Bridging the Gap:
Understanding the Skills and Writing Knowledge of Entering College Composition Students

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Master of Arts
Degree
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DEDICATION

To Eric –
Your ceaseless encouragement and steady support have kept me going.
I could not have finished this without you and your unwavering belief in me.

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ABSTRACT

Given the often-discussed struggles of first-year university students as they learn to write in college, this qualitative interview study was an exploratory investigation of the experiences of five first-year students during their first semester at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The study focused on their experiences in high school and in English 101, the first course in the university's two-semester first-year composition sequence, which all undergraduates at the university are required to take. This study sought the perspective of these students to answer the questions: (1) What do first-year students in first-year composition classes know about writing, and (2) How does students' prior knowledge compare to their actual experiences in their first-year composition classes?

"What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves."

(Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*)

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background and Context

In "Inventing the University," David Bartholomae describes a common dilemma faced by writers: "Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion – invent the university, that is, or a branch of it … *The student has to learn to speak our language*, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (3, emphasis added). He further describes the need for basic writers to learn what, to them, are the mysterious and elusive conventions of various academic discourses at the university level before being able to successfully write in a particular academic discourse. He suggests that:

> One response to the problems of basic writers … would be to determine just what the community's conventions are, so that those conventions could be written out, "demystified" and taught in our classrooms. Teachers, as a result, could be more precise when they ask students to "think," "argue," "describe," or "define." Another response would be to examine the essays written by basic writers – their approximations of academic discourse – to determine more clearly where the problems lie. If we look at their writing, and if we look at it in the context of other student writing, we can better see the points of discord that arise when students try to write their way into the university. (14)

Another composition theorist, Peter Elbow, writes in "Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment":

> Imagine that we want to teach students an ability they badly lack, for example how to organize their writing or how to make their sentences clearer. Skinner's insight is that we get nowhere in this task by just telling them how much they lack this skill: "It's disorganized. Organize it!" … No, what we must learn to do is to read closely and carefully enough to show the student little bits of proto-organization or sort of clarity in what they've already written. … *Notice how much more helpful it is if we can*

> *say, "Do more of what you've done here," than if we say, "Do something different from anything you've done in the whole paper."* (202-3, emphasis added)

Bartholomae and Elbow are not necessarily describing the same phenomenon – Bartholomae is addressing the need for composition instructors to help situate basic writers into the discourse(s) of the university, while Elbow is discussing possible evaluative techniques in a composition classroom. However, there is a subtle difference in the two pedagogical theories at the heart of each of these essays, each of which is implicit in the descriptions of the relationship between composition students, composition instructors, and the university.

What lurks behind Bartholomae's description of university students learning the discourse of the academy is a framework which values the privileged discourse of the instructor as an individual fluent in a given academic discourse over the "native" discourse of the student – i.e., the discourse the student is most familiar with outside of the university and in which the student is most adept. In such a framework, students must learn the discourse of the university and, in the specific case of first-year composition courses, the discourse of their composition instructors – with the help of these instructors, of course. In "Inventing the University," there is no explicit mention of student knowledge and discourse as something that is meaningful – there is, at most, the acknowledgment that the "native" discourses of students differ immensely from the academic discourses of their instructors.

Elbow, on the other hand, suggests that successful composition teachers build upon what their students already know, by telling students to do more of what they are already good at as exhibited by what they have *already* successfully done in their papers.

Behind Elbow's description of this method by which composition teachers might evaluate their students' writing is the idea, then, that writing instructors teach their subject and effectively help composition students improve their writing by building upon what the students already know, what they can *already* successfully do as writers. In such a scheme, students' prior knowledge and previous skills and strengths are valued. In Bartholomae's framework, the focus is on the instructor to teach and on the student to learn the academic discourse of his or her composition instructor; in Elbow's, while the focus is on the instructor to teach the conventions of that academic discourse, the instructor best does so by utilizing the student's pre-existing writing knowledge – *both* sets of knowledge, the instructor's and the student's, are essentially valued.

However, even if a composition instructor enacts a pedagogical theory such as Elbow's, the larger question remains – what *do* writers coming into college already know about writing? Studies have been done that explore the writing experiences of university students once they come to college, such as Nancy Sommers' and Laura Saltz's study, "The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year." This study followed a group of freshmen at Harvard through their first year of college writing, but did not take a retrospective look back at the previous educational experiences of its participants: What brought the participants to Harvard? What shaped them to be the writers they are as freshman in college? Such questions should, in no way, discredit or undermine the importance of such studies as Sommers' and Saltz's. They should, however, bring attention to a certain gap in composition theorists' and instructors' knowledge of students' own writing knowledge.

Statement of the Problem

In order to investigate the gap in composition theorists' and instructors' knowledge of students' own writing knowledge, a pilot study was conducted during the spring semester of 2011. The purpose of the survey study was to attempt to arrive at some answers to the question, "In what situations have FYC students experienced writing, and how do they understand and value writing in those different writing situations?" The data from the survey revealed a distinct disjunction between the teacher-researcher's understanding of writing and the participants' understandings of writing. This led the researcher – a graduate student in English, a Writing Center tutor, and, at the time, a Teaching Assistant for first-year composition classes training to be an FYC instructor and enrolled in the department's requisite Composition Pedagogy class – to recognize that she took for granted that her own understanding of writing would be the same as the survey study participants' understandings of writing. While the survey asked questions about different activities the researcher understood as writing, the participants' responses showed that they did not consider such activities to be writing, and thus her own assumptions of what this group of students already knew about writing were wrong. The researcher realized that, despite her training and preparation to teach her own first-year composition classes and her two years of experience tutoring first-year composition students, she knew very little about what these students actually thought and knew about writing. This led her to the conclusion that, despite their assumptions of what FYC students already know and understand about writing, some FYC teachers, tutors, and others who are fluent to this particular academic discourse community – who hold a privileged position in the discourse, according to Bartholomae – do not know enough

about students' actual writing experiences prior to their arrival at college and in FYC classrooms. The current study is an attempt to address this problem. Many college-level English instructors who teach first-year composition (FYC) assume entering freshmen possess certain writing skills and particular understandings of writing, but those assumptions may not always be based on accurate information about their students' actual skills and knowledge. This may become a problem when teachers from different parts of the country and with varying training meet actual students from a particular locale in a particular college setting, as a mismatch sometimes occurs between teachers' assumptions and students' actual skills. By examining the writing skills and knowledge about writing that local first-year students bring with them to their first semester of college, this study sought to investigate this phenomenon in one setting to arrive at local answers to the question, "What do first-year students in first-year composition classes know about writing?"

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to use qualitative interviewing to investigate what previous writing knowledge, skills, and experience first-year students from Knox County High Schools bring with them into their first-year composition classes at the University of Tennessee.

Research Questions

The current study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1) What do first-year students in first-year composition classes at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UT) know about writing?

2) How does that knowledge compare to their experiences in their first-year composition classes (English 101) at UT?

As this study was exploratory in nature, it was an investigation of FYC students' general knowledge of academic writing, and did not investigate their knowledge of specific aspects of writing, such as the writing process or genre knowledge.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

"The key to understanding qualitative research," writes Sharan B. Merriam,

> lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world. The world, in reality, is not the fixed, single, agreed upon or measurable phenomenon that it is assumed to be in positivist, quantitative research. Instead, there are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality that are in flux and that change over time. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding what those interpretations are at a particular point in time and in a particular context. Learning how individuals experience and interact with their social world, the meaning it has for them, is considered an *interpretive* qualitative approach. (4)

This qualitative interview study took such an interpretive approach. The focus of the research questions was on *students'* knowledge, and so the study's emphasis was on participants' own perceptions and descriptions of their experiences with writing. Furthermore, as described by Merriam, the study had all of the characteristics of a basic interpretive qualitative study, as the researcher sought "to discover and understand … the perspectives … of the people involved," and the "data [were] collected through interviews," then "inductively analyzed to identify the recurring patterns or common themes that cut across the data"; finally, "a descriptive account of the findings [was written] … using references to the literature that framed the study in the first place" (6-7).

For a more thorough discussion of the conceptual and theoretical framework of the study, see Chapter Three.

Significance of the Study

The current study attempts to address a gap in FYC instructors' knowledge of their students' writing knowledge and experiences. The nature of this interview study – speaking directly to a selection of FYC students about their prior writing knowledge, skills, and experiences – puts an explicit value on students' perspectives. Furthermore, the findings of the interview study may ultimately enable English 101 instructors at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville – and perhaps elsewhere – to better understand and teach their first-year students.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

The delimitations of the current study were as follows: Five students enrolled in English 101 at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, during the fall semester of 2011 participated in the study. All of the participants were entering first-year college students, as this is the class standing of the majority of English 101 students, and because such students are new to the academic discourse of the university. All of the participants graduated from Knox County high schools at the end of the 2010-2011 academic school year. Because the university is located in Knox County, the majority of undergraduate students at the university are from Knox County. The limitations of the study included:

(1) A specific sample population: Because the participants were from one particular school system (Knox County), the sample is not representative of the average English 101 student.

(2) The quality of the data: Because all the interviews were not recorded on the same audio-recording device, the quality of the audio recordings of each interview varied. In the case of two audio files (Interview One with Elizabeth and the last part of Interview Two with Francisco), the quality was so poor it could not be transcribed and analyzed.

(3) No actual student writing was reviewed: The researcher did not look at any of the participants' actual writing.

(4) Compensation and the nature of the study: The promise of compensation and the researcher's status as a graduate student in English and an English 101 instructor may have affected the findings of the study. This is discussed in Chapter 5, "Discussion and Conclusion."

Organization of the Study

The study is organized into five chapters:

1) *Chapter 1 – Introduction:* This chapter gives a general overview of the study.
2) *Chapter 2 – Review of the Literature:* This chapter reviews the relevant research in the field of composition pedagogy that addresses issues related to first-time college students in first-year composition classes, including teachers' assumptions about such students.
3) *Chapter 3 – Methods and Procedures:* This chapter presents the methods and procedures that were used in the current study, including the theoretical framework, research design, and research methods.
4) *Chapter 4 – Findings*: This chapter describes the demographic data and the findings of the current study.

5) *Chapter 5 – Discussion and Conclusions*: This chapter summarizes and discusses the findings and implications of the current study, as well as the conclusions that can be drawn. This chapter also includes recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

The following chapter is a review of the literature related to how the field of composition studies understands – and portrays that understanding – of FYC students making the transition into college writing. Before that discussion ensues, however, there is a general description of the phenomenon of transfer, which is a tool for understanding students' transition into college writing. The second section of this chapter then describes and discusses how the image of the FYC student has appeared in the literature since Bartholomae put forth the idea of students writing their way into the university. The emphasis in the first section is primarily on discourses – e.g., academic discourse and the "native" or "common" discourses of students, or the discourse communities students belong to outside of the university – and differences between the conventions of different discourses. While the focus of the current study is not on *discourse*, per se, but on students' experiences and knowledge, these are the terms in which the field of composition studies has described and discussed the struggle of first-year students as they write in college. Furthermore, the imbalance of the descriptions of the discourses of academia and students – which favor academia, as very few actually describe the discourses of students – exhibits the field's overall lack of knowledge of FYC students' knowledge, the missing perspective of FYC students, and, ultimately, the lack of research that has been done which focuses on students' *prior* knowledge of and experiences with writing – i.e., what they know about writing outside of the FYC classroom and the

university. Following the discussion of the portrayals of FYC students is a discussion of recent studies that have been done which focus on first-year students writing in college.

Transfer

In their articles, "Teaching for Transfer" (1988) and "Transfer of Learning" (1992), David N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon describe the phenomenon of transfer. *Transfer*, as they define it, is the idea that "something learned in one context … [helps] in another" ("Teaching" 22). Put differently, "transfer of learning occurs when learning in one context … impacts … performance in another context" (Perkins and Salomon, "Transfer"). Perkins and Salomon typify transfer into four different categories: near versus far transfer, low road versus high road transfer, negative versus positive transfer, and forward-reaching versus backward-reaching transfer. *Near* transfer is the application of skills and knowledge learned in one situation "to closely related contexts and performances," while *far* transfer is the application of such skills and knowledge "to rather different contexts and performances" (Perkins and Salomon, "Transfer"). According to Perkins and Salomon, *low road* transfer "reflects the automatic triggering of well-practiced routines in circumstances where there is considerable perceptual similarity to the original learning context"; *high road* transfer, on the other hand, "depends on deliberate mindful abstraction of skill or knowledge from one context to another" ("Teaching" 25). Discussions of transfer, however, are not always about *positive* transfer, which "occurs when learning in one context improves performance in [another] context" – sometimes transfer is *negative*, meaning that what one has learned in one context has a negative impact on his or her performance in a different context (Perkins and Salomon, "Transfer"). Perkins and Salomon also describe *forward-reaching* transfer, when "one

learns something and abstracts it in preparation for applications elsewhere," and *backward-reaching* transfer, when "one finds oneself in a problematic situation, abstracts key characteristics from the situation, and reaches backward into one's experiences for matches" ("Teaching" 26).

What, though, is the difference between learning and transfer? According to Perkins and Salomon, that difference is unclear: "No absolute line can be drawn between ordinary learning and transfer," they write, because "any learning requires some modicum of transfer," since "to say that learning has occurred means that the person can display that learning later" in a situation which, while similar, will probably not be exactly the same as the original context in which learning occurred ("Transfer"). "However," Perkins and Salomon continue, "transfer … becomes interesting … in situations where the transfer would not be thought of as ordinary learning. For example, a student may show certain grammar skills on the English test (ordinary learning) but not in everyday speech (the hoped-for transfer)" ("Transfer"). "Talk of transfer," then, "is always at least implicitly contrastive: it assumes learning within a certain context and asks about impact beyond that context" (Perkins and Salomon, "Transfer").

However, impact beyond the original learning context is not always achieved; in fact, say Perkins and Salomon, "diverse empirical research on transfer has shown that transfer often does not occur" ("Teaching" 25). Furthermore, when transfer does occur, "the successes fit the description of low road transfer" (Perkins and Salomon, "Teaching" 27). One explanation for why transfer does not often occur is that "knowledge and skill may be too 'local' to allow for many of the expectations and aspirations that educators have held" – that is, "the skills students acquire in learning to read and write, the

knowledge they accumulate in studying the American Revolution, and the problem-solving abilities they develop in math … may be much more specific to those contexts than one would imagine" (Perkins and Salomon, "Teaching" 24).

One of the empirical studies Perkins and Salomon reference was conducted by Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole. Their study tested the hypothesis that "literacy should yield cognitive gains on a number of fronts, not just the skills of reading and writing per se," an idea based on the argument that "written language permits patterns of thinking much more complex than can be managed within the limited capacity of human short-term memory … [and that] written texts, in their presentational and argument structures, illustrate patterns of thinking useful for handling complex tasks" (Salomon and Perkins, "Teaching" 24). Scribner's and Cole's research was a

> detailed study of the Vai, an African tribe that has developed a written language which many members of the tribe learned and used, but that maintains no tradition of formal schooling. Remarkably, the investigators' studies disclosed hardly any impact of Vai literacy on the cognitive performance of Vai who had mastered written language. The hypothesized transfer did not appear. (Perkins and Salomon, "Teaching" 24)

Scribner and Cole concluded that "the impact of literacy depends on immersion in diverse activities surrounding literacy, not on acquisition of reading and writing per se" (Perkins and Salomon, "Transfer").

Though the prospect of transfer may seem grim, Perkins and Salomon do offer some solutions. They suggest that teachers can teach so that the conditions of low road transfer and high road transfer are met (*hugging* and *bridging*, respectively), as well as "help students develop skills of *learning for transfer*" ("Teaching" 28-30). Furthermore, say Perkins and Salomon, "despite the local knowledge results, there are numerous

opportunities for transfer," as "disciplinary boundaries are very fuzzy," and both "important crosscutting thinking strategies" and "patterns of thinking of intermediate generality" do exist ("Teaching" 30-31).

Portrayals of FYC Students

In 1985, David Bartholomae wrote "Inventing the University," in which he explores the difficulties students – specifically, basic writers – face as they attempt to write in the academic discourses of the university, or, as he describes it, the "privileged language of university discourse" (6). Although Bartholomae focuses on basic writers, or those who are the least prepared for college composition, the difficulties this specific group of writers face in college – as described by Bartholomae – also applies to first-year college composition students in general, as it is not just basic writers who struggle to learn academic discourse conventions when they get to college.

