# Effective Composition Instruction:

## *What Does the Research Show?*

A White Paper
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# About the Center

The Center for Communication in Science, Technology, and Management (CCSTM) provides a focus for the study of communication practices and problems within the contexts targeted by the land-grant mission of North Carolina State University. Communication forms the connections between science and society, between technology and policy, between management and its constituencies. The work of the Center will enhance undergraduate and graduate education, enrich faculty expertise, and strengthen connections to statewide industry and institutions and to the public.

Specific objectives are the following:

1. **To initiate and develop sponsored research projects** on communication issues and problems in scientific, technological, and management contexts in order to improve current practices and to produce better theoretical understandings that can translate into better research and instruction in the future.

2. **To use the results of research to enhance and improve the education** of graduate and undergraduate students in writing, speaking, and the use of communication technologies, not only at NCSU but also across the nation through dissemination of successful curricular innovations.

3. **To foster cooperative relationships for interdisciplinary problem-solving** on the communication dimensions of environmental policy, information networks, technology transfer, risk management, and the like.

4. **To provide public service to enhance communication and understanding** between scientific and technical experts, on the one hand, and policy-makers and the public, on the other.

The CCSTM will directly connect the resources of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences to NC State's traditional emphasis on science and technology, providing a place where communication and rhetorical studies, the historic center of education, can be brought to bear on contemporary problems in a technological society. The work should enrich NC State's contribution to the progress of science and technology as well as enhance the education offered to both graduate and undergraduate students.

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# Introduction

The teaching of writing has become a contentious curricular issue in recent years, especially at the first-year level. Frequently the only required course in a college curriculum, the freshman composition course or course sequence may be asked to serve multiple agendas—some the result of tradition, others the result of new curricular pressures, still others the result of particular teaching conditions or student needs.

The composition sequence at North Carolina State University, English 111 and 112, is no different. In 1996–97, the faculty committee in the Department of English that oversees these courses proposed the first major revisions to them in many years, a proposal that ignited a vigorous debate within the department. Since then, the revisions, or modified versions of them, have been approved and adopted by the department. But the reasons for the debate and disagreement within the department are not clear to faculty and administrators outside the department, and the need for these revisions, and even for further revisions, may not be understood.

As specialists in rhetoric and composition, we supported the proposed revisions to English 111 and 112, which draw from research and practices that represent the mainstream of composition studies today and serve as the foundation for the best composition programs in the country. Our purpose here is not to describe the revisions to the freshman composition program (for those details, contact the director of the program, Dr. Judith Ferster, 515-4160, jferster@unity.ncsu.edu). Rather, we will summarize the research and scholarship that bear on this recent debate. This research calls into question a number of assumptions about writing and how it is learned. Because these assumptions are widespread everyday attitudes—many of which seem like common sense—it is worth exploring why they may not be valid.

Our hope is that this discussion will help faculty, graduate students, and administrators, as well as others beyond the immediate NC State community, to understand more clearly current practices in the teaching of writing.

# Two positions on the teaching of writing

Central to the debate in the NC State English Department was the role of literature in the composition class. Some who argued against the proposed revision felt that it placed at risk the basic humanistic values of English 111 and 112 by decreasing the role of literature in them. Those who supported the proposal argued that focusing on literary texts is not a pedagogically sound approach to preparing students for the breadth and variety of writing they will do throughout the university. Supporters do not deny the important role of literature in undergraduate education; rather, they question whether literature is the most effective vehicle for teaching writing.

The debate in our department may have focused on the role of literature in the composition class, but that issue served as a marker for many differences that have divided English departments over the years. On one side are the traditionalists, who represent a position informed by a teaching practice that dates to the late 19th century and has been sustained by scholarly commitments to literature and by the power structure within the English profession. This approach to the teaching of writing emphasizes textual features at the sentence level, unitary standards of "correctness" and the correction of error, writing as a textual product (rather than an intellectual process), and the use of literary works both as exemplars of good writing and as "content" about which students write; often this approach presumes a "teacher-centered" classroom focused on discussion of these literary works, with little explicit attention to the work of students in creating their own texts.

On the other side are the composition specialists and their supporters, who represent a position on most of these issues that is informed by the recent development of composition studies as a distinct sub-field of English studies within the past 25 years. This approach to writing instruction is often referred to as the "new rhetoric." It focuses on writing as a process (not just a product), invention and revision, audience and purpose, and context-dependent criteria for good writing; it employs a "student-centered" classroom with emphasis on student texts, active learning strategies, and collaboration.

