibility of literacy, as literacy is tied to economic improvement, and as demonstrated in Sheils’ text, renegotiates definitions of equality, as Graff argues and ties it to literacy. The argument posed by Apple argues that there is the “appearance” of equality within education since education operates in much the same capacity as a free market and since educational access appears equal--meaning that all children are offered education in the US. Continuing the metaphor of free market, this equality is the ability of choice. However, as consequence of such choice, as with the free market, responsibility lies with the consumer/student for not fulfilling his/her responsibility to succeed in school; for instance, the student did not study hard enough or was not serious in his/her academic pursuits.

Moreover, Apple argues that economic pressures that shape the public perceptions of literacy further complicate discussing literacy. The burden of writing issues is placed on the student, not educational initiatives. Students are complicit in their failure to learn (e.g., learning grammar): “Thus, the current emphasis on ‘excellence’ (a word with multiple meaning and social uses) has shifted educational discourse so that under

achievement once again increasingly is seen as a largely the fault of the student. Student failure, which was at least partly interpreted as the fault of severely defiant educational policies and practices, is now being seen as the result of what might be called the biological and economic marketplace” (19).

Similarly, Deborah Brandt argues that we live in the midst of an “information economy,” in which literacy has become a commodity for a number of political and economic institutions. Though such a shift seems slight, particularly if one considers that advancements in informational technology has revolutionized that manner in which we communicate in the twenty-first century, there is cause for concern this has led to deconstruction of literacy. For instance, de Castell and Luke argue that this concern of literacy, “which, in its previous historical forms, constituted a communicational whole--in desecrate measurable skills” (87). Within an “information economy,” literacy is relegated to a skill or an observable act that follows strict and unyielding culturally approved conventions that can be accessed through competency exams. Brandt suggests that as literacy becomes predictable, it is transformed into a product to be owned, consumed, and sold—a resource for industry likened to electricity as “its circulation keeps the lights on [...] literacy as a staple of life—on the order of indoor lights and clothing” (Brandt 2-3).

Brandt argues that literacy becomes a tool of protection, a means to protect oneself from social and economic hardships. Literacy serves as cultural currency and cache: “to treat literacy in this way is to understand not only why individuals labor to attain literacy but also appreciate why, as with any resource of value, organized economic and political interests work so persistently to conscript and ration the powers of literacy

for their own competitive advantage [...] a resource, literacy has potential payoff in gaining power or pleasure, in accruing information, civil rights, education, spirituality, status, money” (4). As consequence of this commodification, literacy can be exploited as there exists economic and political opportunities for exploitation to promote particular agendas or worldviews:

In short, literacy is valuable—and volatile—property. And like other commodities with private and public value, it is grounds for potential exploitation, injustice, and struggle as potential hope, satisfaction, and reward. Wherever literacy is learned and practiced, these competing interests will always be present. (2, 3)

An example of this technoliteracy can be seen in the recent comments of Kyle Wiens, CEO of Ifixit.com (a popular online repair site) in a 2012 *Harvard Business Review*. Wiens argues that illiteracy (specifically lack of an understanding of grammar conventions) is indication of one’s worth and credibility. Their inability to write reflects their inability to do complex tasks, “Grammar is credibility. They are a projection of you in your physical absence. [...] I hire people who care about details. Applicants who don’t think writing is important are likely to think a lot of other (important) things aren’t important.”

Wiens’ comments reflect larger assumptions that BW programs should be removed from the university entirely. Remedial education is beyond the ability of the university. Moreover, BW programs are not financially viable. Jane V. Wellman and Bruce Vandal’s “5 Myths of Remedial Education” argues that, for many, remedial education is a fruitless endeavor and is financially difficult to justify the continuation of funding these programs:

Most believe that more can be done to reduce spending by getting rid of things that aren't a necessity. And remedial education--the 'catch-up' work now required for the nearly 40 percent of students who come to college lacking basic skills needed to succeed--is a prime candidate for elimination on almost everybody's list.

The public's perception of composition is oftentimes constructed on faulty assumptions that there has always existed a "perfected" English language properly taught, spoken, and written by all that is in contrast to the current educational climate that deviates from time-tested educational practices of old. I believe that it is important for us to return back to 1974 CCCC Statement states regarding students' rights to language as guidance. CCCC counters such assumptions:

Paradoxically, past change is considered normal but current change is viewed by some as degradation [...] no one speaks of the primitive language of Chaucer or the impoverished language of Shakespeare. Few complain that French and Spanish developed from Latin. Literacy scholars might dispute endlessly over the absolute merits of neoclassical verse romantic poetry, but no one would argue that literature would be richer if one or the other did not exist. ("Students' Rights to Their Own Language")

This is problematic as much of the general public is often ignorant on the subject and historical traditions of writing. However, this does not limit those outside the profession to question the teaching practices of English instructors (i.e., Sheils) with an "air of absolute authority [for example] historians, mathematicians, and nurses all hold deciding views of what English teachers should be requiring" ("Students' Rights to Their

Own Language”). As consequence, there is an assumption that writing instruction should reflect that held “prejudices held by the general public” (“Students’ Rights to Their Own Language”). Sheils’ text reflects a cultural definition of literacy that is at odds with composition theory and illustrates a cultural push toward a return to “good old past of writing” (i.e., kill and drill grammar exercises).

As a profession, we need to re-examine our own assumptions of writing. We also need to be better educated on the scholarship on our profession (particularly rhetoric, sociology, and linguistics and how they shape our understanding of language). We must consider how such teaching philosophies contributed to the standardization of the English language. Though many in the profession would consider otherwise, English instruction has helped reinforce Standard English that alienates and excludes non-standardized English practices while simultaneously actively attempts to erase divergent/deviant language usage in students under the larger auspice that a “single American standard English (both writing and speech) which could be isolated, identified, and accurately defined” (“Students’ Rights to Their Own Language”).

As consequence, such educational systems reinforce assumptions that academic standard English has an “inherent value” as cultural currency when compared to non-native language. Educational systems also reward (through placement within remedial writing courses) students with familiarity with standard writing practices that are shaped by their home literacies. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to the attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers and is immoral. The same argument

can be made for writing instruction: As such, the CCCC asks “should we, on the one hand, urge creativity and individuality in the arts and the sciences, take pride in the diversity of our historical development, and, on the other hand, try to obliterate all the differences in the way Americans speak and write?” (“Students’ Rights to Their Own Language”).

Moreover, though writing is held with high regard within American culture, one must not assume that writing is a *simple* act, both with its acquisition and production. Instead, human language, and the means that man communicates with others (writing and speaking), is the development of language that is also a nexus of political beliefs, historical changes, and religious values. It is *because* of the research of linguistic and social scholars who have revealed that “has demonstrated incontrovertibly that many long held and passionately cherished notions about language are misleading at best and often completely erroneous.” As such, writing is “not a simple phenomenon” (“Students’ Rights to Their Own Language”).

## CHAPTER II

### LOCATING BASIC WRITING IN THE UNIVERSITY

The purpose of this chapter is to explore Basic Writing movement of the 1970s as it informs contemporary views of remedial education. The contributions of Mina Shaughnessy and David Bartholomae have transformed composition pedagogy, providing instructors educational framework to better understand writing maladies of students. Furthermore their work serves as a volley, a response to cultural perceptions regarding the power and myth of literacy—an unwavering belief that one’s acquisition of Western forms of literacy can successfully correct social and economic inequalities. Ultimately, this chapter will attempt to historically locate the basic writing movement in order to better gain a understanding the social and cultural constraints that dictate contemporary basic writing pedagogy.

#### **Basic Writing and Open Admissions Policies**

The previous chapter illustrates the deeply entwined language practices that shape conversations about basic writing. However, before any serious conversation about basic writing begins, it is important to locate the basic writing movement historically. It would be of great interest to identify the complexity surrounding the development of the basic writing movement as it reveals current concerns and trends regarding contemporary perceptions of basic writing. An historical overview of the basic writing of movement provides a context for understanding the social and political pressures that shaped basic writing is a composition pedagogy. More specifically, there is value in exploring the

specific language and terminology used in order to describe the basic writer, both as an educational phenomenon as well as a description of nonstandard writing of students. The basic writing movement is intrinsically linked to deep-seated negative perceptions of writing. It is worthy to explore how we talk about basic writing and basic writers.

Specifically, the basic writing movement of the 1970s codified contemporary perceptions of basic writing (writing as disability) into current assessment policies and practices. It is important for us to start at the beginning to look back at the 1970s and the birth of the basic writing movement to examine current to basic writing issues are holdovers from the past. For instance, Bruce Horner argues in “The Birth of ‘Basic Writing,’” there is value in studying the historical connection shared between the birth of the basic writing movement at CUNY and its influence on contemporary composition pedagogy. Such an exploration reveals how basic writing and composition intersects with social and economic inequalities, systemic perceptions of race and gender as well as one’s “right to language,” elements that influence individuals’ use of language. After all, there seems to be an assumption that current basic writing courses and pedagogy are somehow free from social and cultural biases of writing—a prevailing belief in American culture (i.e., writing as a form of intelligence or morality). Specifically, Horner argues that the (then) cultural perceptions concerning the goals of academia as well as the WAC movement disrupts meaningful conversations regarding remediation of students, “the success of Basic Writing in legitimizing the institutional place of basic writing courses and students cannot be separated from the ways in which it works within the framework of the public discussion of higher education and an open admissions policy, particularly its silence about the about the concrete material, political institutional social historical



realities confronting basic writing teachers, students and courses” (“Birth of ‘Basic Writing’” 4).

Homer argues that such an exploration should be of “interest” to the Composition field as a whole, as basic writing history reveals systemic issues regarding writing within the university and “represent Composition’s problems and academic institutional status ‘writ large’” (“Birth of ‘Basic Writing’” 4). As was the accepted belief of the time, the public discourses found little value in “Bonehead English” (a popular nickname for remedial writing courses), “basic writing has long been perceived as marginal at best: expendable, temporary, properly the responsibility of the high schools and therefore a ‘drain’ on English departments specifically and colleges and universities in general” (4). For example, consider the term “basic writing”; it is assumed to be a neutral and unbiased description of students’ writing abilities. Brian Street explore literacy from an ethnographically perspective. Specifically, Street argues that the struggles of language appropriation are part of “autonomous models of literacy” (*Literacy and Development: Ethnographic Perspectives* 1). In the same vein as the myth of literacy, there seems to be an assumption that the activity of literacy is an unbiased endeavor. Furthermore, Street argues that “autonomous model of literacy” ultimately “disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin [cultural views of literacy] so that it can then be presented as they are neutral and universal” (“What’s ‘New’ in New Literacy Studies?: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Theory and Practice” 77).

Before any meaningful discussion about language practices surrounding the basic writing movement, it is important to outline the inception of Basic Writing because there is pedagogical value in exploring social and political trends surrounding the development

of the basic writers movement of the 1960s and early 1970s as there is the potential that such examination provides scholars unforeseen or alternative means of exploring the difficulties in teaching writing instruction. The 1970s was an exciting time for basic writing pedagogy. An unforeseen response to the creation of basic writing pedagogy was in the use of defining and labeling basic writing students. In its attempts in addressing basic writing issues of the 1970s, basic writing pedagogy of the time inadvertently created an additional layer of complexity in discussion student writing issues. There also seems to be an unforeseen repercussion to the newly developing pedagogy as encouraged scholars to ignore and thus “divorce” basic writing as a form of assessment from proceeding scholarship in remedial writing instruction (Horner 18). This division further alienates basic writing students within the university. Furthermore, basic writing as a form of assessments thus becomes a means of responding to writing crisis is occurring across the United States espoused did articles such as “Johnny Can’t Write.” With writing issues on the rise, the university is thus in charged with a very “utopian” goal. Explicitly, through assessments, the university is able to educate the masses and bring literacy to the nonliterate. Basic writing instructors thus are the vanguard of “new profession” of the 1970s; scholars become pioneers in a new educational spheres, who are “teachers [venturing] into uninhabited territory” (Horner 17). However, with the influx of students and the emergence of “experimental” pedagogy attempting to address student literacy issues has the unforeseen consequence of further marginalizing students.

Scholars George Otte and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk argue in their work *Basic Writing* that in discussing the pedagogy of basic writing composition we must first consider how the field is historically situated within a specific historical framework, “For

most scholars and teachers, the story of basic writing is tied to a specific historical moment—the open admissions movement of the 1970s at the City University of New York (CUNY). This seismic shift in university policy grew out of the social and political volatility of the late 1960s” (Otte and Mlynarczyk 3).

We must also consider the cultural climate surrounding the development of basic writing. For many, the university became a means of addressing any quality both racial and economical. During this time, the university experienced an increase in enrollment from minorities and women, who all saw the university as an opportunity to better their circumstances. It is not an understatement to say that during this time America was in the midst of radical transformation of a number of social and political issues, which all seem to converge within higher education. For instance, individuals serving the military took advantage of the GI Bill and other government-sponsored funding and the pursuit of a postsecondary degree, typically required for any employment in the United States. There is also the higher education act of 1965 signed by Lyndon B. Johnson, which attempted to provide equal access and financial assistance for minorities attending public institution. In addition, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 provided legal protection for minorities experiencing discrimination based on race, gender, or religion. Women also seek the education in order to advance in society.

Consequently, there is an influx of “new” students filtering into her education programs typically reserved for white upper-middle-class educated individuals. For example, Adrienne Rich, in her work “Teaching Language in Open Admissions” discusses a great length the stark differences between these new incoming students and

these nuisance are difficult for traditional college students turn in the early 1970s. The life of and challenging were out of place:

The student who leaves the campus at three or 4 o'clock after a day of classes, goes to work as a waitress, or clerk, or hash-slinger, or guard comes home at 10 or 11 o'clock to a crowded apartment with TV audible every corner [...] Our students may spend two or three hours in the subway going to and from college and jobs, longer if the subway system is more deplorable than usual. To read in the New York subway at rush hour is impossible; it is virtually impossible to think. (7)

Their experience is different from those at traditional universities. Rich continues, “How does one compare this experience to college with that of the Columbia student down at 116th Street in their quadrangle of freestone dormitories, marble steps, flowered borders, white spaces of time and architecture in which to walk and think” (7)?

In response, many universities began loosening previous rigorous requirements. It is at this time that a number of social initiatives were created to provide individuals with equal access to education. At the heart of this, New York City’s educational initiatives helped set the groundwork for the basic writing movement. In order to address these issues, the 1964 Board of Education enacted educational initiatives to target minorities and impoverished New York communities (Stephen). Part of the initiative included \$500,000 to provide relief for students, including tuition waivers, access to remediation programs (such as Basic Writing), and financial stipends system (Stephen). Moreover, the board enacted policies that allowed for open admissions to local community colleges for all high school graduates.

CUNY's open admissions policy became the epicenter of basic writing research and teaching. New York created the SEEK program (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge), and the education initiative ensured admission equality to students at New York Universities, regardless of economic and educational backgrounds.

Specifically, Gregory Otte argues in his article "Sunrise, Sunset" that the SEEK program was instrumental in the development of open admission policies in New York as it provided opportunities for underprivileged students to access higher education (22). The SEEK program initiative established in 1966 transformed CUNY into a university that actively worked to provide equal educational opportunities to disenfranchise and disadvantaged students (22).

At the same time, CUNY saw a dramatic increase enrollment for first-year students. George Otte and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk state that Open Admissions were a "floodgate" for college enrollment, with CUNY seeing a dramatic increase of new students. CUNY student body "doubled in the very first year (1970), jumping from 20,000 to 35,000. Almost half of these students entered under the new open admissions standards" (22).

For many, it is imperative to provide equal access to education as well as remedial courses to help prepare students is a moral obligation, as a postsecondary degree does better ensure one's success in the United States. The promise of an education through the SEEK's Open Admission radically transformed the lives of many "it is to give the poor and working class people of New York City a chance to get into the mainstream of the city's economic life. It also to qualify them for jobs that are more than marginal to the

vitality of the city – to give them some purchase of what is called the American dream” (“The Case for Open Admissions” 9).

There was a deeply held belief that open admissions dilute the quality of higher education, through the admittance of poor performing students. Horner argues that these debates reflected a larger cultural conversation about education. Specifically, Horner coins the phrase “academic excellence” in reference of this concern at the center of the open admission debate. Likewise, Patricia J. McAlexander and Nicole Pepinster Greene argue in *Basic Writing in America: The History of Nine College Programs* that the response to an open admissions policy was particularly problematic, with many faculty, students, and administrators resistant to the inclusion of these new students (7).

Specifically, it was not the college’s responsibility to remediate the students who were not adequately prepared in high school for higher education. For many, the inclusion of the students challenged the “academic integrity” of higher education. Remediation programs were “a contrast to what [many] believed higher education was about – standards, cultural literacy, intellectual excellence” (7).

In many respects, this open admissions policy shifted the goal of higher education. No longer was the pursuit of Truth at the epicenter of the Western university of the Academy. Rather, an open admissions policy appeared to have more pedestrian aims--education was an extension of political and social motives. An editorial published in the 1973 magazine *Change: The Magazine of Higher Education* succinctly summarizes the cultural tenor of higher education--mainly that it was a place for the intellectually elite to sharpen their skills for the betterment of society, “College, it was said, was only for those whose intellectual gifts, diligence and commitment to education

had already been proven by admirable high school compliment and by the impressive scores on college entrance examinations. Similarly, Bruce Horner argues that college was still to be a privilege and not a right” (“The Case for Open Admissions” 11). To its detractors, an open admissions policy presents two major concerns: One, an open admissions policy “rewards” undeserving students who lack the academic rigor to enter the university on their own merits (Horner, “The Case for Open Admissions” 7). Two, an open admissions policy creates a competition for the university’s limited resources. The school thus must be selective on the types of students offered admittance. Another concern is that an open admissions policy provides an unfair advantage to minority students applying to the school (thus creating a “quota” system). Ultimately, an open admissions policy displaces “intellectually deserving students with the undeserving” and “dilute[s] standards by letting in all those ‘unqualified’ blacks and Puerto Ricans and undermine[s] the value of the college degree” (Horner, “The Case for Open Admissions” 7-8).