"In order to speak as a person of status or privilege," writes Bartholomae, students must learn to "speak to us in our terms" – i.e., they must learn to speak in the specialized academic discourse of the scholars who teach them (6). He makes two suggestions to composition instructors to ease this transition: (1) To better explain their discourses, to demystify and make them more explicit to students, or, (2) To actually examine the writing produced by such basic writers, in order to "better see the points of discord that arise" (14). Barthomae chooses the latter approach for himself. In order "to determine the stylistic resources that enabled writers to locate themselves within an academic discourse," he "reviewed 500 essays written … in response to a question used during one of [the] placement exams at the University of Pittsburgh" (15). Bartholomae further describes his goals for his examination of these essays, explaining that he "was looking to

see what happened when a writer entered into a language to locate himself (a textual self) and his subject," in order "to see how, once entered, that language made or unmade the writer" (15). What Bartholomae found is that

> the more successful writers set themselves in their essays against what they defined as some more naïve way of talking about their subject – against "those who think that …" – or against earlier, more naïve versions of themselves – "once I thought that…." By trading in one set of commonplaces at the expense of another, they could win themselves status as members of what is taken to be some more privileged group. *The ability to imagine privilege enabled writing.* (20, emphasis added)

This, however, leads to some complications:

> To speak with authority they have to speak not only in another's voice but through another's code; and they not only have to do this, they have to speak in the voice and through the codes of those of us with power and wisdom; and they not only have to do this, they have to do it *before they know what they are doing, before they have a project to participate in, and before, at least in the terms of our disciplines, they have anything to say*. Our students may be able to enter into a conventional discourse and speak, not as themselves, but through the voice of the community; the university, however, is the place where "common" wisdom is only of negative values – it is something to work against. The movement toward a more specialized discourse begins … both when a student can define a position of privilege, a position that sets him against a "common" discourse, and when he or she can work self-consciously, critically, against not only the "common" code *but his or her own*. (22, emphasis added)

In showing that this is often what happens when students try to "write their way" into the discourses of the university, Bartholomae is not advocating that university instructors pit students against their own "common," or "native" discourses – i.e., their discourses outside of or prior to the university (14). Rather, he urges researchers to investigate student writing, "since the drama in a student's essay, as he or she struggles with and against the languages of our contemporary life, is as intense and telling as the drama of an essay's mental preparation or physical production" (27). However, the problem

remains that, even in such a scheme that values student writing, the student must shed his or her own "native" discourse and learn to situate him- or herself in the foreign discourses of academia. There is little-to-no emphasis put on the "common" student discourses out of which such writing ultimately emerges, as Bartholomae's concern is only with the writing produced by students; he does not hear anything from the students whose writing he examined, outside of their words on the page.

One year after Bartholomae's "Inventing the University," Patricia Bizzell continues the discussion of basic writers in first-year composition classes in "What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College." However, unlike Bartholomae, she makes a call for an interview study that would place student writing in the context of students' own world views and past experiences. In her article, Bizzell suggests "that 'basic writers,' … those who are least well prepared for college," are a group whose "salient characteristic is their 'outlandishness' – their appearance to many teachers and to themselves as the students who are the most alien in the college community" (294). However, as in the case of Bartholomae, the difficulties faced by the basic writers Bizzell discusses can be applied to first-year composition students in general.

In her article, Bizzell poses three possibilities of what happens to basic writers when they come to college: they face a clash of dialects, a clash of discourse forms, or a clash of ways of thinking (294 - 296). In this way, she identifies part of the problematic gap in FYC instructors' knowledge, admitting that "we do not know much about the world views basic writers bring to colleges" (297). Bizzell also admits that "we will find it hard to assess the difficulty of acquiring the academic worldview until we know how different it is from basic writers' home world views"; furthermore, "*since we do not know*

enough about basic writers' original world views, basic writers' 'outlandishness' in college strongly suggests that the difference is great and that for them … acquiring the academic world view means becoming bicultural" (297-298, emphasis added). She continues by suggesting that "biculturalism is likely to be very difficult when the academic world view is one of the world views involved, because the academic seeks to subsume other world views to which the students may retain allegiance. … [they] may feel that they are being asked to abandon their less prestigious, less socially powerful world views in favor of the academic" (299). At the end of this article, in which she explores the three possibilities noted above, Bizzell makes a call to action: "We need a study of basic writers similar to that conducted by Perry – a series of interviews to tell us how they mediate between their home cultures and the academic culture as they move on through their college educations" (300).

Like Bartholomae, the "basic writers" Bizzell refers to in her article are a specific type of students, those who are, as Bizzell explains, the least prepared for college and, specifically, college writing. Though the focus of the current study was not on such basic writers, but first-year composition students in general, Bizzell's description of what happens when basic writers come to college is not specific to this particular group of students. Her claim that "we do not know enough about basic writers' original world views" should be extended to first-year students in first-year composition classrooms. Ultimately, Bizzell, like Bartholomae, calls for the field of composition studies to know and understand more about this specific group of college writers, yet little is known about the prior knowledge of first-year composition students in general.

In "Inventing the University," Bartholomae ultimately confronts researchers with the challenge of turning "their attention again to products, to student writing" (27). Bizzell, in "What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College," extends that challenge to understanding the world views students hold outside of the university. Peter Elbow continues this consideration of first-year composition students by making the suggestion in "Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Three Forms of Judgment" (1993) that composition instructors emphasize students' knowledge of writing when assessing the writing produced by students enrolled in college composition courses. In his article, Elbow challenges composition instructors to not simply rank student writing, but to evaluate it, and to not simply evaluate student writing, but to like it – either in addition to, or as the foundation of such evaluation (199).

Ultimately, what these composition theorists (Bizzell, Bartholomae, and Elbow) call for is more of an emphasis on student writing. Although Elbow does not, as Bartholomae does, challenge *researchers*, per se, to focus on student writing, he does urge composition instructors to find "what is good – or *potentially* good" in student writing, to look for "potential goodness underneath badness" (202). As discussed in Chapter One of the current study, Elbow suggests that, instead of telling students to "'do something *different* from anything [they've] done in the whole paper,'" it is much more helpful if instructors positively reinforce the writing skills students *already* have by telling them to "'do *more* of what you've done here'" (202-203). He is taking Bartholomae's suggestion one step further; it is not just in research that those on the "privileged" side of the field of composition studies should focus on student writing, but also in everyday classroom practice. As Bartholomae says, "our students … must have a

place to begin" (23). Elbow suggests that the place for students to begin improving their writing is to draw on what they already do well, what they already know about writing – as evidenced by their actual writing.

In their emphasis – and call for more emphasis – on student writing in the field of composition studies, Bartholomae and Elbow ultimately insist that it is not enough to make explicit to students the specific conventions of a particular discourse – student writing is also important. If student writing is important, then it follows, as Bizzell suggests, that what students have to say about their writing is also important, and is valuable to both researchers and teachers in the field, because one's writing is not produced in a vacuum, but is influenced by the sum of the writer's experiences, both past and present. This is the assumption under which the current study operates, as it ultimately seeks to investigate the problematic discord between student and instructor discourses. The problem evidenced, though, is that there is little emphasis on the actual "native" discourses shed by students in favor of the "privileged" discourses of academia, and so the question of *what* students actually know still remains.

The authors of "Seeking Common Ground: Guiding Assumptions for Writing Courses" – written in 1995, seventeen years before the current study was conducted – discuss some issues in the field of composition studies that prove to be still relevant today. In light of issues such as the debate over the "politicizing of courses in composition" and "the changing nature of writing courses and composition's changing institutional status," Denise David, Barbara Gordon, and Rita Pollard write that, "Now is a crucial time for composition studies to engage in a conversation exploring the assumptions underlying writing courses" (522, 524).

The authors list the role of university writing classes as the "gatekeeper" as one of the reasons for the changes in the field, and describe the "stormy past" of composition instruction:

> Its inherited gatekeeper function has placed it at the very doors of higher education. As [David] Russell states, "Freshman English was an easy target for those who wished to preserve the elite character of the institution which had faded at the turn of the century with the rise of the comprehensive modern university and its decidedly middle-class, professional emphasis. (529)

According to David, Gordon, and Pollard, then, composition classes have traditionally been at odds with an elitist conception of academia. But composition instruction, the authors describe, is not only at odds with an elitist version of the university, but is, in fact, incompatible with "the prevailing and long-standing academic culture," – not simply elitist ideas about that culture – which "is not compatible with the process nature of composition courses and their seeming lack of content. Most of higher education still rests on an assumption that courses focus on subjects, not students' developing abilities. Courses are predominantly constructed so that students master a body of knowledge" (527). University composition courses, then, are – and have been – at odds with the predominant culture of academia in which they are nestled.

It follows that the students enrolled in these composition courses are also at odds with the prevailing culture of academia with which they are confronted when they face the university for the first time. Furthermore, as has already been described, composition students often find themselves at odds with the instructors of composition courses themselves, as the instructors are, to put it in Bartholomae's terms, the "privileged" players in this discourse. While there is the potential for writing courses to "be among the

most empowering courses for students because writing allows them to move from 'silence' … to finding voice," this potential is not always realized, given the common disjunctions between first-year college writers, their composition instructors, and the university as a whole: students are at odds with their first-year composition teachers, who are the "gatekeepers" of the academy, but FYC classes themselves – and so, the instructors of those courses – are also often at odds with the rest of the university (David, Gordon, and Pollard 528).

Consequently, first-year composition courses are poised in a precarious position in the academy, which makes it all the more confusing for the students enrolled in those classes, who are confronting the university culture for the first time. Furthermore, as David, Gordon, and Pollard point out, the field of composition studies itself was, in 1995 (and still is, today), equally confusing: "currently, composition studies is filled with discordant voices. … These voices are multiple, loud, insistent, and ultimately cacophonous. There is no discernible, concordant harmony" (522). However, a certain perspective is missing from this cacophonous mix – student voices telling those in the field what they (students) knew about writing before they came to college and enrolled in first-year composition classes. In light of the description of FYC courses as the "gatekeeper of high education," this perspective is important, as students from many different types of backgrounds pass through the gates of the FYC classroom.

The year after David, Gordon, and Pollard's article was published, Paul Jude Beauvais continues with and adds to their discussion in "First Contact: Composition Students' Close Encounters with College Culture." In the article, he describes the experiences of the students enrolled in his College Writing classes as they encounter the

university for the first time. Beauvais begins the article by describing Mary Louise Pratt's idea of classrooms as contact zones, which are, according to Pratt, "'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power'" (qtd. in Beauvais 25). Beauvais further explains that he was inspired by Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" to design a College Writing course which focuses on college life, and sets out, in his article, to "demonstrate that the first-year composition class can be a particularly important contact zone in that it can serve as an arena for exploring the pedagogical value of several types of *first* contacts that new students experience in other contact zones of the university" by discussing the assignments his students complete in his course (25-26). His motivation, Beauvais says, is that he has "not seen a study of how the classroom may be used to explore what may be the most pressing concern facing first-year college students: their adjustment to life on a college campus" (25-26).

With his discussion of the College Writing course that he designed, Beauvais essentially describes the gatekeeper function of the first-year composition classroom (as identified by David, Gordon, and Pollard) in action, as it ultimately normalizes the prior discourse of first-year composition students learning to write in the discourse conventions of the academy. His three writing assignments – a look at "the history of life at American universities," for which students interview people "who attended college at least ten years ago"; an ethnographic observational study of the students' own college campus; and a proposal "for changes in the policies or procedures of the university" that students are encouraged to submit to administrators – initiate his students into university life, as well

as to the conventions of academic discourse (27-34). Beauvais found that, after completing the ethnographic observational study,

> almost all students agreed that the university exerts too much control over their lives and that it exercises its power in an arbitrary manner. Indeed, the students' images of the administration resemble those that the colonized might draw of a colonizing power: they see the administration as governing by fiat without the consent of the governed. (34)

Furthermore, after writing and submitting their proposals for changes on campus, "students usually find that their most ambitious proposals are undermined by their position in the university … a position that undermines the authority of [students'] discourse" (Beauvais 35-36).

It is, of course, important, as both Bartholomae and Beauvais suggest, for students to understand the university culture and the conventions of academic discourse. However, through learning about college life, students discover the problematic fact that, in the hierarchy of the university – the main function of which, ideally, is to foster the education of *students* – they are the disenfranchised. Beauvais notes his awareness of this fact:

> When I as a teacher promote forms of academic writing for my classes, I position myself as an "other" for my students. I stand as a representative of an institutional hierarchy that constrains their options for expression. In adopting this position I influence my students by pulling their texts toward the conventions of the academy. … In introducing academic modes of discourse, I recognize that students will need to adapt those modes to suit the particular demands of their own positions within the university. (37)

However, like David, Gordon, and Pollard, Beauvais also sees the potential of the first-year composition class as empowering for students; specifically, Beauvais notes the course's ability to assist students in democratizing their universities, as well as its role as a contact zone that provides "a point of entry into the discourse of the academy" (38). So, through the completion of an assignment for a college course whose role as gatekeeper is

to normalize the prior discourse conventions of first-year composition students so that they match the discourse conventions of the university, students discover that, in the institutional hierarchy of the university, *they* are the disenfranchised group whose voices remain unheard – perhaps because their original discourse has been over-ridden by the conventions of academic discourse taught in their first-year composition courses.

As Beauvais suggests, this is empowering, as the recognition of one's own disenfranchisement is, indeed, crucial to one's empowerment. However, what is problematic in Beauvais' article is that, despite his assertion that "the most pressing concern facing first-year college students [is] their adjustment to life on a college campus," which implicitly places value on understanding students' own experiences, any attempt to understand the experiences of students *prior* to attending college is noticeably absent (26). A thorough discussion of adjustment and transition should include the experiences *from* which students are adjusting.

Seven years after Beauvais' article, Gerald Graff finally begins to add the experiences and voices of first-year composition studies to the mix, in his book, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (2003), by describing the discourse of popular culture from which most first-year university students emerge. As has already been described, there exists a discord between the "native" discourses of university students enrolled in composition classes and the academic discourse of the university. That is to say that, at the university-level, students and their instructors do not always speak the same "language." Graff candidly describes the discord between these two discourses. In the introduction, he explains his book as

> an attempt by an academic to look at academia from the perspective of those who don't get it. Its subject is cluelessness, the bafflement, usually accompanied by shame and resentment, felt by students, the general public, and even many academics in the face of the impenetrability of the academic world. It examines some overlooked ways in which schools and colleges themselves … perpetuate that the life of the mind is a secret society for which only an elite few qualify. (1)

This idea of the elitism of the university is an echo of what Beauvais and David, Gordon, and Pollard have to say about composition studies. Bartholomae's conclusion in "Inventing the University" is also echoed by Graff's statement that "academia reinforces cluelessness by making its ideas, problems, and ways of thinking *look* more opaque, narrowly specialized, and beyond normal learning capacities than they need to be." However, Graff further explains that "academic intellectual culture is not at all irrelevant to … students' needs and interests, but we do a very good job of making it appear as if it is" (Graff 1). Graff, then, rejects the idea that the academic conventions of the university are inherently different from the discourse of students prior to and outside of their identity as college students, and thereby begins to bridge the gap between those discourses.

He does so by beginning to describe the "common" discourse to which Bartholomae refers – the discourse communities to which university students belong *outside* of the university. According to Graff, this discourse is, namely, the discourse of popular culture:

> Too often schools and colleges take intellectual conversations that resemble the ones students engage in or encounter in the popular media, and make them seem unrecognizable, as well as no fun. To put it another way, schooling takes students who are perfectly street-smart and exposes them to the life of the mind in ways that make them feel dumb. (1-2)

Furthermore, Graff suggests that it is both "the legacy of American anti-intellectualism, which elevates hardheaded common sense over supposedly impractical academic navel gazing," as well as the "educational institutions themselves … [who make] the culture of ideas and arguments look opaque and therefore more remote than it actually is from the wisdom of the street" that are responsible for "street smarts … [failing] to evolve naturally into academic smarts" and, ultimately, "[opposing] academic smarts, as if the two can't coexist inside the same head" (2). In other words, the discourse of academic life is not as far removed from the discourse of popular culture (with which most students are familiar) as is often perpetuated by those on both sides of the gap between these discourses.

Graff continues with this idea, stating that, "as teachers, we often proceed as if the rationale of our most basic academic practices is understood and shared by our students, even when we get plenty of signs that it is not. We take for granted, for example, that … 'intellectualizing' is something our students naturally see the point of" (43). Likewise, certain "[features] of academic intellectual discourse" are counterintuitive, such as "its seemingly superfluous degree of self-explanation and elaboration, especially when we compare that discourse with casual conversation" (58). On both sides of the gap between these two discourses, then, those who belong in each discourse community take for granted the conventions of their specific discourse. There is no attempt to bridge the gap by explaining specific discourse conventions to those on the other side.

