# How the “Student Writer” is Constructed in First-Year College Composition: Evidence from the Composition Studies Literature, an Instructor Survey, and Textbooks

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**Abstract**

In this study, I explore several ways in which literature in the field of composition and composition instructors have constructed students for the purpose of better understanding the "why" behind course design, assignment design, and preconceptions of students. I investigate the history of the field of composition and attitudes toward students in the field first, noting the way that constructions of students have shifted from negative views of students lacking skills to positive views of students harnessing their writing abilities, along with some major approaches to teaching composition over the past few decades. I then present the results of a survey I conducted with first-year composition instructors about how they perceive their first-year composition students. This survey resulted in a better understanding of how student engagement and participation influence their preconceptions of students. Finally, I look at five textbooks that are commonly assigned for first-year composition courses. I examine the prefaces of these textbooks to determine how the editors view students, what the aims of the textbooks are, and what the editors have in mind for students. I then consider commonalities among the textbooks. Unlike other studies of first-year composition students, I focus on what trends in the field and expectations of students really say about them. My study provides a new approach to considering how instructors' views of students can impact how they teach and interact with students. My findings from my review of the literature, the instructor survey, and textbook analysis indicate that three main constructions of first-year composition students are students as active participants in the classroom, students as writing strategists, and students as writers for life. These findings are useful for instructors to consider when designing instruction and structuring methods of feedback and conferencing for students.

**Table of Contents**

Abstract iii

Chapter 1: Survey of Relevant Composition Literature 1

Chapter 2: Constructions of Students in Composition Literature 19

Chapter 3: Results of a Survey of First-Year Composition Instructors 27

Chapter 4: Constructions of Students in Composition Textbooks 48

Concluding Comments 60

Appendix 1 63

Works Cited 64

# Chapter 1: Survey of Relevant Composition Literature

My research question is, how does the field of composition construct the first-year composition student? My areas of inquiry consisted of looking at the composition studies' literature, an instructor survey, and a study of common textbooks used in first-year composition courses. Past studies have focused on the structure of first-year composition, how first-year writing students can be supported, and the best methods of composition instruction. I sought to look at the student side of composition education, but in a different way than longitudinal studies. By considering how students are constructed through various modes of inquiry, I have collected information that is valuable to the field in helping to show how constructions of students affect instructors' interactions with students and how instructors seek to support students' needs.

## Broader Historical Context

To understand the current work in the field of composition, it is useful to look at the field's history. The field of composition has its roots in ancient Greek rhetoric. Before our more modern, twentieth-century concept of "the writing process," Aristotle described "the composing process as a series of decisions and choices" (Flower and Hayes 365). These "decisions and choices" are still made by all writers—student and professional alike—today as they work through the writing process, though they may be rote, subconscious moves.

Composition's roots in rhetoric in the nineteenth century supply some insights about how the field has developed. In the introduction to *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*, Robert J. Connors defines "composition-rhetoric" as "a modern rhetoric, quickly changing and adapting, driven by potent social and

pedagogical needs, and running on the rails of an ever cheaper, ever quicker, and ever more competitive printing technology" (7). He notes that in U.S. higher education in the nineteenth century, oral rhetoric was prized, and written rhetoric was ignored (Connors 2). However, during that same period, the need for improved literacy skills created a "new rhetorical tradition" for individuals entering professional fields (Connors 4). Writing was taking center stage in the realm of rhetoric.

Thus, the focus of composition textbooks shifted to meet current expectations. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, textbooks contained lessons and practice for concepts such as mechanics and the main modes of discourse, during the same time that the field of composition lacked "scholarly professionals" (Connors 86, 100). The "first composition readers" became available in the 1890s, offering instruction in argument, description, exposition, and narrative (Connors 87). Even so, the available books of the era did not always meet the needs of every instructor or course.

According to Connors, the 1930s "was the decade that saw the first widely based usage studies, the first serious work in error analysis, and a general reassessment of the concept of correctness in error analysis" (95). These changes spilled over into scholarly publications, as *English Journal* and *College English* both ran as separate publications, *College Composition and Communication* began, and textbooks were no longer the only source of inspiration for instructors (Connors 101). In the decades following World War II, "the research on writing and composition teaching...is a history of epistemological warfare, of progressive rhetorical and empirical research struggling with entrenched traditional pedagogy" (Connors 102). Numerous theories took root, prompting more discussion and a wider range of topics to be considered in the field.

The field of composition studies, as it is known today, dates back over half a century. *The Conference on College Composition and Communication* was founded in 1949, and a year later, *College Composition and Communication*'s initial issue was published (Smit 4). According to Smit, the field of composition studies officially began in 1963 (2). In the years since its inception, the field has explored various ideas beyond the original purpose of addressing the basic ideas surrounding writing and writing instruction (Smit 2). With these changes came shifts in writing instruction and views of students in the field.

In David Smit's *The End of Composition Studies*, writer Doug Hesse describes the field of composition studies in the book's foreword as "that singularly American attempt to teach writing directly to all undergraduates, most commonly through one or two required first-year courses" (ix). The keyword in this statement is "directly;" it presents problems, especially since using a first-year composition course to teach students how to write in all contexts is less than ideal due to limited time, the vast number of existing writing concepts, situations, and tasks, the question of whether writing skills can be successfully transferred to other disciplines, and the numerous factors that affect how students write. These issues lend themselves to the discussion of how instructors construct their students, since numerous factors influence how students are perceived.

Just as instructors form constructions of students, students form ideas about their first-year composition courses. Students may not apply the coursework seriously to courses in other disciplines. In *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing* Instruction, Anne Beaufort notes that the atmosphere of a first-year composition classroom may make students think that the course content does not transfer

to other classes and disciplines (9). For instance, if required readings center on personal essays, rhetorical analyses of advertisements, and responses to opinion pieces, students may get the feeling that writing expectations emphasized in the composition class only apply to the composition class. They may think that composition is not what lab instructors or history professors want students to write, so they leave the lessons and practice behind them in the composition classroom when the semester ends, or, really, when each class session closes.

Beaufort goes on to note, "Given the way freshman writing is typically taught, graduates of these courses could easily think the standards for writing they have been given in freshman writing are universal. They are ill-prepared to examine, question, or understand the literacy standards of discourse communities they are encountering in other disciplines, in the work world, or in other social spheres they participate in" (11). This kind of perspective keeps first-year composition students from fully engaging in the work of writing since they are not taught to see composition as an integral part of their education. To them, composition is a stand-alone field that, once the course is completed, does not have bearing on coursework taken concurrently with first-year composition or on coursework later in their academic careers.

## Major Themes in Modern Composition Pedagogy

Teaching is considered an art, so many methods of instruction can be considered when designing a course. In my review of composition literature, I found certain themes to be prevalent over the past few decades. These themes, ranging from the role of students in course design to the ability to write in contexts outside of composition, highlight priorities in the field and preconceptions of students.

*Student-Centered Pedagogy*

Centering students and decentering instructors is one idea that has shaped composition pedagogy. When considering instructors' preconceptions of students, we can consider the ways that instructors teach. Solbrekke and Helstad studied how one student responded to one instructor's approach to teaching pedagogy (964). The researchers observed that the instructor's personable approach positively impacted the student's reaction to learning to write, which shows that instructors' approaches can affect students' reactions to learning course material (Solbrekke and Helstad 968-969). Likewise, Cedillo and Bratta argue that students need to be considered in course design (215-216). Critically reflective instructors consider their instructional methods, successes, failures, and students' experiences to improve their practice.

Cedillo and Bratta address issues with student-centered classes, too, one of which is the possibility that instructors could lose their credibility by "decentering" themselves. However, the authors counter that argument by asserting that by putting students at the center instead of instructors, instructors can potentially push students to deepen their understanding and writing abilities (Cedillo and Bratta 221). While students benefit when they are more active than their instructors in class, instructors still have a role to fill in exposing students to positionality stories—stories (identities) that impact people's worldviews—that challenge students to think about what makes up their identities (Cedillo and Bratta 220). According to Cedillo and Bratta, positionality stories "provide students with opportunities to perceive alternatives to dominant narratives about how they might fit into higher education and about teachers as consummate experts rather than

individuals who interpret knowledge in relation to their identities and those of others (220).

*Instructor Feedback*

While students have opportunities for growth, not all students will become better writers according to first-year composition course learning outcomes. Holcomb and Buell note instructors think students have made revisions between drafts and feedback before turning in a final draft, even if they really have not done so (49). However, instructor feedback and guidance over a semester-long course cannot easily be measured at the end of the course, simply by assessing a final draft (Holcomb and Buell 49). Instructors often do not see each student's revisions and edits between the first draft and the last draft. Therefore, Holcomb and Buell argue that instructors need to incorporate revision tasks within class time (61). This could encourage students to make better use of instructor feedback while also taking time to learn revision strategies.

*Use of Multimodalities*

Composition is more than words on a page. According to Anderson et al., composition exists in still images, video, and sounds, too (59). Anderson et al. consider how teaching the use of more than one mode of composition might affect student learning through a survey sent to composition instructors (59-60). The researchers found that there are potential issues with integrating multimodalities into instruction and assignments, including securing access to technology and instructional resources, and instructor professional development (Anderson et al. 79). However, multimodalities are still a viable part of learning.

*Contact Zones*

One unique aspect of composition studies is that instructors have choices about how to organize topics of study. However, considering the purpose of the ordering of content is important. In "'Contact Zones' and English Studies," Patricia Bizzell addresses how contact zones, a term originally coined by Mary Louise Pratt, can be used to organize composition studies (165-166). Contact zones are social and cultural points in which people can consider the effects of power (Pratt qtd. in Bizzell 166). Contact zones can be used to consider cultural influences in an English course, which in turn can be used to study the use of rhetoric in texts (Bizzell 167-168). Culture is always a facet of the composition classroom, so using contact zones to engage with culture is necessary when teaching students how to write.

*Approaches to Teaching Argument Writing*

Argument writing has been at the forefront of writing curriculums so far in the twenty-first century, edging out other modes. In response to poorly developed writing, Medvedeva and Recuber offer a "conceptual triangle" technique to help students write stronger, meaningful arguments (140, 143). Their purpose in this model is to help students "develop original arguments that effectively answer large 'so what?' questions" (Medvedeva and Recuber 143). A. Abby Knoblauch offers a reconsideration of argument study: instead of asserting that the traditional form of argument writing is best, instructors should teach students the various forms and purposes of arguments (245). Knoblauch notes how certain composition textbooks redefine argument, creating a complex issue in terms of how the study of argument should and can be approached (248-249). These authors draw attention to the complexities surrounding the instruction of rhetoric.

