

Editorial Introduction: Why Write?

In December 1975, *Newsweek* famously explained “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” heaping opprobrium on a Johnny who already couldn’t read (Flesch) or add (Kline) and preceding the disdain for a Johnny and Jill who, various ways in various decades, couldn’t read or write. Even now, one can count on intermittent tut-tutting from newspapers, magazines, and other news media about what the Kids These Days can’t do.

All along the way, composition studies scholars have scrambled to disprove this notion. Writing instructors have and continue to push back on the discourse of the literacy crisis by investigating (and then implementing, then assessing, then reflecting on) what should be taught in first year writing courses. Though we prefer a positive framing of literacy—and some gender fluidity that would allow Johnny and Jill out of that binary—the question of “why [a student] can’t” write has helped to propel our field forward because, by responding to it, we inevitably justify our existence and improve our practice. When we research literacy practices and suggest ways for improving student learning through writing, we show the naysayers that not only can Johnny write, they can learn more about writing, too.

This becomes particularly important to suggest in a moment when so much of the conversation centers on what artificial intelligence/machinic writing means for writing instructors and instruction, for students and their learning about writing, and for our discipline. In the current moment a question gently creeps into the back of our minds: Does Johnny even need to know how to write? These new technologies—and the discourse that accompanies them—shifts the focus from the student (not being able to write) to the need for writing knowledge and practice generally. Of course, as journal editors and researchers and instructors of writing ourselves, we know that students need both writing knowledge and practice—though what that means changes as writing technologies emerge, as it always has. But we also know from conversations with colleagues that this new question haunts many people. Luckily, in this issue’s *Where We Are*, we have several wonderful scholars who engage in meaningful conversations about AI and writing, offering varying perspectives on what it could mean for the field, ourselves, and our students.

For our part, the discourse around AI and writing has moved us to think more specifically about *why* we write. To return to Johnny: what if *Newsweek* had shifted the question from “why can’t” to “why does?” We think this change might have shifted so many of the experiences, attitudes, and perspectives that followed the *Newsweek* article (and still are generated in response to others like it). Instead, literacy crisis discourse shapes the mindset of many students coming into our classrooms: they think that they can’t write because of prior

experiences with writing, and these prior experiences cloud their ability to see the possibilities for learning in their current writing contexts. It can therefore be very difficult for students to push forward in learning how to write more effectively. Negative mindsets with respect to writing can be difficult to challenge, especially when we often only teach students for 10-15 weeks. And, given current technologies like ChatGPT students can sometimes mask “I can’t” with “there’s nothing more to learn” or even “I am not going to need writing for my future.” As writing instructors, we continue to teach and encourage those students by attempting to change the narrative by offering them glimpses of what writing offers—in their current classes, in their future careers—and by showing them what writing teaches them learning, identity, experience, community, inquiry, and perspective. In short: it’s through writing that students can begin to better understand themselves and their needs and uses for it.

In many ways, we are preaching to the choir: readers of this journal are composition instructors, and we all tend to value the teaching of writing; we all want our students to understand how and why writing is important. But if we are going to help students puzzle through why they write, we might want to understand why we write. What makes us—we experts in the universe of writing instruction and scholarship—write? How often do we stop to consider that question?

We know that people write to:

- communicate across time/space
- have their say
- learn
- explore meaning
- impact their communities
- fulfill expectations
- transfer
- resolve conflict
- create knowledge
- inquire
- maintain relationships
- achieve goals
- express themselves
- gain confidence
- share stories
- entertain

...and so on and so on. (And, of course, others write to create conflict, spread misinformation, vilify, disparage, and the like.) We might imagine that compositionists write for similarly positive reasons, especially given what appears in the pages of our journals. For the last several years, NCTE's The National Day on Writing has encouraged people to share #WhyIWrite on social media, and we thought it could be fun to shift the narrative a bit and continue the conversation on why we write. Following a number of contributors to this issue, we will share below a small snippet of why we write; we invite readers to share why you write across social media.

