

# English 299: Writing with Clarity and Power

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## Course Description

English 299 is a two-unit credit/no credit elective, capped at fifteen students per section, intended to help first year composition students become more effective editors of their own writing. The class provides a hands-on environment to help students with sentence-level editing since the writing center on campus traditionally focuses on more global concerns. Incoming California State University Channel Islands (CSUCI) students who are deemed by the California State University system as needing additional support to satisfy their first year writing requirement (so-called “Early Start” students, explained further below) are placed in English 299 and given priority enrollment in the first year composition (FYC) course of their choice. The class follows a coaching model that helps students develop confidence as editors of their own work and demystifies the writing process.

## Institutional Context

Founded in 2002 and located in the city of Camarillo, CSUCI is the newest campus in the country’s largest state university system. Nearly 60% of CSUCI’s enrollment consists of first-generation college students. CSUCI is also a Hispanic Serving Institution, with Latinx students comprising 53 percent of the population (“Fall Enrollment Snapshot”). Many CSUCI students are second-generation Americans whose families work the agriculture fields that surround our Ventura County campus. CSUCI was the first campus in the 23-campus California State University (CSU) System to pilot Directed Self-Placement (DSP) as an alternative to the CSU’s English Placement Test (EPT). It is also the only CSU campus to have never offered remedial English classes.

Since its inception, CSUCI’s composition program has practiced DSP, which provides students with guidance to enable them to reflect on their own readiness for college writing and choose for themselves whether to take two semesters of writing courses (Stretch Composition) or a single semester composition and rhetoric course. These courses are taught by full-time faculty who work together as a team on program and curriculum development and assessment, including holistic team scoring of student writing that yields invaluable, objective data demonstrating that students are, in fact, placing themselves well in first year composition. This program structure, combined with strict course caps of twenty students per section in lower division com-

position courses, supports students in successfully completing their first year writing requirement in whichever path they choose. Whether students choose two semesters of writing or move straight into the one-semester course, the majority (typically ~90-94%) pass CSUCI's college-level composition course with a grade of C- or higher. This is notable given that traditional measures of readiness for college writing have indicated over the years that only two-thirds of incoming first year students come to CSUCI prepared to succeed in college-level composition courses.

DSP began as a pilot at CSUCI but quickly spread to other, more established CSU campuses who similarly questioned the relevance of the EPT. While the CSU Chancellor's Office grew to support these efforts to expand DSP as well as Stretch Composition, they continued to undergird a culture of remediation via unfunded mandates to prove that students were "making up their deficits" in writing. One such program was mandatory Early Start, which forced incoming students with low scores on the EPT to enroll in a noncredit, twenty-hour summer class intended to alleviate their shortcomings in writing.

The 2010 cover letter included with the CSU Chancellor's Office Executive Order (EO) 1048 and the mandatory Early Start policy stated that each campus was required to develop an individual plan for how they would comply with the mandate. These plans were due five months after the policy was introduced. According to the EO, "Campus plans should include general plans for any and all curricular modifications related to the Early Start Program. Proficiency activities may be offered in a variety of approaches recommended by appropriate faculty and administrative leadership" ("Executive Order 1048"). The EO listed several options for what plans might entail, such as "state supported summer courses, Extended Education Special Session courses, courses offered via a coordinated program developed with regional community colleges, summer bridge programs, on-line coursework, and other best practices" ("Executive Order 1048"). Our faculty made the best of this mandate by developing an online "Early Start Writing" course that helped students understand our DSP process and the kind of writing they would be expected to do in college.

As additional CSU campuses continued to adopt DSP and Stretch Composition and move away from remediation in spite of the persistence of Early Start, the CSU Chancellor's Office committed to efforts to increase graduation rates and eliminate remedial courses in both English and Math ("Graduation Initiative 2025"; "Executive Order 1110"). This included doing away with the EPT in 2017 but still designating the lowest performing admitted students as needing an "Early Start" in college writing ("CSU Makes Sweeping Changes to Developmental Education Policy"). These designations were determined by a new "multiple measures" placement process that replaced the EPT ("Multiple Measures"). CSUCI again responded to an unfunded mandate in

a manner that was adaptive and provided underserved students with an edge rather than penalizing them for daring to pursue a degree at a university that had admitted them and then deemed them underprepared. First year students who were identified as least prepared for college writing were pre-enrolled in a section of English 299 and given priority enrollment in the composition course of their choice.