*Use of Textbooks in First-Year Composition*

Some first-year composition instructors use textbooks as a foundation for their instruction, although Knoblauch notes that some instructors do not use them at all (246). Composition textbooks contain thematic chapters with essays, response questions, and writing assignments. Each composition textbook design is based on the editors' approach to teaching and their method of addressing student needs (Woods 393). The varied designs of textbooks indicate that there is not just a single way to teach writing.

King takes issue with how textbooks are used in the classroom. She advocates for a "corporeal," or physical, experience and notes that it is not common for textbooks to be used in bodily ways, even though textbook editors may not consider physical responses to the act of reading (King 96). When students highlight a text, write notes in the margins, and make connections to real-life experiences or other courses, they are making meaningful moves.

Alisa LaDean Russell is one researcher in the field who has considered the use of textbooks in the composition classroom. Her approach centers on the political aspects of textbooks, specifically in terms of the impact that academic language used in the textbooks can have on minority students. Russell argues that an instructor's academic language influences how his or her classroom is perceived by minority students, and can thus interrupt an inclusive, multicultural community. Russell notes that what is accepted as "academic language" lines up with the language of "white, middle- and upper-class students." Thus, if a student outside of the white, middle-class, or white, upper-class enters a first-year composition course, the shift to do "academic writing" is much greater than that of a student who is part of the intended audience for a textbook. In addition, students outside of the textbook's audience may have to leave "cultural and social values

behind to adopt the language of the academy" (Russell). Cultural and social factors form constructions of students, just like students' writing interest and abilities.

Russell adds a thought about the hegemony created through a privileged textbook audience: "how we represent and value academic language in FYC is always politicized: language is always standing in for more than itself." She notes that instructors' insistence on using academic language to communicate in the classroom sends the message that instructors only want to speak to students if they use the "correct" language (Russell). In turn, the language used in a textbook reflects the opinions of students who will use that textbook.

*Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Disciplines (WID)*

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), the concept that writing is a part of all disciplines, remains in composition conversations. According to Lucille Parkinson McCarthy, students must learn the unique speaking and writing situations of each of their classes (233). For the specific student that McCarthy followed for her case study detailed in "A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing Across the Curriculum," determining and demonstrating the specific writing traits an instructor wanted was a method of earning satisfactory grades (233). McCarthy concluded that "writing development is, in part, context-dependent" (261). Therefore, the teaching of writing must occur in each context.

Writing in the Disciplines (WID) is one ongoing movement in the field of composition. Writing in the Disciplines is often associated with "'learning to write,'" as defined by Bean and Melzer (19). Writing in the Disciplines entails providing students with opportunities to write in the specific style of a specific field. In *Writing Across*

*Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*, Yancey, et al. purport that "students could more easily connect the writing they did in classes with writing they would complete in the future (26). In "Writing across College: Key Terms and Multiple Contexts as Factors Promoting Students' Transfer of Writing Knowledge and Practice," Yancey et al. explain that Teaching for Transfer (TFT) curriculum is made up of "three integrated curricular components: a set of key rhetorical terms; a systematic reflective framework; and a culminating assignment, the Theory of Writing (ToW) assignment" (42). The Teaching for Transfer model is one method of preparing students for writing for various fields outside of composition. "Learning to write" and Teaching for Transfer are both essential for getting students to apply writing knowledge to various contexts.

*Transfer*

A subset of WAC is transfer, which is the term assigned to the ability for students to carry knowledge from one context to another context. In *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*, Yancey et al. explore how writing knowledge may transfer from the composition classroom to other disciplines with portfolios, what content's role in teaching composition is, and teaching students the theory that undergirds writing practice (3). Yancey determines that prior knowledge is a crucial factor in students' ability to transfer or not and that students transfer through "assemblage," "remix," or "critical incident" situations (5). In each of these situations, students use a different method of attacking the writing problem with prior knowledge. The question of how to teach students to transfer relates to the levels of Bloom's taxonomy.

McCarthy expresses ideas about transfer like the ideas that Yancey et al. share. McCarthy agrees that "Successful students are those who can, in their interactions with teachers during the semester, determine what constitutes appropriate texts in each classroom" (233). However, "Students who cannot do this, for whatever reason--cultural, intellectual, motivational--are those who fail, deemed incompetent communicators in that particular setting" (McCarthy 233). While McCarthy states that a student's lack of transfer marks a student as a failure, Wardle notes that there is a lack of evidence that transfer occurs from first-year composition to other courses. She explains that if researchers attempt to search for skills acquired in first-year composition in other courses but do not find them, evidence of transfer will go unnoticed (Wardle 69). Both McCarthy and Wardle point out the importance of transfer in students' writing capabilities.

Transfer has a role in how students are viewed as continual learners. Psychologists Perkins and Salomon assert in "Knowledge to Go: A Motivational and Dispositional View of Transfer" that "all learning involves transfer in some sense" (249). Transfer is more than just applying a skill learned in one situation to another situation; it can involve the use of knowledge to solve differing problems or even applying a concept to a distant situation (Perkins and Salomon 249). In "Writing across College: Key Terms and Multiple Contexts as Factors Promoting Students' Transfer of Writing Knowledge and Practice," Yancey et al. determine that the success of transfer can be influenced by how students are taught (59). When instructors tap into students' prior knowledge, provide students with adequate practice, and teach metacognition, transfer is likely to be successful (Yancey et al. 60). Classroom instruction must involve the skill of transfer in order for students to be able to learn how to utilize the skill.

## Preconceptions of Writing Students in Higher Education

Instructors of all fields and education levels have preconceptions about students, whether conscious or not. On the negative end, these preconceptions range from students as individuals who are not interested in their courses to students as chronic procrastinators who wait until the night before papers are due to begin writing them. When instructors make these sorts of assumptions about students, students' voices are diminished. Instruction becomes one-sided instead of reciprocal. However, to best support students in their academic careers, instructors need to consider students' points of view.

No matter the preconception, views about students are formed—and skewed—due to these assumptions, but that does not mean that all preconceptions are negative. Preconceptions about students' interests and abilities can also be neutral or positive. These preconceptions may stem from prior experience with students, academic materials that have been read, or even the instructors' own memories of being students themselves. It is likely that a combination of these factors creates the image of the student in instructors' minds. However, just a single model of a student does not exist. In the field of composition, numerous preconceptions about students have been held or shifted as ideas in the field have developed and students have been studied.

Over the past few decades, students have been mostly viewed through a positive lens by instructors in the field, as evidenced in composition literature. However, in the mid-twentieth century, and even earlier, students were commonly regarded negatively by the field of composition in its publications. Instead of focusing on students' strengths, their weaknesses were magnified. In her 1994 work *Writing Students: Composition*

*Testimonials and Representations of Students*, Marguerite H. Helmers provides thorough context that explains how students have been constructed by instructors, so I rely solely on her work to discuss this topic.

Helmers states that a negative mindset reduces students to individuals who are "less than" and even labeled them as "lacking," "deviant," or "beginners" (45). These terms imply that students who enter composition courses are out of place and do not have existing skills that can be applied to the coursework. Whether this was a way for instructors to feel as if they had a sense of power over students, maintain control in the classroom, or as a method of making students want to better their skills, the negative connotations of these generalizations damaged students' perceptions of their abilities and worth. It is more difficult for a person to succeed if they are told from the beginning that they are not skilled.

A negative representation of the student is addressed as Helmers identifies the student in the context of educators' testimonials as "a character whose inability to perform well in school is his defining feature" (4). This preconception of the student strips away any positive outlooks by assuming that the student is incapable of growth, lacks writing skills, and cannot contribute anything to the classroom community, whether to his or her peers or the instructor. When students are viewed in this light, the field of composition takes away a place for the composition student to learn and engage with the subject.

Helmers notes that since the 1970s, "to have a writing problem was equated with a lower social and economic station in life" and was even equated with mental disability (64). These generalizations do not allow students to even have a chance at growing their

composition skills. When a student marked as a poor writer is also flagged as not belonging to the same social class as other students, he or she automatically becomes the "other." There is a power dynamic present in classrooms that operate with this mindset. The student does not benefit from this construction and may struggle even more to improve his or her work.

## Evidence of Preconceptions of Students in *College Composition and Communication* Article Titles

While numerous concepts in the field of composition have been explored over the past few decades, constructions of the first-year composition student have not been explored in depth. To understand the current perspectives in composition studies, we can look at research and models of thought from recent decades. In the mid-twentieth century, the field of composition was focused on *what* students were writing, but later, the focus shifted to *how* students wrote, otherwise known as the '"process approach"' (Smit 6). Through the most recent decades, the focus in composition studies has been on the cognitive, social, and identity-related aspects of writing. I read through *College Composition and Communication (CCC)* article titles to gather information about the emphases each decade, beginning with the 1970s and ending with the 2010s. I chose *CCC* because it is the central, national journal on composition.

### *1970s*

During the 1970s, an emphasis was placed on the connection between writing and critical thinking. Bean and Melzer explain that two intersecting movements – the Writing Across the Curriculum Movement (WAC) and the critical thinking movement – took shape (19). Described by Bean and Melzer as "'writing to learn,' the aim of which is to

use a variety of writing activities to promote deep learning of a course's ideas, concepts, and skills," WAC created a curricular baseline for disciplines outside of composition (19). The movement centered on teaching critical thinking also centers on deeper learning. Critical thinking is equated with asking important questions, being open-minded, and working to solve complex problems (Bean and Melzer 19-20).

Some keywords from *CCC* article titles in the 1970s include science and technology. "Rhetoric" is used in numerous titles over the course of the decade, showing an ongoing discussion of how to teach students. An emphasis on meeting students' learning needs, how to structure first-year composition, and the representation of race are part of the decade's focus, too. One last topic important during the 1970s is the cognitive process theory, first mentioned in a title in the May 1976 issue.

*1980s*

Published in the December 1981 issue of *CCC*, Linda Flower and John R. Hayes presented their cognitive process theory of composition, arguing that students go through a non-linear process as they compose. The parts of the traditional writing process – pre-writing, writing, and revising – still exist in Flower and Hayes' model, but the stages do not occur in a predictable timeline (Flower and Hayes 367). Instead, students revisit the stages as they complete a piece of writing. There is not a set number of times that a stage is or should be revisited. A writer chooses a stage based on what they know they need to do next or what they think of in the moment (Flower and Hayes 379). It is important that writers are able to move freely among the stages as needed to accomplish their writing.

Flower and Hayes state that "placing emphasis on the inventive power of the writer...put[s] an important part of creativity where it belongs—in the hands of the

working, thinking writer" (386). With emphasis on creativity, Ferris and Hedgcock explain that the process movement "emphasized the individual writer as a creator of original ideas and the need to cultivate his or her innately generative predispositions" (64). Evidence of this shift can be seen in how children, adolescents, and first-year college students are taught the parts of the writing process, so its implications are by no means small. The process approach is ingrained in students. The steps are defined as a natural succession of ideas from brainstorming and feedback to revisions and editing. However, the process approach is still criticized and even seen as flawed by some experts in the field due to how it has "oversimplified" the teaching of writing (Smit 8-9). Just like Flower and Hayes asserted, there are numerous ways to accomplish writing in the process model, not just a single method (Ferris and Hedgcock 65). All writers must navigate the writing stages as needed instead of worrying about moving sequentially through predetermined "steps."