Concerning CUNY, Horner argues that of the issues facing CUNY was directly related to the belief that the inclusion of these new uneducated minority students unfairly offered admittance to the school. These students forced their way into higher education through government intervention; ultimately, derailing the mission of higher education. This sentiment is reinforced by number of popular figures including Lewis Mayhew who identified these incoming students as “dissenting youth [whose linguistic failings] represent a pathology worthy of some further study” (qtd. in Horner, “The Case for Open Admissions” 8). Similar statements were made by Theodore Gross, chair of the English department during this time, who argued the impossible task of properly teaching the

students with “language retardation”:

Few people wanted to confront the unappealing implication of language retardation... But despite all the goodwill that a lifetime of liberalism and academic training dictated, the nagging doubt grew that we might not be able to take an eighteen-year-old who suffered deep linguistic shortcomings and bring him to a college level verbal competence. (Reeves 120)

Similarly, CUNY English Professor Geoffrey Wagner outlines his experience with Open Admission at CUNY in his 1976 publication *The End of Education*. Wagner argues that OA policy is detrimental to the mission of higher education, as it allows students to enter academia without the drive, wherewithal, intelligence could not complete a degree on their own merit. These programs only serve as a means of "political psychotherapy" meant to placate feelings of guilt originating from racial and social ills of society (145). Wagner argues that OA introduces a number of concerns for CUNY and other education programs that enact Open Admission policies.

Specifically, remedial education (such as basic writing courses) is particularly problematic as function as “compensation” for social oppression. Course materials center on placing blame and mechanism of social oppression of New York minorities, rather than meaningful instruction Good writing (i.e., grammar instruction), “Basic Writing [instruction focuses] more about the injustices of society outside the classroom than the use of punctuation within it” (Wagner 143). Furthermore, the degrees awarded to remedial students are often unfairly earned as remedial courses (as well as education initiatives created to assist these students) what Wagner argues as “vogue” composition



pedagogy who promises to provide the “key to remediation [Black English, Visual Thinking]” (143).

Moreover, remedial education victimizes both "remedial" and traditional students alike. Remedial students (particularly black students) are not held accountable for their lax attitudes and lack of academic preparedness; rather their shortcoming is the fault of others, including K-12 education and college instructors:

Another way of shelving the remedial problem is to refer the blame to the high schools. They then shift it onto junior high, when it goes into the home. This is *you*. You are guilty for that ghetto home and must remediate and compensate for it as rapidly as possible. If in this task an A for absence will help, it is entirely excusable. And yet there are a lot of Jewish kids [who succeed in education] in those same ghetto schools, and they aren't squealing (Wagner 147).

An open admissions policy provides pathways for students incapable and undeserving of admittance into the university. These students lack the academic rigor demanded of them by faculty and peers. As consequence, these students become burdens on higher education since their admittance siphons resources (such as increased class time, heavier faculty workloads, and the need for additional facilities) from deserving students who would make better use of opportunity.

Horner argues, though, that this belief is problematic as it conflates conversation of economic and social disparities, the necessity of political activism in challenging social inequalities, and lack of educational resources of minorities to issues of “academic excellence” and intelligence (Horner, “Birth of ‘Basic Writing’” 9). Rather than an open

admissions policy serving as a conversation of the transforming power of education, it is instead relegated to talking points of those deserving of education and those who do not.

The development of an open admissions policy at CUNY and the social and historical issues of the 1960s and 1970s at CUNY have played a significant role in the field of developmental English or Basic Writing as it stands today. While the basic writing movement attempted to focus on assisting marginalized students as they entered the university, mainstreaming basic writers and the inclusion of basic writing programs was not always well-received by those in higher education. George Otte and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk state, “Mainstreaming is by no means the end of the story for basic writing; however, it is a way of underscoring that BW itself was never fully accepted into the academy and so gives us good reason to attend not only to how BW defines itself but also to how it gets defined” (*Basic Writing* 42-43).

At the onset, BW pedagogy struggled to establish itself as a legitimate field of study. Furthermore, remedial students experienced similar struggles with being considered as legitimate college students. The resources needed to educate these students were not considered a sound financial risk. Basic writing served as a way of creating division between basic writers and traditional students using assessment tools used by administrators to both track place and evaluate the basic writers and ability to write acceptable academic prose: “Tracking and testing are the Twin Towers of Unequal City wherein BW resides. These towers rose from an American foundation of low spending and hostile-management directed to non-elites students. Can there be BW without bogus placement and tracking mechanisms? (Shor, “Our Apartheid” 97).

## **Mina Shaughnessy's Influence**

Contemporary wisdom of the 1970s assumed that writing instruction should function in a linear manner. Content experts (i.e., writing instructors) passed on knowledge writing to students unfamiliar with the conventions associated with academic writing. Moreover, student writing errors were used as a form of tracking student performance--as it was assumed issues was an indication of ability and intelligence. Min-Bruce Horner and Zhan Lu argue in their work "Expectations, Interpretations and Contributions of Basic Writing" that academy had traditionally approached error from 'top down,' and thus had understood error as an indication of the students' lack of cognitive skill, linguistic knowledge, or motivation to learn the rules of academic discourse" (44). Under this pedagogical perspective, writing is divorced from content as well as rhetorical awareness of the constraints that shape discourse (i.e., genre awareness or audience expectation). Error free writing was considered "good writing."

However, Horner and Lu argue that Basic Writing pedagogy presented better insight into issues of student writing. Rather than viewing students based on their errors, Basic Writing researchers began examining students' individual experiences when writing. Specifically, Basic Writing pedagogy finds value exploring *why* student writing seems to deviate from the accepted norms of academic writing. As such, Basic Writing [...] gathered information on what individual students were actually thinking, trying to do, and aiming to achieve when producing textual deviations from the established norms [...] It has compiled a rich pool of data demonstrating the cognitive agency of basic writers and a whole range of logics behind seemingly random departures from conventional syntax, tone of voice, organization, and forms of argument" (44).

Many considered Mina Shaughnessy a pioneer in Basic Writing pedagogy. Highly regarded for creating course curriculum that sought to better serve the diverse student population at CUNY, Shaughnessy shaped basic writing as a profession, particularly with her 1977 work, *Errors and Expectations*. Her book serves as an instructive text on how to best educate Basic Writing students. This book is considered groundbreaking as it attempts to provide instructors with some formalized instruction on how to best reach these students. Shaughnessy's work highlights the difficulty in teaching Basic Writing as its mission tends to run counter to larger social and cultural assumption that one has about academic writing. In doing so, her writing and legacy has shaped the field of composition studies. *Errors and Expectations* reveals the complexity of basic writers within the university--issues with which we are still wrestling with today. Most memorable of Shaughnessy's work is its emphasis on exploring students' abilities to write meaningful academic prose; more specifically, Shaughnessy encouraged compassion and empathy for students and an awareness of the difficulties that surround the act of writing. Writing is not the singular marker or indicator of student intelligence but serves as an amalgamation of a multitude of issues, including social, cultural, and economical influences that surround the student. The students were not lost causes.

Instead, Shaughnessy argued the noble cause of providing equal education to all those seek it: "For Shaughnessy, blaming the students for supposed deficiencies was feckless and unjust; errors and other nonstandard features were the result of social inequities, not personal failings" (Otte, George and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk, *Basic Writing* 8). Shaughnessy argues in *Errors and Expectation* that student errors could be shaped by prior experiences of writing; and that it is hubris on the part of the instructor to

assume that their errors originated from “one particular place” (10). For instance, student errors as the produce of an unsavory writing experience where the student was shamed or “humiliated” due to their ignorance of writing conventions (Horner and Lu 159).

Similarly, Jane Maher’s *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work* argues that it is this feeling of confusion that contributes to the difficulty in talking about basic writers: “The writing that emerges from these experiences bears traces of the different pressures and codes and confusions that have gone to make up ‘English’ for BW students” (285).

It is this awareness of the difficulties experienced by basic writers that serves as the core of Shaughnessy’s work, and her text is considered iconic, as it is the first major work that attempts to address developmental students’ needs. Shaughnessy explored early on in *Errors and Expectations* the fears experienced by those placed in developmental writing courses. For such students, academic writing often serves as the gatekeeper or “trap,” meant to bar students from advancing in their academic studies. As such, writing for these students serves no purpose but to expose their learning inadequacies and to foster feelings of frustration and resentment in the students writing and cognitive abilities: “By the time [the student] reaches college [...] he is aware that he leaves a trail of errors behind him when he writes. [The student] can usually think of little else while he is writing. But [the student] doesn’t know what to do about it. Writing puts [the student] on a line, and he doesn’t want to be there” (*Errors and Expectations* 7). The concern for Shaughnessy is that this resentment and inequality embedded within public education runs the risk of marring students’ abilities to think of themselves as competent individuals deserving of equal education to their peers—this apparent focus of riding mastery as indication of intelligence severely impedes students’ success.

*Errors and Expectations* defined basic writers as “beginners,” unfamiliar with the writing conventions espoused with the university. They are not--based on common assumptions of the time--students who were cognitively incapable of writing academic prose or who were “slow” or “indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence” (5). Instead, as Shaughnessy argues, these students are like all novices when attempting to master something new, the novice’s errors are reflective of their ignorance of the topic, nothing more. An example of this could be of the student who receives a graded writing assignment with copious feedback about missing clarity of his/her text. As argued in *Errors and Expectation*, this experience may perpetuate “ambivalent feelings about [reading and writing] (10). Similarly, Jane Maher argues in her work *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work* that Shaughnessy was deeply concerned with the struggles of students’ face when attempting to mimic the specialized language valued in the university. This difficulty in mastering academic writing when compared to student’s home discourses “where [their] language flows most naturally” (273).

Similarly, Otte and Mlynarczyk argue that Shaughnessy’s scholarship reflects a sensitivity to the lived experiences as well as social and economic pressures that shaped student writing. As such, accusing the student for their writing errors “was feckless and unjust; errors and other nonstandard features were the result of social inequities, not personal failings” (Otte and Mlynarczyk, *Basic Writing* 8). For example, in the opening of *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy discusses the type of student desiring higher education. Her work is also important because it shows her dedication to the purpose education. Regardless of past struggles during the previous education, the students

attending to me still desired a college degree in the hopes of bettering their lives as was leaving a legacy for their children:

They were in college now for one reason; that their lives might be better than their parents', that the lives of their children might be better than theirs so far had been. Just how college was to accomplish these available changes was not at all clear, but the faith that the education was the one available route to change empowered large numbers of students who had already endured twelve years of compulsory schooling to choose to go to college when the doors of City University suddenly swung open. (*Errors and Expectations* 3)

Likewise, the text-empowered instructors who struggled to reach students who were capable of but struggled to produce academic prose. Shaughnessy's work functioned as a form of advocacy for students and faculty: "Suddenly, for teachers in a world defined much more by textbooks than by studies of writing, here was someone who spoke as one of them, puzzling over real student texts and making sense of them" (Otte, George, and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk 12). Ultimately, Otte and Mlynarczyk argue, "By force of personality as well as intellect, marshaling support and sympathy for the students who mattered so much to her and for the instruction she believed would save them, Mina Shaughnessy had an influence on basic writing, one that the field is still learning to reckon with" (15). It is no stretch to argue that Shaughnessy radically transformed the conversations of basic writing as a legitimate pedagogy; specifically it is her work during this time that justified basic writing as a legitimate and separate pedagogy apart from traditional composition theory. Shaughnessy's work is important as it attempts to create basic writing pedagogy as a legitimate field of composition theory.

Her work reflects a transformation of the cultural climate of the university and American culture. Her work brings prestige and acknowledgment to the struggles and hardships expressed by both basic writers and instructors. For many, Shaughnessy's work brings a sense of dignity to the conversation of basic writing, and it comes to challenge preconceived notions of basic writers being less or beneath their traditional peers.

#### Issues with *Errors and Expectations*

While Shaughnessy's work highlighted the difficulties in teaching basic writing and her work pioneered an entire field of basic writing and was a response to cultural shifts of education ushered in by open admissions policies that introduced new students into the university, Shaughnessy's legacy is problematic for many as her works perpetuate some longstanding assumptions about student writings. As Jeanne Gunner's "Iconic Discourse: The Troubling Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy," "*Errors and Expectations* provided a way of speaking about and so constructing basic writers as more than remedial students producing unacceptably deviant language reflecting their innate intellectual deficit; her work established instead a mode of being for them as beginners who errors have a linguistic logic decodable by the teacher, thus staking out justifiable place for them within higher education" (28). Many scholars take issue with the elevated role that the basic writer instructor presented in basic writing pedagogy. Gunner argues that Shaughnessy's revered position made it difficult to address these issues. Shaughnessy is considered a "touchstone" in the field of basic writing who represents the core ideology of the movement:

*Errors and Expectations*, a text that emphasizes formalistic instruction in syntax, punctuation, handwriting, spelling, and vocabulary, continues as the ordinary



point of reference for the Basic Writing field, even as the text's particular set of pedagogical practices have largely been left behind. (Gunner 28)

As consequence, Gunner argues any challenge to basic writing pedagogy espoused by Shaughnessy (and others) is considered taboo: "Shaughnessy is perpetually posited as the starting point from which later ideas flow and to whom they are attributed, not necessarily conceptually, but always relationally. Even when conceptual difference is significant, the invocation of the name/author validates the legacy and subsumes later theory under that author of the icon" (Gunner 28-29). For instance, Gunner argues that this "iconic reverence" for the teacher is reflected in how the pedagogy views the teacher as a saint. While this perspective deviates from contemporary views of students as ignorant and is sympathetic to the student's plight, Gunner refers to this view as almost an "anti-literacy" stance. Gunner argues that theorists outside of traditional composition or those not part of the original camp of BW pedagogy are oftentimes shunned. Specifically "critical discourses" as Gunner claims (we can assume that he referring to "political/social rhetoric and postmodern rhetoric), were not welcome during their time as they decentered power away from the instructor (and their "saintliness"): Critical discourse "constructs no heroes [...] The role of the teacher in this discourse is given no special status" (36).

It is important to look at Shaughnessy's work a bit more closely because this conversation shows how contentious Basic Writing instruction can be. For instance, Min-Zhan Lu is often cited as one of the first to start "transgressed iconic discourse" as they attempted to challenge Shaughnessy's work, a position that was not well-received. Min-Zhan Lu, in her work "Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy," argues that

Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* impact to the profession is tremendous. She work provides students with a familiarity with the writing conventions of academic writing (including providing students with a "stock of words, routines, and rituals") (106). Because of this, students develop a sense of autonomy in writing; they gain confidence in their writing. Ultimately, basic writing helps students to "respond to the potential dissonance between changes academic discourse and their home discourse" (106).

Additionally, basic writing instruction is partly the response of the unique position that the field holds within composition history. There is difficulty in discussing the complexity of basic writing. Scholar Jeanne Gunner argues that part of the issue with basic writing pedagogy is that basic writing tends to be generated by composition scholars and basic writing "specialists." Gunner argues that due to paradigm shifts within the composition. The field has moved beyond conversations within basic writing as a field of writing instruction to include larger fields of rhetorical theory and social/political thought (i.e., social constructionist theory and the role of economic pressures that impact student writing) as well as schools on appropriate placements assessment of student writing abilities (i.e., mainstreaming students) (Gunner 25). The inclusion of these alternative fields as an additional level of complexity in as well as a "number of intra-community ideological conflict" within basic writing conversations (25).

Shaughnessy's text also identifies students based on their inability to produce appropriate academic prose. Horner argues that the goal of basic writing (as relates to the university) is to assist basic writing student in their transition from remedial courses to traditional, mainstream classes. While this goal is admirable, it becomes problematic as

when it defines students solely on their “educability” (“The Birth of Basic Writing” 10). The assumption is that remedial students’ writing (or thoughts expressed through writing) does not contain value or merit within the university and students’ writing is viewed as an assessment marker to delineate them from their “traditional” peers. Similarly, Horner argues that only once the basic writing student demonstrates that they are “educated” in the appropriate language of the university (i.e., Western writing conventions and Western ideals of critical thinking) is the student allowed true admittance into the university. Once again, under this educational framework, the basic writing student is considered deficient, and his or her writing deviant, until deemed not so by the university. Traditional basic writing pedagogy does not challenge the legitimacy of “sidestepping the specific circumstances” that labeled the student as basic writing in the first place (“Birth of Basic Writing” 15).

Correspondingly, the written language of basic writers threatens, or seems to threaten, to displace the language that teachers would have them use. “Their” conventions for writing are not “ours.” Then those of us teaching basic writing or cop between the horns of an ethical dilemma: if we “convert” students who are “our” conventions, we are liable to charges of cultural genocide; on the other hand ignoring differences between their conventions in those of edited American English amounts to abandonment. (“The Birth of ‘Basic Writing’” 10)

As Horner argues, existence, in one sense, threatens the instructor/teacher dynamic. The student does not possess ownership of their text, as it is deviant and non-compliant. The student’s text only becomes “real” and “authentic” when they demonstrate that they are able to appropriate “our” language of the university (124). At no point of this relationship

does the university (or the instructors) encourage the reevaluate legitimacy of “their” language when instructing students.

Similarly, basic writing exists as an outlier of the university as its existence is a challenge to academia and the conservative nature of knowledge. Basic writing text is deviant, as it does not adhere to accepted foundations of academic prose. Student writing filled with errors is in direct conflict to cultural citizens of the potential and the possibilities of student writing. Writing can be beyond the conservative construction of clear and concise prose. Writing can be beyond literal print text as be seen in the development of visual rhetoric. Though Horner is writing in the 1980s, this text reflects forward thinking concerning the problem. Ultimately Horner argues that “the written language of basic writers treaties, or seems to threaten, to displace the language that teacher would have them use (“Mapping *Errors and Expectations* for Basic Writers” 124). This is contradictory to assumptions of appropriate writing as well as writing instruction within the university. Specifically, powers withheld within the instructor/academia. As a knowledgeable instructor and as an institution of higher education, writing belongs to professionals. The student does not “own” their discourse as its deviant. Horner argues that the student must then appropriate “our” language of the university (124).