The development of English 299 preceded the 2017 system-wide changes described above and emerged in response to a campus-wide desire for additional writing instruction beyond FYC, and specifically focused on sentence-level issues. In other words, the familiar lamentation across disciplines, “Why can’t students write?” During the initial rollout of the then one-unit course, one of the campus’s Hispanic-Serving Institutions grants was also coming on line. This grant happened to include money for a new course to help students improve their writing. Thus, some of the initial funding to offer English 299 and report on its efficacy came through this grant. As a one-unit, credit/no credit course centered on more local concerns, designed to help students increase their academic register and sentence complexity, and taught within the context of students’ own writing from their other classes, English 299 (initially entitled “Editing Studio”) served to address these needs while reinforcing the primary purpose of first year writing courses as composition pedagogy, not grammar drills and diagramming sentences. The class became very popular with students from multiple majors, and increasingly with upper-division students, who appreciated the supportive coaching model that enabled them to learn and improve in a low-stakes environment from someone other than the faculty member who would be grading their papers. In the Spring 2018 semester, an upper-division version (English 399: Editing Studio II) spun off of English 299 and targeted students who were working on capstones, independent studies, or other writing-intensive projects. Enrollment for English 299 and 399 was capped at seven students per section.

The positive reputation of English 299 among CSUCI students, faculty, and administrators made it a strong fit when campuses were required to provide embedded support for “Early Start” students in first year writing. Remediation already played no role in the existing campus writing culture at CSUCI, and English 299 had come to be perceived as a “bonus” for students, who benefited from a personalized coaching model in a class taught by an experienced, full-time faculty member whose expertise was in writing. Maintaining DSP meant that all incoming students could still choose for themselves whether to complete their writing requirement via two semesters of classes or one while receiving additional support from an experienced member of our composition faculty who was invested in their success. Section offerings of English 299 were greatly expanded for Fall 2019 to accommodate the increased need for seats

for all incoming first year students who were identified as needing embedded support. These incoming students who had been placed in English 299 were not prohibited from dropping the class as they adjusted their schedules; this created empty seats that were then eagerly scooped up by returning students who were already aware of the class's reputation or were recommended to consider it.

During the course of the Fall 2019 semester, an analysis of the staffing model for English 299 revealed that it was unsustainable financially. When English 299 was designed, it was assumed that one instructor teaching three, one-unit sections, each capped at seven students, would be equivalent to that instructor teaching one three-unit section of twenty-one students. However, it turned out that what this actually added up to was the equivalent of one faculty member teaching a one-unit class to twenty-one students. English submitted a curriculum modification that increased English 299 to two units, capped the class at fifteen students, and established it officially as a corequisite for first year composition students who would benefit from additional support as identified by the CSU's multiple measures assessment process. Importantly, incoming students deemed in need of this support can still choose between English 102 or English 105, even as they are automatically enrolled in English 299 at the same time. Students are still not prevented from dropping the course, which reinforces the autonomy we value in our DSP process. At the same time, requiring students who are enrolled in English 299 to also be enrolled in an FYC class assures that the students in English 299 will all be working towards the same purpose, while other students who seek additional support for their writing can enroll in English 399 and likewise take a class with students who are at a similar stage in their college careers.

In spite of the modifications described above, English 299 remains credit/no credit and maintains the same learning outcomes and coaching model while providing additional hours for students to workshop their writing in a supportive setting with an experienced compositionist who is deeply familiar with what is being asked of them in their writing classes. The revamped title of the class, from "Editing Studio" to "Writing with Clarity and Power," reflects these adaptations. A parallel curriculum modification went into effect for English 399, retitled from "Editing Studio II" to "Editing Studio for Upper-Division Writing." The enrollment cap for English 399 has also increased from seven students to fifteen, and the credit hours from one to two, thus making the class more sustainable from a budget-perspective while providing additional support for student writers in a workshop setting.

### **Theoretical Rationale**

As noted above, English 299 was created as a response to faculty critiques across disciplines that students who performed well in first year composition

(FYC) were not able to succeed at the writing tasks they were assigned in their major and elective courses, as well as to the Early Start mandate and Graduation Initiative that eliminated remediation on the one hand but required students to “make up high school deficits” before beginning the college-level work on the other. In “The Language of Exclusion,” a 1985 article written as remedial programs were being instituted in the CSU, famed literacy scholar and advocate Mike Rose argues that the “notion of remediation, carrying with it as it does the etymological wisps and traces of disease, serves to exclude from the academic community those who are so labelled. They sit in scholastic quarantine until their disease can be diagnosed and remedied” (559).

