

Merging Creative Writing and Composition to Produce Competent Writers
Emily Halliday

Staring at a blank document while sitting in the library amongst the shelves of books. An 8:30 A.M. deadline causes desperation to set in. There is nothing left to do but furiously type whatever generic ideas come to mind to make the word count. Chug coffee to stay up all night and finish the essay. Submit the essay without giving it a second thought or read-through.

Does this process sound familiar? It should since it's so common among students that it has become a university milestone. Students and instructors alike can relate to this process of writing an essay the night before. Entering university presents many challenges: living independently for the first time, undertaking a heavier course load, and exploring new areas of study. Conquering the first-year literature class often remains the most difficult challenge since the lack of preparation at the high school level leaves students helplessly trying to crack the code of what makes a well-written essay.

The problems that plague first-year composition classes cannot be narrowed down to one core issue. Because the composition class consists of a variety of problems, the issues within the first-year composition class requires more than a simple change. Three core issues with writing classes need to be addressed: a formulaic approach to writing, a lack of instruction into entering the academic discourse, and a student's voice missing from the writing. While many theories address an individual problem, an approach to teaching written composition must address all of these core issues and provide a practical approach to improving student writing.

Offering students an essay structure of an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion is typical in composition classes as a stepping-stone for students to begin learning how to approach an essay. However, this formula for writing fails some students. Students leave their first-year introductory literature class without gaining significant skills in writing or improving their style of writing. Why? Sharon Crowley argues that “the disparity between the formulaic composing process recommended by current-traditional composition textbooks and the messy procedure that writing is for most people” is to be blamed for the lack of improvement in student writing (344). The formulaic process lays out a logical approach to writing: “roping off a topic, stating the thesis, listing and developing (usually three) supporting ideas and repeating the thesis” (344). However, this process fails to adequately prepare students in learning how to actually write. Nowhere in the formula does it address how to use the active voice along with a variety of sentences to engage a reader, how to construct language around one’s thoughts about a work, or how to structure one’s writing to effectively convey an argument.

The formulaic approach to writing leads to students’ problem of effectively conveying their own ideas through writing. Believing the formula will achieve success, student writers hopelessly follow this formulaic procedure and are thus left to navigate through the writing process. Crowley calls this formulaic process “a bizarre parody of serious discourse and the process by which it is produced” (344). This process fails to inform student writers on how to advance their writing ability or on how to become part of academic discourse. Inadequate writing produced by this formula contributes no further understanding to the academic discourse and instead produces a surface-level,

cookie-cutter version of an argument because they are forced to think within the confines of this formula. By continuing to teach students “a writing process and a set of assumptions about discourse which have nothing to do ... with how writing gets done,” students remain unable to escape the rut of bad writing. Thus, bad writing stems not only from the student but also from the process presented to the student for how to write. Furthermore, fearing they are “bad” writers in first year encourages students to abandoning writing, as well as the English program, to pursue an academic program that will allow them more easily to succeed. The students successful in writing effectively are the already competent writers who are, as a result, granted entry into the academic community. This community doesn’t know how to deal with the students that remain whose writing skills are inadequate. Underdeveloped students cannot gain the knowledge or skillset required to achieve competency if they remain shut out of the academic discourse.

The first-year literature and composition class often fails to improve student writing. Unlike science-based classes, no strict curriculum exists for literature and composition. The professor at the time determines the content of the course, molding the course to their interests and opinions on writing and literature. Instructors must cover a wide range of topics and produce a group of competent writers without much guidance. Thus, instructors themselves face the challenge of how to improve writing competency and include those students in the academic discourse. Among the variety of approaches to and content of the first-year composition class, Kitzhaber identifies three common weaknesses among the many syllabuses he reviewed: “a widespread uncertainty about aims, a bewildering variety of content, a frequent lack of progression within the course”

(258). These three weaknesses help to reveal the circumstances that surround student writers. Students are unable to make sense of what the course is supposed to teach them and struggle through writing because there's no focus on progressing toward good writing. This lack of attention to clarity in writing instruction leaves students with the task of figuring out their professor's expectations and forgetting the need for progression. Unclear and vague syllabi thus marginalize incompetent writers.