Ultimately, Graff makes the claim that the discourse conventions of academic and popular cultures are not so different from each other. Furthermore, he puts the burden on first-year composition instructors to bridge the gap between discourses in their

classrooms by recognizing the overlap, and to draw on the discourse conventions students already know to teach them the specific discourse conventions of academia:

> …this chapter title ["Why Johnny Can't Argue"] has it wrong. Johnny *can* argue competently when he is in a real conversation that requires him to be persuasive. … Children learn to argue as soon as they are old enough to lobby parents … to let them stay up late … But Johnny – and Susie – do often run into problems when it comes to the kind of argumentation that is recognized and rewarded by academic institutions. School argument seems so remote from arguing with your parents … that there seems little carryover in these practices. Schools should be tapping far more than they do into students' youthful argument cultures, which are not as far removed as they look from public forms of argument. … *Instead of taking advantage of the bridges between youthful argument worlds and those of public discourse, schools generally make it hard for students to recognize their argumentative practices in those of academia*. (155-156, emphasis added)

By advocating that composition instructors utilize what composition students already know in order to teach them how to argue, which is, Graff explains, "the name of the game in academia," he takes on Elbow's call to draw on what students can already successfully do as writers one step further (3). However, in these selections from *Clueless in Academe*, Graff only concerns himself with student writing, and the ways students' knowledge of argumentation – as learned through popular culture – exhibits itself in their papers; he does not actually speak to students themselves about their own prior experiences with writing, and thus, this perspective is missing from his discussion of their discourse conventions outside of the university.

In 2011, Linda A. Fernsten's and Mary Reda's article, "Helping Students Meet the Challenges of Academic Writing" was published. In their article, Fernsten and Reda describe their own classroom approaches to helping ease the struggles of students as they learn the conventions of academic writing. As Fernsten and Reda explain,

> Many students struggling to become more skillful users of the discourses required in college-level classes have become convinced that they are simply "bad writers." Stuck in these negative identities and fearful of failure in academic writing tasks (rather than seeing themselves as learners in the process of acquiring the discourses and skills required in discipline-specific genres), students may subtly or overtly resist writing assignments. … How do students come to understand who they are as writers? … How can educators help them explore their writer identities and better understand the complex and multi-layered challenges that all writers face? (171)

Fernsten and Reda offer reflective practices, such as those they use in their own classrooms, as a possible answer to the questions they pose; they describe such practices as "an effective tool … for helping students see themselves as writers learning to negotiate the variety of literacies required in the academy" (171-172). The reflective writing exercises that they suggest help "students better understand the work of writing as they struggle to become more effective writers, negotiating multiple literacies" (173). Fernsten and Reda outline one such reflective writing exercise, the "Seeing Yourself as a Writer" project, which "begins with a low-stakes, generative assignment … [that] asks students to consider their experiences and influences as writers, their typical writing practices, and their views of writing" (175). Fernsten and Reda find it valuable for their composition students to reflect on their prior experiences with writing in order to see themselves as writers. However, the underlying assumption of such an exercise is that students do not already see themselves as writers prior to coming to college. Such an assumption reveals what little value is placed on FYC students' prior experiences with writing.

As evidenced in this review of the literature's portrayal of first-year composition students' struggles with the discourse conventions of writing in the university, little has

been said since Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" was written in 1985 about what students actually know about writing prior to coming to college. The struggles students have, however, still remain, despite twenty-seven years of discussing the differences that exist between the conventions of academic discourse and the discourses to which students belong outside of the university. There is a definite gap, one which might be bridged, as Bizzell, Elbow, and Graff suggest, by understanding where first-year composition students are coming from in terms of their prior writing skills and knowledge and their previous experiences with writing. The next section describes and discusses recent research that has been done on the writing of first-year students as they transition into college.

Recent Research

In "Reading Classrooms as Text: Exploring Student Writers' Interpretative Practices," written in 1995, Jennie Nelson makes a suggestion that echoes Bizzell's call to action in "What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College," to learn more about first-year composition students' world views:

> While it may sometimes be useful to see ourselves as insiders who can help initiate our students into the worlds of academic discourse, I believe that *we may at the same time need to be initiated into our students' world, to position ourselves as outsiders to our students' interpretive practices in order to explore the structure of assumptions that guides students' choices when they write*. (412, emphasis added)

Nelson's stated purpose is "to critically examine [the] commonplace" of "describing students as newcomers or outsiders who need to be initiated into the academic discourse community," thus taking issue with Bartholomae's framework of the first-year composition classroom (411). Her argument is that,

> while many students may be unfamiliar with the specialized conventions of different disciplines, an image of our students as uninitiated outsiders fails to recognize that students are already long-standing members of the culture of school and are highly literate about how classrooms work. *This image fails to account for the powerful legacy of school experiences that students bring with them every time they step into the classroom and undertake a writing assignment*. (411)

To account for this "powerful legacy" of previous school experiences, Nelson discusses four case studies of college students completing writing assignments for different classes, such as history and freshman composition, in order "to illustrate how students respond to certain features of assignments and classroom environments as they set about interpreting and completing their work" (413). The case studies Nelson describes focused less on the previous writing knowledge and experiences, and more on "the factors that influence students' interpretations of their writing assignments" (413). Nelson found that the students she studied used "their knowledge of how classrooms work" in order to complete their writing assignment, "engaging in a variety of interpretations which influence how they define and approach their writing assignments" (422). From these findings, she concludes that,

> By providing an insider's view of the actual work that goes on beyond classroom boundaries over extended periods of time as students define and complete writing assignments, this kind of research helps to complicate our understanding of student writers and the problems they face. For example, each of these students' teachers intended to use writing to promote active learning and to introduce students to the issues and intellectual activities of their particular disciplinary community. And each of these writing assignments presented students with tasks that were unfamiliar to them. … In each case, students struggled … to integrate the new ways of thinking and writing they were being asked to engage in with the familiar interpretive approaches they brought with them. (426)

This conclusion, she says, ultimately "help[s] to complicate our practice of viewing students as uninitiated outsiders" (427). However, there is no description of students'

previous writing knowledge, nor the prior schooling experiences off of which they based their knowledge of how classrooms work and their assumptions about how to navigate their way through college writing assignments.

Nine years later, in "The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year" (2004), Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz discuss the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing, a longitudinal survey and interview study of over 400 Harvard students, which followed participants' undergraduate writing experiences throughout their four years of college. In "The Novice as Expert," Sommers and Saltz explain that their study tells "a larger story about the central role writing plays in helping students make the transition *to* college," as "writing serves many functions freshman year, both academic and social, to engage students with their learning" (127, 131).

From their study, Sommers and Saltz concluded "that students who initially accept their status as novices and allow their passions to guide them make the greatest gains in writing development" (145). Furthermore, they "observed that freshmen build authority not by writing *from* a position of expertise, but by writing *into* expertise" (134). So, according to this study, those first-year students who embrace their status as novice during their first year of writing in college experience more development as writers than those "who cling to their old habits and formulas and who resent the uncertainty and humility of being a novice have a more difficult time adjusting to the demands of college writing" (134). However, despite Sommers' and Saltz's discussion of the transition freshman students make as they cross the threshold from high school into college, there is no description of participants' prior writing knowledge and experiences, no discussion of

what writing skills they brought them as they crossed that threshold, which could have influenced how they handled that transition (125).

In 2006, the article "High School Teaching and College Expectations in Writing and Reading" by J.P. Patterson and David Duer was published. This article reports "some of the results of a set of national surveys designed to find out what writing and reading skills are taught by high school teachers and expected of incoming students by instructors of common first-year composition courses" (Patterson and Duer 81). The national surveys were writing and reading surveys sent out by ACT Inc., a group that "every three to four years, … conducts nationwide surveys of secondary-level teachers and instructors of typical first-year college courses to help ensure that its educational achievement tests … are aligned with what is taught in secondary-level classes and what is expected of incoming college students" (Patterson and Duer 81). 10,900 writing surveys and 5,200 reading surveys were distributed to teachers at the secondary and postsecondary levels all over the United States in 2002-03, and twenty percent of the surveys were returned (Patterson and Duer 81).

In their analysis of some of the survey findings, Patterson and Duer focused on attempting to address issues that they say are not often discussed, issues concerning what is taught in high school English classes – namely, what actually gets taught in high school English classrooms, and how the teachers in those classrooms "strive to teach the skills they think colleges and universities want from their students, but these teachers may have no way of knowing how well their efforts match up with the expectations of instructors of first-year courses at post-secondary institutions" (Patterson and Duer 81). The reading and writing surveys showed that, for the most part, high school and college teachers

"agree on which [reading and writing] skills are most important," including "'Selecting a topic, formulating a thesis' and 'Editing and proofreading'" (Patterson and Duer 82). There was a difference found, however, in the importance high school teachers and college instructors placed on "Grammar and Usage" skills, as these skills "were, as a whole, rated most important by college instructors of entry-level English courses," but received "the lowest median importance rating" from high school teachers (Patterson and Duer 82). Per the findings of the survey, then, "college instructors appear to place more stress on grammar and usage than do the high school teachers" (Patterson and Duer 81). Furthermore, both groups of teachers were found to value "skills in evaluating and judging text" least out of other reading skills; however, Patterson and Duer are quick to point out that,

> since the surveys asked college instructors to rate skills as prerequisites for success in a particular class that they taught, the college surveys do not directly answer the question of how valuable the instructors think the skills themselves are. It is likely that some … college-survey participants teach these text-evaluation skills in their classes; the low ratings may simply mean they do not expect that high school graduates already possess the skills. (Patterson and Duer 83).

This study ultimately attempts to bridge the gap between high school and college curriculums, and Patterson's and Duer's analysis of some of the findings of the study focuses on the values high school English teachers and instructors of first-year composition courses place on certain reading and writing skills. A study like this is certainly important for both groups of teachers to understand one another and the students who move between them, and is a good first step to understanding students' knowledge of writing. However, what is missing, in light of the current study, is the perspective of students. The study shows us how these educators value certain skills, but what remains

unknown is how these differing values manifest themselves in the way the secondary- and postsecondary-level English classes are taught, and, ultimately, how these skill sets show up in the students' knowledge: Are the writing skills high school teachers most value the same skills students actually have?

In "Teaching Discursive Resources: How Students Use Prior Genre Knowledge to Negotiate New Writing Contexts in First-Year Composition" (2011), Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi describe their cross-institutional study of first-year composition students at the University of Tennessee and the University of Washington. The purpose of the study was "to examine how students use prior genre knowledge when they encounter new writing tasks and situations in FYC courses" (Reiff and Bawarshi 314). The study utilized various research methods: surveys of students enrolled in English 101 at UT and the corresponding FYC course at UW, interviews with students, examination of students' texts, and analysis of course syllabi and assignments (Reiff and Bawarshi 317, 320). The focus of the survey was writing students "had done *before* coming to UT or UW," as well as in which domains (school, work, or outside school and work) they had written in those genres; the focus of the "discourse-based interviews" was the early writing assignments students completed in their FYC courses, and students' reflections of "how they called on previous discursive resources in order to write" those early FYC assignments (Reiff and Bawarshi 318). The study found that, at UT, "the top genres reported in academic domains were research papers (96%), summaries (87%), reports (87%), and personal essays (85%)" (Reiff and Bawarshi 321). The study also found that there was little transfer of genre knowledge across different domains – i.e., "students tended not to report drawing on the full range of their genre knowledge when they encountered and

performed new writing tasks in FYC" – and, furthermore, that "how students use their prior genre knowledge when they encounter and perform new writing tasks in FYC … seems tied to how locked into domains students' genre knowledge appears to be" (Reiff and Bawarshi 323-324).

Overall, the purpose of Reiff's and Bawarshi's study is similar to that of the current study, but the focus of their study was different. Reiff and Bawarshi write that,

> While research on outcomes and transfer has begun to shed some light on the challenges students face as they negotiate disciplinary and professional writing contexts after FYC, there has been less attention to *incomes*, or the 'discursive resources' that students bring with them to FYC. … Focusing on prior genre knowledge, we examined how students negotiate between the resources of their previous writing experiences and the expectations of new academic contexts. (313)

Reiff and Bawarshi, then, have identified the same gap in the literature that the current study is trying to fill. However, their study focuses on students' specific genre knowledge, and *how* students transfer that knowledge to their completion of their FYC assignments. This is unlike the focus of the current study, which is more general in its focus on students' overall prior writing experiences, and less concerned with how those experiences transfer to their FYC experiences.

As evidenced by this review of the recent studies that have been done on the transitions into college writing, overall, the emphasis of the research has been primarily on either (1) how the transition into college writing manifests itself in students' writing, or the general outcomes of the transition, or (2) how prior writing knowledge affects students' actual college writing. Less attention has been paid to a primary focus on students' *prior* knowledge and the experiences out of which that knowledge came, which

is the focus of the current study. The recent research, paired with the absence of the student perspective creates a need for the current study to fill.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Overview

In light of what we know in general about first-year composition instructors' assumptions about their students' writing skills, as well as the gap in teachers' knowledge about their students' writing skills and experiences – which entering first-year students carry with them from high school into the first-year composition classrooms at the – the current study investigated what first-year college students knew about writing prior to their college enrollment. This qualitative interview study was designed as a means to give voice to this under-represented group in the on-going academic conversation about first-year writing. This chapter outlines the methods and procedures used in the current study and is divided into the following sections: Theoretical Framework, Research Design, and Research Methods.

Theoretical Framework

As described in Chapter One, this qualitative interview study followed the model of a basic interpretive qualitative study: the focus of the study was the perspective of the participants, the data were collected through interviews with the participants, and the analysis of the data was inductive (Merriam 6-7). The study was also influenced by the constructivist paradigm. According to Amos J. Hatch, "constructivists assume a world in which universal, absolute realities are unknowable, and the objects of inquiry are individual perspectives or constructions of reality" (15). Under such a worldview, "multiple realities exist that are inherently unique because they are constructed by individuals who experience the world from their own vantage points"; constructivist

researchers, then, are interested in "individual constructions of reality" (Hatch 15). The underlying assumption of such a theoretical paradigm is that such individual perceptions of reality are meaningful and valuable to the constructivist researcher. As Michael Crotty explains, "constructivism … points up the unique experience of each of us. It suggests that *each one's way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other*" (58, emphasis added). Furthermore, "we need to recognize that different people may well inhabit quite different worlds … [that] constitute for them diverse ways of knowing" (Crotty 64).

Research Design

In *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, Michael Quinn Patton writes of qualitative interviewing:

> The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else's mind. The purpose of open-ended interviewing is not to put things in someone's mind … but to access the perspective of the person being interviewed. We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. … We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. … We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. *Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit*. (278, emphasis added)

The current study was designed under the assumption that the previous writing experiences of entering college students enrolled in first-year composition classes are, as Patton describes, "meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit." For this reason, the study was designed as an interview study. Because of the nature of first-year composition classes as a general education requirement, a multitude of students from a

variety of educational backgrounds pass through English 101 every semester, and not all of their individual voices are heard, or even recognized as meaningful. The literature, as reviewed in Chapter Two, is missing the perspective of the students, so the design of the current study gave voice to a selection of first-year students enrolled in English 101, allowing them to describe their experiences with writing as *they* – not their teachers – perceived them.

The current study was a two-part interview study. The first interview was conducted at the beginning of the semester, and the second interview towards the end of the semester. By conducting the interviews according to this timetable, participants were able to describe their writing experiences and knowledge prior to attending the university (in Interview One), and then to describe how their English 101 experiences compared to that previous knowledge and experience (in Interview Two). A second interview also allowed the participants to reflect on this comparison of their experiences with writing – both prior to attending the university and as an English 101 student. Each interview was expected to last forty-five minutes to an hour (but, in actuality, they ranged from fifteen to forty minutes). During the interviews, participants were asked the same set of questions. The questions asked during the first round of interviews was different from the set of questions asked during the second round. All of the interview questions were open-ended "How?" or "Describe…" questions.

Research Methods

Identification and Selection of Participants

Selection of Participants

All students enrolled in English 101 at the University of Tennessee in the 2011 fall semester – except for those enrolled in the two sections of English 101 taught by the researcher – were invited to participate in the study. Early in the semester, all English 101 instructors were provided with an informational flyer about the study (see Appendix A) via email, and were asked to share the flyer with their students. Those students who were interested in participating in the study were asked to contact the researcher via email. Within several days, thirteen English 101 students expressed their interest in participating in the study. These students were screened via email to ensure that they met the criteria for participating in the study:

- Must be at least eighteen years of age or older
- Must have graduated from a high school in Knox County
- Must be a first-year student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Once those students who did not meet all of the criteria were ruled out, five study participants were selected from among the remaining potential participants based on when they initially contacted the researcher – i.e., the first five students to who met all of the criteria for participating in the study. Only five students were chosen to participate in the study because of the limited funds available for the promised $25 incentive meant to encourage potential participants to participate in the study. This incentive was noted on

the informational flyer, and each participant was compensated $25 upon completion of the study.