Some other key concepts that appeared in *CCC* issues in the 1980s include peer feedback and peer tutoring. These concepts consider the social aspects of writing. Writing as inquiry and discourse communities are additional keywords that appear in article titles during the 1980s, which frame students as social entities.

*1990s*

By the 1980s, the "cognitive aspect of writing" was at the forefront of composition study, but a decade later, the focus was on the social aspect of writing, namely, language and interpretation of communication in specific contexts (Smit 9). A cursory look at *CCC* article titles from the 1990s revealed the following keywords: borrowed theories, reality, assessment, holistic scoring, cognitive and social dimensions

of writing, collaboration, gender, discourse community (or discourse of community), diversity, equality, writing across the curriculum, authority, writing across the curriculum, rhetoric of inquiry, contact zones, feminism, identity, remediation, basic writing, cognition, affect, academic values, social values, and racism. Out of this list, the keywords that appeared most often surrounded ideas of identity, whether about gender, social systems and ideologies, diversity, or equality. Writing across the curriculum continues to be in conversations, stemming from its origins in the 1970s (Bean and Melzer 17).

*2000s*

By the 2000s, composition's focus shifted once again to embrace the prominent topics of the previous decade as well as to highlight the problems of language, context, and interpretation (Smit 9-10). Beaufort's *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction*, published in 2007, offers this information about composition students: "Writing standards are largely cultural and socially specific. And yet, novice writers usually get little instruction in how to study and acquire the writing practices of different discourse communities" (Beaufort 11). Students are expected to know how to write. That expectation is not just held by the field: individual instructors may believe this, too. One issue with this occurs when instruction or refinement is needed but not provided. The cycle continues, then, with students blundering their way through required writing without the proper tools to help them.

The first decade of the 21st century brought with it ideas of history and traditions from the past. Social class, race, gender, and sexuality made an appearance, just like in previous decades of research and scholarship. A more specific topic, womanist theology,

can be found in volume 52, issue 4 of *CCC*. “Community service learning” appears in volume 55, no. 3 in 2004. Along with this area of study are topics centering on disability, issues of faith, Indigenous Americans, writing across the curriculum, and “education reform.” These topics point to the desire to engage in cultural discussions to promote inclusivity in the field. Overall, the keywords used in the article titles of the 2000-2009 decade show that those who are in the field of composition are dedicated to learning and moving forward with both practice and research.

### *2010s*

“Writing across the curriculum” and “writing in the disciplines” make another appearance in the first volume of *CCC* in 2010, this time to note their staying power over the years. In volume 62, issue 1, Gregory G. Colomb’s “Franchising the Future” highlights the purpose of the field’s existence: providing students with writing instruction. With this purpose there are struggles, namely the issue of burdening composition instructors with the task of teaching all undergraduate students how to write.

“Rhetoric agency” makes its appearance in the 2010s, as does the “literacy narrative.” Abby Knoblauch’s “A Textbook Argument: Definitions of Argument in Leading Composition Textbooks” addresses how “argument” ends up being billed as persuasion.

## Conclusion

From the idea fifty years ago that writing ability equated with socioeconomic status to positive, hopeful assumptions about students, preconceptions about students have been on an upward trajectory. The study of writing has evolved over time, as can be seen through recent decades of scholarship, and the teaching of writing changes right

along with it to best serve students. Considering the historical context of the field of composition is critical to understanding some of the factors that influence how students are constructed.

Current literature in the field offers three main constructions of the first-year composition student today. One of these constructions is student writers as active participants in the classroom. Active participants engage with their courses and focus on sharpening skills and gaining new ones. A second construction is student writers as writing strategists. Writing strategists are problem solvers that strive for continuous improvement while making writing decisions on their own. A third construction of student writers is writer for life. Writers for life are continual learners who transfer writing knowledge to other contexts.

In chapter 2, I will address how the three constructions present themselves in the composition field. In chapter 3, I focus on the results and implications of an instructor survey centered on the three constructions of students. Finally, in chapter 4, I will discuss my findings from an analysis of student constructions in five textbooks that are commonly used in first-year composition courses.

## Chapter 2: Constructions of Students in Composition Literature

There is not a single “mold” that all first-year composition students fit, just as there are not two students who may be exact replicas of one another. The field of composition has constructed students based on students’ needs and abilities and instructors’ expectations of students. Instructors may develop perceptions about students’ lack of skill or limited understanding of certain concepts, prompting instructors to make assumptions about students. Some instructors’ constructions of students may come from

trial-and-error situations when a new curriculum is piloted, from their years of experience in the classroom, or from students' responses to methodology or assignments. They may also be a result of a state's higher education learning outcomes. Instructors' own experiences as students can create facets of their preconceptions of students, too. Three constructions of students evident in the field of composition today are students as active participants in the classroom, students as writing strategists, and students as writers for life. A belief that students are writers pervades each preconception.

Students as Active Participants in the Classroom

The field of composition constructs students as active participants in the composition classroom. Active participation entails engaging in writing assignments and contributing to class discussions. This view of students is a positive outlook that acknowledges that all composition students, regardless of their declared majors or minors, can have a voice in the field. This outlook also encourages all students to engage in their writing, see themselves as worthy of being a part of the conversation, and work toward gaining new skills and honing the skills they have already acquired as readers, writers, thinkers, and speakers.

When viewed as active participants in the classroom, students can be at the center of instruction instead of teachers centering themselves. Student-centered instruction brings the focus to the students' special needs and abilities, as well as their talents, requiring students to do the "heavy lifting" of the learning, while solely teacher-centered classrooms leave little room for active participation from students. However, teachers have a crucial role in student-centered instruction. Chris Zawodniak expresses a mixture of frustration and admiration at his first-year composition instructor's approach to the

classroom, offering little direction to students who need scaffolding and guidance (31). Zawodniak argues that "Teacher involvement is the key not only to starting conversations but also to guiding them along their meandering paths" (Zawodniak 31). Teaching students the necessary tools required to be successful writers helps students grow. To do this, instructors must be actively involved in students' acquisition of writing skills.

Student voices are needed in the field of composition. While students learn from instructors, instructors also learn from their students. Students' feedback about instruction and assignments as well as their abilities and areas that need improvement prove that they are a vital part of the field of composition. Education cannot be one-sided. Though the instructor may be "in charge" of a course, students' engagement with one another, instructors, and the material can impact how courses are shaped. The "student-centered" pedagogy idea comes into play here, allowing instructors to move away from the lectern at the front of the room and instead bring students into the learning. This may look like students participating in small group discussions instead of listening to instructors give lectures or this could look like students exploring concepts with the guidance of instructors instead of passively receiving the information.

An additional aspect of student writers as active participants in the classroom is the discourse community. Anne Beaufort defines "discourse community" as "'a social group that communicates at least in part via written texts and shares common goals, values, and writing standards, a specialized vocabulary and specialized genres'" (179). Thinking of first-year composition students in this way gives them agency; they can be set up for success as they work collaboratively on ideas with classmates and see one another as writers. Collaboration may lead individual students to a better understanding

of how to approach writing tasks or reading materials for a course. Discourse communities introduce students to ways of discussing concepts with others in safe learning environments. Viewing first-year composition courses as communities encourages students to be comfortable growing as writers and sharing ideas.

Students as Writing Strategists

Another way that the field of composition has constructed students is as writing strategists. I define a "writing strategists" as students who problem solve as they write, drawing on prior knowledge and being confident in making both local and global decisions. Writing strategists perform editing tasks routinely and make notes of ways to revise concepts while composing. Writing strategists do not have to wait for instructor feedback to devise ways of adjusting their writing. Writing strategists complete local revisions without even being aware of making those sorts of writing moves due to years of formal instruction, repeated practice, and reliance on frameworks to complete writing tasks. It may be argued that all first-year students can be writing strategists, but the work of strategy is a task that takes serious attention and the desire to continuously improve one's writing. Thus, not all first-year composition students are truly writing strategists.

"Writing strategy" brings to mind the educational buzzwords "writing process" that are relied upon to explain the moves that student writers make as they compose. "Process" is defined as an operation that consists of steps taken in a set order. , but Flower and Hayes assert that the writing process is not linear, but that instead it is a series of processes arranged in a hierarchy. In their 1981 article "A Cognitive Theory of Composition," Flower and Hayes state that "writers are constantly planning (pre-writing) and revising (re-writing) as they compose (write), not in clear-cut stages" (367). The

cognitive process model aligns with the idea that writers use strategy as they work through a writing assignment. Writers rely on their content knowledge and goals as they compose (Flower and Hayes 380). Writers must make decisions about both the text and their process, solving problems as they compose.

The terms “editing” and “revision” often are confused or combined in students’ minds, even though the moves associated with both realms are distinct. “Editing” involves attending to correcting errors in capitalization, usage, punctuation, and spelling. Revision, however, is the detailed work of adding, removing, moving, and changing words and phrases to improve writing. Holcomb and Buell note that first-year composition students oftentimes delete entire sentences or insert new complete sentences instead of working on small editing changes and revisions (49). Their findings indicate that students see “their original drafts as nearly completed texts into which they plug or unplug, not words, but sentences” (Holcomb and Buell 50). As Holcomb and Buell note from the results of their study, students can get stuck completing only some revision tasks while being unaware of others (61). Writing strategists can overcome these difficult revision tasks and learn to see all of the areas that need revision in their writing.

Since reading and writing are the two inseparable literacy tasks, skills in each area are commonly connected. Students with strong reading skills may perform well on writing tasks, and vice versa. Ellen C. Carillo argues that just as learning to write in first-year composition can inform students’ performance in other courses, learning to read in first-year composition may help students read well in other courses, too (9). Sommers and Saltz found in their longitudinal study of undergraduate students “that students who initially accept their status as novices and allow their passions to guide them make the

greatest gains in writing development" (144). Students are writing strategists as they engage with both reading and writing processes as they compose and choose to work with the skills they have as they continue to write.

Students as Writers for Life

A third way that I have observed how the field of composition has constructed students is as writers for life. I define "writers for life" as individuals who continue to pursue further writing opportunities outside of the first-year composition classroom, and who will also continue to acquire more skilled ways of writing. In other words, writers for life are continual learners beyond the composition classroom. Since writing is a component of all academic disciplines, students will engage in written communication outside of just the first-year writing classroom. Beyond the college setting, writing is a part of other aspects of life, too. Writers for life will seek writing opportunities, not just in getting writing published but out of curiosity and desire to learn through their writing.