This dynamic is problematic as it delegates students to the role of novice who lack any autonomy in their own educational processes and does not acknowledge the diverse skill sets that students bring to the classroom. Students are left powerless and defeated. Under such a system, the instructor is devoid of any responsibility and, consequently, is not inhibited to evaluate the role previous composition pedagogy that may inadvertently

evaluate student work under such a deficit model. Shaughnessy and early basic writing pedagogy does not acknowledge how entrenched deficit models of writing in the conversations about basic writers. In its attempts to move forward and deviate from (then) contemporary composition pedagogy that defined the basic writer attempt at writing as “lazy” incompetent, and error prone, basic writing pedagogy cannot fully free itself from the past. Instead of being “lazy” and error-prone, basic writing movement relabeled the student as a novice who commits “mistakes” due in part to their ignorance of academic writing. As consequence, the basic writer movement inadvertently reinforces to students that their own non-academic discourses have no inherent value (when compared to the university). This becomes especially problematic as academic discourse reflects communicative practices of white Western culture.

## CHAPTER III

### IDENTIFICATION OF THE BASIC WRITER

Basic writers are defined by their inability to mimic academic texts. For many, this assumption would be self-evident and true. Under this premise, students placed in basic writing may indirectly find themselves in a remedial course not because of their inability to relinquish “bad writing habits” but because their texts and lived experiences may not align with the beliefs of Western education. As such, a student’s inability to write is indication of his or her inability to follow coded rules of “good academic discourse.” However, this assumption that writing is the end result of adherence to the “rules” is categorically false. Rather, this inherent disconnect between students inability to write and an instructor’s desire to teach reflects the inherent complexity of writing, or as Shannon Carter states in her work *The Way Literacy Lives: Rhetorical dexterity and Basic Writing Instruction*, “we understand that real writing instruction is not about repair work anymore than real writing instruction is about rules.”

#### **Burke and Identification of the Basic Writer**

Kenneth Burke’s scholarship provides insight into the complexity of discussing basic writing. Specifically, Burke’s text provides a discursive space to examine the language practices used in conversations about basic writing. Burke would argue that it is somewhat simple for us to assume that our differences, beliefs, and worldviews are the accumulation of objective thinking. Burke’s scholarship has tremendous implications for a meaningful discussion about basic writing since Burke encourages us to explore the

manner in which language practices and terminology often obscure other competing viewpoints and that those language practices shape our perspectives of ourselves in world. Consider Burke's iconic adage regarding human's use of language, in which he defines a human as a "symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal [...] Separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making" (*Language as Symbolic Action* 16). For Burke, the summation of the human experience is entwined with how he invokes language to engage with others and his environment. The distinction between human as animal and other beasts is one's affinity to construct generalities (to assist in categorizing similarities) from observations (*Language as Symbolic Action* 16). As humans are social creatures, they codify these generalities into extensive nexus of language, and symbolic terminology aids in the communication with others. It is through this commonality of language that humans establish knowledge, using previous agreed on generalities to create, transmit, and develop new knowledge. Burke argues that it is this innate ability to generate symbolic language that separates us from animals: "the dramatic view of the world holds that language is not simply a tool to be used by people (actors), but the basis of human beings acting together and thus, all of human relations. Words act, in other words, to define, persuade, appease, divide, identify, entertain, victimize, move, inspire, and so on" (Blakesley 5). Ultimately, language functions as, what Joseph R. Gusfield claims, both "formative and referential": language is deeply entwined within the human experience as it helps humans interpret and interact with the world.

One would consider that this would be liberating; however, it is language accessibility and usage that inadvertently serves as an existential concern for humans. It

is impossible for us to separate our language practices from our own personal understanding and motivations (since it is language that provides a mechanism in order to understand our realities and lived experiences). For Burke, this becomes problematic as language only offers an interpretation of reality—a reality that is mediated through “frameworks” that are embedded within language practices of society. Ultimately, Burke argues that it is humans’ ignorance of the complexity of language that shields them from the reality that their experiences and the Truth of the world is but a “sliver of reality” (*Language as Symbolic Action* 5). As consequence, humans exist within a book—a “kind of naive verbal realism”—under an assumption that our “first hand” lived experiences, and worldviews are solely the result of our choices, desires, and actions. Humans have not “[peered] over the edge” onto the “abyss.” Therefore, our experiences are mediated through larger, interwoven “symbol-systems” that construct and maintain our world (*Language as Symbolic Action* 5).

Returning to Burke’s iconic quote from *Language as Symbolic Action*, humans are caught in the trappings of language as it separates “[us] from [our] natural condition by instruments of our how making” (16). Part of the power of language is its ability to persuade by and toward identification. Language encourages what Burke defines as *identification*—humans, in their attempts to construct meaning, will categorize their engagements with the world (or “observations”) in relationship to themselves.

Identification language becomes persuasive as it illuminates similarities amongst others.

Burke argues that through language we are able to align ourselves with the realities and worldviews of others through our similarities. The human condition is isolating, as we are unsure of the realities experienced by others. Identification is key to



communication, as it requires those participating in the communicative act to include symbolic language, which is used in order to align the individual realities of the two participants. As argued by Burke, identification is transformative— it changes one's reality by forging new ways of interpreting and examining the world (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 20). Burke refers to this transformation, this alignment of realities, as consubstantiality, which lies at the epicenter of a social contract of society: “A doctrine of consubstantiation, either explicit or implicit, may be necessary to any way of life [...] Men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them consubstantial” (21). Consubstantiality serves as the social glue of society and relies on innate feelings of isolation and seclusion (an existence without language). It is our desire to connect with others through language, our passions to connect and identify with others, which drives us to establish consubstantiality with others.

Humans must establish consubstantiality with others. For instance, consider how closely we talk about success in United States as it relates to literacy and higher education. We defined those who are highly successful and morally good as being educated. One who seeks out in education, who becomes astute critical thinkers, and who requires knowledge to study will use these newly acquired skills to become successful individuals. These individuals will take their newfound skills to better society (i.e., through politics, scientific discovery, working within their local communities). Likewise, those who seek out an education often align themselves with cultural myths and the beliefs of those who are educated. Academics are often considered highly capable and driven with the desire for self-improvement. These individuals have also mastered various forms of effective communication, including clear and concise prose free of

grammatical or structural issues. Richard M. Coe summarizes how symbolic language affects our worldview: “Everything we do is mediated by our symbols. And it is we (historically, socially, ecologically) who created these systems of symbols. They guide us to relevant insights but blind us to more radical insights. [...] They function epistemically—and ideologically—to make us social as well as individual being” (41).

However, Burke warns that consubstantiality is problematic as humans are always “goaded by the spirit of hierarchy” and identification that brings some humans together often results in divisiveness among others (*Language as Symbolic Action* 15).

Identification typically promotes order and hierarchy between others and ourselves.

Consider when discussing identification that its key premise is that there are shared similarities between individuals and groups of individuals. It is their bond that defines them as a unit, a group. However, the opposite is likewise true. The differences between our group alliances, others, and ourselves who do not share the same worldview or realities often assist in creating identification. Burke highlights the irony of language increasing division amongst people. Particularly, exploring the nature of language and its power to unify through persuasion, there is still little explanation for the devices in this.

Identification highlights language’s ability to unify individuals through persuasion and symbolic language. However, that is not the realities of the world. For those humans that are joined together by identification, there still exist conflict and division through language. Burke notes that this is the subtle irony of human’s reliance on symbolic language. The very mechanism that language uses to unify with each other is also implicit in their division: “[I]f men were apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician

to proclaim their unity. If men were wholly or truly of one substance, absolute communication would be man's very essence" (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 22).

This becomes problematic when one considers how language often serves as symbolic action and how language prompts us to move to act to make change. Language persuades. We may be unwittingly caught in what Gusfield refers to as the "prison house of language" since we are trapped within the confines of language (45). We must use language to communicate; however, in invoking terminology that aid in the construction of discourse, we likewise narrow our discursive choices of language. This is particularly true concerning specialized, symbolic language. For instance, the term "remedial education" is nested in related topics of assessment (i.e., what are the ways of accurately assessing student ability?) and performance (i.e., what level of ability must a student demonstrate in order to graduate from a "remedial class"?). Or as Burke argues, "[A]ll terminologies must be implicitly or explicitly embody choices between the principle of continuity and the principles of discontinuity" (*Language as Symbolic Action* 50).

Consequently, Burke argues that the *choice* of language often shields us from other, competing ways of interpreting. Burke argues that in addition to this complexity of language this conflict of division, there is also the concern on how we appropriate language in order to make sense our realities. Specifically, the pursuit of unity is compounded by human's proclivity to formulate his or her reality to symbolic language that shields competing experiences and terminology that may transform our interpretation of the world. Burke sites that "even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be selection of reality; and to this extent it must function as a deflection of reality" (*Language of Symbolic Action* 45).

It is best for us, then, to consider how language relies on specific terminology that is nested in a specific interpretation of the world. Burke challenges assumptions that language is inherently benign and serves only to describe things as they are, and Burke argues that language is predicated on previous knowledge. They are agreed-upon terms, which we use to communicate with others. These terms are often nested with other interrelated terms that as a whole construct a nexus of knowledge. This is particularly true when considering the valued terminology of a society (i.e., God, politics, knowledge). Though this nested nature of language makes it easier to communicate (the lexicon of the human language is massive), there is concern that, in using specific terminologies, we are also inviting those interrelated terms in assumptions to play a role as part of our communicative act. Burke refers to this as employing terministic screens: “We *must* use terministic screens, since we can’t say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another” (*Language as Symbolic Action* 50). As these filters, these terministic constraints are interlinked, and it is difficult to identify where these links begin or end. These terms are interpretation of the world.

In addition, terministic screens often function as self-referential filters that maintain hierarchical social order, with language used as a means of cohesion to maintain human created systems of order, this “orientation is largely a self-perpetuating system, in which each part tends to corroborate the other parts” (*Permanence and Change* 169).

However, Burke warns that social structures housed on these “orientations” rely on conflict and divisions as means of justifying the existence of the system (thus being “self- perpetuating”).

Ultimately, social order must be static and demonstrate a sense of “certainty” in the justness of the system. Burke argues that this certainty serves as a “rock,” a foundation that sustains the authority, especially the system experiences challenges that “topple” it (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 173). Burke argues that this is problematic. This foundation of social order is often nested in a multitude of judgments that aid in the construction of terministic screens and cultural worldviews. For instance, academic institutions in the United States and the fundamental principle that a sound education will insure individual and social prosperity. Upon this “rock” develops the specific judgments, such as the Graff’s “myth of literacy” an unflinching assumption that access to education and literacy will correct social ills (social and economic inequality, racism, etc.). However, “myths of literacy” often value Western academic literacy traditions as hallmarks of good writing (i.e., a reverence for Western literary canon, desire of elevated “academic” prose, and the pursuit of grammar correctness). Moreover, as all academic intuitions (including K-12 education) perpetuate this view of literacy, good writing is often indication of accompany judgements of writing. For instance, the general assumption that writing is predicated on critical thinking and intelligence or the prevailing myth that good writing is an innate ability (akin to speaking well). To challenge this, beliefs (e.g., challenging Current Traditional definitions of literacy or exploring alternative forms of literacy) are tantamount to educational upheaval of cherished academic institutions.

Ultimately, social order employs mechanisms of language that demands uniformity of individuals as part of the “buy in” of a system. When uniformity is challenged, and certainty is questioned, “people will [locate] new structures of certainty [...] They try to salvage whatever values, still intact, may serve as the basis of new exhortation and judgments” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 173). Consequently, hierarchical systems include mechanisms of division to aid “reorientation” of deviant acts and viewpoints that challenges the stability and certainty of social order: “Hierarchy is constant in Burke’s perception of society because in every area of life there is an orderliness of principle, of higher and lower, nobler and baser. Diversity, conflict, division portend the disruption of order, the clash of frames” (Burke and Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society* 33).

Burke’s mechanism of division is problematic for contemporary society. Social order is predicated on prior knowledge, with much of current order based on the foundation of scientific methodology that attempts to generate “neutral” terminology and orientation in the pursuit of a better understanding of the world and human motive, “[...] “suspending judgement,” by inventing a non-moral vocabulary for the study of [...] human processes, they could get a much clearer idea as to how these processes work, and could establish a more efficient system of control over them” (Kenneth and Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society* 176). For instance, Cognitive Composition, Expressive Movement, and Current Traditional pedagogy just in their pursuit in understanding the constraints that impede student master of writing conventions. Moreover, there is focus educational strategies that are founded on the exploration of the mental processes used in processing speech (a thought typically espoused by Cognitive Composition) or the pedagogy built on

observation and prior experience (Current Traditional pedagogy reliance academic educational strategies of the past). Both pedagogies are similar as their goals are the same—to better instruct students on writing.

However, Burke argues that the language practices generated from these “rocks” are inherently not neutral. Language used to communicate these concepts is embed with judgment and bias. Words and language is innately selective—in choosing language to convey ideas simultaneously creates division through exclusion of other discursive options, “It is It is intensely moral—its name for objects contain the emotional over owns which give use the cues on how to act toward an object” (Kenneth Burke and Joseph R. Gusfield, *On Symbols and Society* 177). Consider the language employed when discussing remedial education that posits students are lacking something intrinsic to good writing. Since they are not good writers, they considered poor or incapable writers. Their writing issues are subsequently the fault of someone (many times the student, who is identified as lazy) or a breakdown of thinking. For instance, Geoffrey Wagner, Professor of English at CUNY, identified open admission students as “dunces [...] misfits[...] hostile mental children [...] and the most sluggish of animals (34). A contemporary example of Wagner’s views of remediation is reflected in Jane V. Wellman and Bruce Vandal’s 2011 article, “5 Myths of Remedial Education.” Published in *Inside Higher Ed*, Wellman and Vandal explored the prevailing myth of remedial education, specifically which “remedial education is a major cause of the college crisis, forcing institutions to spend precious dollars on getting students to speed up” and that remedial students lack the maturity or mental fortitude for college. Wellman and Vandal note, “After all, as this

myth goes, students who are not college-ready may not possess the motivation, interest, and wherewithal to success. These students should learn a trade and move on.”

This language of exclusion is disseminated throughout administrative language used to discuss and identify remedial students, taking the form of assessment tests as well as curriculum requirements used to track these students. Similarly, this belief also informs the design of text used in remedial courses. For instance, the popular basic writing textbook *Simple, Clear, and Correct: Sentences* focuses entirely on the development of grammatical concise and clear sentences, rather than instruction on larger texts (i.e., paragraph or essays). The textbook assumes student writing issues are the result of foundational skills of grammar and punctuation: “Good writing can never fulfill its promise if it is not in correct sentence form, which is why *Simple, Clear, and Correct: Sentences* consistently emphasize the importance of writing well as the most basic level: the sentences” (Kelly xiii).

Returning to the previous discussion of identification in academia, consider how traditional non-remedial students are defined when measured by the acts and assumptions that define students as remedial. Those operating within the higher education typically subscribe to a number of nested hierarchical viewpoints. There exists a number of identification markers that align with cultural beliefs of higher education that are perpetuated in Western culture. For instance, the assumptions of those who pursue higher education and find value in the pursuit of knowledge have a steadfast belief that their advancement of knowledge can be fostered through admittance to the university. There is also the belief that the pursuit of education is a morally good objective— those who seek it are intelligent, critical thinkers. As it relates to writing, as most of the knowledge taught



within higher education is founded in the scholarships of the past, there is a deep reverence for clarity and eloquence in academic prose. So much so that there is a deeply held belief that one's ability to write concisely (to adhere to the rituals of traditional writing) is interrelated to intelligence. One who cannot think clearly and critically struggles to communicate clearly and critically, and poor writing is indication of this fact.

Exploring this from another perspective, those who are deemed remedial students are subsequently defined by what they are not in relation to those in academia. This group is considered remedial as they cannot (or will not) conform to the language practices of academia. Remedial student writing is considered lacking in value and deficient as it does not look or communicate in the same capacity as traditional academic text. These individuals are often considered lacking in intelligence, incompetent, or lazy, as they are unable to produce text that mimics the writing conventions valued in academia. Through administrative actions (i.e., test scores, assessment examinations, grades), the students are placed under the moniker of remedial students and systematically separated from their peers into classrooms that are not meant to assimilate students into the larger group of academia.

Likewise, there seems to be an abundance of terms in describing student's lack of ability in writing and a reliance on using negative or deficits metaphors when describing the hardships that basic writers experience in the classroom. For example, consider the term "basic writers." The term is used administratively to distinguish traditional students from those who fall below a certain threshold of acceptable writing defined by either the state or the University. The term is inherently divisive as attempts to distinguish the skill sets between groups of students—that somehow the students are "less than" their

traditional peers. Such terms do not acknowledge the varying degrees that social, cultural, or historical influences shape one's ability to write. This becomes problematic as assessment programs tend to function as a "catch-all" for student issues found within the university. Specifically, remedial courses often house students with diverse and unique writing experiences and issues (including ESL 1.5 students, international non-native students, and students with cognitive impairments). Remedial courses attempt to address writing issues by teaching from the ground-up, student issues are in response to foundational skills of writing instruction (for example, grammar and punctuation). Remedial students are not allowed to progress to the construction of paragraphs or essays until they demonstrate mastery of surface-level construction of sentences.

I argue that there is value in exploring the *hows* and *whys* of the general practice that inform basic writing pedagogy that views students that attempt to address writing issues from the ground up. It could be argued that many of the best practices employed in remedial basic writing courses are the result outdated assumptions of writing (i.e., Current Traditional pedagogy). There may be some inherent benefit to exploring the historical contexts that shaped the development of basic writing as it may reveal pedagogical holdovers that shape contemporary basic writing pedagogy. The labeling conventions used by basic writing pedagogy depicts the basic writer (and their experiences) as having less value than their peers who excel within the university. The language used to discuss the "basic" writer's experience is a negative one--these students are talked about, labeled, and placed based on the perception of what they cannot do: "The problem of definition was forever surfacing in terms like 'nonstandard' or

‘nonacademic,’ terms that implied not the definition of something but rather its lack—  
‘the absence of whatever is present in literate discourse’” (Otte and Mlynarczyk 57).

Returning to Shaughnessy, for instance, her work is iconic because the basic writing movement challenged deeply held views of basic writers as inferior to their nontraditional peers. Shaughnessy was aware of the power of labeling the students as part of shifting cultural perceptions of basic writers. As Otto and Mlynarczyk state: “Mina Shaughnessy had to rename the field to save it from being stuck in the nether regions already denoted by terms like ‘remedial’ or ‘bonehead’ English” (“Basic Writing” 178).