The University of Tennessee

At the time of the study, all of the participants were enrolled in English 101 at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. This university is a public, land-grant institution that is classified as a "Research University," deemed the flagship campus of the University of Tennessee system, and describes itself as "the preeminent research-based, land-grant university in the state, [embodying] the spirit of excellence in teaching, research, scholarship, creative activity, outreach, and engagement attained by the nation's finest public research institutions" ("Vision and Mission"). As of 2010 (the most current data at the time of writing), the total enrollment at the university was 27,523 students; the undergraduate enrollment was 21,308 and graduate/professional enrollment was 6,215 ("UT Fact Book 2010-2011"). Of the 27,523 students who attended the university in the 2010-2011 academic year, approximately 4% were international students, 13% were out-of-state, and about 83% were from Tennessee; of the 22,899 students from Tennessee, over 7,000 were from Knox County – approximately 26% of the entire student population ("UT Fact Book"). Of the total number of students enrolled in 2010, 14,038 were male (about 51%), and 13,485 were female (roughly 49%); around 81% (22,355 students) were white ("UT Fact Book").

In the fall of 2011, the entering freshman class of 2015 – to which the five participants of the current study belong – was comprised of approximately 4,200 students (the source of this information does not differentiate between first-time freshman and other freshman), 89% of whom were residents of Tennessee (Blakely). Roughly 19% of

the students in this class were minority students (Blakely). The average high school GPA of this class was 3.87, and their average ACT score was 26.7, ranking these students "among the top 8 percent of students statewide" (Blakely).

FYC at the University of Tennessee

All five study participants were enrolled in English 101, the first class in the two-semester first-year composition (FYC) sequence. All undergraduate students at the University of Tennessee are required to successfully complete both classes in this sequence (English 101 and English 102) with a C or higher. English 101 emphasizes rhetoric; though instructors may change the order in which they assign them, students write four major papers in English 101: (1) a rhetorical analysis, (2) a contextual analysis, (3) an argumentative paper, and (4) a source-based argument paper. Such an arc of assignments begins with students examining the way others communicate and analyzing texts so that, by the end of the semester, they (students) can incorporate what they have learned about clear communication and effective argumentation from other texts into their own writing. After completing English 101, students then take English 102, a research-based class.

Knox County High School English Curriculum

Prior to their enrollment in English 101 at UT, all five participants graduated from high schools in Knox County. The graduation requirements for students enrolled in Knox County High Schools include four (4) credits of English – English I, II, III, and IV ("English/Language Arts Project Expectations"). For English III and English IV, taken in eleventh and twelfth grades, respectively, students choose from Fundamental, Regular, or College Prep (CP) classes; also available are two Advanced Placement (AP) English

classes – AP Language and Composition and AP Literature and Composition ("ELA Project Expectations").

While not all of the participants specified which of these courses they took their junior and senior years of high school, some of the Tennessee Department of Education's English/Language Arts (ELA) Project Expectations are the same for the different types of courses. As of 2009 all types (Fundamental, Regular, and CP) of English III and English IV classes include the following ELA Project Expectations:

- Write and present a complex speech with clear structure (e.g., sequential, problem-solving, comparison-contrast, cause-effect) to a targeted audience or special interest group.
- Respond to literature selections and/or informational text in a variety of formats (e.g., reading journals, response journals, dialectical journals, investigative papers, learning logs).
- Develop a media application for a specific audience and purpose.

It can be assumed that, as students who successfully passed through such a curriculum, all five study participants probably emerged from their high school English classes having completed such tasks.

Data Collection

Pilot Survey Study

During the spring semester of 2011 – the semester prior to the semester in which the current study was conducted – a pilot study was conducted for a graduate-level qualitative research course, English 682. This pilot study was a survey study, the focus of which was to gain an understanding of how FYC students have experienced, understand,

and value writing in different writing situations. The results of the pilot survey study revealed a noticeable disjunction between the researcher's and the participants' understandings of writing, revealing the need for a deeper look at FYC students' prior knowledge of and former experiences with writing.

IRB Application

During the summer of 2011, an IRB (Institutional Review Board) application (Form B, for review of research involving human subjects) for the current interview study was completed. This application was sent to Research Compliance Services for final approval on August 26, 2011. On August 30, the project was granted IRB approval under expedited review.

Interview One

The first round of interviews took place at the beginning of the semester, during the last two weeks of September (September 21 – 26). Each of the five interviews during the first round lasted between fifteen and thirty-five minutes, for an average of twenty-five minutes per first-round interview. At this time, the participants had been enrolled in English 101 at the University of Tennessee for at least one month.

Prior to beginning the interview, the researcher verbally described the interview study in detail, and went over a written informed consent form with the participant. This briefing on the interview study included:

- The purpose of the interview study, and that it was being conducted for a Master's thesis project
- Information about the interviews:

    - That the focus of the interview questions would be on his or her experiences with writing, in high school and in English 101
    - That two interviews would be conducted, and to expect each interview to take roughly 45-60 minutes
    - That both interviews would be audio-recorded
    - That the participant could stop each of the interviews at any time
- A request not to share the identity of his or her English 101 teacher, so that the participant's English 101 grade could in no way be affected by his or her participation in the study
- The assurance that the participant's identity would remain confidential, and that no one other than the researcher would know of the participant's involvement in the study
- That the participant would be compensated $25 upon completion of the study – after the second interview was conducted
- That the participant's involvement in the study was strictly voluntary, and the participant could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty

During the initial briefing, the participant was also asked to choose a pseudonym to be used in lieu of his or her real name in any written reports of the study, in order to protect the participant's identity. This pseudonym was hand-written on a sheet of paper to which only the researcher had access, and then destroyed once the audio file of the interview was downloaded and named (see "Equipment Used" below).

After the initial briefing, the participant was given time to read the written Informed Consent form. Before the participant signed the form, he or she was asked if

there were any questions or concerns. If there were none, both the researcher and the interviewer signed and dated two copies of the Informed Consent form; the researcher kept one copy for her records, and the participant kept the other copy for his or her own records. By signing the Informed Consent form, the participant acknowledged that he or she was at least eighteen years old, and gave his or her consent to participate in the study. To read the Informed Consent form in full, please refer to Appendix B.

The rest of each interview was comprised of three main segments:

- Questions about the participant's general high school experience, with a focus on the participant's high school English classes and general attitude toward writing
- Questions about the participant's general college experience with a focus on his or her English 101 experience thus far
- Closing remarks, including:
    - That the participant should expect an email seeking to set up a time for the second interview about a month before the end of the semester, during the last week of October or the first week of November
    - A reminder that the participant would be reimbursed after the second interview, and that the details of this reimbursement would be discussed during the next interview

To see the complete protocol for Interview One, please refer to Appendix C.

Interview Two

The second round of interviews took place later in the semester, during the second week of November (November 7– 11). These interviews ranged from eighteen to forty

minutes apiece, and the average length of each of the second-round interviews was the same as the average length of the first-round interviews: twenty-five minutes. During the second round of interviews, the participants had been enrolled in English 101 at the university for roughly three months, and had less than a month left of their first semester as university students. Each of the second round of interviews was comprised of the following segments:

- Details about the $25 reimbursement
- Questions about the participant's experiences in English 101 since Interview One, including his or her college experience in general
- Questions about how the participant's English 101 experience compared to his or her expectations and preparation for the class prior to attending the University of Tennessee
- Closing remarks, including the researcher's appreciation for the participant's willingness to participate in the study

Please see Appendix D to read the complete protocol for Interview Two.

Scheduling of Interviews

To ensure that the study participants had sufficient time to work the interviews into their schedules, for both rounds of interviews, the time of each interview was arranged at least one week in advance. All participants were emailed a comprehensive list of the available interview times, in order to give them the opportunity to choose the most convenient time. Participants selected the times on the list that worked best for them, and the interviews were scheduled based on when the participants responded to the email.

Very few scheduling conflicts occurred, and, when minor conflicts did come up, the researcher and the participant worked together to find a convenient time to meet.

For each round of interviews, no more than two interviews were conducted in one day, and there was at least one full day between each interview day. All of the interviews took place on a weekday, sometime between 11:00 AM and 6:00 PM. No interviews were conducted on the weekend, in order to maintain a level of formality.

Interview Site

All ten of the interviews were conducted in a public place on campus, in order to ensure a neutral space. This public space was Hodges' Library, the main library on the University of Tennessee's Knoxville campus. Hodges' Library was chosen as the interview site because it is in a central location on the main Knoxville campus and is easily accessible to most university students.

Because of the number of English 101 instructors who hold their office hours in the Starbucks and other common areas in Hodges' Library, each interview was held in one of the media-viewing rooms along the north wall of the Media Center, located on the second floor of Hodges' Library. These rooms provided a space wherein the participant would feel comfortable speaking openly and candidly about his or her experiences in English 101 and general attitudes toward writing, without fear of the conversation potentially being overheard by his or her English 101 instructor or classmates. The decision to conduct the interviews in the Media Viewing rooms was also made in an effort to minimize the risk of background noise on the audio recordings of the interviews, thereby ensuring sufficient sound quality of these recordings.

Equipment Used

Each interview was audio-recorded with a digital audio recorder checked out from The Studio, which is "a media production lab … available to UT students, faculty, and staff" ("The Studio"). There are ten M-Audio MicroTrack Digital Audio Recorders in The Studio available to check out, and prior to reserving and checking out the audio recorders used for the interviews, the researcher completed an online certification through The Studio's website. Due to high demand, each of the available audio-recorders may only be checked out for up to three days. Because the recorders had to be reserved in advance, and each round of interviews lasted between one and two weeks, multiple recorders were reserved, each for three days at a time, to ensure access to an audio recorder during both rounds of interviews. For this reason, all ten interviews were not recorded on the same M-Audio MicroTrack Digital Audio Recorder, nor with the same microphone, and so the sound qualities of the recorded interviews were varied.

After each interview was completed, the audio recorder was connected to the researcher's personal laptop, and the audio file of the interview was transferred to the computer, which is password-protected, and to which no one else has access. The audio file of the interview was saved on the laptop under the participant's chosen pseudonym so that the participant's real name was in no way linked to his or her interviews, then backed up onto an external hard drive. Once the audio file of the interview was securely saved in both locations (the researcher's personal laptop and external hard drive), the original audio file was deleted from the MicroTrack Digital Audio Recorder. The original audio file of an interview was deleted from the recorder before the next interview was conducted, in order to avoid potential confusion of multiple audio files and attributing the

wrong file to the wrong participant, as the participants' real names were not recorded. Absolutely no files were left on the audio recorders when they were returned to The Studio.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Transcribing

After both rounds of interviews were conducted, each of the ten interviews was transcribed using InqScribe Transcription Software. This program allowed the researcher to easily listen to the audio files and type in the same program, as well as to customize keyboard shortcuts, which were used in lieu of a foot pedal. These shortcuts enabled her to pause the playback of the file, rewind in five second increments, and insert time stamps with an indication of who was speaking ("Interviewer" or "Participant") without having to move her fingers off of the home keys. The use of these keyboard shortcuts allowed ease of transcribing, and ensured accurate transcriptions of each interview. As the researcher transcribed, she listened to each of the interviews with headphones to drown out ambient noise, because the quality of some of the sound recordings was poor.

Pre-Coding

Prior to coding the transcripts, a close reading of each of the printed-out transcripts was done. The transcripts were paired up and read according to participant – that is, the transcript of the first interview with one participant was read, and the next transcript read was that of the same participant's second interview. Each pair of transcripts was annotated, and trends in participant responses and themes shared between participants were recorded. The reading notes from this initial close reading were used to compile a comprehensive list of attitudes and themes that appeared frequently in the

transcripts. This list was used to create the categories for which the transcripts were coded.

Coding

The themes for which the interview transcripts were coded were divided into two main categories, and each category was broken down into four and six specific parts, respectively. The two main categories and their parts were:

- The transition from high school English classes to English 101
    - Part 1 – High school (i.e., Participants' high school experiences)
    - Part 2 – English 101 expectations (i.e., What participants expected English 101 to be like prior to attending the University of Tennessee)
    - Part 3 – English 101 experiences (i.e., What participants actually did in their English 101 classes)
    - Part 4 – Reactions to high school experience and 101 expectations compared to 101 experiences (i.e., Participants' high school experiences and their prior expectations for English 101 versus their actual experiences in English 101, and their attitude towards this disjunction)
- How participants view themselves as writers
    - Part 1 – Themselves as students (i.e., Participants' senses of themselves as students in general, including their major fields of study)
    - Part 2 – Writing attitude (i.e., Participants' general attitudes towards writing)

- Part 3 – Writing strengths (i.e., Participants' writing strengths)
- Part 4 – Writing weaknesses (i.e., Participants' writing weaknesses)
- Part 5 – Other influences (i.e., Participants' impressions of their English/writing teachers, as well as their awareness of themselves as writers in relation to others – teachers, parents, family, classmates)
- Part 6 – Writing process (i.e., Participants' writing processes in high school compared to their writing processes in English 101, and transfer of writing knowledge – including writing in classes in disciplines other than English)

After defining the parts of each category, each interview transcript was coded for every part using the highlighter tool in Microsoft Word; a different highlighter color was assigned to each of the ten parts. For example, the color yellow was assigned to Part 1 of Category 1; every time a participant mentioned his or her high school experiences (e.g., "In high school, I did _____"), that section of the transcript was highlighted in yellow. All of the yellow sections of each transcript were then copied and pasted into a separate document, so that all of the participants' mentions of their high school experiences were compiled together in one document, and organized according to participant (pseudonym) and interview (Interview One or Interview Two). This same process was repeated for each of the remaining parts of both categories. Every time a new theme was coded, a clean copy of each transcript – that is, a copy of the transcript that had not yet been highlighted – was used. Each part of both categories had its own compilation document; for example, the sections of the transcripts highlighted for Part 2 of Category 1 were put into a document separate from the compilation of Category 1, Part

1, and so on. Once each of the ten parts had its own compilation document, all of a participant's sections from the compilation documents were then copied and pasted into that participant's own profile – e.g., all the coded sections within the compilation documents that were from the first participant's transcripts were copied again into a separate document, and labeled according to coding category and part.

The process of coding the interview transcripts was carefully completed. The coding document files were meticulously organized and clearly labeled, in order to avoid any mix-ups of the data. The work was frequently saved, and the coded transcripts and compilation documents of the codes were regularly backed up on an external hard drive, to ensure that none of the data was lost.

Once both types of compilation documents (category- and part-specific, and participant-specific) were completed, they were printed out and further examined. Following the analysis of the data, an account of the findings was written. The results of the analysis are presented in Chapter Four, "Findings."

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

During the fall semester of the 2011-2012 academic school year, an interview study of five English 101 students at UT was conducted. The study sought to answer the questions: (1) What do first-year students at the University of Tennessee know about writing? and (2) How does that prior knowledge compare to their experiences in their English 101 classes? To answer these questions, each of the study participants was interviewed twice – once at the beginning of the semester, and once at the end. Two main topics were covered during these interviews: the participants' experiences with writing in high school, and their experiences in English 101. These interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded. During the coding process, two main areas of focus were identified in the interviews: participants' transitions from high school to college English classes, as well as their senses of themselves as writers.

The following chapter describes the findings of the study in detail. First, information about the participants, including the high school each participant attended and their reported academic majors in college, is outlined in the "Demographic Data" section. Next, participants' general attitudes toward writing are described in the "Writers in Their Own Eyes" section. Finally, participants' transitions from high school English classes to their English 101 classes are discussed in the "Transitioning from High School to College" section.

One of the major findings of the study was that the participants' knowledge of writing was tied closely to their attitudes toward writing and to their sense of themselves

as writers. The attitude participants had toward writing was not based on whether or not they simply "liked writing." Instead, the study found that various factors brought together in a complex interdependent relationship contributed to a participant's attitude toward writing. In general, participants' attitudes toward writing seemed to be shaped by how they viewed themselves as writers; participants' views of themselves as writers both impacted and were impacted by how interested they were in a topic, as well as their perception of the attitude their English teachers had toward their writing.

Participants' attitudes toward writing were linked to their perceptions of themselves as writers: The participants who described themselves as strong writers were the ones who reported that they enjoyed writing, while the participant whose perception of herself as a strong writer wavered did not report that she generally enjoyed writing. Furthermore, participants' perceptions of themselves as writers seemed to be related to their levels of interest in what they were writing about, which they linked back to their successes as writers. That is, participants suggested that, if they were interested in a topic, they would be more engaged, and thus, do well. To some degree, participants' perceptions of themselves as writers were also affected by their English teachers' responses to their writing – if a previous English teacher had told a participant that he or she had a certain writing strength or weakness, the teacher's comment tended to determine that participant's description of his or her skills as a writer, suggesting the importance of role of the English teacher as someone who verified – or determined – participants' perceived writing skills. These factors worked together to shape participants' attitude toward themselves as writers, how good they thought they were at writing, and, in turn, affected their attitudes toward writing. Ultimately, the findings

suggested that, when participants viewed themselves as successful writers, they had a better sense of what they needed to do to be a successful writer.