Viewing students as writers is congruent with the concept of students writing for life. Automatically calling students "writers" places responsibility and knowledge in their hands, giving them power that could propel them forward as individuals with expertise in the first-year composition classroom as well as in classrooms of other disciplines and even beyond university work.

Evidence of the writing for life concept can be seen in the learning outcomes for Ohio public universities' first-year writing courses. These learning outcomes are centered around rhetorical and critical thinking, writing, and speaking as well as the tasks of revising and editing according to standard English language conventions. When looking closely at the Ohio Transfer 36 outcomes for the first writing course, there is evidence

that students are seen as learners. “Learning to write” and “writing to learn” are key terms noted in the learning outcomes for first-year writing, which imply that students gain knowledge through assignment completion that can then be applied to other assignments. Students take first-year composition to acquire new writing skills while honing ones earned throughout K-12 education, but through taking the course, they can discover new concepts and ways of improving their skills.

One outcome for first-year writing states that students will “complete frequent, low stakes or writing-to-learn activities such as single-draft reading responses, journals, in-class efforts, and discovery drafts” (“First Writing Learning Outcomes”). The language in this outcome indicates that students are expected to always be learning, especially as they engage in composition work. “Frequent” writing introduces the idea that writing is a natural component of a course, and that students are used to writing in response to posed questions. Adequate writing practice is a necessity for growth and success. The language also indicates that there is an expectation that students *want* to continue learning, even though first-year composition is a requirement.

Learning outcomes for the second writing course for Ohio’s public universities move students toward more “academic writing” such as responses to and critiques of sources, specialized writing, and reflection. Reflection is found at the Evaluation level of Bloom’s taxonomy, which is the next-to-highest level in his ideas about higher-level thinking.

Revision has a more prominent role for second writing course students, too, as students are expected to revisit their work to strengthen it (“Second Writing Learning Outcomes”). At this level, students are still framed as continual learners who apply

previously learned skills to current work. In reference to Bloom's taxonomy, the work of revision most closely resembles tasks at the sixth and highest level of creation, which contains the arduous work of modifying and improving what they have already written.

When discussing students as writers for life, one might think about students as experts. If students transfer their writing knowledge to other discourses repeatedly, one might think that they have gained some level of mastery. Beaufort notes, "The literature on expertise suggests that experts not only have very rich, deep, context-specific knowledge, but they also have mental schema, or heuristics, with which to organize knowledge and aid problem-solving and gaining new knowledge in new situations" (17). This kind of ability that Beaufort describes could be what students who continue to write and apply composition knowledge to their writing are able to accomplish well beyond the first-year composition classroom. Successful transfer indicates that students maintain curiosity in their studies and desire to learn more.

In conclusion, the constructions of first-year composition students as active participants in the classroom, writing strategists, and writers for life are made up of many attributes, but each construction considers students as writers. Active participants are writers seeking skills development. Writing strategists are problem solvers that continuously seek improvement. Writers for life are continual learners that transfer abilities to other contexts. It is important to note that these three constructions of students are not the only constructions of students. All students are multifaceted, and all instructors have different perspectives about students. However, with the descriptions of these three constructions of first-year composition students in mind, we can look at how first-year composition students are constructed by current instructors.

## Chapter 3: Results of a Survey of First-Year Composition Instructors

A second method of discovering how the field of composition constructs students was through a survey I sent to instructors of first-year composition courses at Youngstown State University during the Spring 2022 semester. The purpose of this survey was to gather information about how current first-year composition instructors view their students. I wanted to find out how the three main constructions of students that I identified through my review of the literature presented themselves in a current academic setting.

### Limitations

My survey was sent to 50 first-year composition instructors. However, only fourteen instructors responded to the survey. Out of the fourteen individuals who responded to my survey, four are graduate assistants, five are part-time instructors, and five are full-time faculty members. Although there are definite limitations to the study due to this low response rate, I did gather useful information about the constructions of first-year composition students today.

While the varied responses I received offered a rich snapshot of instructors' constructions of students, distributing the survey to first-year composition instructors at a single public, four-year university was an additional limitation. These instructors work in the same department, follow the same requirements for the course, and work with the same composition textbook. These commonalities potentially influence how instructors view their students. Though there are factors that influenced how each respondent conceptualizes students, had I distributed the survey to various universities, I may have

seen more varied results or even stronger patterns among respondents and thus, could have garnered further insights.

One further limitation of this survey lies in the survey questions. Since some of the questions led instructors to consider students in terms of the three constructions, I potentially shaped instructors' responses.

Survey Details

My survey consisted of questions about how instructors individually construct students, what informs their constructions, their attitudes about first-year composition students, how they seek to support their first-year composition students, and the skills they think first-year composition students commonly lack. I also required participants to indicate their teaching status as full-time instructor, part-time instructor, or graduate student. I included direct quotes from survey responses, so any errors in mechanics have not been altered.

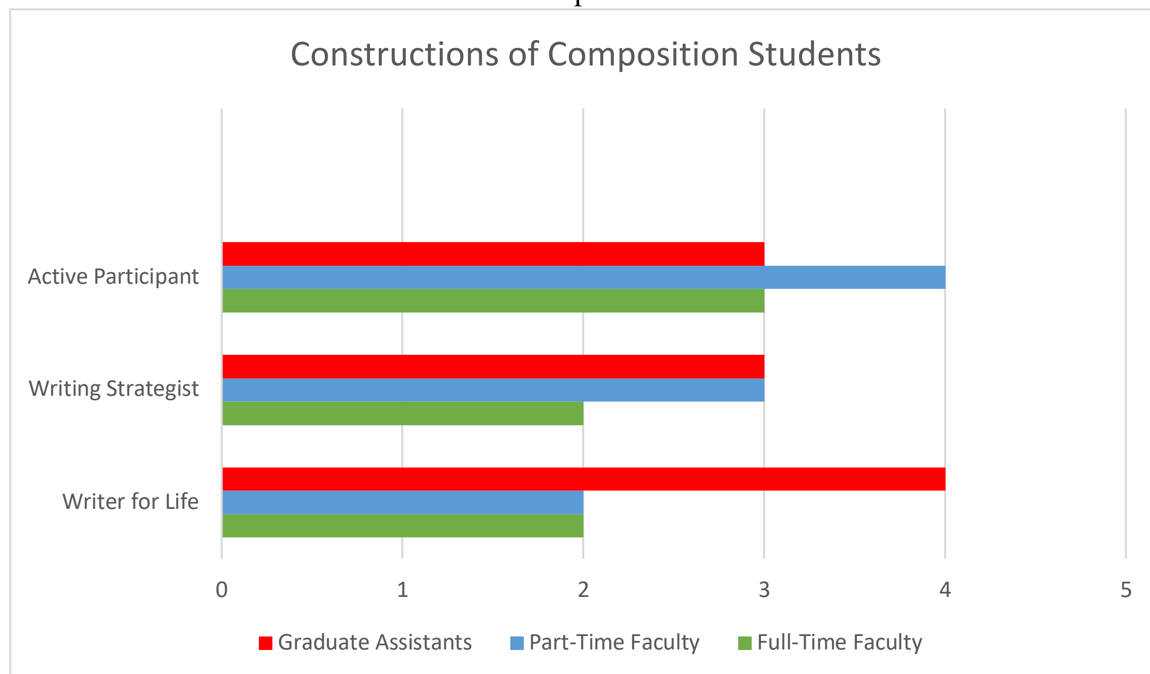
One specific intention with this survey was to determine if my ideas about how students are constructed in the field are shared by current first-year composition instructors. I also wanted to discover what other constructions of students are common among instructors at a single university. In addition, I wanted to gather first-hand knowledge about how the skills that first-year composition students possess and lack clarify the preconceptions that are commonly held by the literature in the field.

Question 1: Views of First-Year Composition Students

| 1. Three ways that instructors might think about the students in writing classes are as follows:<br>(1) The student as an active participant in the classroom; (2) The student as a writing strategist (someone who chooses rhetorical strategies based on the individual assignment); (3) The student as a writer for life. Select the views that you have of the students in your writing classes.<br>The student as an active participant in the classroom |
| --- |

| The student as a writing strategist (someone who chooses rhetorical strategies based on the individual assignment)<br>The student as a writer for life |
|---|

Chart 1: Constructions of Composition Students




*Hypothesis*

My hypothesis for this question was that most respondents would indicate that they view their students as writing strategists. This preconception encompasses writing tasks that require students to problem solve and use prior knowledge to make informed revision decisions. These tasks are central to an independent writer's success in college composition.

*Results and Commentary*

The three response options all center on a different aspect of students. Active participants in the classroom are engaged in coursework and are considered part of the conversation in the classroom. They also are focused on adding new skills while also further developing old skills. Writing strategists are problem solvers; they desire to continuously improve their writing and can use writing knowledge to revise on their own.

Writers for life are continual learners. They can transfer writing skills to other contexts outside of the composition classroom. It is possible for instructors to hold all three views of students. Three out of four graduate assistants who responded to the survey indicated that they conceptualize first-year writing students in all three ways, as opposed to two out of five full-time faculty and three out of five part-time instructors.

Ten total respondents indicated that they viewed students as active participants in the classroom. Almost all part-time faculty who responded to the survey viewed students in this way. Overall, this construction of students was the most popular among the fourteen respondents. This finding implies that instructors seek genuine interaction with their students and strive to create classroom environments in which students learn how to exercise their writing voices. Their focus is on facilitating learning and growth within the academic setting.

Eight total respondents indicated that they view students as writing strategists. Three out of five graduate assistants who responded to the survey indicated that they view students in this way. The opposite of this finding is that full-time faculty who responded to the survey were least likely to see students as writing strategists, compared to graduate assistants and part-time faculty who responded to the survey.

Eight respondents indicated that they view students as writers for life. All four graduate assistants who responded to the survey view students as writers for life. Two of the five full-time faculty members and two part-time instructors view students as writers for life. All but two of the respondents who view students as writers for life also view them as writing strategists. “Writing strategists” and “writers for life” share some commonalities; they imply a certain “know-how” when it comes to addressing writing

problems as well as continued growth in writing practice and ability. The correlation between identifying students in both ways could be a result of these similarities.

My hypothesis was not supported in the results, as the construction of students as active participants in the classroom was the most commonly held preconception out of the individuals who responded to the survey.

Question 2: Additional Views of First-Year Composition Students

| 2. In what other ways do you think about your first-year college writers? |
| --- |

*Hypothesis*

While I did not have a specific hypothesis regarding the responses to this question, I assumed that at least some survey participants would offer views of students that would not be related to the three preconceptions identified in question 1.

*Results and Commentary*

In question 2, participants had the opportunity to share additional views of students beyond the three views in question 1. All fourteen respondents provided information about additional views of students, which shows that it is difficult to frame students into just three distinct categories due to learning needs, writing experiences, perceptions of academic writing, and myriad other factors.