At the center of this is a pervasiveness of defining students pejoratively or solely by their deficits. The division of basic writers from traditional students is predicated on the assumption that the students writing is inferior and deviant. It lacks any inherent value to both higher education and society. Because of this, the student (the producer of the text) is the one solely responsible for his or her abhorrent writing. Thus, the goal of the remedial writing course is to rehabilitate students to cure them of their writing maladies with the hopes that they can be mainstreamed back into traditional higher education. Once again, such a model of basic writing does not acknowledge any social cultural or political influences that may have shaped the students writing. The writing is not different or unique but wrong and must be corrected.

Similarly, Mike Rose argues that the labels used to discuss basic writers are often incompatible with the specific lived experiences of basic writers. For instance, Rose takes umbrage with the terminology used to describe the basic writing course as seems contradictory of the realities of how one becomes a better writer, “Exactly what the adjective ‘remedial’ means, however, has never quite been clear” (“The Language of

Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University” 349). Consider the term “remedial” when labeling writing courses for nonstandard students. Remediation assumes students are deficient; their writing considered error-prone. The student lacks any sense of autonomy or personhood; their language is not the reflection of a multitude of lived experiences or social conditions. Instead, they are receptacles of knowledge. The student is successfully “remediated” when these errors are corrected, and the missing gaps in their knowledge are filled (349). Ultimately, “The implication is that the material being studied should have been learned during prior education but was not” (349).

Similarly, Rose suggests in “The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University” that we code language directed at basic writers to create a self-perpetuating system of looking at basic writers as having a deficit. As part of his arguments in “Of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University,” Rose states this point: “The best definition of remedial I can arrive at his highly dynamic contextual one: the function of labeling certain material remedial in higher education is to keep in place the hard fought for, if historically and conceptually problematic and highly fluid, distinction between college and secondary work. ‘Remedial’ gains its meaning, then, in a political more than pedagogical universe” (556).

Similarly, Williams Jones argues in “Basic Writing—Pushing Against Racism” that the term basic writing serves as coded language to discuss student deficiencies, and ultimately, positions students as being less than, “disadvantaged and culturally deprived” (74). While Jones is referencing the basic writing in the 1970s here, it is still relevant for contemporary discussions of basic writing. Furthermore, basic writing serves as a descriptor for “nonstandard writing,” and is akin to taxonomy classification within the

sciences: “Natural scientists analyze and differentiate distinctive features and behaviors but codify them only when they are certain that their research has been thorough” (73). This becomes problematic as the basis for the taxonomy of basic writers—that all basic writers struggle with grammar—is predicated on the assumptions that the term was founded on objective methodology. As consequence, basic writing as a taxonomy perpetuates the idea that basic writers are somehow deficit. Similarly, scholar Jerrie Cobb Scott claims that perception of student deficiency is anchored in cultural reliance on “narrow definitions of literacy” (including mastery of the Western views of reading and writing). The basic writing programs thus, “targets population[s] in relation to this narrow definition of literacy” and likewise provide mechanisms that “prescribe methods for correcting [these] deficiencies” (Scott 47).

Moreover, basic writing taxonomy is often assumed to be static, self-evident, and unchanging—their use functions as “tent poles” of a theory or pedagogy. Jones challenges such assumptions, claiming that basic writing as a taxonomy is not “incorrect” but misplaced. Good writing (as discussed in higher education) is the embodiment of agreed-upon social conventions of given time as well as the proficiency of the instructor. Definitions of good writing are fickle, and yield to a multitude of social, historical, and cultural pressures. Jones states that “few, if any, behaviors and running or fixed although this fundamental observation seems to have been disregarded, for what passes as taxonomical behavior--as fixed behavior--is this description of the behavior in an instructional moment that should only last until change can be affected by purposeful teaching and the variations amongst learners” (73).

Ultimately, the term “basic writers” is problematic as it is used often to mask larger social and cultural issues that must be considered when creating pedagogy to better teach student writing. The onus of the deficiency is not placed on the taxonomy or methodology used to assess students, and instead the focus and attention is on the writing issues that students bring into the classroom. The argument is made that basic writing pedagogy exists because of students’ inadequacies that call, and the victim in this is higher education who is dealt with the responsibility to fix the students through remediation.

Considering all of this, it is important to explore how higher education scholars discuss specifically the struggles and hardships of basic writers. Specifically, in discussing students’ inabilities to write there seems to be an over-reliance on metaphorical language to encapsulate the difficulties in teaching basic writing students. As one could imagine, the language that we use to discuss writing difficulties are often pejorative and redefine students as inferior without autonomy.

#### Rhetorics of Deficiency

An unfortunate remnant of Shaughnessy’s legacy is her intent in validating basic writing students as capable but “inexperienced” writers (Otte and Mlynarczyk 57). While Shaughnessy sought to challenge characteristics that villainized students for committing grievous grammatical faux pas and, instead, started with their writing errors as simple novice mistakes. However, this increased emphasis on student errors does, as consequences, equates successful “academic” writing with text production. There is no discussion on the rhetorical constraints of discussion that shapes writing: “Though not Shaughnessy’s intentions, her focus on errors inevitably focused on output rather than

intake (on writing rather than reading as a literacy-shaping factor), and attention to matters of form diverted attention from matters of content (concentrating on how writers wrote in terms of error control rather than thought and expression)” (Otte and Mlynarczyk 50). Otte and Mlynarczyk argue, “the resolve to start with the students was always at least as much a problem as a solution” (50). Basic writing pedagogy shifted the focus away from student as individuals, with the propensity to not adhere to academic conventions or as the embodiment of myriad of competing discursive values, and focuses instead on “global descriptions of writers’ minds and stages obscured the social mission of basic writing for the sake of generalized stages and generic schema” (51). Deficiency rhetoric has become the foundation of basic writing pedagogy, as students’ writing is considered “abnormal” by the university.

One example of a pedagogy that identified students and their writing processes as “abnormal,” interpreted student errors as indication of deficiency, and that viewed students’ issues in their writing as reflections of faulty thinking, language production, and assimilation of writing conventions was cognitive composition. Cognitive composition relied heavily on “science” in distinguishing the strengths and weaknesses of student writing, it may also perpetuate assumptions that remain today of student writing. The late 1970s ushered in a period when there was an increased focus on identifying better tools in order to assess college writers and for legitimizing Composition Studies as a field of research. It was at this time that composition functioned only as a skills-based service course with the goal of teaching freshman students how to write well. Basic writing was not viewed as a separate discipline in the same manner as English literature. This is problematic as there was a cultural pressure on composition scholarship to “solve” the

problem of poor writers (as seen with Sheils' "Johnny Can't Write" text). It is because of this that scholar Janice Lauer argues in her 1970 work "Heuristic and Composition" that composition scholarship must "break out of the ghetto" and explore other outside disciplines (including sociology, psychology, mathematics, and economics) for insight to teach academic writing: "Unless the text-makes and the teachers of composition investigate beyond the field of English, beyond the area of rhetorical studies for solutions to composition problems, they will find themselves wandering in and as endless maze" (396). It is the hope that other fields (especially science-based scholarship) can provide composition scholars with assessment heuristics to aid in the teaching of writing.

Similarly, Lad Tobin argues in "Process Pedagogy" that there was a paradigm shift occurring during this time. Scholars were moving away from "philosophical or historical" scholarship for insights of the writing process as these schools of thought struggled to address the complexities of teaching "good writing": "The scope and breadth of this scholarship were stunning: researchers began to focus on writers at all stages of their education, at all stages of the process, at all levels and ability, and in all sorts of environment" (8).

It is at this time, Lester Faigley notes, that composition pedagogy begins to take note of the American cognitive psychology movement, mainly behaviorism and its focus on human action as an observable act ("Competing Theories of Process: A Critique and a Proposal" 533). If writing is an act, a response to mental faculty of the writer, then there must exist a universal mechanism that transforms internal thinking that aids in text production. Cognitive composition attempted then to explore the cognitive stages used in language production in the mind and exposing the mechanisms used in order to produce



writing. As scholar James Berlin states in his work *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges*, “the school of rhetoric based on cognitive psychology is distinguished by assertion that the mind is composed of a set of structures that develop in chronological order [...]. The structures of the mind are such that they correspond to structures of reality, the structures of the mind of the audience, and the structure of language. Learning to write requires the cultivation of the appropriate cognitive structures so that the structures of reality, the audience, and language can be understood” (159).

The main premise of cognitive composition was the assumption that students’ text production (as well as their writing maladies) was the response to specific mental processes (i.e., pattern recognition) in the mind that organizing and classified information. As such, students writing issues (for instance, a writer’s inability to produce text) could be an indication of some sort of disruption of the cognitive process that converts X (thought) into Y (text). Within this framework, cognitive composition thus set out to identify the various processes of the mind in order to gain a greater understanding of the mental mechanisms involved in the transformation of human thought into text. Otte and Williams Mlynarczyk point out, “[O]nce the question was what was happening in the writer’s mind, the answers could not stop with treatments of error, and so studies of process, cognition, and resistance ultimately came to take center stage” (15).

Cognitive composition seemed particularly apt for research within basic writing instruction that often struggled to establish targeted pedagogies for basic writers’ teachers to implement as part of their classroom instruction. The development of cognitive composition seemed to explain the experiences of the basic writer in varying degrees of objective (almost sterile) terms in order to explain a writer’s “abnormalities” (Otte and

Mlynarczyk 19). This sterile and scientific metaphor to discuss student writing is problematic, as student writing is defined in scientific absolutes and basic writers are defined by what they are not (19).

Cognitive composition was promising as it sought to reveal specific points of “malfunction” in a writer’s thinking when producing academic prose and the inclusion of cognitive composition introduced an additional level of complexity in discussing basic writing. For instance, Linda Flower and John R. Hayes argue in “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing” that cognitive composition could be beneficial as it could help instructors identify the “basic cognitive structures or thinking skills used” by writers (276). Flower and Hayes argues that the mind consists of mental systems that transcodes information through a series of processes. Writing thus is part of a “hierarchical structure” that generates ideas through sub systems of “planning, translating, and reviewing” by retrieving content (such as knowledge gained from reading or previous experience) stored in “long term memory” (276-7). Under this framework, poorly written text is the byproduct of processing issues between the related mental systems (such as a system overwhelmed in the “translating” subprocess). This processing issue is the distinction between poor writers placed in basic writing and their peers who are perceived as successful writers who “can juggle all of [the] demands” (279). Andrea A. Lunsford argues in “Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer” likens writing issues as an indication of a cognitive immaturity such that the student lacks the required higher order cognitive processes often found in adults (like the formation stage of development). As consequence, poor performing students are unaware of the cognitive processes used in the formation of abstract thinking (which is thus reflected in their poor performance).

Ultimately, Lunsford argued that basic writers were not relying on higher order cognitive processes when writing nor were they “forming the ‘scientific concepts’ which are basic to mastery of almost all college materials” (300).

Though sincere in its attempt to address the mechanisms involved in students’ production of writing, cognitive composition pedagogy presented questionable means of discussing student writing issues, particularly as basic writers’ issues were presented as synonymous with cognition. Moreover, it perpetuated a deficient model as a means of discussing poor performance in student writing. Within such a system, writing and thinking are universal experiences and because of this universality, abnormalities in writing (such as a basic writer’s inability to write academic prose) are partly in response to some processing or cognitive impairment. For instance, Mike Rose argues in “Narrowing the Mind and Page: Writers and Cognitive Reductionism” that such thinking is “narrow and misleading” because it generalizes the complexity of cognitive functioning into a “textbook-neat” pedagogy that perpetuates assumptions that correct writing is synonymous with cognition (346).

Furthermore, cognitive composition assumes that such a pedagogy is objective, “neutral,” and its assessment is valid; however, this is far from accurate, as social constructs oftentimes justify cultural assumptions of literacy. For example, basic writers have been dismissed as “deficient thinkers” that are embedded in culture and academia, including in our assessment practices and course curricula. Who is, for example to say that a second language learner’s issues are a reflection of poor cognitive skills rather than inexperience with a language and with discourse conventions? Ultimately, Cognitive

Composition (and other process-based pedagogy) is problematic as it simplifies writing errors as evidence of deficiencies in student through processes used to produce text.

Furthermore, this pedagogy reinforces assumptions that students are cognitively different from their peers. These students are seen as childlike and lack the maturity to attempt higher education. Or, as Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu argue in “Expectations, Interpretations, and Contributions of Basic Writers” that basic writing students “have continually been told that they are simply not yet cognitively, emotionally, and psychologically ‘ready’ just as elementary school children traditionally have been perceived as being too immature to handle the challenge of reading and writing in multi vocal contexts” (47). Ultimately, basic writing serves as a sort of maturation “holding pen” outside the standard curriculum of academia until their writing warrants entry.

In a similar fashion, deficient thinking appears to permeate in other Basic Writing scholarship. For instance, David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University” may perpetuate assumptions that error-prone, non-standard text has little value when Bartholomae argues that students should not be seen solely as “deficient thinkers” but as “outsiders” unfamiliar with writing conventions of the university. Students’ errors are issues with students’ ability to reproduce the specialized discourses of the university that is partly due to students not feeling that their works (or themselves) are privileged or of value. As such, Bartholomae argues that students must “see themselves within a privileged discourse [...]. They must be either equal to or more powerful than those they would address. The writing, then, must somehow transform the political and social relationships between basic writing students and their teachers” (“Inventing the University” 9). As such, basic writing pedagogy should “empower” students in their

writing by teaching them the expected writing conventions of the university (i.e., identifying audience, employing specific rhetorical techniques of persuasion, grammar conventions) and thus demystify the writing experience. Basic writing errors are the results of students attempting to “invent the university” without any clear understanding on the specifics of how academics employ conventions when producing text. Under this context, the student is a truly novice in need of assistance.

Although Bartholomae attempts to argue that viewing students as outsiders places students writing in a more favorable light, there is a lingering assumption here that non-traditional writing lacks value and, ultimately, does not belong in higher education. Otte and Mlynarczyk interpret Bartholomae’s “invitation” pedagogy as problematic if the basic writing instruction acts as a means of assimilating the student to academic discourse at the expense of minimizing (and oftentimes erasing) students’ alternative discourses and experiences. Furthermore, while Bartholomae’s attempts to define students as novices means to assist them in “entering the University through embracing the ‘academic status quo’” (43), Lu argues that this “invitation” pedagogy is problematic as it upholds perceptions of basic writers as “other-ed.” In an attempt to “invite” students into the university by introducing them to academic discourses, such a system further alienates students and the pedagogy still fails to acknowledge the social and cultural contexts from which literacy derives. Basic writers thus must relinquish elements of cultural identity in order to mimic the voice of the University.

Consequently, students are only able to excel once they forgo their home discourses, as they lack any capital within academia. As scholars Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski argue in “Postcolonialism and the Idea of a Writing Center,” basic

writing instruction that position students as “foreign” or “other” assumes that writing instruction is innocuous and that students writing errors are merely grounded in their unfamiliarity with academic prose. However, Bawarshi and Pelkowski challenge this assumption, arguing that basic writers forcibly transformed by their appropriation of academic discourses must silence their own language practices in order to be “invited” into academia. This becomes problematic as the academic discourse, the “acceptable standard of the University,” belongs to the privileged communities in American elite (i.e., wealthy, Western-thinking, highly-educated elites) (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 46).

Students’ success is thus predicated on their abilities to navigate the discursive spaces of privileged discourse. Therefore, basic writing (and academia as a whole) functions as an echo chamber of this privilege. Basic Writing instruction affirms the value privileged academic discourse in American culture; one cannot establish their one worth unless they speak or write the appropriately. Moreover, Basic Writing instruction reinforces “status quo” of the university; remedial students are thus justifiably placed in basic writing courses as their discourses do not adhere to the standard practices of the university, and students must exist within the borders of higher education in basic writing classes until they are properly vetted and “invited” into academic courses after their writing reflects and reproduces the university’s social and political formations. Bawarshi and Pelkowski worry that basic writing instruction, in its attempt to teach academic writing, may inadvertently student’s own voices, “when Basic Writing students, so called because they have yet to be acculturated into these privileged discourses, are taught how to function within them [...] they are not innocently being introduced to a new set of discourses; they are being constituted by these discourses” (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 47).

However, the work of Shaughnessy and others within the basic writing movement attempt to assist students in achieving their academic and personal goals, these goals run almost secondary to how basic writing pedagogy has come to function within the university. Basic writing has become a means of “[shielding] faculty from the rawness and inexperience of a new wave of open admissions student” (Otte and Mlynarczyk 55). It appears that a major premise of the basic writing (and autonomous forms of literacy) is used as a means mainstreaming basic writing students into the university by having them imitate academic discourse. In the same manner that basic writers were labeled cognitively deficient, these students are also labeled as abnormal outsiders who must be remediated.

Similarly, Bawarshi and Pelkowski claim that the work of Shaughnessy and Bartholomae overlook the negative impact of language appropriation for students considering “the epistemological demands that such academic writing places on these students’ ways of experiencing, ordering, and making sense of the world—in short, the subject positions and habits of mind that such academic discourses force them to adopt when they become acculturated into the cultures of the university” (“Postcolonialism and the Idea of a Writing Center” 44). Once again, the student is the deviant outsider wanting to get into the academic conversation, and in order to infiltrate the university, he or she must appropriate the language used. However, these marginalized students are outside or beyond the university and cannot get in. As Otte and Mlynarczyk state, “The goal [of Basic Writing] had always been initiation, but the very word acknowledges how unaccommodating and one-sided this demand for change would be. The students must change to fit the institution, not the other way around” (56).