Unfortunately, this controversy cannot be resolved simply by turning to experimental research that compares these two approaches in definitive ways. Writing is too complex a linguistic phenomenon to be measured meaningfully by a few controlled variables, and improvement in student writing is similarly complex and multiply determined. Instead, we must rely on many research approaches and multiple indicators. Although research in composition does not provide definitive comparisons between teaching methods, it does lend strong support to the "new rhetoric." To our knowledge, there is no comparable body of research evidence to support the claims of the traditionalists.

# Unsupported assumptions about the teaching of writing

## Unsupported assumption 1
## There is only one set of standards for good writing.

Writing is a highly complex social behavior. Like spoken language, it requires subtle and continuous adjustments to the customs, constraints, and expectations within social situations; adjustments are manifested in what linguists call dialects and registers. The language that is appropriate and successful in church is not the same as at the beach, the auto body shop, the courtroom, or the classroom. Just as different ethnic groups and regions of the country have dialects, so too do different professions and academic disciplines. Students need to learn the structure of the situations they face as writers and the linguistic and rhetorical repertoires that are acceptable within them.

One construct that has been useful for describing these differences in written discourse is the genre, a conventionalized response to a recurring situation. Understanding a genre involves understanding the nexus of audience, purpose, convention, and text within that social situation (Miller 1984). Textual analyses of academic genres show that they vary greatly among the disciplines, representing the different ways of thinking that are appropriate to each discipline and the conventions that have been accepted regarding degree of formality, principles of organization, and standards of evidence (Bazerman 1988; Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995; MacDonald 1994). Students may learn these genres through repeated exposure and trial and error, but explicit instruction can help them negotiate a variety of genres much more quickly and effectively (Williams and Colomb 1993).

Rhetoricians have also shown through textual analysis and ethnographic interviews and observation that discourse differs significantly not only among disciplines but also among different offices and job functions in large corporations. Engineers and managers use different arguments and appeals and often have difficulty communicating with each other; they use these differences as markers of social status and group membership (Brown and Herndl 1986; Herndl et al.1990). One striking study of specialized language focused on the U.S. Navy. Researchers examined an internal message sent from one electronic communications specialist to another, a message that is unintelligible to anyone who has never been in the Navy. Nevertheless, because it was understandable by 350 naval officers in less than 45 seconds, it must be judged as clear and effective—it provides information readers can use in a form that they find appropriate, as well as identifying itself and the readers as part of the relevant community. When Naval officers were taught to change their normal bureaucratic writing style, they resisted this threat to their group identity by complaining, "I'm not going to write like an enlisted man!" (Suchan and Dulek 1990).

## Unsupported assumption 2
## What students learn about writing in one situation transfers automatically to other situations.

Traditional composition instruction assumed that learning to write is a single task; that is, whatever one learns in the English class transfers easily and naturally to other tasks, classes, and situations. But this assumption has been challenged by research in composition and educational psychology. New developments in educational psychology demonstrate that learning and performance are both situated acts; instruction that appears to be general and

decontextualized is actually defined by the particular and the contextual (Brown et al. 1989; Lave and Wenger 1991; Perkins and Salomon 1989). Thus, what students learn in a particular context serves to improve their performance only in that context unless the teaching is structured in such a way that students learn about and practice applications to different settings. Transfer of knowledge and skills from one context to another requires explicit instruction. Effective teaching, then, demands that the teacher find a strategic balance between the particular and the general so that students can achieve success in one domain and generalize the principles by applying them to other specific domains (Carter 1990).

A number of ethnographic studies reveal the difficulty that students have in moving from one writing context to another, even—perhaps especially—within the university. Students tend to rely on particularized models and criteria that have worked in a previous situation but are inadequate to the new situation (Anson and Forsberg 1990; Berkenkotter et al. 1988; Faigley and Hansen 1986; Herrington 1985; McCarthy 1987). McCarthy, for example, followed a student through several classes of his early college experience and found striking evidence that the student was not able to recognize when writing tasks in other courses called for the skills and knowledge he reported as having learned in his composition course. The student conceived of the writing tasks in each class as isolated from the writing tasks in other classes.

Another obstacle to transfer is described in a classic case study of a graduate student entering a Ph.D. program (Berkenkotter et al. 1988). Whereas McCarthy's freshman "undergeneralized" by failing to use skills learned in one context to others where they could apply, the graduate student studied by Berkenkotter et al. "overgeneralized" by applying conventions appropriate in one domain to a new domain where conventions were different. This study documents the frustrations of this student, an accomplished writer who found that the conventions he had mastered as an English scholar in the humanities tradition contrasted in significant ways with the conventions and values of the social science research community he sought to enter. These difficulties manifested themselves as "writing problems."