When, looking at the additional views of students, graduate assistants who responded to the survey held some positive views of first-year writers, including “emerging research writers,” “learners vetting information,” “critical learners,” “very determined,” “under estimated in their abilities,” “preparing students to write for college,” and “human beings with lives and goals and dreams first.” These terms indicate both value for first-year writers and optimism that first-year writers will engage in learning how to write better so that they can attain their goals, no matter the field that

they are pursuing. By referring to first-year writers as knowledgeable, instructors can empower them, thus instilling in them a sense of interest and pride in their academic work. The optimism exuded from the graduate assistants who responded to the survey may stem from graduate assistants' proximity to the classroom; they are students themselves still, so they can relate to first-year students' experiences and needs.

Neutral views of students revealed through this question included descriptions of students as "people learning to temper passion with reason via critical thinking" and "curious and skeptical, always asking questions and never making assumptions about readers." In addition, respondents indicated that they see first-year writers "in terms of motivation," as "writers who need to apply their writing in practical settings," and as students "navigating a lot of different classes in college and need to feel like they can succeed at writing assignments across a variety of courses." One respondent noted that they view students as writers determining the type of writing that will be the most beneficial to them. These neutral views paint first-year writing students as inquisitive but also practical, focusing on what will serve them best as they journey through their college years.

Along with the positive and neutral views of students were negative conceptualizations such as describing students as "a little resistant" to and "frustrated" with taking the required first-year composition course, especially if they do not see the connections between skills learned in first-year composition and classes for their majors outside of English. These views might better be described as "realistic," especially as some students just do not find value in first-year writing courses. These views highlight the need for instructors of first-year writing courses to make valuable connections to

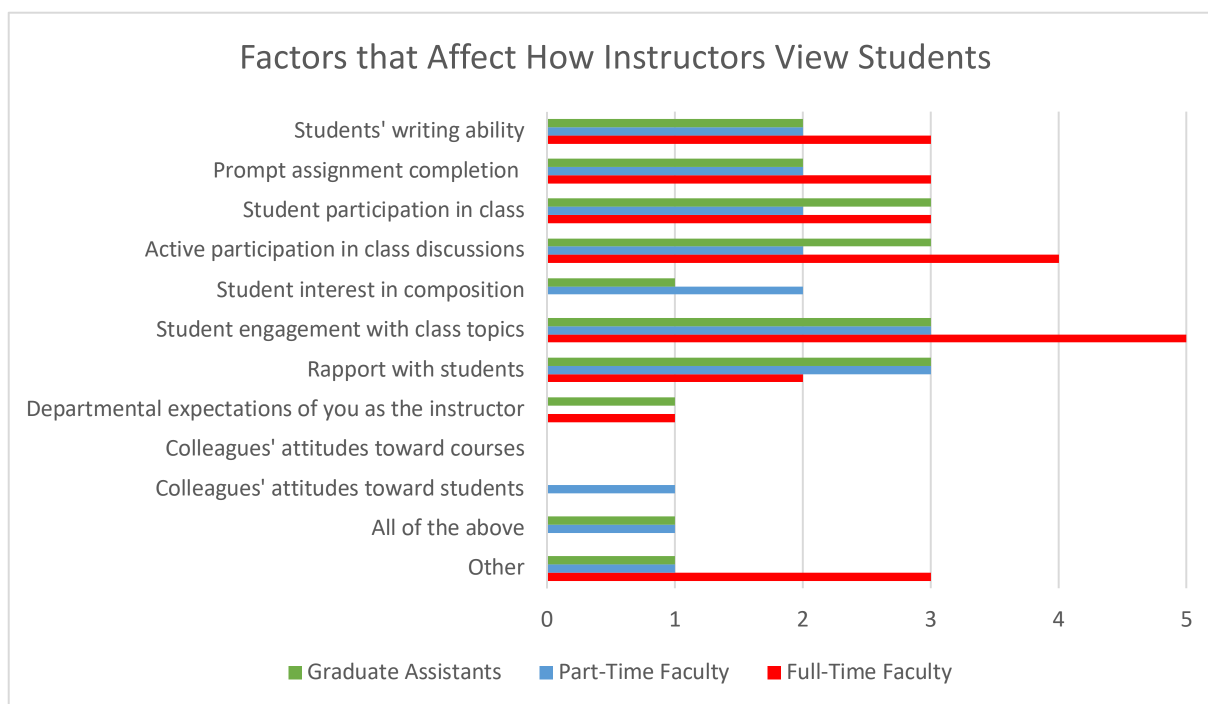
courses beyond the first year. Without seeing value in first-year composition, students cannot become active participants, writing strategists, or writers for life.

Many of the additional views of students are related to the three preconceptions identified in question 1, so my hypothesis was not supported in the results to this question.

Question 3: Factors that Affect How Instructors View Students

| 3. Which of the following are factors that lead you to view students in the way(s) that you do, as indicated in the previous questions? Select all that apply.<br>Students' writing ability<br>Prompt assignment completion<br>Student participation in class<br>Active participation in class discussions<br>Student interest in composition<br>Student engagement with class topics<br>Rapport with students<br>Departmental expectations of you as the instructor<br>Colleagues' attitudes toward courses<br>Colleagues' attitudes toward students<br>All of the above<br>Other |
|---|

Chart 2: Factors that Affect How Instructors View Students




*Hypothesis*

My hypothesis for this question was that most part-time and full-time faculty would indicate that all the factor choices influence their view of students. While the choices cover a spectrum of components and conditions, I expected that part-time and full-time faculty have at one time or another formed ideas about students based on these factors and their teaching experience.

*Results and Commentary*

Two respondents–one part-time instructor and one graduate assistant–frame their first-year composition students based on all ten factors listed in the survey question.

The factor that most often influenced instructors' views of students was student engagement with class topics. All five full-time instructors indicated that this factor helped to shape their views of students. This data upholds the idea that instructors might feel more positively about their students when students show an interest in the topics that they are reading, writing, and learning about. When instructors share a common interest

with students, a connection is made, creating a bond that helps each group find value in the other. This is linked to another option in the survey question: rapport with students. Eight out of fourteen respondents noted that their rapport with students leads them to view students in a certain way. Again, framing students positively, whether as active participants, writing strategists, writers for life, or other constructions, is linked to the relationship that instructors have with students.

Nine out of fourteen respondents said that their views of students were impacted by student participation in class discussions. Eight respondents indicated that students' writing ability, prompt assignment completion, and student participation in class influenced their perceptions of students. These top responses are all connected by student performance and engagement. Student participation is an indicator of progress, talent, and fulfillment of course requirements, along with interest in a subject.

However, student interest in composition was not selected as a major factor in how first-year composition instructors constructed their students. Since first-year composition is a required course for all students, instructors may automatically assume that some students do not like writing and do not want to be taking first-year composition, regardless of how much writing is required in their other classes.

Only two respondents–one part-time instructor and one graduate assistant–noted that departmental expectations of them as instructors played a role in their constructions of students. None of the survey respondents are influenced by colleagues' attitudes toward courses. Only one respondent–a part-time instructor–indicated that their views of their students are shaped by colleagues' attitudes toward students.

Once again, my hypothesis was not supported. The factors most closely related to students' interactions with instructors and courses along with instructors' relationships with students outweighed the factors tied to colleague and departmental influences.

Additional Factors that Affect How Instructors View Students

| If you indicated "Other" for Question 3, please describe the additional factors that lead you to view students in the way(s) that you do. |
| --- |

*Hypothesis*

I did not have a hypothesis for this question.

*Results and Commentary*

Respondents could offer additional factors that influence their views of students. One graduate assistant noted that "students' inexperience vetting information from scholarly and popular sources" is a factor that leads them to perceive students in a certain way. One full-time faculty member said that a factor that affects their view of students is the "effort the student demonstrates in attempts at writing." These two factors focus on student ability and willingness to exercise learned skills. From instructors' perspective, lack of effort equates with a negative view.

A second full-time faculty member offered this information:

> I require students to complete an "Intro to Course Survey" at the start of the semester that asks them three words they would use to describe themselves as writers and why they chose those words. I also ask about their prior experiences with writing and English classes and what they hope to get out of the course. At the end of the survey, I ask them if there is anything they would like me to know that may impact their participation in the course. Students have shared things like mental health issues and family challenges, and this knowledge gives me insights

> for how to respond if they stop submitting assignments or attending class at some point during the semester.

This response links the academic life of the student with the personal life of the student, showing how the two spheres can affect one another. Student progress and achievement can be hindered or helped by the health of their personal life. Most importantly, though, this response highlights the need for instructor support in student writer growth.

One factor from another full-time faculty member highlights a positive outlook on first-year writers: “I want them to gain confidence in their writing by being fully engaged in the process.” Lastly, a part-time instructor shared this perspective:

> I believe students are often underestimated in their abilities and that they tacitly possess many of the skills that a first-year writing course seeks to develop. Students just don't realize this given the dispositions that are instilled in them in their secondary education which leads them to think about knowledge as being about matters of correctness rather seeking nuance.”

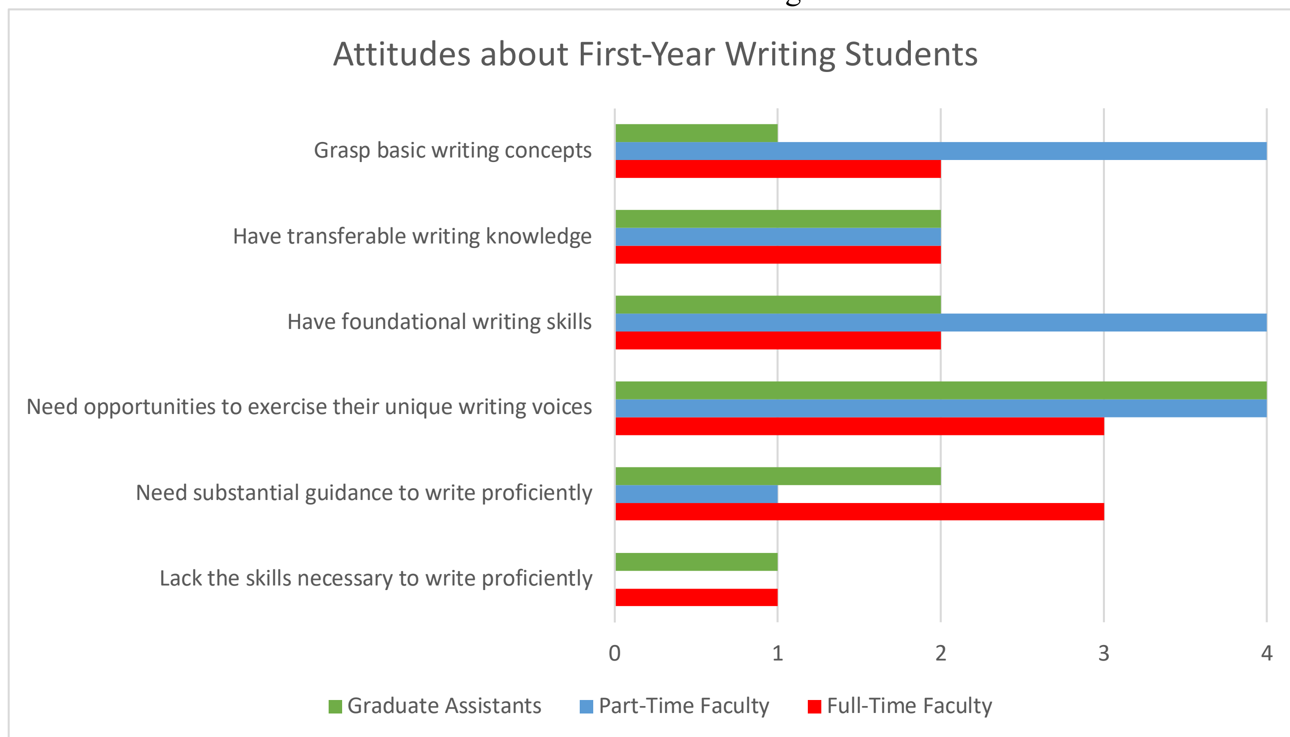
This part-time instructor’s response highlights a positive view of students in light of factors that can lead to potential negative views, such as student effort and engagement. Maintaining a mindset that students are inherently writers and thinkers empowers students to write well. Overall, these additional insights from instructors show how believing in students’ abilities can produce positive results in their writing.