Along with the syllabi, expanding sizes of first-year composition classes further isolate students from their instructors, which serves only to perpetuate the problem of lack of explicit instruction. According to Kitzhaber, as English departments have become less concerned with "the needs of the dullest and most poorly prepared students, they have taken a sharply increased interest in the needs of those who are the brightest and best prepared" (265). Academic gatekeeping is the product of a discourse community that rewards those who are already skilled and does not pay adequate attention to novice student writers. Students who have already learned the tools prior to university secure their place in the academic community while students without that knowledge struggle to find the path to securing entrance. Since the discourse communities control the discipline, "students of diverse backgrounds might be marginalized by academic discourse conventions and forced to accommodate or assimilate" (Podis and Podis 180). The feeling of exclusion causes students without the tools to improve their skills to abandon the discipline, in hopes of finding a discipline they can enter into with their current skillset. A student's writing competency is unlikely to improve when the academic community fails to provide the explicit writing support many students need. First-year courses would ideally offer students equal opportunity to learn the conventions of

academic discourse. Without this ideal, many students abandon the community and thus removing a voice from the academic discourse.

Remaining as a core issue in student writing is the lack of distinctive voice. A lack of voice in student writing results from not transitioning into the academic discourse during the course of the composition class. Although students know a general writing process, once they enter the first-year composition class, they assume they must take on the role of the academic. Because the students' writing must sound academic, the student "must dare to speak it or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is 'learned'" (Bartholomae 606). Forced into writing in a style unfamiliar to them, student writers struggle to argue effectively when their concern is with sounding academic enough. Without the adequate knowledge learned, student writers find it hard, according to David Bartholomae, to "take on the role—the voice, the persona—of an authority whose authority is rooted in scholarship, analysis, or research" (607). Authority comes from knowledge and expertise. Since student writers in first-year composition classes, according to the system outlined by Kitzhaber, lack exposure to the adequate knowledge needed, these writers lose their confidence in being an authority over their subject matter. Their lack of confidence prevents students from expressing their voice in their writing; thus, students remain outside of the discourse community because of the ineffectiveness of their writing.

The issue of students' lack of voice only further isolates students from the academic community. Because students don't believe they can contribute to academic discourse, their voices imitate that of someone they believe can. Bartholomae suggests that instead of a genuinely authoritative voice, student writers "slip, then into a more

immediately available and realizable voice of authority, the voice of a teacher giving a lesson or the voice of a parent” (607). These two voices, when embodied by a student writer, step away from the authority role and become a more passive voice that does not serve to address the reader effectively. This ineffective address reveals the style of writing that the student writer will engage in. Competent writers accepted in the academic discourse take on the authoritative voice, knowing that they are a part of the discourse community. Incompetent writers use the teacher voice, communicating their argument in a way that does not entice the reader since their voice lacks the authority that comes from inclusion in the academic community. Thus, student writers who fail to meet the standards of the academic discourse and do not receive adequate support in first-year courses continue the struggle.

To approach solving the struggle with writing, the way composition is viewed needs to be reassessed. According to Williams, the “stereotypical argument at every level in the process of education is that the teachers at the prior level did not do their job, did not teach their students what *we* (at whatever level ‘we’ might be) think they should be taught” (170). The skills necessary to be a competent writer cannot be taught in the same way that the skills necessary to succeed in science classes are taught. It is not memorization or a process that makes good writing, but rather a complex internetwork of information, argumentation, and writing style. Therefore, “one cannot learn complex activities like writing, problem solving, critical thinking, and argumentation, etc., as generic skills,” and thus the approach for gaining these skills must reflect the complexities of these activities and the demands on students “of being socialized into the universe of discourse, of becoming part of that universe” (Williams 171). The core issue

of the formulaic approach to writing is that it does not teach students writing beyond an over simplified argument. In order to address the problem of ineffective writing produced by the formulaic process often taught, a new method must be utilized that directly engages students with their writing.