The transfer problem extends to other experienced professionals as well, people who are expert and successful writers within their fields. Myers (1995) studied two well-published scientists as they wrote their first patent disclosures, who felt like "aliens in a foreign land" as they undertook this new kind of writing. They had the same kinds of difficulties that students have, because many of the principles underlying their successes with scientific research reports and proposals were not applicable to the genre of the patent disclosure; rather, they needed to spend time learning (by trial and error) the strategies that would be effective in a very different situation.

Russell (1995) provides a useful analogy to illustrate the transfer problem: teaching the traditional composition class is like teaching tennis while claiming to teach general principles and skills of ball-playing that can be applied to all other forms of ball-playing—soccer, baseball, jacks, handball, etc. This claim assumes that if students get better at tennis they will also get better at all the other games in which a ball is used. Aside from some of the most fundamental elements, like improved muscle tone and endurance, there is likely to be little if any transfer of knowledge and skills. Similarly, students who practice writing essays about literature will become better at writing—but only essays about literature. Beyond some of the most fundamental elements, such practice will not help those students with other writing tasks, like reviews of literature in psychology or case studies in management.

### Unsupported assumption 3
## What's really important about writing is grammatical correctness.

This is a complicated assumption because it depends on and ties into other assumptions: that grammar is teachable and that grammatical errors are a matter either of not knowing the rules or of carelessness. Also hidden in these assumptions about grammar is the idea that writing teachers should focus their energies on the surface-level features of their students' texts. But all these assumptions too have been challenged by research suggesting that the student, and not the text, should be the focus of the teacher's attention.

Instructional approaches that foreground the context-free study of grammar and mechanics have been demonstrated to have little or no effect on the writing performance of students—in some cases they even have negative effects because they divert attention from more productive instruction. Students can learn rules of grammar, recite them, and work exercises in books, but none of this makes any appreciable difference in the grammatical correctness of texts they subsequently write (Hartwell 1985, Hillocks 1986).

Indeed, the very concept of error is more complicated than most people think. Linguists point to the gap between competence and performance, that is, the "grammar in your head" that you absorb as a child vs. the actual use of grammar in writing. Bartholomae's study (1980) of basic writers showed that even though they tended to make egregious errors in their writing, they corrected most of those errors naturally when asked to read their work aloud, often without even realizing that there was an error on the page. In other words, the students' performance in no way captured their competence. Indeed, Bartholomae concluded that rather than being a marker of failure, error can be an indication that a writer is using writing as an occasion for learning. Williams (1981) showed that "error" is very much in the eye of the beholder; that is, we tend to notice certain errors only when we are looking for them. Thus, composition specialists view grammar as an ingredient of good writing but not the only ingredient, and they recognize that grammar instruction is effective only when it is individualized and adapted to context.


### Unsupported assumption 4
## Beyond grammar and mechanics, there is no "content" to be taught in a writing course; students just need practice.

One of the reasons composition specialists object so strenuously to the literature-based instructional model is that it leaves little time for actual instruction in the processes of writing. Over the past 25 years, researchers in the fields of composition, cognitive science, and developmental psychology have demonstrated that the development of skill in writing is more than a matter of practicing and refining existing skills; expert writing processes are in many ways qualitatively different from those of novices.

Based on evidence from writers' "think-aloud" protocols, process observations, interviews, and text analyses, this research has revealed, for example, that experienced writers tend to engage in global or "whole-text" revision as well as sentence-level revisions, whereas student writers often focus only at the sentence-level (Sommers 1980; Faigley and Witte 1981); experts tend to use a broader range of planning devices and strategies than novices (Rose 1980; Flower and Hayes 1981); experienced writers manage the writing process by breaking tasks into sub-tasks and setting priorities, whereas students are often paralyzed by the attempt to address the multiple demands of writing all at once (Flower and Hayes 1980).

Perhaps most importantly, this work has demonstrated that expert and novice writers tend to interpret writing tasks quite differently: they perceive different reader expectations, import

different assumptions about genre, bring different interpretive strategies to their reading of other texts, and adopt different stances toward the claims of other authors (Flower et al. 1990; Haas and Flower 1988; Penrose and Geisler 1994).

Explicitly teaching students about these expert-novice differences helps them expand their own writing repertoires and adopt more purposeful and flexible approaches to writing tasks (see Wallace and Hayes 1991 for a vivid example of the effects of such instruction). On the other hand, students who believe writing is an art or "gift" that cannot be taught or learned find writing practice frustrating and futile (Palmquist and Young 1992).