In terms of what participants knew about writing before attending UT, the study found that all participants knew how to write papers about the books they had to read for class. Their prior experiences in English classes – classes that were primarily based on the study of literature and, for the participants who attended public schools, classes that focused on more technical aspects of writing – shaped their assumptions of what an English class is "supposed" to be like. Their expectations of the course content of English 101 and the kind of writing assignments they would be asked to complete in the course were thusly shaped. Additionally, the majority of participants reportedly had similar assumptions about the difficulty of English 101 and had expected it to be an impossibly hard class, an idea reportedly perpetuated by their high school teachers. However, although participants emerged from similar high school experiences, and had, for the most part, similar expectations of English 101, they all reacted differently upon discovering that English 101 matched neither their high school English classes nor their prior expectations. Participants' reactions to these differences ranged from optimism about the challenges of the class to anger and frustration with high school English teachers for not adequately preparing students for the writing assignments in English 101. No matter what their reactions were, participants undeniably felt that they were not prepared for at least one aspect of English 101.

Demographic Data

All five participants of the current study were enrolled in English 101 in the 2011 fall semester, attended a Knox County high school, and graduated from his or her

respective high school in the spring of 2011. Four of the five participants graduated from public high schools in Knox County: one from Bearden High School, one from Hardin Valley Academy, and two from Farragut High School. The fifth participant graduated from a private high school in Knox County; because of the school's small student population, it will remain unnamed in order to protect her identity. Four of the participants had completed ninth through twelfth grades at their high schools, while the participant who graduated from Hardin Valley Academy attended an out-of-state high school for ninth and tenth grades and was enrolled at Hardin Valley Academy for her junior and senior years of high school.

Of the five participants, two were male and three were female. One of the participants was an English major, one was majoring in engineering, and one intended to pursue medical school after graduating from the University of Tennessee. The other two participants did not discuss their major fields of study. See Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Data

Participant	*High School*	*College Major*
Cecilia	Private High School*	Not Reported
Elizabeth	Farragut (Public)	English
Francisco	Farragut (Public)	Pre-Med
Josh	Bearden (Public)	Not Reported
Michelle	Hardin Valley (Public)	Engineering

**Name of Cecilia's high school withheld.*

Writers in Their Own Eyes

General Attitudes Toward Writing and English Classes

Participants' attitudes toward writing seemed to be both directly and indirectly linked to their own perceived successes as writers and to their degree of interest in given topics. The majority of the participants had a positive general attitude toward writing and English classes. For two of the participants, enjoyment of writing was explicitly linked to and based on skill and interest, or their ability to complete a particular assignment well, while two of the participants described themselves as strong writers several times during their interviews. The participant who reported a more negative attitude toward writing and English classes displayed a wavering perception of herself as a successful writer throughout her interviews. Participants' enjoyment of writing, then, appeared to be linked to their own identification of themselves as strong writers and their level of interest in a given topic, despite their identification of writing as just something they "have to do for school."

Four participants described writing as something they simply have to do for classes and reported not doing any writing outside of school (i.e., writing that is not assigned by a teacher for a class). However, three of these same participants reported that they generally liked English classes, particularly their high school English classes.

Josh explicitly linked his positive attitude toward English classes and writing with his ability to write well when he said, "My entire life, I've enjoyed writing. I've always been good at it, so it's really come easy to me, so I've always enjoyed it. … English has been fun just because it's never been difficult." Josh also described how his level of interest corresponded to his success in English 101: "I feel like I'm succeeding in the

course just because, when I'm in an environment where everyone's interested, that makes me interested." The more interested he was in the class, the more engaged he was, and, thus, the more successful he was. Likewise, Francisco reported that, while he's "not a huge fan of writing," when he does find a topic that interests him, "it's really hard to stop writing … y'know, you just wanna say it over and over again." Francisco also described that some of the material he covered in his English 101 class was hard, so "it wasn't like [he] understood it completely, *but* [he] liked it all" (emphasis added). Here, Francisco pointed out that, *despite* the difficulty of successfully mastering this material, he did, in fact, enjoy it, thereby explicitly connecting his enjoyment of the material to his perceived successes, as Josh also did during his interviews. For Josh and Francisco, then, enjoyment of writing was directly linked to both interest and success and interest, which feed into each other.

Cecilia and Elizabeth, on the other hand, did not explicitly make the connection between their successes as writers and their enjoyment of writing, but they did discuss both during their interviews. When asked what her general attitude toward writing was, Cecilia responded without hesitation, "I liked writing. I like English." At other times during her interviews, Cecilia described herself as a strong creative writer and reported that she had "never had to get help in an English class before," indicating that she normally succeeded in her English classes without needing any additional help. Like Cecilia, Elizabeth also frequently talked about herself as very successful when it came to formal writing and cited an instance when she "literally wrote a three-page essay in about an hour." Elsewhere during her interview, Elizabeth said that, because she was an English major, "I obviously love English." Cecilia's and Elizabeth's reported enjoyment of

writing and English classes were indirectly related to their identification of themselves as strong writers, but they did not explicitly make that connection themselves, as Josh and Francisco did.

The one participant who did not report that she liked writing and English classes did not have as consistent a perception of herself as a strong writer as the other four participants. When asked about her general attitude toward writing and English classes, Michelle said, "I'm not an English person, or a writer person, so I struggle with it. So, I guess…that attitude – I don't wanna do it." However, at other times during the interviews, Michelle spoke of her strengths as a writer, which included technical skills, such as formatting, and her ability to write a final draft of a paper without having to do any pre-writing or write any rough drafts. Michelle even stated, "I've never really had a problem with English. I've been able to do well, well enough … to get by." In spite of these reported strengths, Michelle's identification with her engineering major seemed to overwhelm her perception of herself as a writer. When asked about her English 101 class, Michelle said, "I don't feel like I'm learning anything [in English 101]. I think it's busy work. Of course, the writing that we're learning how to do in English 101 doesn't pertain to my field of study, 'cause I'm [an engineer], I don't need to know how to analyze an argument for technical writing stuff." Later in that same interview, when asked if the material covered in English 101 made sense to her, she said it did "because it's a little logical, and, being the engineer, we think logically, and so I've been able to catch onto it." Despite her reported strengths as a writer, then, Michelle's identification as an engineering student seemed to interfere with her ability to identify herself as a strong,

successful writer, or, as she put it, “an English person,” and, thus, she did not enjoy writing or English classes.

The Importance of English Teachers

None of the participants spoke of themselves as writers without mentioning their English teachers. Overall, participants seemed to have experienced some sort of connection to their high school or college (or both) English teachers. This connection was brought up during the interviews either through participants’ explicit descriptions of the importance of their teachers to their overall learning experiences in English classes, or participants’ framing of discussions of themselves as writers with their perceptions of what their English teachers thought of their writing.

Some participants explicitly described the importance of their English teachers to their overall learning experiences. When asked what aspect of English 101 she found to be most helpful to her improvement as a writer, Michelle named her English 101 instructor, because of her instructor’s availability to meet with students outside of class during conferences and office hours. Elizabeth also named her English 101 instructor as the most helpful part of the class: “My professor … is really good at, y’know, relating it back to us, probably because she IS a student – she’s a grad student. And so she understands, like, where we’re at in college.” Elizabeth’s instructor’s ability to identify with her English 101 students made her seem more approachable to Elizabeth, and, thus, more helpful. While Michelle focused on the accessibility of additional help outside of class in her responses, Elizabeth emphasized how approachable her English 101 instructor was. Josh, too, described how important his English 101 teacher was to his learning experiences, and said that his “very understanding instructor was definitely a

part of" his overall positive experience in the class. Josh recognized what he described as the empathy of his English 101 instructor, which he found to be helpful. Though he was positive about his English 101 teacher, throughout his two interviews, Josh also made it a point to display his loyalty to his high school English teachers. For example, he reiterated statements such as "if I say I enjoy 101, that doesn't mean I didn't enjoy high school" when discussing his high school English teachers. For Josh, then, the importance of his English teachers was so pronounced that he seemed to feel he was betraying one teacher by speaking highly of another.

Perhaps Josh's sense of loyalty to his English teachers was derived from the importance of his English teachers to his own perception of himself as a writer. For Josh and other participants, the feedback they had received from teachers on previous English papers guided their answers to questions about themselves as writers. When asked what he thought he did best as a writer, Josh replied, "Umm, from the responses of my teachers, my organization is definitely my strength." Cecilia's answer to this question was also based on one of her high school English teacher's observations: "My senior English teacher told me … [that] I'm really good at picking out the little details that most people don't notice." Francisco, too, grounded his replies to questions about his perception of himself as a writer on teachers' comments written on his papers: "I can remember just the comments, too, on some essays," he said in Interview One, "'Great ideas but y'know, ya gotta put it into form. The ideas are everywhere.'" During the same interview, Francisco named organization of his ideas as his primary writing weakness. These participants' perceptions of themselves as writers were influenced by the feedback their teachers gave them, thus highlighting the impact of English teachers on students'

determinations of their own writing skills or weaknesses. Teachers, then, seem to have played a role in the participants' senses of themselves as successful writers, which, ultimately, fed into their general attitudes toward writing.

Transitioning from High School to College

High School Experiences

All five of the participants reported that the core subject of all of their high school English courses was literature, as exhibited by the types of writing assignments they did. Although participants mentioned that they also wrote different kinds of papers in their English classes, such as research papers and persuasive arguments, these writing assignments were secondary to the writing they did that was based on the books they read in class. Furthermore, the other primary focus of the English classes in the public high schools was a concern with the technical aspects of writing, while English classes in the private high school reportedly focused on creative writing. In addition to what they learned in their high school English classes, three of the students discussed the further development of their writing skills in classes other than English; interestingly, the skills they described (such as analyzing the rhetorical appeals of another person's written argument) are highly valued in UT's English 101 classes, thereby suggesting that participants' high school English classes alone did not adequately prepare them for their college composition classes. Furthermore, although students generally reported similar writing experiences as far as the *types* of writing they did in their English classes, the average *amount* of writing the participants reported completing for their high school English classes was greatly varied. So, although all of the participants emerged from high

school having experienced similar types of writing situations, they did not all have the same amount of practice writing in such situations.

General High School Experiences

The study found that the average high school experience of the participants was not very difficult. When asked to describe their general high school experiences, the majority of the participants reported that their high school experiences were generally easy; those participants who did find certain aspects of high school to be difficult intentionally put themselves in more challenging situations that were not part of the average high school experience.

Cecilia described the private high school she attended as a very small school (there were only twenty-five or thirty students in Cecilia's graduating class) that she did not consider challenging compared to surrounding schools and was "sports-based, not as academically-challenging, to make sure everyone could stay on the sports teams." During her junior year, she sat in the actual classroom, "probably ten classes out of the whole year. I sat in the hallway most of the time. 'Cause it was a small room, and … we had five new kids come in that year, and they put them all in our class, so there wasn't room anyway, so … me and my friends sat in the hallway, and did the assignments on our own"; according to Cecilia, however, she did well in the class because the teacher "was one of those teachers – if she liked you, you did well." Josh, like Cecilia, described a general high school experience that was not very difficult. According to him, Bearden High School was "a great place … [with] a really relaxed environment," and his senior year of high school was especially relaxed:

> I was a football player, so I kinda knew a lot of teachers, and knew the principals and athletic directors, so, it was a good place for me just because I would walk down the hall and say hey to some big people and it was kinda a nice feeling. But it wasn't too difficult, really. I made all A's, never studied, just kinda breezed through it. The typical senior year schedule, got out at noon. But I really enjoyed it, I really did.

According to Cecilia and Josh, then, they were both able to do well in high school without having to try very hard.

Like Cecilia and Josh, Michelle also described her high school as not very difficult, but at least one aspect of her high school experience was challenging because she put herself in a challenging situation. According to Michelle, her overall experience at recently-opened Hardin Valley Academy "wasn't very challenging, because [she] didn't take the higher-level classes." However, Michelle did do dual-enrollment for courses other than English at Pellissippi State Community College, which "was challenging, but everything else [about high school] was pretty … average." The most challenging part of Michelle's high school experience, then, did not actually occur within the walls of her high school, but at the local community college where she took classes as a high school student.

Francisco, on the other hand, had more positive things to say about Farragut High School, but described his schooling experience as challenging because he took the initiative to make it so. According to Francisco, Farragut "is considered a blue-ribbon high school … [with] higher standards than other high schools," and he believed it was a good school. Francisco said he intentionally took difficult classes at Farragut: "Some classes, yes, were challenging. I also tried to put myself in situations where I wouldn't normally fail, but I didn't [want it to] be really easy, so, yes, I did take challenging

courses. And there was a good selection [of such courses to choose from]." Francisco, like Michelle who was dually-enrolled at Pellissippi while she was in high school, made an effort to challenge himself during high school. The average high school experience of these participants, then, was not difficult, according to their perspectives, unless they put themselves in more challenging situations, such as taking college classes or more challenging courses at their high schools.

Writing in High School

The study found that the focus of participants' high school English classes was on the study of literature and, for the participants who had attended public schools, upon certain technical aspects of writing. Overall, this group of students emerged from high school having, for the most part, experienced similar writing situations in their English classes: all of their high school English classes focused on reading and writing about literature, the majority of the types of writing assignments they wrote were similar (all participants wrote papers based on the books they read, while four of the participants were also prepared to write research papers, and three had experience writing persuasive arguments), and the four participants who had attended public schools said that they had learned mostly about the technical aspects of writing, such as paper format and citations in their English classes. However, there were some differences between their reported experiences. Three of the participants described further development of their writing skills beyond technical skills in classes other than English, and there were striking variations in the average amount of writing participants reported doing in their high school English classes.

While there were similarities between the types of writing assignments participants completed in their high school English classes, there was an extreme variance in how much writing they reported actually doing in those classes. Participants were asked how many papers, on average, they wrote in one typical English class, as well as the average length of each of those papers. The reported average number of writing assignments per each high school English class ranged from two to five writing assignments, and the reported average lengths of each of those writing assignments were even more drastically varied, ranging from one-and-a-half to ten pages per assignment. Table 2 shows the averages reported by each participant.

Table 2: Reported Average Amount of Writing in H.S. English Classes

Participant	*Average Number of Writing Assignments*	*Average Length of Each Writing Assignment*
Cecilia	2 per English class (1 assignment per semester)	1 ½ - 2 pages
Elizabeth	--	--
Francisco	3 - 4 per English class*	4 - 5 pages (8 - 10 pages for "important" research papers)
Josh	4 - 5 per English class*	3 - 7 pages
Michelle	4 - 5 per English class*	2 - 3 pages

**According to Francisco, Knox County High Schools run on block schedule, so the participants who attended public schools took one English class per year, but in one semester, instead of two.*

All five participants discussed how their high school English classes heavily emphasized literature, and that the papers they wrote in those classes were based on the books they read. Cecilia shared that, in high school, she "did a lot of creative writing based on the books [they] were reading" in class, and later named the books she could

remember reading for English classes during her four years high school, including *Dante's Inferno*, *Hiroshima*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Macbeth*, *Things Fall Apart*, *The Odyssey*, *Romeo & Juliet*, *Animal Farm*, *House on Mango Street*, *Hamlet*, *Grendel*, *1984*, selected writings of Edgar Allan Poe, and other short stories. Based on Cecilia's experiences in her high school English class, she defined English classes as such: "That's an English class. You read books, you write a paper, and you read another book and you write another paper."

The other four participants echoed how important literature was in their English classes. During her second interview, Elizabeth said that, "by the end of my high school career, I wanna say I read over ten Shakespeare plays." She also described the emphasis her high school writing assignments put on the literature they read for class:

> In high school, we focused a lot on reading books. We would read a novel that our teacher chose, and then analyze that. … It wasn't, like, analyzing why they did what they did. It was more like, 'this is the tone they used, this is the diction. … Because we were doing it over the whole a whole book, we would [also] do things on themes.' … We focused on theme, like, the entire semester.

Josh, who went to a different high school than Elizabeth, said they did something similar in his English classes: "We would read different Shakespeare poems or different styles of writing and then … try to figure out why the author wrote what he did, or why said this, or why they put it in this sarcastic manner." He also said that "the English [class] kinda felt like a reading class … with a side of writing." Michelle, too, described that, in her high school English classes, "We did a lot of papers on what we read. We'd read books and then write an analysis about it." As far as books she read in high school, Michelle named "the classics, like *The Great Gatsby* and *1984*" (two of the books Cecilia also said

she read in high school). Michelle and Francisco, who went to different high schools, both described similar papers they wrote on *Beowulf* in twelfth grade: Michelle said she "picked a theme from a list to write about" and wrote an analysis of her chosen theme as it appeared in *Beowulf*; likewise, Francisco's paper was about "a certain set of beliefs" in *Beowulf*. Francisco further explained that the topic of his English III class was American Literature, and the topic of English IV was British Literature, and said that his high school writing assignments were also "based on a reading," as the other participants described.