## **Rhetorics of Disability and Passing**

As the previous discussion illustrates, basic writing pedagogies rely on deficit models to view student writing. Everyday practice tends to adhere to the presupposition of the traditional relationship between student and teacher, and students are still required to pantomime their way through their works, embodying as best they can what the universities identifies as “good” academic writing from “good” students. But, this suggests that there exists an idea means for students to produce and instructors to evaluate writing; however, this presupposition frames basic writing students as “atypical thinkers” and encourages them to attempt to “pass” as strong writers. However, “passing” by producing more universally accepted academic prose does not necessarily prove knowledge. This leads to academic writing that is performative, with students playing the roles that they think they should play in order to get passing grades. Brenda Brueggemann argues in “On (Almost) Passing discusses her own experience “passing” as a deaf woman to the struggles and experiences of basic writing students struggles in “passing” detection of writing evaluations that deem their text as deficient and poor:

I kept seeing myself in and through students I worked with in the “basic English” classrooms. They were the mirror in my ears; and they were so, too, in all the distorting, cacophonous ways that this mirror metaphor doesn’t ‘fit’ the notion we have of what mirrors usually do (allow us to see ourselves, to look—not listen and hear ourselves). These students often had volatile, if not violent, histories of passing—especially academically. Most of them, by virtue of finding themselves ‘stuck’ [...] in English 050, were still floundering mightily, struggling violently, to pass at basic English literacy. (648)



The consequence critical thinking is decoupled from style--students are encouraged to view literacy from the lens of grammatical correctness. Moreover, students become “passive and cooperative” learners who must succumb to the voice and instruction of the university and how must be educated appropriately at to the valued “style” of the university. There is little value of approaching other aspects of writing, including critical thinking, genre expectations, and the use of persuasive language. In Bruggemann’s “Deafness, Literacy, Rhetoric” she discussed at great length the struggles of deaf students “passing” within academia. Though her work was originally written from the perspective of her students, her discussion regarding literacy reliance on style is particularly apt in discussions concerning basic writing students’ hardships within remedial education. Specifically, Brueggemann notes, “when literacy is about communication, grammar, usage, or vocabulary, it is about passing. Just passing. Getting by. Adapting, functioning, getting graded (with that grade)” (“Deafness, Literacy, Rhetoric” 125). Similarly, most students are able to adhere and appropriate this voice, other students, such as developmental writers, tend to have difficulty in producing text in the manner expected of them within the university. In keeping with this deficit model, these students are typically shamed and shunned within their education.

Such presumptions still hold true. Bruggemann’s discussion also has significant implications as it relates to the persistence of cultural assumptions on the “myths of literacy.” We hold assumptions regarding the power of literacy ability to transform. Moreover, those who lack “Literacy as a communicative product” means the individual is either a “have” or a “have-not.” Much of composition theory tends to look at writing as a process...however, it still looks at communication as being a “product,” and thus

“literacy skills must be obtained and retained.” Thus literacy is viewed an “individual attribute rather than a social achievement” (“Deafness, Literacy, Rhetoric” 121).

This rhetoric of medicine and disability is often used in composition, primarily basic writing instruction and it is problematic as it labels and stigmatizes basic writing students. Such an investigation reveals the consequences of alienating and “othering” students whose texts may not adhere to accepted standards of contemporary writing and who are thus defined as “basic” or “developing writers. As such, writing instruction oftentimes mimics medical deficit models of disability: the medicalization of the human body and cognition that deems abnormalities or impairments as disadvantages and deviant that must be cured or repaired. Particularly, as Simi Linton argues in her work *Claiming Disability*, disability studies has the potential to reveal systems of institutionalized power paradigms that both label, critique, and isolate the deviant human body and behavior through language and social institutions: “A disability studies perspective adds a critical dimension to thinking about issues such as autonomy, competence, wholeness, independence/dependence, [...] Scholarship in this field address such fundamental ideas as who is considered a burden and who is a resource, who is expendable and who is esteemed [including students labeled basic writers]” (118).

In regards of remedial education, disability students provide a perfect vehicle to explore issues of access and exclusion experienced by basic writing students. In keeping with this deficit model, students who able to adhere and appropriate academic discourses in print voice are rewarded whereas, other students, like developmental writers, are considered atypical students who are shamed and shunned due to their difficulties producing text in the manner expected of them within the university.

Ultimately, writing instruction serves to expel such “deviant behavior” and cure writing “abnormalities” in the hopes of transforming such poor performing students into rational, enlightened good men and women who are able to write effectively. Writing instruction thus serves as a remediation for irrational prose and the non-standard thinking associated with “poor writing.” Composition studies (as all academic education) is conservative by nature, or as Margaret Price refers to in her text *Mad at School*. Price argues that America educational institutions reflect the Age of Enlightenment and the purist of rationality and reason. Therefore, correctness is conflated with concepts of morality, and education should serve to irradiate irrationalism. Price argues that academia is innately conservative. Similar to medical treatment of illness, educational institutions actively attempt to isolate and cure non-standard and deviant behavior (i.e., remedial writing students), “we continue to practice academic discourse [i.e., Classrooms] as a project of social hygiene. Our practice continues to circulate around the imperatives to diagnose, cure, contain, or expel the mad subject [...] pedagogical research seems almost obsessed with the diagnosis of sound and unsound minds” (33).

Developmental students are perceived as lacking and must be educated appropriately to the valued academic writing style of the university and the traditionally “print-based” modalities. The students’ failure to produce effective writing prose is their shame and stigma to bear entirely upon themselves, despite the number of outside reasons infiltrating the classroom: from students’ lack of education in previous class instruction, students’ physical or cognitive disabilities, social and economical issues that limit students’ success, and/or legislative and bureaucratic interference.

Disability academic studies, then, offers a scholarly framework to explore social constructions and education that define non-standard writing as an illness in need of a cure through remedial courses since these students' writing is non-compliant with the conventions of academic writing. For instance, Paulo Freire, in his criticisms of public education of the late 1970s and 1980s discussed at great length that those who subscribe to the "banking" metaphor view nonstandard students as having a "pathology of healthy society" (74). Students under this worldview are a "diseased" by failing to adhere to rules of the university. The students are not particularly welcome, as they exist only on the "margins" of education.

Using disability studies as a rhetorical lens reveals how students may experience feelings of stigma as well as pressures of "passing" as they attempt to silently move through their college education undetected by instructors' assessment tools that would identify them as poor writers. Particularly, as these tools often define nonstandard texts as being indicators of a student's cognitive or physical impairment, assessment measures may inadvertently rely on negative and pervasive assumptions of what constitute "good writing."

This becomes problematic as remedial courses are often used as "gate-keeping" barring student access into higher education. Or as Ira Shor argues, the classroom becomes a "gate to certification for upper-level courses leading to upper-level jobs" ("Our Apartheid" 92). Remedial courses become a punitive tool used against non-standard text. Furthermore, Shor argues that basic writing serves as a means of transferring power outside of the classroom and into the ownership of administration could use this to better certain types of students from entering into higher education under

the auspices that the students did not meet certain assessment markers (92). Shor notes that it is this very assessment policy that maintains basic writing as a valid assessment marker to track students. Basic writing justifies its existence by artificially creating a subset of students that must be rehabilitated before they are allowed entry into traditional education, “BW is a containment track below freshman comp, a gate below the gate” (94). Ultimately, Shor argues that basic writing instruction “is part of a long history of curricula for containment and control, part of the system of school tracking to divide and deter non-elite students in school and college. The students themselves are tested and declared deficient by the system, which blames the apparently illiterate and culture less victim, stigmatizing the individual as the problem while requiring BW comp as the remedy. [...] This arrangement is undemocratic and immoral” (98).

As these students are deviant, they must be rehabilitated (returning back to discussions of disability), expunges their pathologies of “bad” writing, which could only occur through academic remediation (with an extensive focus on rote memorization of grammatical rules). Finally, students must demonstrate they have a clear “bill of health” (i.e., mastery of writing conventions) before full admittance to the university. George Otte and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk argue, “basic writing has to be more ‘basic’ somehow, situated underneath or before what is nevertheless conceived as it introductory. It is also, by its nature, associated with remediation, developmental education, ‘pre-college instruction,’ ESL (English as a Second Language), ELL (English Language Learning), and other related fields” (41).

## Rhetorics of the Foreigner

Similarly, a rhetoric of identifying basic writers as “foreigner” often describe these students and their writing. Rhetorics of “otherness” often position students as lacking the familiarity of with the language practices used in academia and basic writing students are “foreigners” entering the strange land of academia and “basic writers” who lack understanding of writing conventions and whose thinking may not adhere to the Western thought espoused in the university. Onus (as the unprepared novice) is on the student to quickly “learn” these conventions before granted entry into the university. Moreover, this pedagogical distinction is inherently exclusionary since it describes basic writers as different from their peers. This pedagogical investment in defining student abilities using deficit metaphors does nothing to challenge deeply entrenched assumptions related to writing and critical “adopting such identifications have sidestepped indications by treating the contradiction of describing native students as “foreign” not as oxymoronic but as paradox, a mobile wondered at the not challenged or questioned (Horner, “Mapping *Errors and Expectations* for Basic Writers” 121).

Students’ experiences in academia are described as akin to non-native speakers traveling to a foreign land--students who are unfamiliar with the language and customs of higher education. For example, this view of students-as-outsider is reflected in the language uses in Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations*. Shaughnessy’s work often included metaphors positioning basic writing as “foreign” “outsiders” within the “frontier” of higher education who struggle with appropriating academic prose (Shaughnessy 1-4). The instructor, thus, serves as a translator, mediating the students own personal language with the expectations of the academia. Shaughnessy often used

metaphor to discuss the difficulties teaching basic writing as a “new frontier,” and instructors were surveying new territory of composition theory that was largely “unmapped”: “the territory I am calling basic writing (and that others might call remedial or developmental writing) is still very much of a frontier, unmapped, except for a scattering of impressionistic articles and a few blazed trails that individual teachers propose through their texts” (*Errors and Expectations* 4).

In similar fashion, the basic writing instructor is positioned as settlers in academia, who were willing to move away from their familiar and more “traditional” composition pedagogies and move away from working with students who shared a somewhat similar writing and educational experience: “[L]ike the settlers of other frontiers, the teachers who by choice or assignment are heading to this pedagogical West are certain to be carrying many things they will not be needing, that will clog their journey as they get further on. So too they will discover the need of other things they do not have and will need to fabricate by mother wit out of whatever is at hand” (*Errors and Expectations* 4). As frontier explorers, encouraged on by the spirit of exploration and settling on new lands not initially examined. The beneficiary of this pedagogy is the basic writing students, who due to the goodwill and the knowledgeable instructor can rejoin society (maintaining their writing to mimic traditional academic prose).

In his work “The ‘Birth’ of Basic Writing,” Bruce Horner argues that the use of metaphorical language attempts to place the complexities of the basic writing movement in much of the same framework as the frontier life of the past. The rise of literacy in the United States and the lauded position of the university as the stronghold of knowledge, arguments identifies, label, and critiques poor writers as individuals in need of

remediation. Basic writing pedagogy reframed the conversation no longer were remedial students “‘barbarians’: outsiders by virtue of their racial and/or ethnic identity and illiteracy who threaten the university—Western civilizations place of rationality;” a belief perpetuated by those in higher education and the general public (14). Rather, basic writing pedagogy transformed the basic writing experience. The students are unfamiliar to ways and practices of the university. They are true outsiders. Basic writing scholarship often embraces the developmental student as “outsiders” and its students as “immigrants” traversing the landscape of the university. Their goal is the goal of all Americans--a desire for prosperity and a better life that can be accessible through education. The labels of “outsiders” and “immigrants” “represented them as beginners and/or foreigners seeking to join the American mainstream” (“The ‘Birth’ of ‘Basic Writing’” 14).

The act of viewing basic writers as “foreigners” or “barbarians” is not a particularly new phenomenon. This practice is seen as an evaluative measure to identify, discuss, and penalize nonstandard writing within higher education. We see this, for example, when Lanham describes the difficulties of modern college students as “visiting anthropologists” traveling into a native continent with many neighboring countries. Students, in turn, practicing their own “professional language during every travel between every class period” and worshipping a singular all-knowing and knowledgeable deity (142). The instructor must work as an ambassador to insure the visiting student can appropriate the language of the respective country: “[W]e speak the natural language of God, and it is our sacred obligation to teach language to all students who pass our way” (142).



The identification of the basic writing student as “foreign” and “barbarian” becomes especially problematic considering that contemporary composition cannot remove itself from the cultural and historical connections between rhetoric and morality. (For example, Quintilian's view of rhetoric ties morality to writing. Quintilian argued that rhetoric was a reflection of one's moral fortitude and thus claimed that only “good men [speak] well.”) As Brenda Brueggemann argues in “Deafness, Literacy, Rhetoric: Legacies of Language and Communication” contemporary views of literacy and writing often views one's ability to master such skills through the lens of “goodness” and morality. Brueggemann argues that such a student who is able to “speak well” demonstrates a master of “style, delivery, memory, tone [...]. His goal is the correctness of his language, the appearance of the product itself, and his ability to convey information ‘accurately’” (120). As such, Brueggemann argues a good writer “uses language [... and] literacy to convey thoughts, morals, ethics, both his own and those of the community, nation, or culture at large.” A “good”--in this case, literate--citizen is able both to shape and connect to others via language. As he is a good man, he is likewise ethical, so his language practice both reflect and shape the culture at large [and language] becomes the “social glue used to connect ‘to people and place’” (120). Such views then relegate literacy to a product, wherein the ability to write is a tool to be “obtained and retained” (121). If, as Brueggemann argues, literacy is a product, then one is acquired through learning and hard work. Thus, it is the individual's responsibility to learn such skills. The consequence of such logic, then, is that for those unable to demonstrate such skills in their writing, they are deemed responsible for their own failings and judged harshly in society.

Much of American exceptionalism is dependent on a contemporary American culture that holds those who are literate in high esteem. For instance, Robert Graff's charges as "myth of literacy" the assumption that literacy will solve the social ills. Mass literacy would address many of social and cultural inequalities found in the United States, and the very act of becoming literate would rise an individual up from poverty as well as dismantle deeply held beliefs of race and gender. However, this belief is problematic as it places a great deal of responsibility on the mastery of writing (and those who teach writing): "Literate persons, for example, are said to be more empathetic, innovative, achievement oriented, cosmopolitan, media and politically aware, identified with a nation, aspiring to schooling, 'modern,' urban in residence, and accepting of technology. Literacy, is claimed, correlates with economic growth and industrialization, wealth and productively, political stability and participatory democracy, urbanization, consumption, and contraception" (Graff 19).

Paulo Freire argues in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that this type of educational model operates under a "banking metaphor" of knowledge instruction in which the student is a passive "container" in whom knowledge is "deposited." Therefore, "the teacher is the Subject of the learning process [representation of Truth], while the pupils are mere objects [nonfunctioning receptacles with no autonomy]" (73). Freire states that within this educational model, students are the equivalent to "welfare recipients," poor (in knowledge), and "incompetent and lazy" (74). The work and very existence in education are deviant due to their inability to demonstrate mastery of learning conventions; they are an affront to the university. This model argues that the university thus has a moral imperative to reach out to these impoverished students as they reject the ideals of "good

and just society” (74). Society thus demands compliance from students, as they are mere “objects.” These students cannot rest on the “margins” good; but instead, they must be “integrated” to the values dictated by society.

Similarly, in the article “Crafting Virtue: The Rhetorical Construction of Public Morality,” Celeste Michelle Condit argues that rhetorical morality is the construction of cultural negotiated through approved discursive rules that ignores individual “private moral beliefs” or perspectives. In addition, agreed-upon concepts of morality are in a state of flux, as they are improved through dialogism. Celeste Michelle Condit notes that dialogism occurs within larger social implications as they “indicate shared commitments and prescribe what each person as a member of a collectivity is obligated to do so within the collectivity” (309). Furthermore, Condit claims that the individual morality and “desires” hold importance within society, when elevated by apportioning the discursive requirement of a discourse community (i.e., grammar, punctuation, spelling). As Condit notes, “[P]ublic rhetoric requires that individual speak a public language that includes linguistic commitments shared by all who are constituents [...] More fundamentally, these terms are moral because the public area [...] requires the use of terms that match the essential requirements of morality—the sacrifice of self-interests for larger good” (309).

Jami Carlacio and Alice Gillam argue that Condit’s claims are important as they outline the intrinsic nature to morality and persuasion. There exists a shared relationship of “give and take” as language is discursive. One must forgo their individuality and adhere to delivery conventions of a group; as such, speakers must “articulate their concerns in more tolerant, less self-interested, more responsible terms” (159). As consequence, Condit states that public definitions of “goodness” advances above the

morality of the individual—their complexity lies in the how they are constructed as these “general goods” are crafted by socially negotiations via dialogism and are historically situated based on previous accepted usage. Because of this, there does not exist universal definitions regarding issues of morality, which again are the result of dialogism.

However, “goodness” functions within boundaries of negotiation of a society, and is not inherent or universal. We cannot assume that these agreed-upon morals are democratically constructed or, more specifically, that such constructions are the result of unbiased objectivity. At best, Condit notes that such views of morality are thus not “objective truth” but are grounded in “human morality” (that is inherently flawed): “once we accept some kind of ‘reality’ as probable and useful concept, we can locate universal conditions such as the existence of language, sexuality, and morality, which have moral consequences (85). This discussion is important to note when discussing issues of language acquisition, as there one may assume that discussions of “goodness” is universal and natural, or more to the point, such negotiations are not democratic and may not include “equality in communication” and thus can (and have been) appropriated by those whose experiences and views are not shared by those of society:

[A] rhetorical morality must meet the challenge of ideology. To the extent that dominant elites control the means of communication and the public vocabulary, they can represent singular partisan interests as universal or moral ones. They can thereby evade the modifications, compromises, and larger goods wrought through agonistic competition between values and interest. Dominant elites thus hijack the moral potential for partisan ends (author 83).

Lanham argues that rhetoric cannot be separated from morality and as such, “goodness” is inherent in “good speech.” As such, a “good man” will employ good rhetoric “in good causes, the bad kind in bad causes. The weak defense argues that rhetoric is style to assist in ornate communication and is a form of tricky often used by those trying to discredit a speaker or his/her argument (155).

Returning to the identification of “frontier” and “border” as a means of discussing the difficulties of basic writing inadvertently introduces new issues into the conversation:

In contrast to the American frontier experience, on this frontier no natives were displaced or herded into special reservations, new territory was conquered from others, and people’s appearance on the scene was compelled by no obvious social, political, economic, or historical force. Rather, teachers ventured into uninhabited territory as so many pathological Eves and Adams, pursuing a mysterious, divinely ordained destiny. (“The ‘Birth’ of ‘Basic Writing’” 17)

This “geographic metaphor,” at the onset, presents composition as a way of identifying the struggles of students entering into the classroom. The basic writer is traversing the “frontier” of higher education--this new land established on a very specific type of language that must be mastered by those traveling the area. Moreover, the students are often at the border of their own land which practices and those of the university. This rhetoric of the foreigner is meant to help the instructor--as guide--settle into the role of assisting students.