| 4. Which of the following best describes your attitude about first-year writing students? Select no more than three. First-year writing students are individuals who:<br>grasp basic writing concepts and can apply them to various contexts.<br>have transferable writing knowledge.<br>have foundational writing skills.<br>need opportunities to exercise their unique writing voices.<br>need substantial guidance to write proficiently. |
| --- |

| lack the tools necessary to write proficiently. |
| --- |

Question 4: Attitudes about First-Year Writing Students

Chart 3: Attitudes about First-Year Writing Students




*Hypothesis*

My hypothesis was that most respondents would indicate that first-year writing students are individuals who have transferable writing knowledge, have foundational writing skills, and need opportunities to exercise their unique writing voices. This hypothesis is based on the composition studies literature that I reviewed.

*Results and Commentary*

Words like "basic," "substantial," and "proficiently" may have been interpreted differently by survey participants. These words are subjective, and it is likely that several understandings of each one exists among the survey participants.

One respondent did not answer question 4, so data numbers are different from other questions. The most common response to this question was that students "need opportunities to exercise their unique writing voices." All four graduate assistants who took this survey chose this as an answer to this question. This high rate of response indicates that most first-year composition instructors acknowledge that students can complete composition tasks, likely even in the first-year composition course. It may also indicate the desire to teach students how to find their writing voice. In addition, this response indicates that instructors believe that all students are capable of writing well, if they are given opportunities to do so.

The next most popular attitude indicated by the survey was that students "have foundational writing skills." Seven of the respondents who indicated this attitude also indicated that they view students as active participants in the classroom. Half of the respondents who indicated this attitude also indicated in question 1 that they view students as writing strategists. This correlation might indicate a belief that first-year composition students are focused on skills acquisition and refinement.

Seven respondents said that first-year writers "grasp basic writing concepts." Out of these seven respondents, four also indicated that students need opportunities to exercise their unique writing voices. Six respondents said that students have "transferable writing knowledge." In relation to believing that students have transferable writing skills, four respondents selected both factors, indicating a correlation between the two abilities.

Six respondents said that students "need substantial guidance to write proficiently." One correlation I found was that two of these six respondents linked student effort with their view of students in question 3..While these respondents may

think that students cannot write proficiently without instructor intervention, it is not clear if that view of students is neutral or negative due to the ambiguity of the response choice. "Need substantial guidance" could be interpreted as meaning that students are willing to write but truly need assistance, but it could also be interpreted as meaning that students are lazy and need to be pushed to write.

Only two of the thirteen respondents–one part-time instructor and one graduate assistant–said that students "lack the tools necessary to write proficiently." This data suggests that first-year composition instructors are more likely to hold positive attitudes toward students, which correlates with positive outlooks on their writing capabilities.

My hypothesis was partially supported by participants' responses. Two of the most common answers to this question were that students have foundational writing skills and that students need opportunities to exercise their unique writing voices.

Question 5: How Instructors Seek to Support Students

| 5. In what ways do you seek to support your students, based on your view of them as first-year college writers? (2-3 sentences) |
| --- |

*Hypothesis*

My hypothesis regarding the responses to this question was that instructors would indicate that they seek to establish rapport with students and provide students with individualized feedback on assignments.

*Results and Commentary*

As this was an open-ended question, all participants offered unique information, although there were identifiable similarities among some respondents that showed a desire to help students succeed. Overall, the responses indicate that first-year writing

instructors want their courses to be accessible, helpful, and instrumental in the development of students' writing skills.

One commonality among the responses centered on communication. Six respondents mentioned "feedback" in their responses. Four respondents discussed offering one-on-one conferencing to each of their students. Peer review, revision opportunities, and encouraging students to write about topics they were interested in were each mentioned by two respondents. These support methods prioritize students' refinement and writing growth. Beyond these written forms of communication, offering online help during online class sessions, holding online office hours, making an effort to be available when students need them, and email communication were mentioned.

Closely related to communication was simply meeting students' needs. One full-time instructor wrote that they want their students "to get the support they need to complete their assignments." A graduate assistant said that they provide additional assistance when students need it and a full-time faculty instructor explained that they give students clear expectations with which to complete assignments as a means of support. These methods show that instructors understand that students are at various levels of preparedness and need different levels of individualized attention to meet their specific needs. Based on survey results, instructors are open to helping students in a number of reasonable ways.

One instructor shared that they intentionally design their first-year writing course so that students can succeed, even if they do not have strong writing skills. Specifically, this instructor will break down a larger assignment into small segments, helping students work on skills throughout the entire process. Another respondent described tailoring

instruction to meet varied learning styles to reach all students, focusing on individualization through feedback, conference time, and rapport along with reaching out to students who show signs of difficulty with course assignments. These approaches to helping students succeed are centered on support as well as student growth. The supports provided are intended to help students gain transferable writing skills.

Another way of looking at meeting students' needs is by giving them options. Two respondents discussed how they encourage students to write about what interests them. When students write about topics they care about, they might take assignments seriously and truly learn something. Structuring some coursework around student choice can help them succeed.

My hypothesis for this question was supported by the survey responses since communication was a popular method of supporting students, along with nearly half of respondents mentioning that they provide students with feedback as a support method.

Question 6: Skills First-Year Writing Students Lack

| 6. In general, which writing skill(s) do most first-year writing students lack when they begin taking first-year composition? (2-3 sentences) |
|---|

*Hypothesis*

My hypothesis for this survey question was that some respondents would mention thesis development as a skill that first-year writing students struggle with at the beginning of first-year composition. In addition, I thought that some respondents would indicate that students only know how to write five-paragraph essays.

*Results and Commentary*

Several college-level writing skills were mentioned in responses to this question, as well as commentary about how to address these issues. Overall, the responses indicate

a learning gap between high school and college, even though numerous concepts mentioned in responses are concepts addressed in learning outcomes for high schools. This potentially indicates an assumption that high school coursework does not relate to first-year writing coursework.

Maintaining control of conventions, writing structure, and skills related to research and referencing sources were the main issues brought up by respondents. A lack of control over grammar, which is a considered a local revision matter, can be concerning, as proper conventions are necessary for clear communication. However, one respondent shared that students cannot think that "good grammar alone will make them better writers." Structure is a global revision concern. Referencing credible sources and quoting correctly are essential components of strong writing.

Writing in depth about a topic was noted as a lacking skill, along with "synthesizing multiple ideas in one paper" and the "ability to vet information." A respondent said that "first-year writers sometimes struggle when they are given an expansive writing prompt that offers freedom in interpretation or writerly approach." Students may not be confident enough in their abilities to fully engage with an extensive prompt or with an assignment that offers freedom of expression.

One respondent noted that "first-year students tend to lack structure and form, which is easily modeled and teachable." Knowledge of how to use rhetorical approaches was mentioned as an additional skill first-year writers lack. Another stated that since some students have not mastered writing conventions, "making them aware of these conventions is a primary focus / learning outcome." When working on in-depth study of a topic, offering students practice helps them "devlop [sic] that ability over time." This

handful of helpful responses indicates the willingness of instructors to identify and address issues within the first-year writing classroom.

I was surprised that only one respondent mentioned thesis development as a skill that first-year writers lack. Instead of issues with clearly stating a claim, instructors saw more issues with having a sense of audience when writing. One graduate assistant offered this insight:

> I don't think it's a matter of "which." Each person comes from a different background, experience, and perspective. Some students lack skills compared to others or weren't prepared as well as others, but ultimately, to me I think what students lack most is a writing atmosphere that is individualized and free of judgement. They lack the space to grow as creative, critical thinkers and writers because of the pressure we put on them to things "right.

This response supposes that the “right” atmosphere for student writers may help them to flourish, regardless of prior knowledge and experience. Overall, my hypothesis was not fully supported by the responses to this question since more results focused on conventions, use of sources, and evaluation of sources.

Question 7: Skills First-Year Writing Students are Proficient In

| 7. In general, at which writing skill(s) are most first-year students proficient in when they begin taking first-year composition? (2-3 sentences) |
|---|

*Hypothesis*

My hypothesis for this question was that some respondents would indicate that first-year students are proficient with mechanics and usage as well as demonstrating comprehension of texts through written responses.

*Results and Commentary*

As in responses to previous questions, responses ranged from basic understanding of writing conventions to adapting writing to audience and task. Many of the skills explained in responses to this question centered on the skills that correlate with learning outcomes for high school students, just like in the previous question. One respondent stated, “It’s hard to say, since there is always a considerable variation of writing skills in any given classroom. Some students are better prepared than others, while some have good ideas but don’t know how to express them effectively yet.” It is interesting to see how each respondent’s perceptions of the student frame their answers to these questions.

One response to this question was not helpful due to lack of context, and another respondent did not yet have enough data to be able to assess their students in this area. One respondent does not see evidence that first-year writing students are “proficient at any aspect of writing.” Conversely, a separate respondent said that first-year students are “already writers who know how to adapt their writing based on the situation.” “Proficient” may be the key word in the question that shapes these responses; students may only be approaching proficiency at the beginning of first-year composition. Also, proficiency is subjective, so it cannot easily be measured without specific benchmarks. This question can be interpreted differently, since “proficient” can be measured in more than a single way; “proficient” means competent or skilled, so it can be interpreted as better than average, but it could also be interpreted as above average.