Though they spoke mostly about papers they had written that were based on the books they read, the participants also discussed other types of writing they did in their English classes –four participants noted having written research papers and, and three mentioned that they wrote persuasive arguments. According to Michelle,

> Each class had four main types of papers. It'd be, like, a research paper, [then] just a regular ol' essay [that] could be about anything. … Just standard essay writing. … And then the persuasion. We'd pick a topic that we were really avid about. … And so we'd have to do research and get facts and stuff that like persuades people to think what we think. … And then, our fourth paper was decided upon by the teacher. Senior year, we were required to do a speech.

Though Michelle did not explain what she meant by "standard essay writing," she did further describe the research papers she wrote:

> We also did research papers. We never really did any analysis *in* our papers. We'd just write up a research, like, about a president or something. … The research papers were pretty much, pick a president and tell what they did, what their life was like, what their big achievements were, how well they did in office, and you had to have your facts to back it up and everything in quotes. It was pretty much to learn how to cite things and everything.

Three of the other participants also specifically named research papers as one of the types of papers they wrote in high school. According to Josh, "towards the end [of high school] they started teaching us how to write research papers and just how to write and how to have a thesis statement." Cecilia remembered writing a research paper on *The Great Gatsby* for her junior-year English class, and "a big research paper over the colleges we wanted to go to" for her English class her senior year. Francisco also mentioned writing research papers, but according to him, the majority of his high school English writing assignments were either based on class readings or were "timed writing, which were persuasive arguments." He remembered that one of the topics for this kind of assignment was the issue of teachers carrying guns at school, a topic about which he would make an argument and then "have four to five paragraphs to discuss it." Elizabeth, who attended the same high school as Francisco, also said that they wrote argumentative essays in eleventh grade. The majority of participants, then, came out of their high school English classes having written research papers and persuasive arguments, in addition to essays based on the books they read, such as thematic analyses and personal responses.

The four participants who attended public schools described what they learned about writing from completing such assignments in their high school English classes. Specifically, they said that their teachers emphasized the more technical aspects of writing: paper format and rules for things such as citations. According to Elizabeth, "All you're taught in high school is how to write a formal paper. You never use 'I,' you never use the word 'we,' you always talk in third person, away from the action. You never, you know, address your audience." The other three participants further discussed the specific guidelines of such formal papers. Francisco typified the writing he did in his high school

English classes as "normal, so-strict persuasive writings" with "rigid guidelines." He later elaborated on those guidelines:

> Teachers would expect to see a certain format, how to cite, how certain things … your introductory paragraph should hook in the reader, the rest of the bodies [body paragraphs] need to have good transitions, it just needs to be fluid. No breaks in the ideas that give it a weird structure, it just needs to be fluid [so] it's not hard to read the essay. The topic is not something that we go over, so that would be more difficult.

Josh, too, said, "That's definitely one thing that my high school teachers taught us well, how to organize your paper," and stated that, in high school, all he wrote were five-paragraph essays, which he also described: "I would write a thesis and then I would have the typical sentence with three examples, and then I would have those examples, in order, as my three base paragraphs, and then, the conclusion would repeat my thesis." According to Josh, his teachers "would teach you the layout of a paper before they teach you how to twist it and kinda make it your own." According to Michelle, her high school English teachers focused less on organization, and more on MLA format; Michelle reported that, in high school, "We learned to cite really well … and how to do [citations] in-text and everything." Not only did she learn about citations, she also learned "how to pick out a good fact, and how to place it in, and make it sound good, and have a paper flow." In addition to MLA format, Michelle said, "We worked on grammar a lot." However, unlike the other four participants, Cecilia did not report learning anything about such technical aspects of writing in her high school English classes; her descriptions of the writing she did in her high school English classes focused on the creative writing assignments she completed, such as "pick[ing] a chapter out of *Macbeth* and rewrit[ing] it in plain terms" and journal responses based on the books they read.

In addition to discussing the writing they completed for their high school English classes, three of the participants also made a point to discuss what they learned from the writing they did in other high school classes, which helped them develop writing skills they drew upon in English 101. On top of his English classes, Francisco also took a creative writing class, where, he said, "I was able to sort of develop my [writing] skills." He later described what he learned in this class in more detail, and said that as far as "learning to write and really put it all together … Creative Writing helped a little bit, able to think of ideas, and being a little more creative through writing." Josh described his Honors World History class, in which he "learned a lot … about thesis statements and backing it up with facts and examples," something students are expected to be able to do in English 101 at UT. According to Josh, "the History class was more difficult writing, and we had a lot more writing. … The history class actually felt more focused on writing than my English classes did." In her Apologetics class, Cecilia wrote "a lot of personal responses" in addition to papers that analyzed the arguments in their assigned readings, by "pulling out the ethos, pathos, [and] logos," which is a significant part of the English 101 curriculum they encountered at UT.

Even though there were differences in the amount of writing they did in their high school English classes, participants' overall experiences with similar types of writing exhibits what these students knew about writing and thus what they felt they were prepared to write prior to enrolling in English 101 at UT. Overall, they were used to writing papers that responded to the books they read in class, and thus, that is what they understood English classes to be. As Cecilia noted, "That's an English class. You read books, you write a paper, and you read another book and you write another paper."

Expectations of English 101

Unlike their writing experiences in high school, participants' expectations of English 101, prior to attending UT, were dissimilar. Three of the participants had expected English 101 to be incredibly difficult, and most of these expectations were based on what their high school teachers had told them about English 101. However, one participant had expected English 101 to be similar to her high school English classes and easier than what her actual experience was in English 101, and one participant did not speak of his prior expectations of English 101 in terms of the level of difficulty of the class, but in terms of how he anticipated it would shape him into a stronger writer.

Three of the study participants described having had similar expectations of English 101 prior to attending UT. Before coming to UT, these participants were scared of taking English 101, as they had expected it to be a very difficult class taught by a mean teacher. These expectations were largely instilled in the participants by their high school teachers. In her first interview, Cecilia recalled what "everyone [and] all the teachers" told her and her classmates about English 101: "All the teachers [said], 'You're gonna have to write a paper a week and it's gonna have to be ten to twenty pages' and that was terrifying"; Cecilia added to this description that she had expected her English 101 instructor to be mean. Elizabeth's prior expectations echoed Cecilia's. She said, "In high school, they totally prepared you for war. … They were like, 'Yeah, you're gonna have an essay a week, and you're gonna have homework every single night, and you're gonna have readings of like a hundred pages.'" Josh also shared with the researcher that he had "heard the horror stories of the papers returned, you got 'failed' with red pen all over it," but, he admitted, "I guess they kinda psych you out about college in high school." Josh

further reported that he had expected his English 101 instructor to lecture in class, then assign "a ton of homework, and then, 'Oh, yeah, you have a ten-page paper due tomorrow.' Almost disrespectful to the students in a way." On a similar note, he also said, "I've always heard about the college courses where you get left out to dry."

In contrast to the responses given by Cecilia, Elizabeth, and Josh, Michelle did not report having been fearful of English 101. On the contrary, Michelle had expected her English 101 class would be easier than it actually was, and that the assignments would be similar to the writing she had done in high school. She said she "never expected to be doing this much work in English 101," and had expected her English 101 experience to be more like her high school English classes: "I thought we would do more of a mix, kinda like what we do in high school English, where you write a paper about *The Great Gatsby*, and then research a president and write a paper, and then write a persuasive paper about a topic you are strongly for, like … abortion or something like that." Michelle had thought that, in her English 101 class, she would "just to write a bunch of different kinds of papers," and "do different types of writing."

Unlike the other four participants, Francisco did not discuss his prior expectations in terms of how hard or easy he had expected English 101 to be, but in terms of how he expected English 101 to shape him as a writer. Overall, Francisco's prior expectations of English 101 were the most optimistic, and, unlike Michelle, expected it to be different from what he had experienced in his high school English classes. He said that he "was more or less expecting … growing out of your normal, so-strict persuasive writing and things and start to look at things from a different angle in writing." Later, Francisco also described his expectations that throughout "all these English classes, we'll be evolving,

as a whole, all students, no matter what high school they came from. … I believe everyone will have their own struggle, whether it'll be someone starting from square one, or someone who came from a good school who already has foundations." Francisco, then, did not necessarily expect English 101 to be easy or difficult, but anticipated that each student in English 101 would experience the class differently, depending on where they came from, and he was optimistic about English 101 shaping him into a better writer.

English 101 Experiences

All five participants experienced English 101 differently, despite their similar experiences in their high school English classes and English 101 being different from all of their high school experiences. The main areas of differences between participants' English 101 experiences involved: (1) how it compared to their high school classes, (2) the level of difficulty of the class as compared to their prior expectations, and, (3) most significantly, participants' reactions to these differences. All of the participants reported that English 101 was different from their high school classes, and four of the five reported that English 101 did not match their prior expectations. However, each participant's reaction to these disjunctions was different.

The same three participants who had been scared into expecting English 101 to be incredibly difficult participants ultimately found the class to be easier overall than they had expected it to be. One of these participants began the semester frustrated with English 101 but was much more positive about it by the time of Interview Two; one participant maintained a positive attitude about both English 101 and his high school classes throughout the semester; and the other participant (whose first interview was not able to be transcribed, due to the poor quality of the sound recording) expressed anger

with her high school teachers for not adequately preparing her for the types of writing she was asked to do in English 101, despite finding the class easier than what she had expected.

Neither of the other two participants had expected English 101 to be as challenging as the other three participants. One of the two remaining participants found English 101 to be more difficult than both her prior expectations of the class and her high school English classes; she, too, expressed frustration with her high school English teachers for not having made the writing in her English classes more difficult. The remaining participant was the only one who found English 101 to match, for the most part, his prior expectations. However, he found his initial confidence and optimism waning by the time of Interview Two.

Overall, Cecilia's reactions to her experience in English 101 shifted dramatically from the frustration expressed in her first interview to a more positive outlook on both her high school English classes and English 101 in Interview Two. Because the horror stories Cecilia had heard about English 101 prior to attending UT did not match up with her actual English 101 class, her experience – which was not as hard as she had expected it would be – was ultimately a relief. Furthermore, despite not feeling adequately prepared for the class at the beginning of the semester, throughout the semester, Cecilia overcame her frustration when she found that the types of papers she would be writing in her English 101 class did not match up with her expectations of the types of writing typically done in an English class. However, what helped Cecilia overcome this frustration was not anything she had learned in her high school English classes; instead,

she relied on the writing knowledge she had learned in her Apologetics class in high school.

During her first interview, when asked if English 101 was different from what she expected it to be like and if it was different from her high school English classes, Cecilia answered "yes" to both questions without hesitation. Later, she described her answers in more detail: "I mean, just 'cause we always, you go in, these are the four books you're gonna read this semester, and it ended up being more like my Apologetics class, which wasn't what I expected. I was like, 'oh!'" Furthermore, according to Cecilia, "everything [about 101] was just completely different" from her high school English classes. At the time of the first interview, the primary difference in English 101 was the type of writing she did, which Cecilia described as "just straight-forward writing, [with] no opinions." This type of writing, she said, was a struggle for her: "I'm having a hard time in this class. Like, I enjoy it, but I've had to get help on it. I've never had to get help in an English class before, somehow. I think just because I did so much creative writing in high school, not as much straight-forward writing … that it's a lot harder for me to put my papers together." Because of these differences, during Interview One, Cecilia did not feel as if her high school English classes prepared her for the English 101 class she took, "just because everything we did was based off the books and creative writing, for the most part."

However, Cecilia's reactions to English 101 were very different and her responses much more positive by the end of the semester, when, during her second interview, she said of English 101, "It think it's easy, I guess. To me, it's a lot of common sense things." It was easy, she said, "because I had already taken an Apologetics class … [So] it was

easier to write my own argument. And it was easy to take apart everyone else's. Because I'd already spent however long working on those." Furthermore, when asked during Interview Two if she felt her high school English classes had prepared her for English 101, Cecilia answered differently than in Interview One by saying that a

> few teachers got us really well-prepared, for the most part. And then, the Apologetics class, which wasn't English, but it was taught by an English teacher. So, for the most part, I think they really helped us, and that's saying a lot, 'cause I don't speak highly of [my school], in most cases, but, yeah, no, I think they really, for the most part, helped us.

Specifically, Cecilia felt that the English classes she took her sophomore and senior years prepared her well, "with a lot of different readings, a lot of different writing styles." However, during Interview Two, she still maintained that she wrote different types of papers in English 101 than she thought, because, she said,

> We always did research papers and … reflection papers and comparative papers [in high school English classes], not…Apologetics papers [rhetorical analyses of others' arguments]. I mean, I did that [in high school] … but, that was a different class [Apologetics class]. I didn't think about it corresponding into English.

Interestingly, Cecilia felt that the arguments she wrote in Apologetics prepared her most for English 101. Overall, by the end of the semester, Cecilia stated that she liked her English 101 class, and "thought it was easier than I thought it would be, 'cause, just how everyone talked, they said it'd be like you're gonna have a paper due every week, and so, going in, I thought, 'I'm gonna have a paper due all the time,'" which, as she found out, was not the case.

Like Cecilia, Josh found his English 101 class to be less difficult than everyone had told him, but he expressed a very optimistic and confident viewpoint about his experiences with writing (both in high school and in his English 101 class) throughout the

semester, and, unlike Cecilia, his responses in Interviews One and Two were more consistent. Even though the material covered in English 101 was different from what he had covered in his high school classes, he welcomed the change, and maintained that his high school classes had prepared him for English 101, and even attributed his successes in the class to that sense of preparedness. The biggest struggle Josh faced in his English 101 class was getting his classwork done, but even in light of this challenge, he was positive about his experiences in English 101, where he reportedly learned a lot about himself.

Although Josh was confronted with material in English 101 that he had never encountered before, he was not discouraged or intimidated. "[We're] learning about ethos, pathos, and logos," he said during his first interview, "which I actually have never talked about before in English, so it's kind of interesting that I haven't talked about it." In fact, Josh enjoyed the differences he found in his English 101 class, particularly the "college" outlook on writing, which he described as a "more mature outlook on writing, versus [the] 'Here's a rule-book. Do it.' [outlook]" of his high school English classes. Josh further described the differences between the writing he did in high school and the writing he did in English 101:

> High school was definitely more … busy work, monotonous. I enjoyed it, and it prepared me, but now that I've done it, I'm ready to just do what college is doing, and discuss things and analyze things and branch out from just the straight, 'This is how you should answer this question and this is how this is defined.' And so college feels more free, almost, just because you're free to write about what you want and how you look towards a certain thing. And it's not necessarily worried about the guidelines of high school. … There's not a lot of guidelines in college, which I like a lot.

Josh welcomed the freedom of his English 101 class, as well as the material covered in the class, which he said he "actually enjoyed … a lot" because it was not boring.

The main difference between high school English classes and English 101, Josh said, did not involve the writing assignments themselves but actually sitting down to do them. In fact, he said, "I felt like the writing assignments I was most prepared for, just because writing comes easy to me. The hardest part," he continued, "is me sitting down and actually writing the paper. Once I got used to that and realized that, yeah, you're gonna have to suck it up and write this paper, it really wasn't bad." Josh went on to explain, how, "In high school, I definitely was not used to studying or doing anything outside of school because I didn't have to." In English 101, Josh said his study habits had to change. Even though the amount of work he had to do in his high school English classes and his English 101 class was about the same, Josh said what changed in college was

> *when* you're doing that work. … In college, it's "Okay, write the whole paper at some point and turn it in on this day." And it's kinda, "Oh, wow! I have two, three weeks to write this, I don't have to start for another week and a half." … But, definitely, that was the most difficult part for me, realizing I had the same amount of work, and I wasn't being forced to do it, so, "Why do it?" But, [I'm] definitely gettin' outta that rut now, and realizing that's not the way to go.

While Josh welcomed the freedom of his English 101 class – and college in general – he struggled to adjust his study habits to that freedom.

Despite the differences he encountered between his high school English classes and English 101, Josh was confident about how prepared he was for his English 101 class. When asked if he felt like the writing he did in high school English classes prepared him for English 101, Josh replied,

> I definitely do. … I had teachers that were down-to-earth, and they would sit down one-on-one and tell you what you're doing wrong. I feel like they definitely, through the process of the four years, kinda molded me into this flower that can, is ready to grow. And they didn't mold me into an incredible writer. I'm not an incredible writer, they didn't mold me into already successful. They molded me into something that could *become* successful. And so I feel like, without that base, I would be struggling in college.

Because of his sense of preparedness, Josh's prior expectations of English 101 were not met, as he found English 101 to be "a lot less stressful than I thought it would be," and admitted that, "I guess they kinda psych you out about college, but it's not been bad." In his second interview, Josh had the same reaction and said of his experience in his high school English classes, "I feel like it gave me, and I said it before when we met, but it gave me a good sense to build off of," referring to his sense that his high school English classes gave him a good foundation of writing knowledge. Once again, he also admitted, "It was a little easier than I thought it would be, actually. I think I kinda psyched myself out before the semester, but, yeah, it's not as bad as I thought it [would be]." Josh further attributed his successes in English 101 to how prepared he felt going into the class, and reported that "I definitely felt prepared from high school, so I went into English 101 with a successful outlook and knew I was gonna be successful just because I had always felt very prepared." Because Josh felt so prepared for English 101, he was successful in the class. Furthermore, according to him, realizing that "you're actually gonna have to [work hard] is all it takes to succeed in English 101."