Horner argues that Shaughnessy’s text rises above the fray of this conversation as her use of frontier terminology attempts to establish a “paradoxical” relationship between the student and the instructor. Students are not lazy or incapable of learning academic

prose. Their inability to follow the conventions of academic text is not an indication of cognitive deficiencies. Rather they are “foreigners” due to their lack of familiarity with writing. The classroom functions as a border between both the lived experiences of the students and the practices of higher education represented in the instructor. Due to their interactions in the classroom, students and instructor must address the power inherent in language appropriation as part of the learning process.

However, Horner argues that this terminology is problematic as it perpetuates deep-seated assumptions about basic writers. Student success is dependent on a student’s ability to appropriate academic discourse while simultaneously denying his or her “native tongue”: “if learning to write is not a matter of becoming cognitively mature but of changing one social and cultural identity initiating such change seems liable to charges of cultural parallels, converting the ‘native’s’ our native ways by teaching them the rituals and gestures of academic discourse. Such conversations are difficult to justify ethically” (“Mapping *Errors and Expectations for Basic Writers* 33). Ultimately, this presents a very limited view of the teaching of academic writing. Writing is relegated to a possession that must be given: “American culture [...] sometimes present particularized, narrow, but most importantly reified views of discourse of academic writing as representative literacy to be given to students viewed as ‘other’ by teachers imagined as ‘having’ ‘literacy’” (36).

Still, though Horner does provide space for Shaughnessy’s work to function within the larger problematic discussion of frontier rhetoric, I am a bit more cautious of its employment within her text that students’ struggles in the classroom are similar to the difficulties of those migrating to a foreign country. Such rhetoric perpetuates the myths

associated with academic writing and education. To assume that the students are foreigners is to assume that they have no tie or connection to the values of the university. Additionally, this metaphor assumes that students do not live and experience American culture which is deeply entrenched in the values of higher education. Students are deeply aware of their inadequacies in producing academic discourse (which is highly specialized). Moreover, the act of negotiation and learning academic discourse inherently asked the students to devalue their own language practices. It often feels like forced appropriation. Also by referring to basic writing as a “new frontier,” instructors are the “pioneers” and students the uneducated “natives.” The teaching of basic writing becomes a mission of salvation. Furthermore, it continues to denigrate the experiences of basic writers by identifying the instructor as “saints” that are “working in the trenches” to reach out to these “unfortunate students” when teaching basic writing.

## CHAPTER IV

### DECONSTRUCTING BASIC WRITING TEXTBOOKS' ROLE IN THE MYTH OF LITERACY

Students entering into the basic writing classroom bring with them a diversity of experiences that shapes their ability to produce and interact with academic texts. Discussions about basic writing are oftentimes riddled with complexities. Issues experienced by basic writers are not universal. These issues are oftentimes compounded by the requirements of the university—an expectation that students are able to produce appropriate prose valued by the university. Basic writing students are not, as a whole, lazy, incompetent, “cognitively impaired.” Nor are the students traditional or nonstandard students as is often time exposed by basic writing pedagogy of the late 1970s and 80s and their attempts to define basic writers through an unyielding and stringent pedagogy that attempts to reveal the mysteries of students writing malady. Because of this, there are a number of different fields of studies competing to solve the “issue” with basic writers. Such pedagogies shape the educational tools used to instruct basic writers as well as educate future instructors on how to teach academic writing.

#### **Textbooks and the “Myth of Literacy”**

As used within a university, textbooks are oftentimes attempt to bridge the gap between students' lack of understanding of the subject matter and the instructors' familiarity with the educational material; however, textbooks may inadvertently perpetuate long-standing assumptions of basic writers' abilities and limitations of basic



writers themselves. For the student, the textbook often serves as a “touchstone,” an immediate and reliable means of accessing educational principles within the respective subject. The textbook often serves as a means of preparing new instructors for teaching the valued knowledge of their respective profession. Embedded in the textbook are long-standing pedagogies that comprise of a multitude of pedagogical “voices” that attempt to identify basic writing students as well as isolate their problems in the pursuit of identifying a writing instruction that best facilitates students. However, various “lessons” students and instructors receive when using sources may include conflicting rhetorical voices. Textbooks often assume that previous pedagogical approaches were flawed and incorrect and that this text will provide new insights into better approaching basic writing issues. There is value in closely examining the nature in which textbooks are produced and marketed to universities and composition programs. There is also value in closely examining the various messages that are conveyed in the lessons presented to basic writing students. Such an examination reveals additional complexities and teaching basic writing.

One problem that exists is when one considers the nature and how these textbooks are constructed. Textbooks may be complicit in the labeling of students. To borrow from Xin Liu Gale and Fredric G. Gale’s text, “we [academic scholars] cannot afford to neglect the dynamic roles textbooks play in conserving, challenging, and transforming the academic culture, the discipline, and the tradition of teaching writing” (13). Because of this, it is important to examine how various future tools may shape the profession.

It would be pertinent to focus on one element that may contribute to the students and ability rights, mainly the textbooks used to shape pedagogy within the writing

classroom. Textbooks play a very unique role within the classroom. In many respects the textbook is used to reaffirm the lessons taught by the instructor as well as shape the instructor's pedagogy within the subject. One must consider how writing issues tend not be the cause of a singular issue or concern. This line of thinking will be considered too simplistic and reductive. Rather, one must consider writing as the accumulation of multitude of experiences, including prior teaching experience as one confidence in writing as well as other things that shape the writing experience. In addition, textbooks also serve as a physical, tangible entity—it is the physical manifestation of composition pedagogy. A personal professor, if you will. The students, struggling to write a major paper, refer back to the textbook to refresh their memory the instructor's previous lectures on writing. Moreover, these texts have been authorized by the university, students can take solace information presented in is universally “true.” The text is factual and unchanging.

The dynamic between the textbook, the instructor, and the student (struggles with writing) does pose issues in the transference of writing instruction. While basic writing students often struggle with the “rules” of writing and if they are enrolled in a class that had clear and concise writing instruction as well as incorporated and accessible textbook that serves as a touchstone for class instruction, obviously the students would be better for it. The textbook then becomes an invaluable tool for the basic writer. However, there is the concern the student is defined as part of this relationship between the student, the instructor, and the textbook creators. Consider, who defines what “correct” writing is within a specific basic writing classroom? Is it the instructor, who is hired for their expertise in writing instruction or has met a state's requirements to teach writing to

students? Is it the textbook—a “text” created by writing experts (i.e., multiple pedagogical voices) and textbook publishers whose “definition” of writing may not reflect the needs of a specific demographic of students (e.g., students enrolled in a community college). Or is it the educational institution that defines student success through a specific writing “Truth?” And finally, how do these definitions converge within a classroom, with a student population weary of writing?

It seems though that current textbooks emphasize style (in the guise of academic conventions) and function as an authoritarian voice within the classroom that is further complicated by the fact that instructors may have their own “rules” of writing. This contributes to a student’s sense of confusion. Moreover, the purpose or function of textbooks as they exist within the university is very similar: modes based text that focus on grammar instruction. There lacks an emphasis on students writing academic prose that emphasizes critical thinking and revision. Basic writing textbooks are part of the system of exclusion, and the teaching of basic writing is problematic as instructors often have to teach a sizable selection of instructors who may not have any experience understanding of basic writing history and the complexity of academic writing, particularly with students who come from a pretty diverse background. Basic writing textbooks rely heavily on pedagogy that does not empower student but is a form of indoctrination that favors certain aesthetics associated with Western writing. The ultimate take away--the struggle between these different logical thoughts and the problematic contents of *Errors and Expectations* fuels the complexity of talking about basic writing instruction. This should also be a warning sign for composition instructors who used textbooks, textbook companies, and publishers that attempt to sell textbooks as being the premier way of

teaching basic writing. This discussion becomes more important as now large textbook publishers are starting to bundle online digital tools to help teach basic writing with the explicit selling point that these tools will better engage students.

Textbooks are a uniquely interesting construction, particularly how they are implemented within the university. Typically, the assumption is that textbooks are a neutral objective amalgamation of information within a particular profession. The information is concise and valid. And the textbooks expressed goal is to further the understanding of the subject matter that it represents. For instance, when one considers a composition textbook for a freshman composition course, the assumption is that the textbook would provide students with instruction on how to make appropriate rhetorical choices when producing a text, provide students with readings or models that would help facilitate the students understanding of academic writing, provide students with a style passage outlining MLA.

However, as David Bleich argues in “In Case of Fire, Throw In,” this distinction makes writing textbooks complicated and different from textbooks from other subjects. Moreover, it is important for composition to be aware of the genre and the genre constraints that center on writing textbooks (for instance, financial pressures that may spur the development of online software). Specifically, Bleich argues that a textbook in science tells readers what they should know (like an equation on gravity) that is both “declarative and direct.” As consequence, textbooks do not adequately predict the needs of the abilities of the students’ “Knowledge as textbooks represent it is not contingent on the experiences of the readership” (16). Bleich argues that although writing textbooks often claim that they are receptive and accommodating to the experiences of the students,

textbooks are inherently “authoritarian.” Ultimately, Bleich argues that “writing textbooks don’t teach alternatives because they’re textbooks, which are expected to give instructions” (17). Michael W. Kleine makes the same claim about the textbooks becoming authoritarian: “What is troubling about a written rhetoric is not that it is arbitrary and persuasive, but that too often it postures, as does The Law, as a kind of transcendent discourse, free of values and persuasive force—really, to a discourse at all, but a foundational truth” (137).

This creates a few issues. One, textbooks are authoritarian and displace teachers’ voices. Textbooks also perpetuate writing pedagogy that is not clearly understood by the instructor or may be in direct conflict with the instructor’s pedagogy. Bleich argues that this becomes problematic when textbooks may or may not be useful to the instructor. For instance, we might see this in a classroom in which instructor forgo whole passages as they do not fit in the framework of a specific assignment or in those cases where the textbook is only accessed through a limited time via subscription. In addition, Bleich argues that textbooks might present just enough information that the inexperienced instructor appears competent; however, the instructor may be unfamiliar with the historical context of the pedagogy that shapes that textbook. Bleich asks us to consider how textbooks can (and do) add complexity into basic writing instruction. For instance, the basic writing classroom is oftentimes staffed by instructors with limited experiences in teaching students with a varying degree of writing ability or lack of “professional-level knowledge” of composition theory (18). Such instructors are at a disadvantage as they lack the ability to justify any pedagogical choices made in the teaching of writing to students (18). This ignorance may encourage instructors to rely on outdated pedagogy

that does not align with students' needs or one that employs teaching models based on assumptions about writing--like those based on personal experiences with writing or ones that are grounded in cultural "myths" about writing. Consequently, Bleich argues, "inexperienced writing teachers do not know what choices they have in the teaching of writing. They do not know how to use the variety of *possible* approaches to writing to serve the special student population that they meet in their class" (18). Ultimately, the textbook functions as a form of "insurance" for the university and the inexperienced teacher (34).

Another concern is that inexperienced instructors use textbooks to supplement their lack of knowledge about composition theory and an instructor's inexperience impacts the type of textbooks used in basic writing classes. Specifically, the instructor may inadvertently introduce competing or conflicting voices into the composition classroom. The instructor's inexperience in pedagogy comes in conflict with the authoritarian voice the textbook.

Instructors' lack awareness of the possibilities in teaching a competition theory becomes more problematic as many universities may require basic writing instructors to use unified textbooks as part of course instruction. This leaves us with the question "what impact does the textbook have within a classroom in which the instructor is unfamiliar with the nuances of the subject matter?" In this situation, the textbook becomes a rival to the authority of the instructor within the classroom. Rather than being in a supplemental source, which the instructor is able to appropriate particular lessons, or knowledge that is pertinent to teaching of academic writing, the instructor is in constant negotiation with the "authority" of the textbook. Due to the instructor's lack of familiarity with the subject

matter, they may not be able to ascertain or challenge “questionable” knowledge of the textbook. Moreover, this unfamiliarity runs a risk of hard coding writing suggestions as critical rules of writing (i.e., using a comma in the pauses of a sentence). For remedial students unfamiliar with writing conventions, there is concern that textbooks thus elevates writing to issues of style and correctness--rather than meaningful exploration of writing a collection of rhetorical choices that impact the quality of a text.

### **Deconstructing Textbooks**

As textbooks function as an official, sanctioned text of the classroom (and the institution), there is no discursive space allowed to question, as well as challenge, why specific choices are made when writing. Samantha Looker argues in her work “Commodifying Writing: Handbook Simplicity versus Scholarly Complexity” that textbooks risk commodifying academic language for students because textbooks’ instructions often rely on declarative statements when discussing the writing process. Students, unfamiliar with the complexity of academic writing, oftentimes misunderstand these statements as absolute requirements of all academic writing (136). Furthermore, these declarative statements appear in popular basic writing textbooks and in their description of “good writing.” For instance, Lisa and Kent Hoeffner’s textbook *Common Places: Integrated Reading and Writing* opens with a lengthy discussion on the value of critical thinking and how critical reading is an invaluable skill for academic and career success: “To succeed in college and at work, you must be able to read critically and write clearly [...] Every college course requires reading [and will assess knowledge] through writing assignments [...] Additionally, most jobs require competent writing ability. In short, your ability to read and write well is a life skill” (2). This passage is followed by a

lengthy discussion (titled “Developing Your Vocabulary”) on how students go about acquiring stronger vocabulary (reading skills) to strengthen their language usage. The passages rely on dictionaries, such as Merriam-Webster and the Oxford English Dictionary (“the quickest and easiest way to learn the definition of a word is to use a dictionary”). Next, the textbook encourages students to learn the prefixes and suffixes of words. The textbook goes so far as to define the terms and provide a three-page list of common prefixes and suffixes.

*Common Places* attempts to prepare students in acquiring new vocabulary that can be used in their writing, hence the authors note that vocabulary acquisition is also dependent on understanding synonyms, and the textbook suggests that students keep records of their new vocabulary in a notebook or on note cards, so they can be referenced when writing: “When you write emails, use as many of the words on your note card as you can” (39). Furthermore, each subsequent chapter includes suggested vocabulary words activities (titled “Vocabulary Collection Word”) located at the outer margins of the textbook pages. The activity encourages students to generate sentences that include the selected vocabulary as well as to transcribe the official dictionary definition of the phrase. The inclusion of this section appears to make sense on the onset. Word choice can aid in sentence clarity and conciseness. Remedial students often struggle with text production due (in part) to a limited word choice. Therefore, it seems that the authors included these lessons to strengthen students’ language repertoire.

While these lessons may aid students in their ability to critically read and write academic prose, *Common Places* may provide additional barriers for students attempting to learn academic writing. Specifically, these lessons codify “good writing” as being



synonymous with word choice and specialized language. Although diverse word choice can aid in writing concise prose, this textbook provides little-to-no instruction on how language usage is ultimately a discursive choice in response to the rhetorical situation surrounding a text. For instance, the textbook does not provide more meaningful discussion on why academic text values specific wording over others (i.e., casual language or slang). Similarly, the textbook does not include conversations on how specialized shapes meaning (i.e., discussing the implications of using the word “woman” as opposed to the term “female”).

Furthermore, *Common Places* assumes that students’ reading and writing issues are the result of lack of familiarity concerning the epistemology of language (for example, the need for prefixes and suffixes, understanding synonyms and the parts of speech). Though this also seems to be pedagogically sound, this textbook further complicates writing accessibility for students, ultimately, serving as a barrier separating remedial curriculum from traditional education. Students may (incorrectly) assume that meaningful writing cannot take place until they have mastered the building blocks of writing (reminiscent of the Current-Traditional movement). Students may interpret that their writing has no value, as it does not mimic the language practices of academics. I share the same concerns as Samantha Looker and worry that textbooks such as *Common Places* present to students’ academic writing as the accumulation of rigorous and unyielding skills that students must mimic in their texts. The textbook’s depiction of writing runs counter to the realities of writing; namely, academic writing is messy because “what qualifies as ‘academic writing’ is shot through with a multiplicity of genres, voices, and textual histories that make the category far more blurry than

traditional representation [including textbooks like *Common Places*] would suggest” (137).

This becomes a problem when considering how this information is expressed to the novice instructor. The instructor may not be able to articulate why a thesis statements as defined in this manner outside of the instruction in the textbook. Moreover, such instruction does not encourage students to consider how their audience in the subject matter may dictate how the thesis statement functions within a text. Moreover, the textbook serves as an unyielding rule to an abstract concept of writing. The thesis statement rule is arbitrary in the sense that it is dictated by the rhetorical situation surrounding the text (which includes audience, subject matter, and occasion). As such, sound academic writing will oftentimes attempt to negotiate between these concepts when structuring a thesis statement. Therefore, while the textbook definition is not incorrect and will serve the student well in a few classes, it does not adequately prepare them to think about the nature of writing. Instead, the textbook distills writing to a collection of rules that will lead the reader to produce solid academic prose. As consequence, Bleich argues that textbooks, inadvertently, perpetuate beliefs that writing as only a medium of communication and only serves as “tools” to convey meaning (particularly in their other courses). Writing is thus “a technical task to learn” (19). Ultimately, textbooks perpetuate the idea “that good writing is reachable through the following of rules and the compliance with ideas by others” (23).

Textbook inherently position basic writers as novices to academic writing. Bleich argues that textbooks create a divisive relationship between the instructor and the student (34). The student within this relationship is one with a “problem” that the textbook is

attempting to address. Students are labeled as “developmental” due to their inability to follow conventions of effective writing, and it is the responsibility of the student then to master the skills. There is a shared characteristic of basic textbooks that often define the basic writer as the “novices” to fundamental construction of academic writing. Bleich argues that experts attempt to distill complex compositional theory and much of active writing into simplistic, “boiling-down” academic writing into easily digestible phrases, summaries, and lists (34). This type of language use perpetuates the distinction between the instructor and student and creates a false sense of understanding of academic writing as a collection of hard, fast, and unyielding rules that one must follow. Moreover, the textbook (as a singular physical object) cannot teach students how to write but instead reinforces the student status within the university as “novice.” Or as Bleich argues, “The patronizing language of textbooks help to perpetuate the hierarchical structures of society. These structures render coercive speech by an authoritative. But in teaching, there is no way to authorize the equivalence of students’ language experiences to those of teachers because teachers’ judgments rendered through grinding ends every course” (35).