Addressing what is wrong with the formulaic approach to writing can aid instructors in showing students the approach to writing that will lead to more effective writing. Teaching writing composition must depend upon immersing students in the academic discourse and building up the skills necessary to improve students' writing.

How can one teach writing composition then? Many academics argue new strategies for teaching novice writers. Basing his approach on Bartholomae's argument of the problem in student writer's voice, Gordon Fraser argues that student writers need to learn to "not just don a particular discourse like a mask, but instead reconcile that discourse with other shaping influences" (63). By reconciling discourse, Fraser desires to manage the various voices in a piece of writing: the voice of the author, the voice in the text, the voice of the critics, and the voice of other academics. Ideally, instructors would critique in class how other writers in the academic discourse reconcile with the multiple voices in an argument, and thus display how the student could approach their own writing.

Explicitly developing the student's voice in the composition class could resolve the issue of a lack of voice according to Fraser. Because Fraser argues that the goal of academic writing is "to bring the individual's discourse into contact with a larger discourse, or to enter the conversation," student writers must hone their voice in order to actively participate and reconcile with other voices (64). Reconciling the various voices

in a piece of composition requires the writer to control their own voice and use it in relation to others' voices. Fraser's approach relies the flexibility that "writing instructors must [have] in opening up new areas of inquiry, offering new approaches, and allowing students to discover an academic voice on their own terms" (64). Thus, the role of the professor must aid the discovery of an academic voice and so must focus on the individual writer rather than creating a generalized curriculum. Steering away from the generalized curriculum can help instructors to hear more of the voices of student writers. In giving the students a chance to explore their own voice, the curriculum would acknowledge:

Each student arrives at her introductory writing class with a complex history of interactions with language. It is only by bringing these ideas into conversation with the material at hand that students will be able to embody and take control of an "academic" voice (Fraser 74).

Although Fraser makes an excellent point about the direction and focus that professors would ideally take in teaching novice student writers, he offers no real-life applications of this approach. Improving students' writing depends upon applications of theory into the classroom. Without implication in the classroom, instructors cannot develop a curriculum encompassing these pedagogical theories of addressing the problems student writers face.

The issue of the formulaic writing produces the problem of how to instruct students on writing. In an attempt to address solving this problem faced by student writer, Rebecca Gemmell, in her article "Encouraging Student Voice in Academic Writing," sets out some practical applications of these theories into the classroom. She uses these applications in her own classroom to experiment with the ways student writers find and

hone their academic voice. Until Gemmell began her changes in teaching and approaching writing, her students “didn’t believe that it was OK to express their opinion in an ‘academic’ essay. They’d been taught that there was no place for personal opinion, only analysis” (65). Ingrained in students is the thought that academic writing couldn’t be about themselves or include their voice. This belief helps identify why the lack of voice plagues student writers. Having been taught that academic discourse is impersonal and consists only of hard analysis; student writers fail to write effectively when they view writing as such a rigid tool for conveying knowledge. Students cannot express their own ideas and readings of a work if they believe their writing must not express their own opinions.

Gemmell offers practical solutions to solve the problem of formulaic writing, giving suggestions that can be implemented in the classroom. To correct the students’ notion of not being allowed to express their opinions, Gemmell used “informal writing assignments and the discussions they spurred prepared students to then answer more challenging academic questions” (66). These informal assignments and discussions allowed students to explore the same academic questions in a more personalized and interactive way. Informal, personalized assignments and discussions remove the fear of not sounding academic, and allow for a more open flow of conversation and exchange of ideas because the tone of these methods suggests that the goal is not to be academic and formal. Building upon this release from the clutch of the pressure of being academic, student writers can begin to approach a text using their own opinions and ideas as a guide. According to Gemmell, requiring “students to respond to the readings, to take a position, and back it up with evidence from their personal experiences or personal

observations” helps students make their own connections to the texts and engage personally with the context. This engagement empowers student writers by allowing them to explore the space between the reader and the text. Approaching each text as an opportunity to explore the ideas within the text, student writers can give insights based on their unique perspectives and help to enhance others learning by sharing their observations of texts.