The “myth of transience” is a phrase coined by Rose in “The Language of Exclusion” (355). Rose contends that the “myth of transience” leads those who believe it to look for quick fixes to compensate for some high school gaps or deficiencies; he feels that this myth has contributed to making the teaching of basic writing programs an uncertain and tenuous enterprise. Rose argues that “[t]he myth’s liability is that it limits the faculty’s ability to consider the writing problems of their students in dynamic and historical terms” (358). Implied by the word “transience,” and inherent to the logic of this deficit model and the term “remedial,” is the belief that any factors contributing to student unpreparedness need not persist, that there is some kind of remedy or inoculation that will keep future generations from suffering from this illness. Sugie Goen (now Goen-Salter) asserted in her dissertation about a CSU developmental writing program, “It is this intended temporariness, or so it would seem, that justifies and obscures the permanence of basic writing and relegates it to the margins of the university” (295). Eschewing the stigma of quarantine while still supporting students to become more empowered as writers is a complicated bill to fill for a one-semester course, but we believe that English 299 can and does fill it, and in ways that are theoretically and pedagogically sound.

Compositionists understand that the need for writing instruction does not end with FYC. If anything, FYC is the beginning of college-level writing. This concept is reinforced by the CSU in its requirement of a junior-level writing course (or proof of junior-level competency); however, this nod at the need for extended writing support is not always recognized or backed by our colleagues, many of whom assume that students will leave FYC ready for whatever writing assignments they will be given in their courses. They fail to consider the complexities of moving on to new genre, rhetorical, and disciplinary conventions that will be required in their majors. While English 299 is by no means a panacea, it gives students added opportunities to work closely with an experienced compositionist and become more empowered and self-directed as writers. Moreover, English 299 accomplishes this mandate from an asset-based model as opposed to a deficit-based one.

While grammar and sentence-level instruction in writing is part of the curriculum of English 299, this is by no means a “skill and drill” course. Instead, as noted above, the course empowers students to become more capable and critical readers and writers. Often, students are assigned writing tasks in their major and general education courses that are not written or structured in ways that enable students to make the most of the writing task. In English 299, students are taught to strategically break down and analyze their writing assignments before they write them and to look back at their drafts and make sure that they have addressed all aspects of the prompt—whether specifically stated or implied in the assignment.

Students are also given the opportunity to continue to peer review and workshop their writing across various sections of a class and with students who are new to the topic. Giving and receiving effective, actionable feedback takes time to learn, and when students take English 299 they are given additional opportunities to work on these complex tasks in one more setting with another highly qualified instructor in addition to their FYC professor. When it comes to working on sentence-level issues within their writing, students are receiving the kinds of instruction in these areas that compositionists have found to be most effective: finding the lapses in convention they’ve made in their own work and getting the grammar/sentence-level instruction at the time and point of need—what Katie Hern and Myra Snell term “just-in-time remediation” (*Toward a Vision* 14-17). For example, by creating personal proofreading journals, students begin to see and learn how to address their own issues and also learn effective ways of responding to error in the work of others (see Adams; Graham et. al.; Clearly).

### **Critical Reflection**

One of the key tenets of the composition team at CSUCI is our commitment to a collaborative pedagogy in course and program design (Howard 54-70). As such, when we develop new courses—including Early Start Writing and Editing Studio/Writing with Clarity and Power—it’s a program effort, involving collaboration among multiple English faculty members over several months.

Most of us who teach composition would define our personal pedagogy as strongly rooted in feminist pedagogical principles, and our approach in the class has been one that focuses on an asset model, one that asks and acknowledges what students bring to the table, what they’ve learned from their lived experiences (Jarrett 113-131). As the first person to teach the one-unit class, Vose focused on de-stigmatization. The one-unit class was initially designed to run from weeks three through ten of our fifteen-week semester. As previously stated, the class was created in response to the age-old complaint, “students these

days can't write," so the original design was set up so that faculty could refer and recommend the class to students whose writing they deemed problematic. Thus, most of the students enrolled in the first few semesters had been advised to take the class by a faculty member who found the student's writing lacking.

Naturally, these students entered the class feeling the pall of their perceived deficits hanging over their heads. As Mina Shaughnessy puts it, for many of our students, "academic writing is a trap, not a way of saying something to someone . . . writing is but a line that moves haltingly across the page, exposing as it goes all that the writer doesn't know, then passing into the hands of a stranger who reads it with a lawyer's eyes, searching for flaws" (7). These feelings of shame hinder students in a couple of important ways: the more obvious one being that the students believed they were bad writers, and people who believe they aren't good at something often don't have a growth mindset (Dweck 64-70). Most of us would agree, based on experience, that this is especially true when it comes to writing. Students with writing challenges often don't see writing as a skill like any other that can be developed; rather, their experiences based on a lifetime of schooling have convinced them that they aren't good writers, as though they aren't good people, which is to say, they often don't believe they'll get better. When English 299 students were asked why they thought that, they frequently replied with a version of "it [a sentence or idea] sounded good in my head, but it just doesn't come out the same way on the page."