Further complicating the issue is how these textbooks are often assigned to a basic writing classroom. Since many textbooks are assigned by writing departments in order to ensure consistency in the education of basic writing students, the textbook often serves as a form of maintaining a “status quo” of academic writing (including grammar and punctuation). In addition, writing textbooks often hold a revered position in both academia and society at large. Scholar Kurt Spellmeyer argues that textbooks are not designed to encourage critical thinking but serve as an archive of knowledge that is

deemed “true.” They do not offer the student the ability to generate questions regarding the subject.

Rather, textbooks function as a “choreographed simulation of questioning” (46). Likewise, Spellmeyer argues that textbooks create division between student and instructor. The textbook functions as an approved body of knowledge selected by the university as valuable. For basic writers in a remedial composition course, the textbook serves as a marker or indicator of the students’ lack of knowledge on the subject. They have not mastered the ability to write based on the knowledge contained within this textbook (which includes writing one sentence thesis statements). As such, Spellmeyer argues that the textbook functions as a form of “ritual” that students purchase in order to enter the status quo and the university. Their enrollment in the remedial class and the purchase of this textbook has identified them as outsiders to the university. They have demonstrated through assessment that they are unable to write within the status quo. So purchasing a basic writing textbook, a student is now joining what Spellmeyer argues is the “the economy of knowledge” (48). The basic writing student has taken the first steps in participating in this exchange. However, the goal of the textbook is not to ensure that students develop the critical thinking skills in order to produce text independently or to become competent and capable writers. Spellmeyer argues that, instead, the textbook is only a collection of “specialized knowledge valued for its scarcity” that allows to student have value and capital within the university—for example, students are allowed to enroll in non-remedial courses as well as graduate. Spellmeyer argues that there exists an assumption that writing textbooks teach students how to write. Spellmeyer’s argument is particularly relevant to conversations regarding textbooks. Specifically, basic writing

textbooks or any writing instruction that relies on the use of textbooks does not serve the students in developing the skill sets needed to generate prose. Under this metaphor of “economy of knowledge,” the textbook functions as part of the larger assessment of the student’s ability to write (48).

As consequence, Spellmeyer argues that textbooks do not inherently enable them to become better writers (46). As often is the cause with basic writing textbooks, discussion on what is defined as “excellent academic prose” is a sparse, a scarce resource that students are not able to obtain on their own. Only through purchasing both the textbooks and paying for remedial writing course can students become better writers. perpetuated by both the textbook and the basic writing course. In order to have any capital, the student must create prose that has value within the system as their own voice and text has no value.

For example, consider the larger narrative when people discuss proper writing. Writing is supposed to be an effortless and simple process that students in a basic writing course should have mastered years prior to their entry into the university. The student’s inability to follow grammar conventions is perceived as reflective of a larger issue and reflective of the student’s ability to be successful in the pursuit of higher education. The appropriation of the “status quo” of academic writing is the only gateway that students can use in order to enter the university, in order for students to become better writers. The desire to master these conventions as well as the student’s inability to have learned these “innate skills” over the course of their lifetime delegates academic writing to “a scarce commodity.”

Textbooks teach the importance of student compliance to a specific type of writing, and, in turn, textbooks require compliance from students. Students have little to no recourse in questioning or deviating from the pedagogy expressed within the textbooks, and student success is dependent on their adherence to rules of the text. There exists no sense of dialogism shared amongst the student and textbook, and textbooks tend to avoid the latter, as it is too difficult to do on a large scale, so that textbook-assigned writing is divorced from the process of writing. In turn, textbooks only offer “simulation” of writing and rhetorical instruction. Rules are often time explicit and unyielding, with little to no in-depth discussion about oratorical choices made in producing text. Textbooks do not offer students the space to engage or question the material or topic. There is no exploration on for whom or why the writing rules exist. Moreover, there lacks any discussion on how a student could manipulate these rules to their own ends. Once again, the textbook has a presence and authority on the subject, due to the place textbooks hold within university and society.

This issue of exclusion and stigma is especially disconcerting with recent educational initiatives that redesign remedial education toward more cost-effective technologies to assess and educate students. The concern is that such software is built around an educational pedagogy that views and labels atypical writing as “poor” or “deviant” and lacks the nuance of a human instructor to “read” a text beyond the absolutism of writing rules and conventions. Such instances include the recent 2012 study released by the *Complete College America* encouraging the end of remedial education that suggests, instead, placing “poor writing students” into traditional writing courses with computer assisted writing software like Pearson’s *MyComp Lab*. In addition,

*Complete College America* pushed for better assessment tools, such as online computer scoring software of students' texts that in turn "diagnosis" and determines students' writing abilities. Of course, such software assumes that there exists a correlation between student performance on assessment test and the ability to write.

Although the intent of remedial writing courses is to assist students in appropriating proper control of academic prose. Traditional assessment tools such as SATs or writing samples, assessment essays are excellent resources in identifying writing errors in student texts (i.e., missing commas, misspellings). However, the term basic writing often is placed on students whose texts have a variety of writing abnormalities that are unique to the individual student. Scholar Angela Woodward summarizes the common and "daunting" struggles of basic writing instructors who are charged with teaching a frustrated student population sequestered into a remedial course:

Many [students] hate English because they have done poorly in it. Some have a learning disability such as dyslexia that makes reading and writing particularly difficult. Some, I suspect, have such a disability [...] it's never been diagnosed, and they haven't had much help in working around it. A few come from big urban school systems where it seems they did little reading and no writing. A few others are recent immigrants, still learning English, but these few are the least angry and the least afraid. [...] The majority of the class seems to feel at the outset that they are here to be punished. (77)

Similarly, scholar Paul Kei Matsuda makes claims regarding basic writing placement. Particularly, when it is the issue of ESL students, the term basic writing often generalizes to issues of writing errors and misused language. As consequence, there is little

conversation on the linguistic and cultural conditions that shape student writing, the generalized term “basic writer” has often been used in referring to diverse groups of students without regard to their backgrounds -linguistic, cultural, or educational” (67).

Likewise, scholars Kimber Barber-Fendley and Chris Hamel discussed their concern with composition pedagogy’s struggle in assisting students with learning disabilities that impede their writing: “We as a field have yet to establish any real means to distinguish LD writing from basic writing (or from mainstream writing). [...] At our best, we have tried to identify students with LD without having the knowledge to do so, to remediate them by addressing their grammatical habits, and to offer them accommodations we do not fully understand” (“A New Visibility: An Argument for Alternative Assistance Writing Programs for Students with Learning Disabilities Author(s)” 506, 512).

This difficulty in discussing basic writing often informs the materials that are used to instruct students (i.e., online software, textbooks, and grammar handbooks). The term basic writer as used within higher education, as practice, makes large generalizations of the struggles and needs of students. This generalization may, as consequence, manifest itself in the lecture materials and design choices of basic writing textbooks. Those students that fall outside of the confines of “basic writers” are thus often left invisible and not adequately discussed. Moreover, these generalizations may appropriate long-held views of academic writing. As a consequence, textbooks attempt to “serve multiple Masters” in their effort to address the needs of diverse student populations.

This all becomes problematic when considering the cost leveraged against remedial students. It is common practice for basic writing courses to cost the same as a



traditional academic course; however, the student taking the class often receives little to no credit towards the terminal degree. Consider too that many of the textbooks required for basic writing courses often cost upwards of \$150. In many respects, remedial students are being financially penalized for their inability to produce academic prose.

Likewise, textbooks are often slow to change and do not reflect contemporary pedagogy of a particular topic. Robert J. Connor succulently argues that textbooks often are resistant to change: “The function of texts has always been essentially conservative: textbooks, which change with glacial slowness, provide stability amid the shifting winds of theoretical argument” (Connor, “Textbooks and the Evolution of the Discipline” 190).

This is important when one considers the role of textbooks within the classroom, or as Deb Martin argues in her work “Add Disability and Stir: The New Ingredient in Composition Textbooks”: “For students, textbook represent authority. Students come to depend on textbooks to help them navigate the meaning of new and difficult concepts” (77). Since the textbook plays an authoritarian role in the construction of students perception of academic writing, it is important to explore the various messages of writing convey to students. Specifically, are textbook costs justified considering the materials provided to students?

A common issue with many basic writing textbooks is that there oftentimes identifies students as deficient. For instance, basic writing textbooks appear to have appropriated disability metaphors to inform design cues used in basic writing textbooks. Under this assumption, student writing issues are conflated with cognitive impairment that impede student understanding. As such, textbooks will include design cues such as larger than normal fonts and extra spacing between sentences and paragraphs similar to

K-12 textbooks. Typically, use with young children and the dyslexic of feel overwhelmed by small font and find difficulty in processing the message of text passages. Large font and spacing helps in migrating these feelings. Scholars Paul Chandler and John Sweller argue that children and dyslexic students often experience a “cognitive overload” when reading text that is small and close together. The act of reading is the management of cognitive systems that aid in reading text, including previous knowledge of the genre material, access to a nexus of vocabulary, and the awareness of the relationship between words. Reading comprehension is reliant these cognitive systems understanding of a text “cognitive load associated with material to be learned strongly related to the extent to which the elements of the material interact with each other” (188).

As a consequence, students experience a form of “visual crowding” or the inability to ascertain the meaning of a passage due, in part, to stimulus overload: “Visual crowding occurs when stimuli become more difficult to either detect or discriminate when surrounded by other stimuli, compared to when they are presented in isolation” (Cassim). Students who experience visual crowding will struggle with processing issues like, for example, slower reading speeds, as well as an inability follow the relationships between sentences.

For students who experience processing issues (including dyslexia), the use of larger than normal font and additional space benefits students with reading process errors as it lightens the cognitive overload, thus adding in their ability to understand text: “The beneficial effect of extra-large letter spacing might also be linked to sluggish visuospatial attention in dyslexic children [...] Indeed, spatial attention dimities crowding by improving the accuracy of target identification or reducing the critical spacing [...]

Sluggish spatial attention has recently been observed even in at-risk pre readers who later become dyslexic ” (Zorzi et al. 11458).

Based on my observations of a number of popular basic writing textbooks, it seems that textbook authors are applying similar assumptions about basic writing issues regarding reading and writing. Under this terministic screen, basic writing students are akin to young or dyslexic students who have difficulty reading academic prose. They may experience a sense of frustration in reading a traditional college textbook inclusion of small font and tight spacing. For instance, the textbook *Touchstones: A Guided Approach to Writing Paragraph and Essay* by Chris Juzwiak can devote an entire page (or chapter) discussing the intricacies of the thesis statement. An opening paragraph used to describe the function of a thesis statement can be isolated into a large and readable paragraph. There is not the risk of complicating the readability through the inclusion of smaller paragraphs and more text that “crowds” the page. However, the increased font size does come at an expense of page size devoted to instructing students. An example of this is *Touchstones* section covering brainstorming technique of Clustering. The section contains less than 150 words and includes a large clustering diagram.

Textbooks also perpetuate this concept of students through their inclusion of loosely pages in basic writing textbooks. In many respects, contemporary basic writing textbooks are a continuation of workbook genre of instructional materials of the early twentieth century. In his work “Textbooks and the Evolution of the Discipline”, Robert J. Connors argue that the” workbooks “endlessly derivative” in their attempt to provide students opportunities to work on grammar exercises, skill drill, and sentence combining activities that would be turned in and submitted to for evaluation to teachers (189).

Contemporary basic writing textbooks, including *Touchstones* and *Writing First: Paragraphs and Essays* continue this tradition of including loose-leaf workbook activities. The assumption is that the writing activities can be used as individual homework assignments that students can submit to the instructor. Many of the perforated writing activities are “fill-in-the-blank” assignments; for example, *Writing First* includes an activity where students are required to read the passage of a provided essay and underline the supported evidence hidden in the example. A similar activity asked students to generate examples to support the provided topic sentences (i.e., “When it comes to feeding a family, there are several alternatives to fast-food. A romantic relationship with a coworker can create serious problems” (45).

Ultimately, these textbooks are problematic as they perpetuate very prescriptive concepts of writing. Specifically, good academic writing is the ability to mimic and recreate appropriate grammatical conventions associated with academic writing. These assignments also localize academic writing to mastery of skills and activities. If it is true that basic writers struggle with text production, it would be beneficial for them to practice producing academic text. Moreover, there is concern that such activities will reaffirm to students grammatical correctness supersedes content and that they will only become competent academic writers when they can master these rudimentary skills. Ultimately, students are encouraged to interpret writing divorced from content.

Furthermore, basic writing textbooks often identify students as deficient through their use of low-risk writing activities meant to invite students to participate in academic writing. On the onset, these assignments seem to be a welcome addition to textbooks as they are meant to provide students with confidence to continue writing. However, many of these writing activities are not directly related to writing and often could be interpreted

as being overly simplified. For example, the teacher edition of *Touchstones* includes a writing assignment meant to encourage student sense of agency when writing. The instructor is encouraged to create an activity where students learn how to organize paragraphs using tying colored socks ties and scarves together as a class. Similarly, *Reading First* dedicates an entire chapter to teaching students on how to be productive and respectful college students. Another activity includes suggestion for student success, such as to create a bookshelf where students can keep their school materials at home. Other suggestions: come to class, take notes, do their homework regularly, and purchase a large wall calendar to fill with “important dates, such as school holidays, work commitments, exam dates, and due dates for papers and projects” (6-8).

Similarly, the textbook *Sentences* truncates the writing process to sentences rather than essays. *Sentences* take the premise that writing is a series of interconnected steps that students must follow in order to produce academic writing: “Good writing can never fulfill its promise if it is not in correct sentence form, which is why *Simple, Clear, and Correct: Sentences* consistently emphasize the importance of writing well as the most basic level: the sentences” (Kelly xiii). Writing assignments typically center on 100-150 word prose that mimics the larger writing process of an essay, including an opening thesis sentence, the main idea sentence, and a supporting concluding sentence.

Ultimately, basic writing textbooks inadvertently promote basic writing students as cognitively incapable of producing academic prose. Many of the included activities and design choices used in in the example books are not applied in traditional composition textbooks. Understandably, it would make sense to include these additions to a basic writing textbook because students do struggle with writing. However, these

design choices are predicated on old-school assumptions of academic writing and developmental students. Furthermore, as these textbooks are authoritative and thus may solidify generally good practices of academic writing as merely a set of hard-and-fast rules. Mainly, student writing needs to be clear free of all grammatical issues in order to be deemed “good writing.” Such lesson would be wasted on a number of students placed within remedial courses like, for instance, a non-traditional student who struggled with placement exam but who has a strong work ethic and study skills or the ESL 1.5 student who has excelled in their other academic courses but has difficulty producing English syntax.

Returning to the identification of students as foreign others within academia, basic writing textbooks often included authoritarian voice when instructing the outsider basic writing student. In “Commodifying Writing: Handbook Simplicity versus Scholarly Complexity” Samantha Looker argues that composition instructional texts often present the complexities and nuances of academic writing in a simplified manner. They are encouraged to appropriate the values of writing conventions of the academia to be accepted. Similarly to the arguments made in David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University,” students lack the familiarity of the writing conventions valued in higher education. As such, these should be “invited” to learn proper writing within remedial courses. Specifically, Looker takes umbrage with textbooks and handbooks that are presented as authoritative but provide students little to no opportunity to question or challenge the information provided: “These books paint a picture of cohesive academic community with shared standards and expectations. This cohesion is implied throughout handbooks by statements that tell students what to do in college writing or what an

academic audience to expect” (134-5). Although Looker work relates to handbooks, these issues are pertinent in basic writing textbooks as well. Basic writing textbooks present writing strategies as absolute rules that students must follow. Furthermore, basic writing textbooks value grammatical correctness as a condition to student entry into academia.

Consequently, conversations concerning the complexity of writing (audience awareness, genre conventions) are often simplified into a collection of rudimentary rules. For example, in the fourth edition of *Focus on Writing: Paragraphs and Essays*, Laurie G Kirsznner and Stephen R. Mandell describe the thesis statement as an explicit, singular statement appearing at the end of the introduction. The goal of the thesis statement should, at its core, advance the argument of the paper: “A thesis statement: a singular sentence that expresses the main idea that you will discuss in the rest of [...] the essay” (187). Kirsznner and Mandell argue that a thesis statement must make “a point about a topic, expressing the writer’s opinion or unique view of the topic.” Students are encouraged to avoid non-functioning thesis patterns, including announcing (“in this essay, I will discuss older students going back to school” and statement of facts (“Many older students are returning to school”) (188). Moreover, Kirsznner and Mandell suggest students avoid using transition phrases such as “in my opinion” and “I think” in the thesis statement.

Similarly, Chris Juzwiak makes similar statements about the thesis statement in *Touchstones: A Guided Approach to Writing Paragraphs and Essays*. A thesis should “clearly, directly, and powerfully [state the idea of the essay] as possible in one complete sentence. [Moreover, the thesis should] identify the topic, and express [a] particular idea, a point of view, or feeling about the topic” (200-1). Students are encouraged to not only

avoid announcements thesis statements but also to avoid asking questions as part of the thesis statement for fear that: this might make your original point or opinion about the topic unclear” (203). On its surface, the thesis statement discussions found in both *Touchstones* and *Focus on Writing* are not incorrect. A thesis statement should advance the argument. Similarly, a thesis statement should center on the main argument of the text. Both texts do not provide students with any meaningful discussion why a thesis statement should adhere to these rules. This is a missed opportunity to explore how a thesis statement functions in tangent with the needs of the audience, the constraints of the genre, and the conventions associated with essay writing—a conversation that would better empower students to make informed choices in their writing.