To further dispel formulaic writing from the classroom, Gemmell places the students in control of their writing. Gemmell engages students to keep a notebook, which acts as “a safe place to explore topics freely without worrying about correctness” (66). The notebook serves as a medium to record every thought about the text, giving students the opportunity to reflect on the text in the moment as they are reading as well as make connections between thoughts and reactions afterwards. Students, provided with a safe space to make connections in a text, begin a process of writing using their own ideas and opinions towards critical analysis of a text. For Gemmell, “putting students’ ideas and opinions at the center of our classroom has freed students’ voices” (68). The ability to freely explore a text and approach it in whatever way the student wants frees the student from the pressure of having to sound academic and allows for the focus to return to the text and away from sounding smart enough. Gemmell’s approach helps to resolve the formulaic approach to writing that is often presented and gives classroom applications to address the problem of bad writing as the result of rejection from the academic discourse.

What Gemmell does not address is the lack of explicit instruction focused on how students can participate in the discourse community. Marcia Dickson notes that in order to improve instruction to students, instruction to teachers must first be improved.

Instructors of first-year composition classes encounter students who are “convinced that this class will only bring what most of them have suffered through for their entire academic lives: failure” (Dickson viii). Tasked with proving writing as a worthwhile practice, instructors look to pedagogy to achieve the difficult task expected of the first-year composition class: produce competent writers. However, Dickson argues that instructors “can’t find the answer to every instructional problem in a single book” (ix). Instructors who rely on only one or two methods of teaching eventually reach the limitations of those theories and approaches. These limitations arise from the individual needs of students from year to year changing “the dynamics of teaching and learning so greatly that almost any pedagogy can be rendered null and void” (Dickson ix). Dickson sets out to promote a teaching style that incorporates multiple theories and approaches, so instructors can engage with students with various learning styles.

In an attempt to help instructors face the first-year class with more effective methods, Dickson offers a curricular approach, the Distanced/Personal, that helps students “to develop a literacy that integrates the world of abstract and theoretical knowledge with the practical wisdom learned from friends and relatives” (ix). The blend of abstract and practical knowledge connects students to the academic community.

Dickson’s approach to connecting students to the academic community and larger community resolves the issue of the lack of explicit instruction on entering the academic discourse. Entering the academic discourse requires an ability to effectively communicate ideas and arguments. Novice writers lacking this ability cannot make the implicit leap instructors set up from high school writing to university academic discourse. For Dickson, resolving this implicit leap comes from creating “a mode of personal

exploration that is as comfortably personal and familiar as it is academic and rigorous” (15). To display how an instructor would implement this pedagogy, Dickson outlines a prompt that guides novice writers on how to approach a textual analysis: “My book says _____, followed closely by Local experts say _____. ending in My investigation leads me to think _____” (15). This prompt works to mix the personal and the academic, allowing a slow transition from personal writing to academic writing. This mixture also “allows novices writers to bring the authority of home into the academy rather than tackle the academy by themselves” (Dickson 15). Now confronting a comfortable authority, novice writers can cultivate their own personal voices while still adhering to the academic standards instructors must set.

Dickson’s approach guides novice writers to enter the academic discourse through their instructor. Instructors can “endeavor to be models to interact with rather than models to imitate” (Dickson 35). The distinction between interact and imitate relies on the level of learning that novice writers gain. Being able to interact with their instructors opens the gates of the academic community and learning through interactions how to enter into it. Mimicking limits the student writer’s learning because they simply writing according to another’s writing without any understanding of the process. Through Dickson’s mixture of personal and academic, instructors can effectively teach and guide novice writers into entering the academic discourse.

