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The Pedagogical Pitfalls of Literature in College Composition and Teacher Education: A
Foundational Analysis

During the last half century, the role of English has evolved greatly in the realm of higher education. In the mid-1900s, English scholarship in rhetoric and composition began to emerge, grounding a discipline wholly separate from English literature. However, literature is viewed as integral to teaching composition on a foundational level. In middle and high school, most students are introduced to English class by means of literature, chiefly in the form of the classics, like *Macbeth* and *Moby Dick*, or perhaps *The Great Gatsby*. Just as every student has their favorite subject, every student has a least favorite—and countless students decry their English classes, especially when faced with nuanced and difficult-to-read literary texts. Every English teacher has been met with the famed question, “Why do we have to read this?”; as someone who thought they hated English in high school and as a college freshman, I can identify with these frustrated students.

When I decided to pursue a master’s degree in rhetoric and composition in hopes of teaching the subject as a career, I began to think again about the students who hate English and those who struggle as writers. As they embark on their chosen career paths and majors, today’s college students face various types of writing in their disciplines, and oftentimes they are required to take few—if any—courses on writing after freshman composition. When students reach higher-level classes related to their fields of study, they often struggle to produce effective

but basic pieces of writing that are commonplace in their fields. Other times, students find themselves with no idea where to begin when they are faced with basic college writing assignments, such as character analyses for their literature surveys or research papers for their psychology classes. For years, English literature has served as a foundational tenet for collegiate writing courses, and while many claim that reading makes better writers, I am not so easily convinced. However, I am not alone in my skepticism of the purpose of literary instruction in the rhetoric and composition field.

Today, countless student writers struggle to write a measly thesis statement, likely because a Norton anthology cannot teach them how to write one. Perhaps it is time for higher education to pivot from literature-based first-year composition (FYC) curricula and toward a more pragmatic, career-oriented form of FYC instruction, while allowing room for a modernization of literary instruction, to much traditionalist and classicist dismay. After decades of literature existing at the core of college English instruction, the American higher education system must evolve to better prepare the modern college student to enter the workforce with a repertoire of writing skills that they can leverage into any chosen discipline or career. This undertaking is one that cannot be solved by a simple cry for change, and change must begin not in high school English classrooms or in Congress, but in the English departments themselves.

The fact that increasing numbers of college freshman struggle to produce functional academic writing is not the only issue at the forefront of discourse among English scholars. Some academics complain that today's students who balk at the assignment of lengthy literary readings are lazy and distracted by the instant gratification of digital media (Bassnett 204-5), while others believe that high schools ought to better prepare students for college and mold them into "basic writers" in order to tackle collegiate writing (Buell 95-97). However, other English

academics are focused on more pedagogical matters, such as what content belongs in freshman composition, what content belongs in undergraduate literature classes, who should be teaching freshman composition, and who should be teaching the literature surveys. At the heart of these conversations is a central question: how are English teachers supposed to reach a generation of digital natives who are believed to be lazy, disengaged, and deficient writers? Moreover, students are not the only ones at an impasse when it comes to being engaged with first-year composition and writing classes in general. On both a collegiate and high school level, many English teachers are as disengaged with their courses as their students are (Major). Given all of these problems that I have identified, there is but one root cause, which I will address in this essay: English departments and their stronghold on literary theory.

For decades, literature has dominated English scholarship as one of the most dignified of the disciplines, while rhetoric and composition is adolescent as a discipline, giving literature heavy precedence in English classes nationwide. Although study of English literature observes texts that are anywhere from hundreds to thousands of years old, study of English literature itself only dates back about a hundred years. On the other hand, scholarship on rhetoric dates back thousands of years to Aristotle's famed treatise, the *Rhetoric*. As it turns out, literature instruction moved to the forefront of English instruction in the 20th century out of the convenience afforded by reading texts instead of writing them, leaving professors with far fewer essays to grade than they would have had they taught writing exclusively (Wright). This hierarchy of disciplinary prestige in English departments nationwide has resulted in a collective attitude that views teaching writing as a job for the "worker bee" adjuncts and graduate instructors, leaving the literature surveys to the esteemed professionals and PhDs (Major). Virtually every institution of higher education in the country requires at least one to two

foundational composition classes (Major), so one would think it more practical for universities to place only their most effective English composition specialists in charge of students' communicative skills rather than a survey of post-Antebellum American literature.