Two respondents mentioned that most first-year writing students are proficient in basic grammar and spelling skills while the ability to articulate ideas and opinions showed up in two other responses. Being able to “write volumes about what they feel

strongly" about and writing about their own experiences are strengths of first-year writers.

An encouraging response gives students some credit for these abilities: "While students often lack the knowledge of the expectations and college-level writing, they are already writers who know how to adapt their writing based on the situation." First-year writing students were also seen as "open to learning and understanding different perspectives when put in a safe space free of judgement." Being receptive to new concepts is an important part of learning and growth as a writer. Overall, these responses to the question about students' proficiencies in first-year writing courses support the preconception that students are writing strategists. They know how to adapt their writing to fit task, purpose, and audience. They also can articulate ideas related to their experiences and perspectives effectively.

My hypothesis was partially supported since two respondents did mention student proficiency in basic grammar and spelling skills. However, comprehension of texts did not appear in the survey results.

## Discussion of Results

This survey provided valuable insights about how the three constructions of students are framed by instructors. Based on the survey results, the student as an active participant is the most common of the three constructions of students. Additional constructions beyond the three identified and defined for survey participants center on students as writers, students as critical thinkers, and determined, curious individuals navigating college. All these preconceptions frame first-year writing students as capable learners.

The most frequently identified factors that influence how instructors view students include students' engagement with the course and their active participation in class discussions. Communication is a shared facet between these two factors, which indicates that instructors feel that they can form constructions of students based on how they interact with them. Student relationships with instructors, participation in class, writing ability, and assignment completion are also common factors that influence how instructors view students. These factors encompass some basic pieces of data that instructors may use to think about how students are doing in class.

The most common attitude about first-year writing students is that they need opportunities to exercise their unique writing voices. This attitude could be interpreted negatively or neutrally due to the wording. When considered along with the next survey question regarding how instructors seek to support their students, it can be inferred that instructors believe students are capable writers who need guidance. Some of the most common responses about how instructors support students were providing feedback, providing adequate support, and encouraging students to write about topics that they like in order to fully engage with their writing. These responses highlight the care with which survey respondents operate in the classroom.

Survey respondents provided a wide range of skills that they perceive first-year writing students lack, including use of rhetorical appeals, sense of audience, understanding of voice, and grammar skills. At the same time, survey respondents indicated that first-year writing students are proficient in understanding arguments, generating ideas, adapting their writing to various situations, and control of proper grammar. These varied responses offer ideas about how students' experiences with

writing affect their performance in first-year composition. They also highlight the varied priorities that each instructor may have for his or her course.

Conclusion

This survey, though limited in its scope, provided useful insights about the three constructions of students. The responses I received informed me of the attitudes that current first-year composition instructors have about the students in their classes. While my exact hypotheses were not all fully supported by the results, positive student perceptions were confirmed through the survey results that I collected. First-year writing instructors want their students to experience success with writing, even if some students lack the experience and tools necessary to succeed with ease. Having data from instructors, as opposed to only journal articles, provided a fresh perspective on the topic that could not have been achieved without conducting the survey.

## Chapter 4: Constructions of Students in Composition Textbooks

A final method of investigating preconceptions of students in the field of composition was through studying the prefaces, introductions, topics, and appendices of five commonly used textbooks in first-year composition courses: *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*, 5th edition (Bullock, et al. 2019), *Everything's an Argument with Readings,* 8th edition (Lunsford, et al. 2019), *Ways of Reading* (Bartholomae et al. 2017), *The Bedford Reader*, 13th edition (Kennedy et al. 2017), and *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, 11th edition (Axelrod and Cooper 2016). My rationale for this method of inquiry was to determine how preconceptions of students are developed by textbook editors based on the aims and emphases of the textbooks. Also, I wanted to come to an

understanding of the influences that create instructors' preconceptions, with textbooks being one staple component of a first-year composition course.

Limitations

The five textbooks offer ideas about first-year composition students, but since they are not living, active instructors, they are a limited source. A textbook alone cannot provide all the instruction that a first-year composition student needs to form writing skills that will help them succeed as college students, and a textbook alone cannot anticipate the diverse individuals who make up first-year composition courses. During my study of these textbooks, I noted information that related to the three preconceptions I identified in my literature review. These inferences were worthwhile for my study, but they were also an indication that information from other methods was needed to gain a fuller understanding of the three preconceptions of first-year writing students.

Basic Construction of Students

Although no two students are the same, it seems that the editors construct a basic "ideal" model of students for whom they design their textbooks. This student has a desire to hone his or her literacy skills, to think critically, and to stretch his or her writing potential, even when some students may not have declared a major. The textbooks provide learners with a broad range of writing scenarios that can be applied to numerous areas of study and professions. Three constructions of students that are evident in the five textbooks are the student as an active participant in the classroom, the student as a writing strategist, and the student as a writer for life.

The active participant preconception can be defined by students' engagement with their writing courses. These students put effort into assignments, contribute to

conversations in the classroom, and are considered important voices in those classroom conversations, which creates a learning community that centers students instead of instructors. Additionally, active participants utilize writing skills already developed while gaining new skills. This preconception can be seen through textbooks' emphasis on helping students succeed by using textbooks that function as writing handbooks.

The writing strategist preconception can be identified by the editors' desire for students to improve their writing, reading, and critical thinking skills. Writing strategists are problem solvers who know how to make both local and global revisions as they write. The textbook editors want their textbooks to be useful to students beyond the single class for which they were assigned.

The writer for life preconception frames students as adaptable, capable writers that embody the characteristics of the active participant and the writing strategist. These students are engaged with coursework, can make writing decisions, and can transfer writing knowledge to different contexts and beyond the university setting as professionals. Writers for life can also be called "continual learners" due to their ability to continue to grow their writing abilities for the sake of learning and development beyond the classroom.

From my inquiry, I found that all three preconceptions can be identified in the five textbooks. I was surprised to find that the editors appear to indicate a view of students as active participants, including a belief in student engagement in coursework and skills attainment, because textbooks do not interact with students in the same way as instructors do. However, other facets of this preconception, such as students' place at the

center of instruction and involving students in conversations about composition, appeared regularly in the prefaces to all five textbooks.

Similarities Among the Textbooks

- All five textbooks regard students as capable learners.
- All five textbooks contain evidence that the editors regard students as active participants in the classroom, writing strategists, and writers for life.
- All five textbooks are both accessible and challenging.
- *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*, 5th edition and *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing,* 11th edition aim to prepare students to transfer writing knowledge to other contexts.
- *Everything's an Argument with Readings*, 8th edition and *Ways of Reading* focus on rhetoric to help students, implying that student writers communicate effectively.
- *Ways of Reading* and *The Bedford Reader*, 13th edition focus on literacy

From my study of these five textbooks, I found that student writers are regarded as capable learners. *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*, 5th edition and *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, 11th edition both share the goal of preparing students to write beyond the composition classroom, hinting at the belief that transfer is possible from first-year composition coursework to writing in other courses outside of composition. *Everything's an Argument*, 8th edition and *Ways of Reading* focus on aiding students in understanding and skillfully using rhetoric in writing, implying that student writers work with language to communicate effectively. I inferred that *Ways of Reading* and *The Bedford Reader* share the goal of intertwining the closely related literacy tasks of reading and writing, suggesting that developing reading skills alongside writing skills is necessary for success.

Through my inferences based on language used to discuss the textbooks' purposes and priorities, the editors of these textbooks seem to indicate a view of students as active participants in the classroom, writing strategists, and writers for life. They view students as individuals who are accustomed to the work of writing, whether they have already

been exposed to writing assignments in high school courses or whether they have received enough scaffolding to complete the writing assignments at the college level. The textbooks are written at an accessible level for students so that they can understand concepts while still feeling challenged to produce well-written compositions.

Key Highlights of the Five Textbooks

| | Key Highlights |
|---|---|
| *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*, 5th edition | • Relevant tool for developing transferable writing skills<br>• Useful for multiple courses<br>• Editors view students as fellow readers and writers |
| *Everything's an Argument with Readings,* 8th edition | • Focus on writing style<br>• Helpful guide for improving skills<br>• Preparation for developing rhetorical knowledge |
| *Ways of Reading* | • Emphasis on literacy<br>• Critical reading for understanding<br>• Editors view students as equal counterparts in academia |
| *The Bedford Reader*, 13th edition | • Emphasis on literacy skills for college success<br>• Editors want students to develop unique writing styles<br>• Preparation for writing beyond the first-year writing classroom |
| *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, 11th edition | • Focus on rhetorical situations<br>• Emphasis on effective communication<br>• Focus on transferable instruction |

*The Norton Field Guide to Writing, 5th edition*

The editors of *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*, 5th edition are focused on providing a relevant and helpful guide that students can use for more than a single course. Some of the keywords that stand out in the first two paragraphs of the preface are "user-friendly," "brief," "student success," "guidance," and "flexibility" (Bullock et al. v).

These words frame the textbook as a useful and practical resource for many types of students and classes.

According to the Preface of *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*, 5th edition, the main aims of the textbook are to provide transferable writing skills and to serve as an all-encompassing guide for students, with the overarching goal of producing capable, talented writers (Bullock et al. 5). "Transfer" is one of the key terms in the preface. The editors state that "students need to transfer their knowledge and skills to other courses and other writing tasks" (Bullock et al. v). This belief that composition skills gained through using this textbook transfer to other writing contexts aligns with the view of students as writers for life. This seems to indicate that editors believe students can use the skills they have learned to make decisions about their writing to fit other tasks, purposes, and audiences.

*Preconceptions of Students*

The editors of this textbook think of students using it as individuals who want to improve writing skills to become better communicators (Bullock et al. v). They believe that students have a basic understanding of terminology and structure of genres like arguments and narratives. By framing students as learners who want to become better writers, it seems that the editors view students as writing strategists. They believe that students intrinsically desire to improve their writing skills.

Finally, the editors of *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*, 5th edition view students as fellow readers and writers. Inclusive language is used in the opening paragraph in the section titled "Writing a Literacy Narrative": "Narratives are stories, and we read and tell them for many different purposes" (Bullock, et al. 75). The use of "we"

makes readers feel as if they can be grouped in the same category as the editors themselves and not as less-experienced individuals. With a focus on writing alongside students, it seems that the editors view students as active participants in the classroom, working alongside them as they develop their skills and gain new ones.

*Everything's an Argument with Readings, 8th edition*

The editors of *Everything's an Argument with Readings*, 8th edition argue that rhetoric is not just for formal work situations; "public and private discourse" is part of all areas of life (Lunsford et al. v). A major emphasis of *Everything's an Argument with Readings*, 8th edition is to help college writers navigate writing style (Lunsford et al. v). Information is available to students in overwhelming amounts online and in print textbooks, so students may not be able to easily discern what information is best or know what to do with discrepancies among sources. The editors of this textbook want to provide students with a guidebook to help them through college writing assignments, not just to "get through" them, but to understand them and improve writing skills. It appears these aims imply that the editors view students as active participants in the classroom because the focus is on engaging in writing assignments and working on skills development.