Also concerned with developing student voice, Matthew Sumpter merges composition and creative writing in an attempt to aid student writing. Composition and creative writing, argues Sumpter, aren’t as polar opposite as they seem and both adhere to the goal of teaching “writers aesthetic techniques and the tools with which to manipulate

language's rhythm, pace, sound, and appearance" to create meaning or make an argument (340). The two approaches should function well together.

In practice, composition and creative writing are taught separately. Yet, both composition and creative writing, as often taught, fail to encourage student voice and promote the conformity to the language of that discourse. According to Sumpter, the creative writing "classroom finds its source of authority in 'the experiences and predilections of the faculty member leading the course'" (347). In the same way that the composition class usually depends upon whomever is teaching at the time, the creative writing course and a student's success in the course depend on the teacher. Because of the similarities in goals and in problems, creative writing and composition converging to tackle these problems together seems to logically follow. To Sumpter, despite the different needs in a composition class and a creative writing class, their similarities "reinforce the notion that union and dialogue between the two fields makes intuitive sense" (351). A union between these two fields could form a beneficial relationship where each field aids the other in resolving problems by sharing techniques and approaches.

A new approach to composition can arise from the union proposed by Sumpter. The creative writing course often focuses on "how to shape persona through syntactic choices, how to adjust ratios of scene to summary and with what effect, how to manage rhythm and cadence for clarity and interest" (Sumpter 351). Using a persona, developing a voice, and learning clear techniques of language and their effect resolve the lack of individual voice in writing that currently plagues the first-year composition class. Sumpter acknowledges that "composition teachers can teach these things, but, by sheer

fact of the often more strictly academic or essayistic assignments composition focuses on, the likelihood of their being taught well is low;” therefore, shifting the focus of the composition class into a more individualized writing process strengthens the likelihood that creative writing techniques can be used to improve student voice.

Bringing all of these solutions together seems an impossible feat, and yet Smitherman and Girard incorporate each of these solutions into a unified approach to teaching the first-year composition class. Smitherman and Girard incorporate elements from Gemmell, Dickson, and Sumpter: allowance of freedom in student writing, teaching methodology instructors can utilize, and empowerment of student voice.

In the same way Gemmell advocates putting student’s ideas and opinions at the center of learning, Smitherman and Girard are also concerned with situating students in a position that aids development of writing. Smitherman and Girard suggest introducing “students to practices inspired by theory that encourage students to reflect on their own writing practice” (Smitherman and Girard 52). Gemmell dispenses with the formulaic approach and replaces it with learning through informal assignments in the same way Smitherman and Girard advocate for “new writing processes and practices so that [students] may see themselves as writers” (52). These new approaches, such as keeping a notebook and hosting class discussions that Gemmell suggested, transition students into entering the academic discourse using their own ideas.

According to Smitherman and Girard, writing should be used not in a formulaic manner but should provide an opportunity to learn and explore concepts and interpretations. Giving “students the opportunity to use writing as a tool to better learn course material and to learn a particular discipline’s specific conventions and genres”

aids both their understanding of course material as well as their understanding of writing beyond completing an assignment (Smitherman and Girard 54). Instructors can motivate students to use writing as a tool through various assignments and to engage in different styles to understand the many voices a writer can take. Smitherman and Girard emphasize “it is important that students see themselves as writers in order to stay engaged and motivated while developing and discovering their own complex writing processes” (Smitherman and Girard 54). Students must explore their writing style while learning the conventions of the academic discourse to smoothly transition into the academic community. Smitherman and Girard advocate that instructors integrate creative writing into this approach “by giving students examples of ‘craft criticism’ and then having them write reflectively on their own writing, [so that] instructors are affirming the students as writers and showing students that they are part of the writing discourse community” (55). Unlike the writing formula for an essay, presenting writing as a tool gives students the power to engage the academic community. When students recognize that their professors, teaching assistants, and peers all contribute to the academic community using writing instead of writing serving as the entry, students are encouraged to develop their writing to contribute to the academic discourse rather than writing serving as an admission ticket.