We believe that shifting the narrative this way helps to move away from the thinking that writing might not be needed and back toward the meaning of what writing offers and why we do it.

Kt

My undergraduate degree is in English with a focus on creative writing—I stumbled onto the focus somewhat through optimistic fun when, as a first year student, my mama and I emailed “poems” back and forth about my current life events. My favorite, “Justin, the Tall and Kara, the small,” centered on a long-standing relationship that would follow me for several years past undergrad. Though the relationship died, my love of language, more specifically of writing, did not. I spent my undergraduate career attempting to understand how a writer could deviate from “traditional writing” even researching and writing about it for my senior thesis. Through textual analysis of famous writers and through a series of interviews with English faculty members, I unknowingly began a quest towards attempting to understand how good writing is understood, practiced, and even taught. The conclusions I came to in this thesis inadvertently, or maybe not so inadvertently, trailed behind me imprinting on my education, my research, and my classroom as I sought to understand what good writing is—both for myself as a writer, a teacher of writing, and for my students.

I share this piece of history because it impacts the reasons I write:

1. Because I want answers, and I have always wanted answers. The answers help better myself as a writing educator, and through this, help my students become better, more effective writers;
2. Because I love language and always have loved it. My days of weaving together pieces about nothingness (short story), celebrating the life of my grandfather (creative nonfiction piece), and disco diva (poem about a dancing queen) have morphed into pieces about the teaching of transfer and reflection and learning but nonetheless, the love I have for what language can do when written down has not waned. Words hold so much power (this we know)—they can be

fun yet tragic and when we put them into writing, they are given a different kind of life.

MD

My teacher for 5th grade Language Arts quit during the first week of school. Minutes before he packed his briefcase and walked out of the classroom for good, I had asked aloud—during an oral spelling test—whether he wanted us to spell “PUH-neu-monia” or not. My hope was to give my classmates a hint on a tricky word, but the effect was that he put his things away silently, walked out of the school’s back door, and drove out of the parking lot. We waited about 10 minutes, silent-struck, and then went to the main office to tell the administration that our teacher probably wasn’t coming back.

His replacement, Mrs. Humphries, didn’t do oral spelling tests. Instead, she transformed the classroom into a madcap adventure of painting, drawing, poetry, and drama, bringing history alive in each unit. (For one unit, she literally let us paint the inside walls of the classroom like a castle—complete with damsel in distress—on the promise that we would wash it off at year’s end.)

We did have writing assignments—handwritten and hand-drawn reports on the historical periods under study. When we acted, spoke, and read aloud in class, I knew Mrs. Humphries was paying attention; when we wrote the reports, I wasn’t so sure. So, when it came time to write the report on the Medieval Period, I laced my report with strategically-placed and clever profanities. I figured that one of two things would happen: either she wouldn’t read carefully and I would get away with it, thus proving my thesis correct, or she would read carefully and would be entertained by my tales of the bleeping knights and their bleeping heraldry. When I received my report back, I found that Mrs. Humphries had circled every single profanity throughout the report and left a note at the top to the effect of: “These probably weren’t necessary.” (And, for those of you who were grade-grubbers like me: she did not take points off for it.)

Indeed, dear reader, she was reading carefully. Reflecting on this experience now, it’s clear that there are several layers to why I wrote the report the way I did. On one level, I was required to—it was an assignment for school. On another level, I wrote because I wanted a relationship with my reader. I wanted to know she was there, paying attention to my writing. I wanted to know that my writing wasn’t just disappearing into the gradebook.

Relationship Goals

Developing and maintaining relationships is a large part of why we write. It’s also one of our main areas of focus for the work of *Composition Studies* this

year and next. Establishing, building, and maintaining relationships is what makes an independent journal survive and thrive.