Overall, Josh felt he learned a lot in English 101 and described it as "a good stepping stone [that] really eased me into college." He was careful to point out, though, that "If I say I enjoy 101 that doesn't mean I didn't enjoy high school, 'cause I think

without high school you don't have a successful or enjoyable 101 experience. But I think they're both very necessary." Furthermore, according to Josh, in English 101 he "found [himself] learning a lot more about [himself] through that process, instead of a high school way of grading, where it's, you turn it in and they tell you what's wrong with it and you move on." Not only did Josh learn a lot about writing in English 101, he learned a lot about himself; it was a growing experience for him as a student, as he began to carry-over what he learned from one assignment and adapted it to another.

Like Josh and Cecilia, Elizabeth found her English 101 class generally easier than what she had expected, and even felt over-prepared for the workload of English 101. However, Elizabeth was out of her comfort zone when it came to the informal writing assignments, as she had expected to write the same types of formal papers in English 101 as she had in high school. Although the class was easier than what she had expected, she did not feel she was prepared for the class. Consequently, at the end of her semester in English 101, Elizabeth was angry with her high school English teachers for focusing so much on literature at the cost of not having adequately prepared her for the types of writing she was asked to do in English 101.

Elizabeth, who was an English major and regarded herself as a strong writer, found that her English 101 class was "a lot easier than I thought it was gonna be. … Like, I was expecting to get here and just have to be writing and reading ALL the time, and it's not like that." Despite the class being easier than what she had expected, Elizabeth felt that, while her high school English classes had prepared her for the workload of English 101, the type of writing she was asked to do for the majority of the paper assignments

was a challenge, because it was so unlike anything she had been asked to write in high school:

> I feel like our English [classes] in high school prepared us pretty well for the college writing that we're doing. … My lower-level high school classes were kind of pointless, but my upper-level high school English, yeah, they really did. We wrote a lot in both of those, and we did a lot of analysis. … But none of [the writing was] really informal, and I wish that we would've done more of that. I wasn't really prepared for *that*.

Later, Elizabeth also mentioned that, while she definitely felt prepared for the amount of work that was required of her in English 101, high school did not prepare her "at all … for what we're writing about [in English 101]."

The main challenge of English 101 for Elizabeth, then, was informal writing. When she described her upcoming assignment in English 101, she seemed apprehensive about completing a project unlike any other she had ever done in an English class. "It's new territory," she said, "doing an English project that's not just summarizing what we know about the subject. It's, like, actually having an opinion about it. … So, I'm not worried, but it'll be a little bit harder." Later, she also said that English 101 was getting "a little bit more challenging," probably because she felt as if she was "out of [her] comfort zone with the opinion pieces." Later, she described this feeling further:

> It's really different, because in high school, we always had to use a formal tone. And in college, she purposely wants us to use an informal tone to get practice writing like that. And so, I was not prepared for that. Like, I don't really know how to write informally at all, [because] all you're taught in high school is how to write a formal paper. … So, it was hard to get started on [informal writing], 'cause it's something that I had never done before.

By the end of her second interview, Elizabeth's feelings of apprehension about writing in a new genre had turned to anger at her high school English teachers for wasting her time in their classes by focusing so much on literature:

> I love Shakespeare, I do. … But, I feel like in high school, it wasn't really necessary. *We didn't have to read all that Shakespeare.* … And you don't talk about Shakespeare [in college]. I'm pretty sure I would have to take a Shakespeare English class to even talk about Shakespeare in college. So, it's like, all of that was really not necessary, at all, and, even though I enjoyed doing the Shakespeare stuff, I know there's a lotta kids in my class that their grades got worse because they would get so frustrated … and fail the quiz, because they didn't understand what Shakespeare was saying. … So, just, looking back on it, I'm kind of angry, I guess. Because it's like, you wasted all of my time. I could've been doing more important things than reading Shakespeare.

Elizabeth, who did not struggle with the literature she read in high school, but knew that her classmates had, concluded that focusing so much on literature was a waste of time, because it was so unlike what she was asked to do in English 101. Ultimately, she said she wished her high school English teachers "would've taken some of the novels out … and, instead, did some smaller-scale stuff," like analyzing a newspaper article, which was something Elizabeth never had to do in high school, but did in her English 101 class. Elizabeth also said that she wished her high school English teachers had taught them about informal writing,

> because they *never* even mentioned it, I never even thought of it as a possibility. You would fail a paper if you used the word, 'I' in a paper. You would, she would just give you a zero. … So, getting to college, I am literally in uncharted waters. … They should have prepared us and let us know, there *are* situations where it's okay to use this.

Elizabeth's anger stemmed from her frustration over the extreme differences between the focus of her high school English classes and her English 101 class – namely, that, she

was being asked to do in English 101 what was strictly forbidden, even taboo, in her high school English classes.

Overall, Michelle found her English 101 class to be different from her high school English classes, but unlike Elizabeth, Josh, and Cecilia, Michelle found the class more difficult than she had expected, as her prior expectation of the class was that it would be similar to her high school classes. Michelle found that the focus of her English 101 on rhetoric was difficult, as she had never encountered this subject before and was thoroughly uninterested in it. She was also unprepared for the amount of work she was asked to do in the class. Like Elizabeth, Michelle also expressed some frustration with her high school teachers, and wish that they had made the writing she did in high school more difficult.

The two main challenges Michelle faced in her English 101 class were its focus on rhetoric and the amount of work she was required to do. According to her, English 101 was "a little bit difficult. We're doing stuff that I haven't done before. So it's all new to me. We're doing a lot of rhetoric stuff, and I didn't even know what rhetoric was when I went into English class, so, it's been a challenge." Overall, Michelle said, English 101 was "stressful because of the amount of work that we have to do. … And so, that's been a big adjustment. I never expected to be doing this much work in English 101." She said she did more work in her English 101 class "than some of [her] engineering classes," and found the amount of work she had to do frustrating, because, as she said "I don't feel like I'm learning anything. I think it's busy work."

In addition to having more work to do in English 101 than she expected, Michelle found English 101 to be "different [from what I expected]," as it was "completely

different from high school classes." Later, she explained, "I expected something more like high school English, and this is just completely different." The differences included the readings in the classes; according to Michelle, "We're reading really different stuff [in English 101], like articles, and … our textbook, excerpts from different textbooks that are about rhetoric." Furthermore, she said, she was given more time to write her papers for her high school English classes said, and the paper assignments in English 101 were "not at all" what she expected. The main difference Michelle described, though, was her enjoyment of the classes. "I usually really enjoyed my high school English classes," she said, "[but in] English 101, I had a hard time doing that, like, convincing myself, 'I like this. I'm going to write about this because I like this. Because my teacher says I like this.'" Her main struggle in the class was, ultimately that "[she] could not get interested in rhetoric at all."

When asked if she felt the writing she did in high school prepared her for English 101, Michelle answered that, "to an extent, it has." She said she felt prepared to do citations, but, as far as "actually analyzing things … it was a brand new thing, and I had to go get help on it, and figure out what to do." Overall, though, she thought high school "was a good basis. [But] they probably could've made it a little bit difficult to write the papers in high school. It was really easy stuff to write about." Michelle wished that she had been better prepared by her high school English classes for the difficulties she faced in English 101.

While Francisco also found his English 101 class to be different from his high school English classes, unlike the other four participants, he reported that the class generally lived up to his expectations. However, while his descriptions of the challenges

of the class were consistent, as were his discussions of how it was different from his high school English classes, his attitude toward the difficulties of English 101 and how it differed from his high school English classes was different during Interview Two than it was at the time of his first interview. His confidence in himself as a writer also changed throughout the semester, as exhibited by his differing descriptions of how prepared he felt for the challenges of the class. Overall, though, Francisco enjoyed his experience in English 101, and his expectations of the class were met.

During his first interview, Francisco was very optimistic about his English 101 class. "I like it," he said, "It's definitely different. I guess, in some ways, it's a breath of fresh air. Instead of writing about the same ol' you have for four years, now you're able to intellectually develop yourself with the essays." He seemed excited about the prospect of growing as a writer in English 101, even if it meant encountering some difficulties along the way: "In terms of writing, [English 101] is a big step up. And it is difficult to have to grasp the whole idea of trying to do it all, rhetorical analysis, jumping into it day one. You don't cover it that much in high school." Ultimately, by the end of the semester, Francisco did not find his English 101 class to be easy, and thought that it was harder than what he had expected. He said, "It wasn't *easy* for me to just, like, write and be able to get good grades. So, yeah, I [had] to improve, be a little bit more disciplined about working, writing these papers. So it was harder than I thought [it would be]." While he seemed very optimistic about English 101 during his first interview, in Interview Two, Francisco seemed a little less optimistic when he described how, "in high school, they kind of prepare you for college by writing some papers and you feel like your senior year, you're really good, and that you're proficient at writing, but, in college, you kind of

realize that it's different. So you're having to kind of change, try to adapt." Francisco's confidence in himself as a writer, despite his initial eagerness about the class, was shaken by the difficulty of English 101.

Francisco's sense of preparation for English 101 also changed between Interview One and Interview Two. When asked if he felt his high school English classes had prepared him for English 101, Francisco said, "yes," in Interview One. He made it clear, though, that his preparedness for college stemmed from his own hard work, not his high school classes or teachers, and did not seem fazed by the prospect of encountering something new in his English 101 class:

> I feel like, because of my discipline in high school and [ability] to write it and really, really get it out there, I feel like, yes, *through my effort in high school*, I feel like it has prepared me a little bit. But it's still a new step that you have to take, and … nothing can fully prepare you to come to 101, for you to say, 'Oh, this is easy and I've already done something,' and you're just able to write a paper just like that. It's gonna be a new thing that you haven't quite gotten yet. (emphasis added)

Francisco further described that, coming into English 101, he felt most prepared for the technical aspects of writing that he was taught in his high school English classes, but not the topics covered in English 101: "The preparation was not so much on what we write about, but definitely the things they expect. Teachers [in high school] would expect to see a certain format." Several other times during his first interview, he emphasized that, "the topics [in English 101] are not something you'd write about in high school."

However, Francisco was not able to rely on his confidence in himself and his knowledge of the technical writing skills he learned in high school throughout his whole semester in English 101. When asked in Interview Two if he felt that his high school English classes had prepared him for his English 101 class, Francisco's answer was

different: “Now, I think when I answered the first time, I believe I said ‘yes.’ But, uh, I’d have to say now, with the ideas that you have to put in [to English 101], I would have to change my answer to ‘no.’” He said his changed response was due to the emphasis on ideas in college, where, he said, “I feel like it’s more of ideas you have to get down on paper, and I feel like that’s a little bit different” than the “more solidified things,” such as books and timed persuasive writing assignments he wrote in high school. Interestingly, he discussed this very same emphasis on ideas during Interview One, when he seemed more confident in himself to do well in English 101, as evidenced by the difference in his reactions to this emphasis.

Despite the challenges of it, Francisco said that, overall, he liked his English 101 experience, as it was different from his experiences with writing in high school. “The only English class I can compare it to is high school,” he explained, “so comparing it to my high school, it was a little bit different. I’d say that now, [I] can probably write [my] own ideas. … I guess in high school, you’re more constrained to the boundaries that they give you.” Like Josh, Francisco enjoyed the sense of freedom fostered by his English 101 class.

Overall, Francisco’s expectations of English 101 were met. Throughout his two interviews, Francisco consistently described English 101 as a class in which the focus was on the students’ *ideas*, not the specific formatting guidelines of writing a paper, which was the emphasis of his high school English classes. At the end of Interview One, Francisco discussed what he thought the rest of his semester in English 101 would be like:

> It will certainly probably get more [like] something that you have to really think about, use your thoughts to develop. It's something more intellectual, rather than just, y'know, you read Story A and you're able to get the main point, and now you write about it. It's something that you have to use your … creativity is one way of putting it, but just, being able to think, and have your ideas.

During his second interview, Francisco described how those expectations had been met:

> I think I'm able to sort of think outside the normalcies of high school, and how it's only supposed to be a certain amount of pages or paragraphs, and so rigid, and the ideas you can expand a little bit more in college and … doing things that we never wrote about … things I had never really heard of in high school, we're doing it now in college, so we're able to write a little bit more. More about things that're much more difficult to grasp than an argument paper. Some things you really have to focus on and try to think about.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Overview

This study sought to learn about the previous writing skills, knowledge, and experiences first-year students from Knox County brought with them as they transitioned into their first-year composition classes at UT. Much of the similar research in the field of composition studies focuses on the writing first-year composition students do in college, yet little is known about what first-year composition students think and know about writing *prior* to coming to college. Thus, the purpose of this study was to hear, firsthand, about FYC students' past experiences with writing, as well as their accounts of their negotiations of the transition from their past experiences to their experiences in an FYC classroom, given their prior writing knowledge. The design of the study was qualitative in nature: a two-part interview study with five participants who had all graduated from a high school in Knox County and were first-year students enrolled in English 101 during the semester the study was conducted.

Summary of the Findings

One of the major findings of the study was that participants' knowledge of and enjoyment of writing was linked to their perceptions of themselves as strong writers and to their level of interest in a given subject, which led to engagement with said topic, and, ultimately, to a feeling of success; this feeling of success was additionally influenced by participants' English teachers. Participants, then, appeared to view writing from a personal perspective that was tied to a value-laden sense of themselves as writers – that is, they identified themselves as either "strong" or "weak" writers, an identification that

was largely grounded in teacher feedback, and rationalized their writing strengths in terms of their own degree of interest in a particular subject matter or paper topic.

Another major finding was that, despite the participants' similar experiences in their high school English classes and somewhat similar expectations of English 101 prior to attending UT, no two participants had the same reaction when their actual English 101 experiences did not correspond to their prior expectations and high school experiences. Participants' reactions ranged from unwavering optimism about growing as a writer in the face of the challenges of English 101 to outright anger at the high school teachers who had, reportedly, wasted students' time by not adequately preparing them for college writing. However, there was no clear pattern between participants' reported attitudes toward writing and English classes and their reactions to their experiences in their English 101 classes.

In regards to participants' previous writing knowledge and experiences, the study found that:

- Participants' primary understanding of writing was that is a means to discuss or respond to literature, a perspective shaped by their high school experiences. The emphasis in all of the participants' high school English classes was on reading and writing about literature, and the majority of the writing they did in those classes was based on the books they read – for example, thematic analyses and personal responses. Participants also had some experience with writing research papers and persuasive arguments.
- For the participants who had attended public schools, their high school English teachers emphasized "lower-level," or local concerns, such as paper format and

citations, in contrast to the participant who had attended a private school, where English classes emphasized creative writing and personal responses.

Overall, the study found that participants' prior understandings of and experiences with writing did not match the writing they were asked to complete in their English 101 classes, and each participant reacted differently to this disjunction.

Discussion of the Findings

The Findings in Relation to the Reviewed Literature

For the most part, the types of writing assignments participants of the current study reported having completed in their Knox County high schools matched up with the genres participants in Reiff's and Bawarshi's study reported having written in the domain of school – the top genres that the UT participants in their study reportedly had written were research papers, summaries, reports, and personal essays (321). Participants in the current study named thematic analyses, personal responses, research papers, and persuasive arguments as the types of writing they had done the most of in their high school English classes. The difference is that, for the UT participants in Reiff's and Bawarshi's study, which investigated students' use of prior genre knowledge in the face of new writing tasks encountered in college, the research paper was the top genre written in an academic context, while the current study showed that research papers and persuasive arguments were secondary to the thematic analyses and personal responses they wrote in response to the books they read in their English classes. However, this difference could be accounted for by the fact that Reiff's and Bawarshi's study did not identify the classes in which their participants wrote certain genres, and the current study

focused solely on English courses. Overall, then, the types of writing most frequently reported by the UT participants in both studies align, for the most part.