## *Unsupported assumption 5*
## Students can learn to write by reading good models.

The use of literary texts as good models stems from European classical education, when teachers used literature to instill moral principles and cultural history while students were learning Latin or Greek grammar from the same texts. Models still play an important role in composition courses, but the nature of that role and the types of models used have changed significantly as the goals of literacy instruction evolved over the past century and as our understanding of how students learn from models has developed.

We know from research on learning that students learn best from models when instruction includes explicit analysis of critical features to be subsequently practiced; there is little evidence to suggest that students will notice relevant features and apply them to their own writing situations without such intervention (Charney and Carlson 1995; Stolarek 1994).

However, even the guided use of models is of questionable value as the primary mode of instruction in writing. Reviewing three experimental studies that compared model use with other teaching approaches in college writing classrooms, Hillocks (1986) found no significant effect of the models approach on the quality of subsequent student writing, when compared to control conditions. This finding was embedded in a statistical meta-analysis of 60 experimental studies of writing instruction from the primary grades through the college level. From comparing gains across these studies, Hillocks (1984;1986) determined that courses focused around the reading of model texts led to *lower* gains in writing quality than other instructional approaches, particularly approaches in which students applied analytical criteria, scales, and questions to samples of their own and others' writing. Of the six categories studied, instruction emphasizing the development of strategies for writing and inquiry resulted in the largest effect sizes; gains for these treatments were two-and-a-half times larger than gains under the models approach.

## *Unsupported assumption 6*
## Student writing today is much worse than it used to be (so traditional teaching methods must be better).

There is no reliable data to indicate that student writing has gotten worse over time; agreeing on what features make writing "worse" would be difficult in itself. Historical research, though, shows a remarkable sameness of complaints about student writing since the turn of the century at both elite and other institutions. For example, the Harvard Overseers commissioned four reports in the 1890s about the "composition problem"—that is, the poor quality of student writing and the "mental drudgery of the most exhausting nature" required to read and evaluate student writing. The first of these reports also noted that nearly one-half of applicants for admission were "unprepared in the department of elementary English for admission to the College. They could not write their mother-tongue with ease or correctness" (excerpted in Brereton 1995, 75, 92; see also Connors 1985).

A recent study of errors in 3,000 freshman papers from colleges across the country compared these errors with those made by students in surveys done in 1917 and 1930 (Connors and Lunsford 1988). One finding was that today's college students make no more errors in grammar and mechanics than students did in the two earlier studies, despite radical changes in the number and types of students attending college from the beginning to the end of this century (all three studies showed averages of about 2.2 errors per 100 words).

Another finding, however, was that the pattern and types of errors have changed over time. Spelling remains the most common error, but the recent data also show a proliferation of other errors that suggest declining familiarity with the visual look of a printed page: missing inflections, missing apostrophes, missing commas, misused homophones, etc. This trend—which Connors and Lunsford attribute to the effects of an increasing cultural emphasis on electronic media—underscores the importance of a continuing role for reading print texts in the composition curriculum. The research overviewed above on the transfer of knowledge in general and of grammar instruction in particular, along with the difficulties students have in learning and generalizing from models, suggests that this reading should represent as wide a range of writing contexts and text types as possible.

## *Unsupported assumption 7*
## Composition and literature are natural parts of the same discipline and should naturally be taught together.

Departments of English arose in the late 19th century as collections of activities rather than coherent intellectual projects, and were often both opportunistic and acquisitive, including fields as diverse as linguistics, journalism, debate, and theater (Parker 1967). The presence of composition and literature in the same department is thus a matter of historical accident, not disciplinary unity, and in fact the two fields have maintained an uneasy co-existence for most of the past century.

Historical research shows the formative effects on English departments of the changes in higher education occasioned by the Morrill Act of 1862, rapid industrialization, the emergence of the research university, and the dramatic expansion of the number of students attending college (Brereton 1995, Kitzhaber 1953). Before the Civil War, the curriculum had been dominated by education in Greek and Latin that prepared young men for careers in the church, the legislatures, and the law; both composition and oral debate were incorporated at all levels. After the Civil War, this curriculum was rapidly replaced by English-language instruction, the elective system, and courses of study in the sciences and the technical professions; composition then became a separate course.

Anxiety about the expansion of higher education to the "industrial classes" by the Morrill Act led to an emphasis in the new composition course on grammatical correctness as a sign of acceptable social class and thus to a view of composition as a remedial course that served as a barrier against the uneducated masses. Instruction in composition became dominated by a view of good writing as the avoidance of error and by the labor of marking student papers, or "themes," for error (Connors 1985).