These issues with what Linda Flower and John R. Hayes called translation were never made explicit to students by their teachers; in the teacher's defense, they may not have understood translation issues either, due to the lack of composition training in many teacher preparation programs (373-4). This deficit in training, combined with our own observation that most undergraduate English majors choose their majors because they're strong readers, or writers, or both, means that teachers may not understand why students don't "get it," despite repeated instruction. This also seems to be true of many academics.

A second, perhaps less obvious problem for students referred to English 299 was the subtext of the message that many felt: you don't belong here. As noted above, more than half of CSUCI students are first-generation, Latinx students, Pell Grant recipients, and very often, children of the agricultural workers who sow and reap the fields that literally surround the campus. As such, their lived educational experiences have often been with deficit-minded approaches, and their lived societal experiences, especially in the last several years, have reinforced that message (Milner 34-37). As Terrel Strayhorn's work on belonging illustrates, students need to feel like they belong in our colleges and universities, and too often, that sense of belonging is elided, often inadvertently, by well-meaning faculty (15-26). As H. Richard Milner, IV discusses based on Elliot Eisner's work, by not explicitly addressing the ways

in which many students' experiences have set them up to feel like outsiders, we are teaching them something, and by the time those students are sitting in our college classrooms, they've internalized it (18-19, 212). That's why it's important to acknowledge opportunity gaps, and destigmatize the things students don't know, which is a conversation English 299 faculty have with students at the first class meeting. This approach worked well for students who were referred to the class, and willingly chose to enroll in it, but may need modification for students who are opted in, based on their results from the CSU's new multiple measures assessment. As Hern and Snell point out, "non-cognitive issues—more than the math or English—are likely to be the most significant issues [students] will confront" (*Toward a Vision* 25). Thus, explicitly teaching students how to have a growth mindset will likely be part of the expanded curriculum.

English 299 has changed structure quite a bit since its initial offering. As previously noted, the class was first offered as a twice a week, one-hour class that met for eight weeks. While the first cohort of students believed the class was beneficial, they also felt that in ending the class in week ten, they were cast adrift just as their final papers were coming due, and they wanted the structure of having time to work on actual assignments. Based on that feedback, in the following few years, the class met for one hour/week for the entire semester. Many students still wanted more time in class, and that desire, combined with the previously stated institutional units per instructor led to the newly designed approach: a two-hour class that meets once a week. While the transition from a seven-student, one-hour class to a fifteen-student, two-hour class will likely produce new challenges, ultimately, we think students who are enrolled in the class based on their test score will see the two-unit version as more of a "real" class than some Fall 2019 first year students did. Some students, particularly those who have historically been poor test takers, and hence had often found themselves in "support classes," saw English 299 as another example of that type of class, though the option to drop the class alleviated some of that stigma.

An additional benefit for incoming students who are placed in English 299 is that it is integrated with their regular coursework during the academic year rather than tapping their time and money during the summer, as the Early Start class did. Our composition faculty understood that the expectation for Early Start to remedy deficits in readiness for college writing was unrealistic. Instead, we took the opportunity to design the online course to boost incoming students' confidence by offering a dip into the shallow end, exploring the kinds of assignments they would be exposed to in the fall, including units on the differences between high school and college writing, sample first year writing prompts and prompt analysis, as well as writings and reflections from recent first year composition students. Most students in CSUCI's Early Start classes

reported having reduced anxiety about beginning their university education. As the expanded, semester-long class, Writing with Clarity and Power, is intended to replace the Early Start class, and is now a two-hour weekly class, that will allow us to incorporate the successful Early Start curriculum into English 299, hopefully with similar benefits for students. The reduced anxiety about college writing and navigating writing tasks will be especially important for incoming students in Fall 2020, as almost all CSU classes will be offered virtually, including English 299. Fortunately, Early Start at CSUCI was designed as an online class in order to allow students to work during the summer, so the framework was already established as an asynchronous class with rotating call-in or Zoom-in office hours.

Ultimately, with the turn away from the remedial classes, and noncredit classes, colleges and universities must still meet the needs of the students who come to us with staggering ranges of preparation for college-level writing. Classes like Writing with Clarity and Power—which provide students the individualized attention they need, and are taught by a compositionist who knows exactly the types of writing assignments students will be expected to master—offer a way to meet those needs (Hern and Snell, “The California Acceleration Project” 34-36). We understand that curricular decisions are always based in local contexts even as they ideally draw upon theoretically sound rationale. We are also aware that the larger public is not always as ready to let go of terms like “remedial,” and that it is convenient to lament the decline of student writing without addressing what students do well and working from an asset model. It is our sincere hope that this discussion of English 299 helps to spark ideas and other courses that focus on our students’ assets instead of their supposed “deficits” and that increase access and equity for students who have so often been marginalized by the institutions designed to serve them.

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