Likewise, the findings generally support Nelson's conclusion that students are not just "uninitiated outsiders." Her study showed that students used familiar interpretive practices to navigate their way through unfamiliar writing assignments in different college courses, suggesting that Nelson's participants were able to engage in high-road transfer, and apply their prior writing knowledge to new writing situations and contexts. Though the two studies (Nelson's and the current study) were different in methodology and purpose – and so, not easily comparable – the current study's conclusion matches Nelson's, as participants in the current study did try to utilize what they knew to navigate their way through English 101. However, while the participants in Nelson's study were successful in transferring prior knowledge to new situations, the participants did not seem to engage in the kind of high-road transfer described by Perkins and Salomon. Because of the differences between the two contexts – they had experienced different kinds of English classes in high school than what they encountered in college – participants were often unable to draw on their previous writing skills, and abstract from those skills knowledge that would help them succeed in the new writing context of the English 101 classroom. The problem arose for the current study participants, then, when what they knew (what they had learned in their high school English courses) did not seem to match what they were being asked to do in English 101; they did not always feel they could successfully utilize the skills they had learned in their high school English courses, although some participants were able to use what they had learned in high school classes other than English (for example, Cecilia, who drew on the skills she learned in her

Apologetics class to help her complete English 101 assignments). Like each of the students in Nelson's study, participants in the current study "struggled … to integrate the new ways of thinking and writing they were being asked to engage in with the familiar interpretive approaches they brought with them" (426). The main difference between the findings of the two studies was in the participants' successes in achieving high-road transfer.

The findings of the current study were also different from Patterson's and Duer's discussion of the results of the national reading and writing surveys sent out to high school English teachers and FYC instructors. Because these surveys investigated the perspectives and values of high school and college English teachers – not students – when compared to the findings of the current study, they pinpoint a problematic gap between teachers and students. As Patterson and Duer explain, the ACT surveys revealed that the two groups of educators (high school and college English teachers) were, for the most part, in agreement on the value they placed on various reading and writing skills. One implication of this finding is that the classes taught by these teachers – high school English classes and college English classes – should be similar. However, the current study contradicted this finding by showing that, from the perspective of students transitioning from high school English classes into FYC courses (and not the teachers of these courses), there was a mismatch between the curriculum of English classes at the secondary- and postsecondary-levels. So, per the results of the ACT surveys, a comparison of the perspectives of high school and college English teachers shows that there is general harmony between the skills taught in English classes at the two different levels, but according to the student-participants in the current study, there is quite a

mismatch between these two different types of English classes. Consequently, when the results of the current study, which investigated student perspectives, are held up to the results of the national reading and writing surveys, which focused on teacher perspectives, it is evident that an emphasis on the teacher perspective clearly does not reveal the whole story of what students know or what they perceive is taught in these classes. Thus, the student perspective is shown to be crucial when examining students' transition from high school English classes to FYC classes; *both* sides of the story must be told.

Likewise, as discussed in Chapter Two, much of the discussion in the literature of first-year students' struggles with writing in college neglects the perspective of the students. What is missing from discussions such as Bartholomae's, for example, is what FYC students have to say about their experiences. It is not just that students struggle as they learn to write in a different discourse, or that they have a hard time writing their way into the university (à la Bartholomae), but that they have very real (and very different) reactions to the experience of transitioning from high school to college English classes, as evidenced by the findings of the current study. It is notable that, in light of their discovery that English 101 did not match their high school English experiences and/or their prior expectations for the class, participants' responses ranged from consistent optimism, enthusiasm, and acceptance of the challenges that came with being shaped into a stronger writer throughout the course of English 101; to losing some confidence in one's writing abilities after a semester that was initially greeted with enthusiasm; to being downright angry with one's high school English teachers for wasting students' time. This wide range of student reactions is noticeably absent from Bartholomae's treatment of students'

adaptations to writing in a new discourse. While Bartholomae does note the "drama of an essay's mental preparation or physical production," the "drama" is limited to the written product itself, and does not consider the whole drama of the student-writer's adaptations to a new writing situation (27). Likewise, Elbow's push for teachers to ground their teaching of writing in what students already do well *as writers* does not consider students as writers outside of the boundaries of the written page. As the findings of the current study revealed, the process of negotiating a new writing situation impacted participants' perceptions of themselves as writers which, in turn, reportedly seemed to affect their writing itself. A focus on student writing, as Bartholomae and Elbow suggest, while important, does not reveal the whole story of students' transitions from high school to college writing. Student writing, then, should be studied in the context of the experiences of the student who writes it. This conclusion echoes Bizzell's 1986 call for a study of student-writers that examines students' world views. Overall, the findings of the current study reiterate the need to consider the perspectives of students when discussing their transition from high school English classes to college English courses.

Methodological Considerations

As is the nature of qualitative research, certain aspects of the study's research design may have affected the findings – namely, the population from which the participants were chosen. First, because I was dependent on other first-year composition instructors to pass on the invitation to participate in the study by distributing the informational flyer to their students, it is probable that not all students enrolled in English 101 during the semester the study was conducted were actually invited to participate, thereby potentially limiting the overall population from which the participants were

chosen, and, thus, perspectives outside of the perspectives represented by the study participants. The promise of the $25 compensation, as noted in the in the call for participants, also may have affected the pool of potential participants, as it is possible that students chose to participate in the study solely for the $25 compensation, and thus were not actively engaged in a reflection of their experiences.

Related to this possibility is my role as both the researcher and a graduate student in English and an English 101 instructor, as well as the nature of the study itself. Given the full disclosure of the informational flyer, participants knew my status as the researcher, and also knew that the study was being conducted for a Master's thesis project. This knowledge may have affected participants' answers. Because English 101 is taught primarily by graduate students such as myself, the participants may have associated me with their own instructors, and thus, may not have been completely candid when describing their experiences with writing and with English classes, despite the protection measures that were set in place to ensure that their identities never got back to their own English teachers. Furthermore, given the circumstances, there is the possibility that participants were self-conscious about their responses, and may have even told me what they thought I wanted to hear – as a graduate student in English (someone who is an "English" person) or for the thesis they knew I was writing.

Finally, the absence of the consideration of participants' actual writing in the research design is noticeable in the findings. Given that the emphasis was on their perspectives – as my main critique of much of the literature is that there is too much emphasis on student writing without situating it within the context of their own experiences and perspectives as writers – I did not consider possibility of also including

writing samples from the participants in the data. However, such data would have supplemented participants' responses, and could have fostered a more thorough discussion on how participants' writing had changed from high school to the end of their first semester in English 101.

Due to my prospective graduation date, the current study was conducted, from the time of the submission of the IRB application to the time of writing, in roughly seven months; the span of the interviews was only two months. The time constraints of the study were limiting. As a consequence, this study was conducted on a very small scale. (See "Recommendations for Further Research," below.)

Conclusions

Implications of the Findings

In light of the current study's findings, there are some pedagogical implications to consider. FYC instructors can and should not be expected to get to know each and every student's past writing experiences to the extent that this study explores them, as the demands of the job as it is are already consuming enough. However, as the study showed, students' attitudes toward writing were impacted by their perceptions of themselves as writers, and English teachers had an impact on those self-perceptions that should not be ignored. FYC instructors could be sympathetic to and more understanding of the twenty-something different student perspectives housed in the typical English 101 course at UT. While FYC students all have at least one thing in common – that they all passed through the college admissions process with the appropriate high school GPAs and standardized test scores – as the current study showed, they do not all write at the same level, even if students emerged from similar high school English experiences. This is not to suggest

that the standards in FYC classrooms be lowered, but that teachers in those classrooms at least acknowledge the diversity of their students' prior experiences. Once that diversity is acknowledged, FYC instructors could explicitly teach their students the skills of transfer, and teach their students "how to learn for transfer" as Perkins and Salomon suggest ("Teaching" 30). Specifically, FYC instructors could model for and teach their students backward reaching transfer, and help students develop the skills to reflect on and reach back to their prior writing knowledge and experiences to help them as they negotiate new writing contexts in college.

On a larger scale, the findings imply that the high school English classes in the county closest to the university where this study was conducted do not prepare students for the material covered in the FYC courses at UT, even if students are on the "university path." While the primary goal of the high schools in Knox County is not necessarily to prepare students for college – unless, perhaps, students are enrolled in "College Preparatory" (CP) courses – but to meet the state standards for curriculum, at a time when more and more students are encouraged to attend college, the two curriculums should better align themselves. Students such as the participants of the current study, who arrive in FYC classrooms feeling as if the knowledge they attained in their high school English classes does not apply, struggle with that transition – to which many years of literature on the subject attests. While this study begins to fill a certain gap in the extant literature, more research on the subject needs to be done.

Reflections on the Research

Given the time constraints and other limitations of this study, I was unable to explore all of the different avenues of results that came out of the interviews, and,

instead, focused on those areas that best answered the research questions. However, because of the exploratory nature of this inductive qualitative study, other findings did emerge that, although promising, could not be analyzed for the purposes of this study. These areas include participants' reported strengths and weaknesses, and how they changed throughout the course of the semester; participants' definitions of a "good" English teacher; participants' ideas of what makes a writer a successful writer, and how those ideas changed from the first interview to the second interview; and, finally, the influence of people other than their English teachers on their perceptions of themselves as writers, such as their classmates and family members.

Recommendations for Further Research

The primary purpose of the current study was to bridge the gap between FYC instructors' assumptions about their students' knowledge and their students' actual writing knowledge prior to and outside of the FYC classroom. To begin to bridge this gap, two research questions were asked – one which inquired about the prior writing knowledge, skills, and experiences of FYC students, the other concerned with how that prior writing knowledge affected students' transitions from their high school English classes into their English 101 classes at UT. This study has attempted to show the arc of that transition for some FYC students, beginning with their prior experiences with writing, continuing with how those experiences shaped their expectations of their FYC classes, and, ultimately, how their actual English 101 experiences compared to their past experiences and prior expectations. The study, though, only scratches the surface, given its limitations. Before other pedagogical implications can be explored or even put into practice, more research on this topic needs to be done. Future research should continue to

investigate the perspectives of other first-year composition students as they, too, make the transition that so many students make during the first year of college.

As previously discussed, the current study lacked any consideration of students' actual written work. No writing samples were analyzed or discussed, as the primary focus was on students' perspectives and adding their voices to the on-going conversation about the struggles of first-year writers in college, given the imbalanced focus on students' writing without contextualizing it in their actual experiences. Future research should examine students' writing samples *in conjunction with* their voiced perspectives. By focusing solely on student writing samples, researchers run the risk of imposing their own values and judgments, their own perspectives on said writing; likewise, by focusing solely on student perspectives, as this study did, students' experiences are not grounded in or balanced by any written artifacts. Further research should be done that balances students' writing with what students have to say about that writing.

Future studies that truly follow participants through the transition from high school English classes to FYC classes should also be considered. Such studies might be similar to Sommers' and Saltz's Harvard study, which was longitudinal and analyzed student writing. However, such research should follow participants from a time *before* they begin their FYC courses – perhaps beginning as early as their senior year of high school, or just after – and follow participants, via interviews and examinations of their writing as it progresses, through their whole year of FYC courses (at UT, English 101 and English 102). Such a study would truly bridge the gap, as it would follow participants through the entire transition, and not just focus on their college experiences.

Since Bartholomae first wrote "Inventing the University," there has been a twenty-seven year-long conversation in the field of composition studies about the struggles of first-time college writers as they enter into new writing contexts. This conversation has failed to adequately consider the perspectives of the students themselves, and, when their perspectives have been considered, little attention has been paid to their past experiences with writing and how those experiences shape their writing performances. Instead of continuing to talk *about* students' writing, we in the more "privileged" positions of the field of composition studies should change the tone of the conversation and speak *with* students about their writing.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Informational Flyer

Bridging the Gap: Understanding the Skills and Writing Knowledge of Entering College Composition Students

To English 101 Students:

If this is your first year at UT and you graduated from a Knox County High school, you are invited to participate in an interview study being conducted for a Master's thesis project. The purpose of the study is to hear firsthand from you about writing in high school and college English classes.

If you choose to participate, you will be interviewed twice during the semester: once early in the semester and once later in the semester. Each of these interviews will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and will be arranged at times of your convenience.

Your English 101 instructor will not be informed of your participation in the study, and your participation will in no way affect your class grade in English 101. Your name will never be revealed to any other person and will not be used in any report of the findings from the study—no one will know of your participation in the study. You will be able to choose a pseudonym if you wish.

Your feedback will enable future first-year composition instructors to better understand the knowledge and skills that entering students bring with them, so that they can connect with and teach their students.

Please note that you must be at least 18 years old to participate in the study. If you are interested and would like more information, please contact the researcher, Laura Sceniak, via email (lsceniak@utk.edu) no later than Tuesday, September 20.

Information in the study records will be kept confidential. All data will be stored securely and only the researcher conducting the study will have access to it, unless you give permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference will be made to your name in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. In such reports, you will be given a pseudonym of your choosing.

If you choose to participate, you will be compensated $25 upon completion of this study.

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Laura Sceniak at lsceniak@utk.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you

withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

Appendix B: Informed Consent Statement

Bridging the Gap: Understanding the Skills and Writing Knowledge of Entering College Composition Students

You are invited to participate in an interview study being completed for a Master's thesis project. The purpose of the study is to hear from you about your experiences in your English 101 class this semester.

You will be interviewed in-person twice during the semester: once early in the semester and once later in the semester. The times of each of these interviews will be arranged with the researcher at your convenience. Each interview should only take 45-60 minutes of your time, and will be audio recorded. You may stop the interview at any time, if you so choose.

To ensure that your participation in the study will in no way affect your English 101 grade, your English 101 instructor will not be informed of your participation. Please do not share the identity of your English 101 instructor with the researcher.

Your feedback on your English 101 experience will enable first-year composition instructors at UT to better teach their students.

The data in the study records will be kept confidential; only the researcher will have access to the recordings and transcripts of your interviews. All audio files and transcripts will be destroyed within three months of the completion of the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. In such reports, you will be given a pseudonym of your choosing.

You will be compensated $25 upon completion of this study.

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Laura Sceniak at lsceniak@utk.edu or [phone number withheld]. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed. By signing and dating below, you state that you are 18 years of age or older, and give your consent to participate in the study. Please sign one copy for the researcher's records, and one copy to keep for your own records.

Consent

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

Appendix C: Interview One Protocol

Bridging the Gap: Understanding the Skills and Writing Knowledge of Entering College Composition Students

Introductions and Informed Consent

- Introductions (to each other and to the project)
- Informed Consent
- Pseudonym

High School Experience: English Classes and Attitude Towards Writing

- Where did you go to high school? Could you describe it for me?
- Overall, what is your attitude toward writing and English classes? Do you enjoy writing, or is it something you just "have to do for school"?
- Can you describe the English classes you took in high school?:
    - What types of writing did you do? How much writing was required of you?
    - Tell me about your strengths in your h.s. English classes. What did you do best as a writer?
    - Tell me about your "weaknesses" as a writer.
    - Were your English classes challenging? What made them challenging (or not)?
- Tell me about writing you did for classes other than English in high school.
- Tell me about other writing you have done that is not for school purposes.

English 101 Experience Thus Far

- So, you've been in English 101 at UT for a little over a month now. Can you tell me how that class is going for you?
    - Is it different from what you expected before you got to college? What did you expect it to be like?
    - Is it different from your high school English classes? How so? Is the material you're covering similar to what you covered in high school?
    - Tell me a little bit about how what you perceive as your strengths as a writer are being confirmed (or not), and whether you are able to apply them in your writing now.
    - Tell me about how your weaknesses as a writer are showing up now in your college English class.
    - What do you expect the rest of the semester to be like?
    - Do you feel like the writing you did in high school prepared you for English 101? How so (or not)?
- Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experiences either in high school English classes or your English 101 class right now?

Closing Remarks

Appendix D: Interview Two Protocol

Bridging the Gap: Understanding the Skills and Writing Knowledge of Entering College Composition Students

Semester in Review: English 101 Experiences

- Last time we met, you had only been at UT for about a month. Now you're almost done with the semester; in general, how has the semester gone for you? Do you feel like you're starting to get the hang of things on campus?
- How is your English 101 class going right now?
    - What types of assignments have you done (and what material have you covered) since we last met? What are you working on in class right now?
    - Has it gotten more or less challenging since we last met? What previous knowledge or skills have you been able to draw on? What has been new to you?
    - How do you feel about the material you've covered? Does it make sense to you? Overall, how do you think you're doing in the class (compared to the other classes you're taking)?

English 101 Expectations and Preparation Prior to Beginning this Semester

- Do you feel like your high school English classes prepared you for the writing assignments you've been asked to do so far in college, in English or other classes?
- Now that you're at the end of your first semester, how do you feel, overall, about your experiences in English 101?
    - Was the class harder or easier than you thought it would be? What would you say was the hardest part of the class? What was the easiest?
    - How has the class, in general, compared to the expectations you had for it at the beginning of the semester/the first time we met? What about the expectations you had for it before you came to UT?
    - How well do you think your high school English classes prepared you for English 101?
    - Reflecting on your whole semester in English 101, what do you think you were the most prepared for? What do you wish you had been more prepared for?
- Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences either in high school English classes or your English 101 class?

Reimbursement Information and Closing Remarks

VITA

At the time of this writing, Laura Ashley Sceniak is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Prior to pursuing her M.A., she graduated *summa cum laude* from UT with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Religious Studies. She is originally from Murfreesboro, Tennessee.