It sounds logical that having professors of rhetoric and composition teach freshman composition would yield stronger writers, but finding effective composition professors often proves more difficult and expensive than merely plucking a few graduate TAs and adjunct instructors to sow the seeds of FYC (Major). Due to literature's prestige in the field of English, training and finding proper teachers of writing is difficult in itself. Many contemporary English programs offer graduate English degrees that focus on rhetoric and composition, but a majority of these programs tends to "marginalize writing in favor of instruction on the teaching of literature" (Wright). This imbalance of literature over composition instruction is illustrated by undergraduate and graduate English education programs nationwide, where many education majors and prospective English teachers take an array of literature courses but few courses on writing and rhetoric. In fact, my own undergraduate English required me to complete seven literature courses and two grammar courses, but only three writing courses. Wright highlights an example of this too-common conundrum:

...In the State University of New York system, SUNY Fredonia's secondary English education training program makes its graduate English education students take three of four core courses in literature. Students there must choose an additional 27 credit hours, and the only choice not in literature is a course that emphasizes not writing but grammar. Students only take one course in writing pedagogy.

Although Wright primarily focuses on high school English teacher education, high school English establishes the foundation that FYC aims to build upon, so it is integral that high school

English teachers have some understanding of rhetorical concepts and composition theory to prepare students for the writing they will face in freshman composition. Wright's argument supports this notion as she states, "If teachers themselves do not know about the importance of understanding rhetorical situations as a part of writing, [their] students will be less likely to become effective writers" (Wright). Nevertheless, at the core of the issue, not only are freshmen underserved by their FYC classes as a result of being taught by academics who would rather be teaching more sacred literature courses, but English undergraduate and graduate students are also disadvantaged by the lack of focus on rhetoric and composition in their own degree programs. This imbalance between literature and composition in higher education fails to prepare both freshmen for disciplinary and workplace writing and English majors who want to teach or use rhetoric and composition in some capacity. Not only will undergraduates not know how to write the research papers, lab reports, and the statistical analyses dictated by their disciplines, but English undergraduates will enter the workforce want of any theory of rhetoric and composition that they can impart to future writers or even leverage into their own careers as writers.

Given the hierarchy of the English disciplines, literature's prestige has undoubtedly filtered into first year composition classes, where students are met with the drudgery of reading literary texts and writing essays about them. Countless freshman composition classes have followed this model, perpetuating a cycle lasting for decades. One of the loudest voices in this corner of English discourse is Erika Lindemann, who has famously argued against literary theory in FYC. In a 1993 article, Lindemann critiques literary instruction in freshman composition as writing-based courses should teach students how to produce texts and respond to others, not just consume them (Lindemann 313). Lindemann also claims that literature-based instruction often provides the teacher's perspective on texts with little or no input from students (313-14), likely

because these students are merely trying to understand the text itself (Shaufele 148). Moreover, studying literature serves little purpose in teaching style to basic writers because these writers do not aim to produce literature in their freshman composition classes (Lindemann 314).

Oftentimes, students who write literary essays have had little contact with the genre of literature about which they are writing, while “most of the writing they do is first-try writing in a genre, and then they move right on to another without a chance to try again” (Whitney 525). Writing about literature is impractical for first year composition—which is a practical course above all else—and I am willing to wager that many students would agree with me in that writing about literature should happen in an actual literature class. Moreover, it is hard to justify the usefulness of a character analysis of *There Will Be Blood* when students will face writing assignments in their upper-level courses that will require skills they should have developed in their lower-level English courses.