Within the new curriculum, instruction in English-language literature replaced the moral and historical education formerly provided by Greek and Latin literature. Thus, the new departments of English usually combined instruction in both writing and literature. By 1910 the pattern we still see today had become securely established: tenured professors teaching advanced literature courses and low-status and temporary personnel teaching first-year composition as "apprentice work" (Brereton 1995, Connors 1990). From the beginning, composition courses have been treated as remedial and, from the perspective of many teachers, as a way-station to something better. One teacher in 1903 voiced the

feelings of many even today: "I thank God I have been delivered from the bondage of theme-work into the glorious liberty of literature" (Connors 1990).  Both the increasing number of students to be taught and the labor of reading student writing sustained the low status of such instruction and encouraged an emphasis on reading over writing, even within the composition course, in order to lighten the burden.

The marginalization of composition within English departments was matched by the marginalization of other practice-oriented subjects of instruction that were included in the early departments, such as oratory and debate, theater arts, and journalism.  In most institutions these disciplines split away from English to form their own academic units and pursue instructional and research agendas of their own, agendas that were discouraged within the hierarchy of the English department (Brereton 1995, Parker 1967).  Because composition did not pursue this route, its low status remained unchallenged until the 1960s when the open-admission policy at CUNY initiated a wave of research and professionalization in composition that still continues.  This movement has made a strong case that there's nothing natural about teaching composition and literature together.

# The two positions — reconsidered

These seven assumptions about teaching and learning writing are undermined by the research and scholarship we have summarized above. And new rhetoricians across the country have been designing and revising composition programs to move beyond these assumptions and build on the research and associated new teaching practices.

Traditionalists often misinterpret these challenges and revisions as a denial of the value of literature in the curriculum. That is not the case. We do question whether either composition instruction or literature instruction is best served by combining them. At NC State, the General Education Requirements include a humanities requirement of two courses in literature and/or history, providing a place for literature in the curriculum of every undergraduate. One may disagree with the structure of this requirement; for example, it does not require all students to take at least one literature course. But that's not an argument about composition courses, which are included under a different section of the General Education Requirements altogether.

None of this is to say that writing should not be used in literature courses, as it should be used in all courses across the curriculum—chemistry, sociology, accounting, nutrition—for students to demonstrate what they have learned, engage in critical thinking about it, and practice ways of applying it. The General Education Requirements specifically call for this. But separate courses devoted to writing can provide a foundation for these other efforts.

Traditionalists sometimes argue that focusing on writing instead of literature saps the composition course of its humanistic value in the curriculum. Rhetoricians deny this charge as well, arguing that a properly taught writing course (whether freshman composition, technical writing, journalism, or creative writing) will emphasize the human relations that are established through writing and will require students to demonstrate critical analysis, empathy, strategy, and creativity, as well as respect for the power of language (see Miller 1979 for this argument as applied to technical writing). Rhetoric is, after all, the oldest of the liberal arts.

If we think of the composition program not as "English" courses but as university courses, with the needs of all departments and students at the center of the program, we find that the traditional approach falls short. We need composition courses that are designed with these needs in mind and informed by the best research and teaching practices available.

# Principles for effective composition instruction at NC State

The challenge is to design writing courses that offer students the ability to succeed in the writing and thinking they do at the university. Of course, no composition program can focus on every kind of writing in every curriculum, so we must develop a program that balances the general and the particular. The research suggests that such a program ought to do four things:

1. A first-year composition program should focus on genres that are specific to the university setting and tend to cross disciplinary boundaries—student genres such as the essay exam, the research report, the summary of assigned reading material, the critical analysis. That is, it should include instruction in types of writing and writing skills that can be adapted for transfer across disciplines.

2. It should include the writing process as an important part of its teaching agenda. Such instruction goes beyond the analysis of written texts to help students develop the strategies needed to produce such texts.

3. It should teach students that there are different expectations for writing and thinking across the university and beyond, different disciplinary and professional cultures, if you will. It should provide students with tools for analyzing the conventions of thinking and writing that differ across these cultures. Students must learn to be "academic anthropologists," developing the ability to analyze a culture and to work successfully in it, if only for a semester. The analytical tools give students the power to discern the crucial distinctions among different cultures: what guiding assumptions underlie arguments, what counts as evidence, what kinds of claims are made, who the readers are and what purposes they have, what forms of documentation are used, what the key sources are, etc. These tools will help prepare them to learn in later courses what it means to think like a botanist or a sociologist or a civil engineer. And the way they write will provide the best evidence of their ability to do that kind of thinking.

4. It should furnish ample opportunity for students to practice writing of different types for different contexts in order to apply the learned knowledge and skills under the watchful eye of someone who is trained to understand how language works in a variety of situations.

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