Consider Kirsznner and Mandell’s statement that students’ thesis statements should be an announcement (“in this essay, I will discuss older students going back to school”) and statement of facts (“Many older students are returning to school”). Their criticisms are grounded in stylistic conventions—they are not official rules. For instance, the thesis, “I will discuss older students going back to school,” functions as a legitimate sentence if paired with an introduction that overviews various reasons why older students seek out an education. Similarly, Juzwiak’s avoidance of thesis statements as questions could also be interpreted a stylistic choice, rather than a rule of writing. For instance, a question stated as a thesis statement (“Do pets help nursing home residents”) could serve as a legitimate thesis statement as well as the text itself attempts to answer the question in some capacity. The question here thus serves as a rhetorical mechanism to keep the readers focus on the main purpose of the text (specifically, to explore the effectiveness of pets as a form of therapy for the elderly). It is toward the end of the text where the author (in



good faith) shows support that answers the research question as well as makes clear their position.

Similarly, there is a conflict of voices within textbooks. In their attempt to make academic writing accessible and invite students to learn academic conventions of writing, the nature of how the textbook informs students about writing often belays their objective. The audience is the intended audience for these textbooks as they often rely on complex language often reserved for instructors and not novice writers on a conflict.

Basic writing textbooks included a grammar rules handbook at the end of their texts. Many times, the language used in discussing these rules are often in conflict with the simple language used in the earlier sections. The information presented in these sections is not accessible to students in any meaningful manner. For example, the language used to discuss these rules is often technical and highly specialized terminology to discuss writing. This also includes that amount the text spaced devoted to grammar instructions. Often, the grammar handbook takes up a 3rd of the textbook pages. For instance, *Writing First* includes a 245-page grammar section in its 644-pages. Similarly, *Real Writing*, a 532-page textbook, contains 209 pages devoted solely to grammar.

The goal of the previous chapter was to explore how basic writing techniques often appropriate assumptions of basic writing students and their abilities to produce text. Specifically, textbooks often identify students are either being deficient or struggling with processing information that would help aid in the writing. Furthermore, basic writing textbooks also identify students as lacking maturity and comments and skills typically associated with traditional college students; for example, assigning class activities that that appear little to do with writing instruction. This is problematic as textbooks often

serving authoritarian voice. Information included as part of text basic writing textbooks are interpreted as absolutes with little to no discursive space to challenge the information provided. Therefore, many general best practices of academic writing become stagnant and unyielding rules (i.e., A thesis statement must be only one sentence long). This problem further exacerbated by the competing duality of voices within the traditional basic writing textbooks. The textbook attempts to present grammatical rules and writing conventions in an easy to understand manner. However, this attempt is often in conflict with the goals of a reference materials included in a text; for instance, the inclusion of grammar handbooks (that typically take up a third of a textbook). This is understandable that a remedial writing course should slowly transition students from constructing grammatically sound sentences to understanding why such sentences are necessary. Specifically, basic writing textbooks assume that there is a shared similarity between a textbook and handbook. Handbooks are typically reference materials that students can easily and quickly look up information. However, this may be lost on students reading this text. They may assume that this reference material is part of the larger textbook. The inclusion of handbooks as part of base writing textbooks may perpetuate prescriptive models of writing instruction, particularly when one considers that many basic writing textbooks contain copious grammar activities and exercises.

This also becomes problematic when considering the cost of these textbooks as well as the cost of a basic writing course. For instance, basic writing textbooks are expensive (many textbooks costing upwards of \$100). Students are required to purchase them when enrolling in a remedial writing course, which like textbooks are expensive and may not count towards official college credit. Economically, the students are thus

penalized for their inability to write appropriate academic text. Ultimately, both the class and the textbook become punitive.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The goal of the previous chapter was to explore how basic writing techniques often appropriate assumptions of basic writing students and their abilities to produce text. However, textbooks often fall short of their original goals of preparing students for academic writing, as they contain a number of assumptions of what basic writers need to become better writers. For composition pedagogy, basic writing instruction is wrought with a number of issues that need more exploration. These textbooks are often founded on a very romanticized view of writing instruction, a desire to return to a simpler time where students were excellent writers who adhered to writing conventions. For many, there is an assumption that education (such as writing) is static and that writing instruction is static. The pursuit of “good” writing is just. Writing is one of the modes of displaying intelligence. Society needs highly literate citizens to strengthen American commerce (illiterate students cannot work) and democracy (students cannot engage in the democratic process). Deviant language practices do not promote unity. The writing that holds intrinsic value is that of those in positions of authority. It is the failure on the part of the society if they are unable to write correctly and “integrate” the ideals of society.

The university (and its instructors) has shucked their responsibilities to students (and society) by not adequately teaching students proper writing. These students are “forsaken” and are “regarded as the pathology of the healthy society, which must, therefore, adjust these [...] folks to its own patterns by changing their mentality (Sheils

74). Consider, this belief is “hitched” to writing conventions that are socially constructed. Rules of writing often shift and transform in response to those who command authority. Under this construct, being “literate” is about a highly specialized type of literacy (Western academic prose). This represents what assumes regarding the “myth of literacy.”

At center of this conversation is the persistent “myth” regarding literacy that shape cultural expectations of writing as well as inform educational policies centered on composition, particularly educational initiatives that are targeted at developing writers. When examining the various arguments on what seems to be the function and purpose of literacy, there exist conflicting arguments of what actually defines literacy-- arguments grounded on common assumptions as to the purpose and function of language. Within discussions of rhetoric and composition, there is an acceptance of these differences, and much of the history of rhetoric is grounded in centuries-long shifts within the canon of rhetoric. Such viewpoint becomes problematic as literacy and the basic writer become a symbolic scapegoat for all cultural and social ills, including racial and economic inequality. For example, we might return here to Graff’s insistence that the lack of educational focus on grammar as indication of potential economic turmoil: “With revealing contradiction, levels of literacy abilities serve as simultaneously as symptoms and symbols, causes and consequences” (“Literacy, Myths, and Legacies: Lessons of from the History of Literacy” 13). Such viewpoints assume that there exists a “condition of civilization” associated with the function and purpose of literacy and language. However, such thinking reduces language to a simple act that is inherently “natural,”

“essential,” and “universal.” Such viewpoints argue that all individuals are potentially born with the same aptitude for writing and speaking.

The issue regarding composition studies is that it is housed within the university that still adheres to antiquated ways of looking at education can be traced back to Plato and, specifically, Plato’s rhetoric concentrates on the pursuit of truth (*Phaedrus* 91, Line 248c-e). He argues that only the philosopher can know the ideal as they have developed the mental faculties to ascertain truth through the discipline of observation and dialectic exchange as means of judging “what is true” and what is not (*Phaedrus* 132, line 277c). Through such process, Platonic rhetoric argues that the philosopher is moral righteousness, as one who has seen the ideal Truth he is obligated to share such truth with others. Thus, in the pursuit of the truth, the philosophy becomes morally good. However, sophistic rhetoric is akin to “trickery” as it creates a discourse that appears to be the result of philosophical truth but, in reality, are various techniques that attempt to persuade. Such trickery, Plato warns, is dangerous as sophistry does not concern itself with the Truth, and as such is not “good” (*Gorgias* 28-30).

Classical rhetoric, particularly Quintilian’s philosophy of rhetoric as the “good man speaking well,” shapes contemporary education, specifically academic writing. J.J. Murphy writes in his introduction to *Quintilian on the Teaching of Speaking and Writing*, “Rhetoric, or the theory of effective communication, is for Quintilian merely the tool of the broadly educated citizen who is capable of analysis, reflection, and the power action in public affairs” (xxvii).

Similarly, Lanham argues that much of Quintilian's discussion regarding morality within rhetoric has caused some problems within the Western education. Lanham

suggests that academia has not challenged the legitimacy of the Q question or explored its implications on how it shapes curriculum: “To design a humanities curriculum (or even, as more often do, to decline or design one), you must know how to get from theory of reading and writing to a curriculum, and that requires having a theory of reading and writing in the first place” (Lanham 156). Scholars Jami Carlacio and Alice Gillam are that Classical rhetoric and impartial Quintilian philosophy shape contemporary education of academic writing since there seems to be also a continuation of the academic “elite” in education for the public good: “In a curriculum aimed at preparing ethical citizens for the twenty-first century, we can hardly avoid the Q question” (159). This is particularly true as Lanham argues that foundation of higher education is founded on an antiquated educational structure grounded in Ramus divisions of knowledge. Knowledge is not interpolated as a “seamless thread of learning,” divided into various branches of education with “rhetoric and grammar thus becoming cosmetic arts, and speech—and of course writing—along with them. Reason breaks free of speech and takes on a Platonic self-standing freedom” (158).

Within specialization, there seems to be no room for atypical writing or knowledge in the teaching of composition. Inherent within the Quintilian’s model of education is the identification of students as deficient thinkers. The instructor is the all-knowing-voice of academic writing, and students, by comparison, have major deficiencies in their thinking, their textual production, and their ways of producing atypical text. Similarly, cultural perceptions of writing are likewise shaped by the “myth of literacy” in which poor academic writing is an extension of students’ moral failing. It is the goal of the writer to produce text that is clear and concise—free of any textual

distractions that may impede the reader's understanding of the writing's work. Because of this, the writer must justly and dutifully maintain a persona that actively avoids confusion and misinterpretation of their thoughts and/or ideas. The responsibility of communicating morally falls on the student (work is deviant) or society to correct the issue. Effective communication is ultimately a negotiation between one's own text and the shared values of the audience.

Failure to acknowledge this relationship between morality and clarity (through either ignorance or incompetence) is thus problematic. This conflicts with the goal of literacy often play a role in the design and construction of basic writing textbooks and often perpetuate assumptions of student writing as being the responsibility of the student (and not higher education). Moreover, these conversations perpetuate deficient frameworks of education. In this dissertation, I challenge this assumption or pedagogy that avoids engaging student on their strengths, rather than their weaknesses. We should, as William Jones notes in "Basic Writing: Pushing Against Racism," push back against pedagogy that limits student writing issues as a collection of errors, instead; we should question; therefore, any pedagogy that may betray an acceptance of a deficit model of minority student academic functioning, understanding that the pedagogies we choose reflect the evaluations we make of students and the understanding we have of their possibilities as learners" (Jones 88).

For instance, with the current state of public education in the United States there is a glut of adjunct labor who will be teaching many of these courses. It is many times easy to hire an individual who is familiar with writing in general and may have a firm understanding of how to communicate using rhetoric; however, there is not a lot of



thought or time spent in cultivating or finding instructors who specifically can teach basic writing. Moreover, how often are instructors unfamiliar with the history of basic writing and are unaware of the social, cultural, political, and moral conversations surrounding teaching and labeling basic writers? What happens to instructors who are handed a textbook by the department to teach composition and it has embedded within certain viewpoints about basic writers that are communicated to students. This also very important because the majority of basic writing students may not fit “traditional definitions” university students.

Negative frameworks of basic writing, however, do not consider how literacy is a multi-faceted and dynamic process, an amalgamation of one’s learning proclivities, home literacies, social pressures, or neurodiversity. Such views do not account for how one acquires literacy or as to how is a form of privilege and access. For students, this issue stems further than just their lack of appropriating academic discourse. We must also consider other competing factors that may affect the perceptions of the basic writers. While much of composition scholarship provides some insight to the upward struggle these students face when entering the university (including Bartholomae and Shaughnessy) here, too, we must also consider the structure of university education as another major component of the problem, mainly Western thought and its focus on limited/linear thinking and specialized knowledge. If the goal is to more effectively reach students, writing instruction must reevaluate this power dynamic in the hope of creating a more opportune educational environment where students can learn valuable skill sets needed for academic writing.

In “Basic Writing: In Search of a New Map,” Susan Naomi Bernstein argues that there needs to be a more in-depth exploration about the goal in the focus of remedial education. Specifically, she challenges the term remedial as outdated and does not adequately assess student writing. For instance, assessment testing and other mechanisms in order to identify place students in remedial courses cannot access the various support systems afforded by “privileged” students as “the bureaucratic systems barriers that a new college student must negotiate, or the damage done by marking Basic Writing courses a ‘remediation’ and misidentifying students and their teachers ‘as failure’” (68). Ultimately, Susan Bernstein argues a part of this interpretation of basic writing students as “failures” stems from the negative framework that used to articulate basic writing issues. As a pedagogy, students are defined as basic writers as well as basic writing courses are typically defined by “what is not”; for instance, “Basic Writing is not grammatically correct [...] does not have a thesis [...] is not complex [and] is not College Writing” (61).

It is here that Susan Bernstein encourages us to flip this deficit frame. While identifying students based on their weaknesses may appear to be beneficial to teaching writing, it does little to foster the various individual strengths the basic writers bring to the classroom. Specifically, basic writing pedagogy should serve to identify the positive strains that basic writing pedagogy and students bring to the field of composition. As it may provide unique pathways to better assist students. Susan Bernstein asked us to consider exploring basic writing as a discursive space to explore that allows for “critical engagement” with basic writers; for instance “Basic Writing creates a space—physical and/or virtual—physical/or virtual—for students to develop as writers. Basic writing

provides opportunities for students to discover the kinds writing they will encourage throughout college in the workplace. Basic Writing offers time to piratic writing intensively and extensively.” There is value in Bernstein’s argument. There is value in finding pedagogy and basic writing curriculum should be anchored in exploring student writing issues from work of difference in uniqueness and celebrate how student unique writing experiences can help inform their appropriation of academic writing conventions.

Specifically, as Bernstein states in her article, we need a new “map” to help navigate our conversations a basic writing instruction--new ways of talking and engaging with students. Furthermore, we must go back and revise the narratives used in describing the basic writing experience. We must not be “silent,” as Bernstein suggests, and move away from pedagogy and conversations that frame basic writers in a negative light. Moreover, we must acknowledge how mechanisms of academic assessment and placement exams are not absolute measures of writing ability, “This silence and the absence of embodied lives is what we risk when we re-inscribe institutional practices of placement and assessment that were not always natural or normal” (68). Rather, composition pedagogy should attempt to reframe the basic writing experience, specifically isolating their strengths as opposed to their weaknesses. For this to occur, we need a new “map” that provides pathways that enact these changes; we must “document our own search for a new map, whether that means writing with students, or contributing to scholarly discourse, or initiating or adding to discussion in our own institutional and other communities” (68).

There is value in reframing our conversations and viewpoints of basic writing students. We should celebrate the strength that basic writers as the foundation of new

pedagogy (“maps”), forging new educational opportunities for them. For instance, sociology can provide an alternative lens in order to explore the basic writing experience. Specifically, asset-based frameworks of success that can serve as an invaluable tool in addressing student success within the classroom. ABS scholarship attempts to disrupt deficit models of education. Specifically, deficit models of education attempt to place the locus of issues on the students and do not acknowledge to interconnected webs of agency, motivation, and cultural as well as community narratives function as pillars of support for students seeking an education. The shift of focusing on student success should provide educators a better understanding of students previous experiences shape their ability to perform within the classroom and avoids the overgeneralization of specific minority demographics within higher education. For instance, in “A Framework for Understanding Latino/a Cultural Wealth,” researchers Vijay Kanagala, Laura Rendon, and Amury Nora researched minority Latino students in their expenses of minority students attending the University of Texas at San Antonio. As part of their study, they argue that minority students often must navigate complex discursive spaces (i.e., home community, cultural communities, academia) as well as external conflicts (i.e., financial, child rearing) when attending college (18). Often, those who are successful relied upon a network of resources.

In regards of basic writing pedagogy, this research this provides a few avenues to explore new ways of constructing basic writing pedagogy that instills in students a sense of agency accomplishment in their abilities. For instance, students’ “aspirational wealth” would include assignments that incorporate or draw from positive and uplifting narratives based on their successes in the classroom. These narratives are important and matter:

“Their aspirations were often shaped by validating agents (e.g., parents, siblings, grandparents) who shared testimonies/life stories about overcoming adversity and who provided support and consents/sage advice (18).

Similarly, students rely on “navigational wealth” and “pluriversal wealth,” that instructors should recognize. This awareness suggests that students are often between worlds and are constantly attempting to locate and relocate themselves into these new discursive communities (typically on a daily basis). Students navigate these different discursive spaces, and we must be aware of the required “mental script[s] and language code[s] [valued within these discursive spaces], as well as [modifying their] intellectual and behavioral conventions” of a specific community (e.g., home, school) (18).

Returning to conversations about basic writing, an assignment could ask students to explore the social and cultural contexts that define Western academic discourse (including reliance on adhering to grammatical conventions of writing) and discuss their exposure and experiences with various discourses. Within such an assignment, students could explore the value of being multi-literate and able to navigate between acronym discourses in their home discourses. For instance, such an assignment might ask students to explore how a specific term works within their home community as well as encourage students to explore the complexities in shifting between multiple discursive spaces that they simultaneously exist in. In the examples provided above, students could explore writing as a form of discursive choices made to properly communicate with others. Rather than exploring writing as a series of stylistic choices apart from the content in critical thinking associated with academic writing, students should be encouraged to think and justify the rhetorical choices that they bring forth within their writing.

Furthermore, researchers argue that students also rely on “perseverant wealth,” or the ability to stay motivated and persevere in spite of hardships. The students are instilled with an unwavering belief that they can succeed through by dedicating themselves to school and sacrifice: “[These] students refuse to quit, they also recognize and embrace a price that they made going to college. Admirably, students were able to overcome difficult challenges such as being undocumented, lacking role models and mentors in their community, experiencing poverty, and attending poorly resourced schools” (19). “Perseverant wealth” can serve as a valuable tool in teaching writing strategies to basic writers. For instance, instructors can create assignments that challenge students to explore beyond their comfort zones as academic writers and provide a safe space where students feel encouraged to tackle difficult subjects as well as “experiment” with new or different writing conventions. An example of this can be demonstrated in a writing assignment asking students to experiment with writing an introduction out of the traditional organization scheme offered by basic writing textbooks (i.e., introduction typically has a lead-in, background article reference, and a thesis statement, or a thesis statement must only be one sentence long). Afterwards, students could explore if the newly written introduction that appears to better assist the reader’s understanding of the text when compared to a more traditional introduction. Similarly, students could practice writing prose for different audiences and explore which version seems to function best. In addition to these changes, instructors could encourage students to revise and edit their work without experiencing academic penalty. Ultimately, the goal should encourage students to not become paralyzed with fear of their own writing issues but to promote explorative spirit when drafting academic text.

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