Although much debate has circulated around literature’s place in the composition class for the last couple decades, there are still plenty of viable modes of English instruction that warrant the use of literary texts. For centuries, literature has served as a primary source of material for instruction in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL). In fact, studying the literature of a target language can assist learners in understanding not only the language, but the culture associated with it. However, in the mid-20th century literature began to disappear from EFL/ESL curricula due to the belief that some literary language was outdated and the idea that speech precluded writing as a form of language acquisition. Despite the lack of scholarship on literature’s role in language instruction, a 2019 study by Saedpanah and Dastgoshadeh concluded that the use of literary texts in EFL/ESL instruction is more effective in helping language learners identify and practice various lexical

patterns than instruction without any literary context (Saedpanah and Dastgoshadeh). Although this essay does not focus on foreign language instruction, literature's role in language acquisition and lexical development is undeniable and may even shed some light on the fact that literature can serve various purposes for those not dedicated to traditional English academics.

While I have discussed at length the places where literature does not serve a purpose, it is important to acknowledge that literature is still a keystone subject in secondary and postsecondary study. Having said that, the scholars who so badly want to teach literature must make themselves comfortable in the age of technology, where multimodality influences every form of media—including literature—and the majority of students are extremely digitally literate. As a student of rhetoric and composition, I have witnessed multimodality filter into my composition studies over time, but the charge for a multimodal approach has met with less enthusiasm from literature scholars. Unfortunately, the core knowledge and beliefs of the humanities do not progress as quickly as the realm of the sciences, resulting in countless “humanities departments...[remaining] largely traditional and in some cases even outdated in content development and approaches for teaching and learning” (Perry 430). In “Literature for the Twenty-First Century,” Perry identifies multiple ways for literature teachers to practice multimodal teaching strategies outside that of the essay to get the digital native student of the 21st century to engage with literary texts. In the article, Perry's central claim is that multimodal instruction can foster the development of real-world soft skills through the lens of a literature class (429), and her study offers multiple methods of multimodal exploration of classical texts like *King Lear* and *Macbeth* (437). It is important to note here that although Perry's study took place at The National University of Malaysia, it provides an interesting perspective on ways to modernize and keep students engaged with literary study. Unfortunately, to solve the issue of

students will require a transition from textbook-and-chalkboard English departments to podcast-and-blog-posting English departments across institutions nationwide. It is a grand undertaking, and it can only begin once the academe acknowledges that although this digital age might present some uncomfortable territory for the most tenured and esteemed professors, what is even more uncomfortable is a generation of college graduates who can hardly write a coherent email.

Considering the discourse surrounding FYC curricula and literature's purpose within it is not a new topic in the field, it is necessary to acknowledge some of the efforts and methods that have been introduced to restructure freshman composition with a more pragmatic approach. Some have theorized that before educators can begin to improve the written communication skills of their students, English programs ought to increase the rigor of training for both undergraduate English education majors and graduate English students who want to write and teach in some professional capacity (Wright). Auten argues that programs that do not offer graduate degrees in rhetoric and composition should offer foundational courses on the theory of composition and teaching writing to facilitate the "student-to-teacher transformation" (Auten 97) and "bridge the divide between students in literary studies and creative writing and [the]...field of composition studies" (96). With that said, it would seem logical and feasible to propose that undergraduate English education programs also adopt some kind course grounded in composition studies to equip secondary educators to teach writing as well. If educators and field experts expect college students and graduates to produce "good" writing in their careers, then a good-faith attempt to overhaul the way college students learn to write must begin at the source of their instruction.

Not only could English undergraduate and graduate programs benefit from some curriculum-based changes, but first-year composition programs would also benefit from a shift in

course design. Although many English departments are often required to follow core curricula established by their respective state university systems, course design is often left to the instructor's discretion. Instructors must pivot their FYC course designs to more pragmatics-based curricula to both redefine the notion of the basic writer and account for their students' academic and linguistic needs as basic writers. Whitney describes FYC in the context of genres that students face in high school English and first year composition, saying that most of the writing they do is routine writing in genres they will likely not encounter outside the classroom, like the timed essay test or the five-paragraph essay. With that in mind, Whitney advocates for teaching students how to write "in a range of genres in the way that genres are actually learned in the world outside school—through authentic exposure and immersion—rather than writing...in contrived circumstances (Whitney 525). By prioritizing the kinds of writing that students will encounter in their future academic endeavors and beyond, educators can "encourage flexible, aware writers who can discern for themselves the conventions of new genres" (527). Considering the real-world applications of writing that should be fostered by FYC, the argument that literature does not necessarily demand a role in FYC does not sound as jarring as some scholars might think. While literature certainly has its place in English education, perhaps reading texts to write about them only holds so much value beyond the classroom.