Here are some of our relationship goals:

- Paramount to our efforts is to maintain positive, open, reciprocal relationships: with readers and subscribers, for whom the journal exists; among our staff and Advisory Board, whose tireless efforts make the machine go; with reviewers, who—judging by the acceptance and completion rates for reviews—are clearly more and more overburdened; with former, current, and potential authors, whose research and scholarship is the backbone of the journal; and with distributors and our publisher, who help the good work in the journal’s pages reach mailboxes and libraries across the world, among others. This year, we’re dedicating additional effort to nurturing those relationships through clear communication, open conversation, and engaging efforts.
- We are happy to say that our anti-racist heuristic continues to inform the relationships among the staff and with reviewers and authors. We continue to maintain that document, updating it and its implementation as needed. Our next policy project will focus on our relationship with emerging writing technologies. We will work toward an machine-generated language policy—an AI policy, as it were—for which the *Where We Are* in this issue will serve as a kind of intellectual foundation. Our goal with this second heuristic will be to articulate how the journal relates to new writing technologies and how that relationship plays out for authors, reviewers, and readers.
- Lastly, we will begin more work on relationships that can financially sustain the journal. COVID-19, inflation, declining library budgets in higher education, lack of institutional support, and other factors have made sustaining the financial health of the journal doable but difficult. We have been blessed by the willingness of our staff to serve without remuneration; by our Advisory Board, and by a relationship with our publisher, Parlor Press, that has been steady and sustaining. Until now, our subscription fees have stayed flat, but that will need to change. In addition, our editorial staff and the Advisory Board have ideas for a fundraising project that we hope to share later this year. We hope to have your support!

This Issue

The front cover of this issue is a powerful visual response to the attacks on higher education around the country, especially in Florida, where the state government is leading this insidious effort through their attacks on New College of Florida. It's no accident that the redoubled efforts to dismantle public higher education in the state targeted a small liberal arts school known for its progressivism, activism, pedagogical innovation and—we should say—fun, funky, and robust writing program and writing center. For this issue, then, we invited a writing class at New College of Florida to compose art for the cover. One of their images appears on the front of this volume, and their artist statement about it is as follows:

They, the people who feel that they have the right to tear us down, to say that people aren't allowed to be people, that we can't read the books we want to, that we can't use the bathroom we feel comfortable in, that we can't play the sports about which we are so heavily passionate, that we can't have the education that we deserve, *They* don't appreciate our ability to be a holistic group of individually unique and beautiful voices that can come together to create a world in which we want to exist and that we can truly say we are proud of and can call home.

- I'm thinking about tearful conversations on the phone with my mom, trying to decide what's better: 180 miles away and fighting *this*, or starting over 1,173 miles away with *nothing. Again.*
- The world may be falling apart around me, but my plants are still growing; I still do laundry; the moon is still beautiful; students still laugh and cry and complain about the food; and I am still here.
- The New College that is our community will long outlive the "New College" that is controlled by administrators, and, for this reason, we will not fall.

This piece is made by artists in the broadest sense: by writers, by creatives, by academic visionaries with a knack for writing in the wild, but, first and foremost, it is made by students of New College of Florida, a fact that shines brightly throughout the entirety of the work.

Scruffs O'Neill, Kaitlyn Bates, Kranti Jafar,
Alex Wills, Sammi Sacristan

At A Glance

The At A Glance for this issue was a real transmodal challenge: we invited Courtney S. Danforth, Kyle D. Stedman, and Michael J. Faris to try and capture visually what their excellent recent projects—*Soundwriting Pedagogies* and *Amplifying Soundwriting Pedagogies*—do verbally and sonically. The result, as the title of their piece suggests, is a mixtape: 16 tracks (and explanatory notes) that honor various aspects and insights from those projects. As a bonus, they've curated the mixtape as a playlist: the url and link for that are available in their piece and on the *Composition Studies* website.

Articles

Melissa Yang's "Homing in on Etymology in the Writing Classroom" showcases her unique pedagogical approach to teaching using adaptable multi-modal methods. Yang uses her rhetorical research on pigeons in histories of human communication and etymologically concepts of "homing in, pigeon-holing, and dovetailing" to help students understand writing and research concepts. She weaves together her approach while also "inviting readers to brainstorm on productive ways to continue this perpetual work-in-motion, and [she welcomes] stories, in response, of how fellow instructors are integrating etymology and historical explorations of idiomatic expressions into your teaching of writing."