The second emphasis of this textbook is meeting standards for first-year composition coursework (Lunsford et al. xii). The Council of Writing Program Administrators Outcomes and correlation to textbook contents show the alignment between the textbook's contents and student learning outcomes. In the preface's first paragraph, the editors argue that the time invested in this textbook proves its worth; they worked for two decades to include accurate and current information and instruction on

rhetoric and arguments (Lunsford et al. v). This dedication seems to indicate a commitment to helping students act as active participants in the classroom as well as to help students develop as writers for life outside of the first-year composition classroom.

*Preconceptions of Students*

Based on language like “argument has always surrounded us” and “rhetoric is the art, theory, and practice of ethical communication” used in the preface, the editors assume that students have been exposed to numerous arguments, but that they are relatively new to the work and structure of writing arguments (Lunsford et al. v). By pointing out the arguments that exist in various mediums, such as bumper stickers, cover art, political cartoons, and advertisements, the editors help students think of how arguments are created and how they appeal to certain audiences. The editors state that they want students to “think of themselves as rhetors” (Lunsford et al. v). It is implied here that editors view students as writing strategists that seek continuous improvement and understanding of the ways that arguments are a part of their lives. By using this inclusive language, the textbook editors welcome student writers into their academic sphere, which indicates a view of students as active participants. The editors believe that the textbook can prepare students for solid rhetorical skills and to strengthen their abilities as writers both in and out of the first-year composition classroom.

*Ways of Reading*

Out of the five textbooks, *Ways of Reading* is the one that focuses the most on literacy. The first sentence of the preface declares that the textbook “is designed for a course in which students are given the opportunity to work on what they read and to work on it by writing” (Bartholomae, et al. v). The editors emphasize that reading and writing

are more than just means to an end; reading and writing are designed to stretch readers' understanding, develop critical thinking, and even validate or change their beliefs.

*Preconceptions of Students*

Reading, writing, and thinking are all a part of academic life, no matter the area of study (Bartholomae et al. viii). Though a course may be considered a "composition" course, the act of reading is still required to keep stretching students' thinking and abilities. *Ways of Reading* exposes students to challenging reading selections that are typically more difficult for students to grasp on first reading, but these selections help them see the value in reading, rereading, and grappling with their contents until they make connections and do more than simply read to understand everything the writer wanted the reader to gain from the text (Bartholomae et al. vi). The editors teach students the value of rereading to gain further insight into the problems addressed by a reading selection (Bartholomae et al. vi), and they also encourage students to "read with a purpose" (Bartholomae et al. vii). This is shown through the way that questions and writing assignments ask students to solve problems. These reading tasks fit with the preconception of students as active participants in the classroom. The focus of these tasks is on engagement, which teaches students skills. At the same time, it seems that the belief that students are writing strategists is implied due to how the editors stress the close connection between reading and writing tasks.

The editors aim to assist students in accessing what they read, instead of simply just trying to make sense of what the writer is saying (Bartholomae et al. vi). The editors note that "Good readers do what they can and try their best to fill in the blanks; they ignore seemingly unimportant references and look up the important ones" (Bartholomae

et al. vii). The editors believe that reading is “a social interaction” (Bartholomae et al. 1). They encourage students to move beyond “finding information or locating an author’s purpose or identifying main ideas” (Bartholomae et al. 1). Instead, students are instructed to engage with authors, evaluating arguments and reflecting upon the larger implications of a piece of writing. These academic tasks point to the preconception of students as writing strategists. These can be difficult concepts for students to engage in, but they can teach students to continuously improve their skills.

Based on language used in the preface, the editors of *Ways of Reading* view students as readers. They welcome students into the world of academia with inclusive language that encourages them to take part in the difficult and deep work that is required of them. Bartholomae et al. note that they can discuss difficult texts with both their peers and their students, even if the students struggle with the content and purpose of the texts (v). The editors of *Ways of Reading* view students as individuals who can perform the task of deep reading, even if certain selections are above their zone of proximal development. These views of students seem to indicate that students are active participants in the classroom by welcoming students into classroom conversations.

*The Bedford Reader, 13th edition*

The preface to *The Bedford Reader*, 13th edition opens with the idea that students can learn to become good writers by studying the good writing of others (Kennedy et al. iii). The editors included examples of student writing as a method of instruction in the textbook in addition to selections from professional writers and authors. Kennedy et al. argue that to become better writers, students must also be readers (9). Along with this emphasis is the idea that critical reading is a skill needed in many fields, not just

composition (Kennedy et al. 9). Overall, *The Bedford Reader*, 13th edition links reading and writing as essential literacy skills for the college student.

*Preconceptions of Students*

Throughout the textbook, the editors establish the link between reading and writing to become writers through annotated excerpts, focused questions, and explanations of the ways in which writers compose as a method of helping students acquire their own unique writing style (Kennedy et al. 2). This language is broad and does not clearly define what it is that students are being asked to do, but it can be inferred that the editors leave the specifics up to students, which seems to indicate that they view students as writing strategists who can use problem solving skills to determine which style choices are best for individual writing tasks.

Based on the section "How (and Why) to Use This Book," the editors of *The Bedford Reader*, 13th edition view students as individuals who desire to improve their reading and writing skills. Kennedy et al. state their purpose: "Our aim...is to provide you with ample and varied resources that will help you develop your skills as a reader and writer" (1). While this statement is broad and does not touch on what it looks like to be a reader or writer as a first-year student or address the specific skills that are at the core of the textbook, it can be inferred that the editors view students as writing strategists with intrinsic motivation to continuously improve. It can be inferred that the editors view students as active participants in the classroom due to the focus on developing the textbook as a resource that students can refer to for their writing assignments.

*The St. Martin's Guide to Writing, 11th edition*

The primary aim of *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, 11th edition is to be a writing aid for individuals to use while in college as well as in careers beyond graduation (Axelrod and Cooper v.). The editors want textbook users to become writers for life through their use of the book, not just passive students who have to write to pass college courses.

*Preconceptions of Students*

In alignment with the Council of Writing Program Administrators Outcomes Statement, the editors want to help students to "build proficiency" (Axelrod and Cooper vii). The editors strive for students to be skilled writers as a result of studying and learning from the concepts in the textbook. Through this aim, the editors seem to indicate that they view students as active participants that will engage with the writing tasks in the textbook.

Since written communication is not limited just to careers in composition, the editors have the mindset that students in all academic disciplines need to be able to communicate effectively through writing. With in-depth guides to writing, each chapter includes sample pieces paired with writing prompts aimed at challenging students. Basic review of information, such as the writing process, is also embedded in the chapters. This seems to indicate that the editors hold the preconception that students are writing strategists that can make both local and global decisions once they have learned skills needed for college-level writing.

One notable aspect of this textbook is the first chapter devoted to rhetorical situations, defined as "any situation in which you produce or receive a text" (Axelrod and Cooper 2). By presenting students with this in the first chapter, the editors can frame

every concept that follows it since rhetorical situations encompass reading, writing, listening, and speaking, which are all facets of English studies. Providing students with this transferable instruction seems to indicate that the editors view students as writers for life.

Conclusion

Through the prefaces, introductions, topics, and appendices of these five textbooks, the editors imply positive preconceptions of students. They believe that students who use their textbooks are prepared to write well in the composition classroom and in other contexts and that giving students the right tools—writing guides, exemplar texts, and prompts to promote critical thinking—will keep students engaged in the writing process. Centering students in instruction, trusting that students are mature writers who desire continuous improvement, and believing that students will continue to grow as writers beyond the composition classroom create a positive learning space for the development of first-year composition students.

## Concluding Comments

This study is just a starting point for considering how literature in the field of composition and composition instructors construct the first-year composition student. Considering the language used to frame students as well as the various models of instruction over time reveals the positive constructions of students that I defined. While the topic of constructions of students is complex and has not yet been directly addressed by many researchers, gathering data from first-year composition instructors was a valuable source of information to begin to understand the root of constructions of students. However, the low number of responses to this survey was a limitation since I

did not have a large pool of data with which to work. Also, the survey was sent to instructors at a single university, so it is possible that similarities in the data collected could be a result of common departmental goals and course requirements. A limitation arose with the use of textbooks as a mode of study, too, since textbooks are not the only source of instruction in a course.

In terms of future research, my survey of first-year composition instructors could be expanded to include additional questions. Asking survey participants how many years they have taught in general as well as how many years they have taught first-year composition would provide context for answers to other questions in the survey. Also, asking survey participants which textbook they used in their first-year composition courses would provide me with useful data, especially since I investigated several common textbooks used in first-year composition. For each instructor, I would be able to compare ideas emphasized in the textbook he or she uses to his or her responses to survey questions.

A second idea for future research is to send the instructor survey to first-year composition instructors at other universities. This data that could be compared with data collected from Youngstown State University instructors to provide insights about cultural aspects of other universities and how those aspects affect instructors' views of students. One specific way that this expansion of the survey would provide useful information is through data collected about the factors that influence instructors' perceptions of students. This information would help to explain if a university's cultural context affects the factors that most likely influence instructors' perceptions of students, or if a university context does not influence instructors' perceptions.

To explore the student side of constructions of students, I could survey first-year composition students about their views of themselves as first-year composition students. Looking at this data along with instructor data would highlight areas in which students feel that they need more support from instructors. This data would also provide information about which constructions of the first-year composition student are shared by both instructors and students.

Lastly, interviewing or surveying textbook editors would be a valuable source of information for future study of this topic. Since I relied on assumptions and inferences of what textbook editors had in mind for students and how they constructed students, directly asking textbook editors about their constructions of students would provide a stronger analysis of constructions of students. Data collected from either editor interviews or surveys would clarify my assumptions or prove them wrong. Either way, collecting first-hand information from textbook editors about how they view students could be compared with how they talk about students in the prefaces and introductions of textbooks.

## Appendix 1

All research conducted for this study was approved and considered exempt by the Youngstown State University Institutional Review Board.

**2022-41 - Initial: Initial - Exempt**

Dec 30, 2021 1:51:32 PM EST

Jay Gordon
Languages 140705

Re: Exempt - Initial - 2022-41 Composition Survey

Dear Dr. Jay Gordon:

Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board has rendered the decision below for Composition Survey.

Decision: Exempt

Selected Category: Category 1. Research, conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Institutional Review Board and may not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly reported to the IRB.

Findings: Approved exempt protocol which includes a survey of teaching graduate students and faculty about how compositions are constructed. There is no risk beyond what the potential participant will experience by taking a class.

The IRB would like to extend its best wishes to you in the conduct of this study.

Sincerely,
Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board

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