On the other hand, however, some critics believe the shortcomings of freshman composition may be a result of a disciplinary failure at defining the "basic writer." Unfortunately, when graduate and adjunct instructors enter the FYC classroom, the graduate programs from which the instructors come often do not offer a course focuses on what Buell terms "Basic Writing theory," which results in the following:

...Graduate students may come into such courses seeking to “fix” the grammar and structure of basic writers, adhering to a commonly held view that basic writers should be taught to eliminate surface grammatical errors from sentences before moving to paragraphs, which also follow circumscribed forms. (Buell 92)

In other words, FYC instructors without a theoretical and pedagogical understanding of basic writing as a process tend to focus on things like grammar and punctuation in their evaluations of student writing, which places focus on sentence-level revision and prevents students to focus on content-oriented matters. This practice, in turn, motivates students to prioritize the “flow” of their writing as they try to “make it sound right,” when the more important matter is if their writing reflects an honest effort toward critical and analytical thinking. Furthermore, these basic writers may begin to question whether they belong in higher education because of “institutional practices, and even teacher perceptions” of the way they think, speak, and write (93). This notion underscores the need for institutions not only to acknowledge the cultural, social, and linguistic contexts from which basic writers emerge, but also to invest in training for the instructors who are tasked with teaching writing to an increasingly diverse student body (93). Nevertheless, the issue of struggling FYC students and struggling FYC instructors cannot be solely attributed to the presence of literary texts in the freshman composition class; English departments in higher education institutions across the country desperately need a pedagogical and curricular overhaul. Only then will they be able to equip the next generation of English teachers, English graduates, and college graduates with the written communication skills demanded by a globalized, digitized society.

Over the last three generations, the number of young adults pursuing post-secondary education has increased greatly, and with the rise of the digital age and the internet, writing in

academia has taken on a vastly different role than that of the 20th century. Although many think of writing as something to be left to the authors and poets, in today's digital age everyone is a writer, and rhetoric and composition influence communication in countless ways. With the collegiate student body larger than ever, higher education is responsible for shaping an entire generation of writers—many of whom either claim to hate English class or think themselves to be “bad” writers, or both, which prompts the question as to whether the cycle of reading and writing about literary texts holds as much value to FYC as it might have a half century ago.

This essay does not aim to discount literature or literary instruction, especially in that as an English student, I have always been inspired by the academic setting and awed by the sacrament of literary study. Some scholars falling upon traditionalist and classicist mindsets will undoubtedly continue to defend literary theory, alluding to the aesthetic experience of consuming literature and the notion that literature helps to deepen one's understanding of the world and reality. These are points that I simply cannot denounce because I do, in fact, agree with them. However, when students begin to inquire about what the intended purpose of a reading is—especially when they have to digest sometimes long, complex pieces in short amounts of time—it is simply not enough to tell them that the reading will make them smarter, or a better writer, or that it will help them “later in life.”

As previously stated, freshman composition is a practical foundational course, and students must be motivated by the pragmatics that are afforded to them by the course material, not by abstract promises of future enlightenment. With that said, the modern workforce demands that college graduates possess an array of communicative abilities, including an effective command and understanding of the disciplinary conventions of written English. Meanwhile, the current climate of higher education fails to acknowledge the needs of a continuously growing

and diversifying collegiate student body while parents, teachers, and employers question whether high school English and college composition classes are actually equipping students with tools to succeed. The answer to the question of placing blame is not on the teacher, or even the student—for they do not know what they do not know—but perhaps the foundation upon which higher education itself rests.

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