In "Designing Digital Repositories," Banat et al. describe and illustrate the process of developing CROW—the Corpus & Repository of Writing—a digital repository of both student writing and instructional materials for writing courses. The collaborative team behind CROW lays out here the user-centered design processes that informed the collection, processing, classification, and tagging of repository materials and the construction of the repository's website interface. The piece provides a behind-the-scenes look at a web-based archive, a perspective that will be of interest to those interested in creating such resources—whether for classroom, programmatic, or disciplinary uses.

Adrienne Jankens and Joe Torok in "Structuration and Genre: Revising Teaching Observations to Reflect Program Values" describe the process they took in revising their writing program's teaching observation forms and processes. To do so, they analyze the genre of the teaching observation form and generated a two-fold argument: (1) "a responsive and reciprocal praxis for teaching observations must be sustainably operationalized through the intentional design of the overall process, particularly through tangible artifacts such as email correspondence and the observation form"; and (2) an object that plays an important role in social interactions, the form has the "potential

to both demonstrate program values and frame responsible rhetorical interactions between program personnel.”

Loretta Ramirez’s “Archival Quest” is a deep-dive into archival recovery research within the classroom. With careful attention to departmental, institutional, geographical, cultural, and political contexts, Ramirez shows how students can engage in rhetorical excavation of archives to “advance epistemological freedoms in support of rhetorical sovereignty in their own writing.” In other words, Ramirez orients archival methods, classroom pedagogy, and academic inquiry into culturally-specific rhetorical practices as ways for students to become empowered and agentive in “assum[ing] responsibility for presenting an academic voice supported by rhetorical belonging.”

Course Designs

Jennifer Sano-Franchini’s innovative graduate course design centered on Asian American Rhetoric and Representation focusing on “disciplinary conversations and concerns in and around Asian American rhetorical studies over time, with a focus on the affordances of Asian American rhetorical theory for the study of rhetoric and writing more broadly.” Sano-Franchini’s design of the course was influenced by her own reading and research on Asian American rhetoric and the community of Asian American scholars who work in our field (as well as an MA course she took). The course was broken into four units and opened with rhetorics and writing history before moving into a “somewhat chronological organization” on ancient Chinese rhetorics and then onto contemporary Chinese and Asian/Asian American rhetoric to help students who might not have the background on the topic.

Omar Yacoub’s course design explores an intensive summer ESL bridge course—one designed to prepare multilingual students for academic writing at the undergraduate level—specifically oriented toward transfer. In this course, Yacoub combines a rhetorical approach to writing (centered on genre, audience, and reflection) with four projects in familiar academic genres (of narrative, collaborative, reflective, and research writing), finding that such an approach creates space for exploring open educational resources (OERs), community engagement, and even new kinds of writing support for multilingual students.

Where We Are

The Where We Are for this issue, focused on AI and writing, is timely and, we hope, useful for staving off despair and fighting off the worst of the “hot takes” available in online publications and department meetings everywhere. There’s no doubt that recent developments in AI and writing have teachers, researchers, administrators, and writers of all kinds worried. But the eight contributors to this section are all writing researchers whose work focuses on

AI and machinic writing, and their contributions to this section was not only to mark a moment with respect to the topic, but also to remind readers (and us) that the best response to changes come from curiosity and intellectual courage and not reactionary fear.

As it turns out, the discipline knows a thing or two about emerging writing technologies and how they intersect with pedagogy, teaching, research, program administration, creative experimentation, and the like. As Gavin Johnson admonishes in his piece: don't act like you forgot.

Book Reviews

And as always, we are very glad to have a number of good reviews to conclude this issue including a review essay by Kelly Ritter wondering if graduate education can be saved. The other six book reviews include topics about writing's future, writing and failures, pedagogical perspectives on cognition and writing, Wikipedia's contradictions, visual approaches to representing WPA work, and voices and standpoints of Latin American authors to help redefine democracy by decentering the historically-centered Western and US perspectives.

Kt and MD
Denver and Boston
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