Smitherman and Girard’s approach also incorporates Dickson’s recommendations for instructors. The key to student success is the instructor. Although students can develop their skills solely through making connections in classroom material, instructors must take on the role of a guide for students to follow into the academic community. According to Smitherman and Girard, “while students’ academic growth, to some extent, is enriched by their ability to make these connections, faculty should help students

navigate through foundational theories so that students may build upon them” (Smitherman and Girard 50). Instructors can enrich learning for students by exposing them to theory and fortifying a path into the academic community for them. Transparency thus becomes a critical element of the first-year composition class. When instructors remain explicit, clear, and open about their expectations and about the skills necessary to advance, novice writers can improve their writing.

However, helping students to transition into the academic community requires instructors to step down from their privileged membership of the academic community. For Smitherman and Girard, teaching theories and implementing tools to aid writing will do nothing for instructors if they cannot decenter themselves from those theories (51). Because students view instructors as an authoritative voice in the academic community,

Instructor authority needs to be decentered to a certain extent in order to demystify pedagogy and critical analysis of writing theory and practice for students. Allowing students to “see behind the curtain” of pedagogical practices in the classroom enables them to stake their own claims in moving from novice to more independent academic writers. (Smitherman and Girard 51)

If instructors show the reasons and theories behind the course material, they invite students into the academic community. Again, transparency is critical. Students need to be able to see the individual voices that make up the academic discourse. In order for students to experience the varying voices in the academic community, instructors should create “a ‘rhetoric of dissensus’ will cause conflict within the classroom between scholars or academic perspectives that will reveal to students that there are other theoretical

vantage points and that the teacher is not an unwavering authority” (Smitherman and Girard 56). The opposition of academic voices enables student writers to embrace their own voice and explore the ways their voice fits in with the existing academic discourse. However students cannot achieve this level of exploration without their instructor revealing the hidden dissensus and theory of the academic community.

Recognition plays a critical part of Smitherman and Girard’s approach. Their approach parallels Sumpter’s approach in that both focus on using creative writing theory in the classroom so students recognize and utilize their own voices in their writing. Despite the different objectives in a creative writing class and composition class, “creating connections between creative writing and composition theory is an innovative way for instructors to make the composition classroom a place to talk about writing so that students recognize themselves as writers” (Smitherman and Girard 56). As students begin to recognize their writing as contributing to the academic discourse, the disconnect between student writing and academic discourse slowly resolves. Students begin to understand that their voice is situated in the academic community in the same way that their instructors are. Smitherman and Girard argue that “if college composition students understand how closely their writing practices are connected to those of the creative writers they look up to, then the students will be better able to take their own writing seriously and become more motivated” (55). Increased motivation in writing boosts the empowerment students find through writing. Students’ voices improve when students are conscious of their own writing and can recognize themselves as writers.

The overlapping goals and techniques between creative writing and composition engage students in discussions and writing exercises that can directly link to the academic

discourse. For Smitherman and Girard, both creative writers and academics are aware that all of their writing contributes to the academic discourse in a variety of ways. No single piece of writing, no matter how small the reading audience, is excluded. Creative writing helps transition students into the academic discourse. Smitherman and Girard argue,

Because creative writers discuss and write about craft in ways that are very accessible to students, we see instruction about composition theory mirroring creative writing craft conversations in the first-year writing classroom. Giving students access to ideas about craft criticism, which we see as a metacommentary about writing, will enable them to better understand composition theory, engage in conversations about writing that few undergraduate students have had access to before, and become more informed in their application of these theories across the disciplines” (50).

Creative writing thus serves as the missing link between instructors and students. Students engaging in discussions about writing, in the same way creative writers discuss craft criticism, transition into the discourse community. Instructors can use these discussions to address the conventions of the discourse and get students involved in understanding why those conventions exist. Additionally, students will utilize their own voice and opinions in these discussions, thus improving their ability to communicate their ideas. Creative writing in the composition class can empower students to find the power of writing and encourage students to continue using writing as a form of expression.

The problems of the first-year composition class are rooted in the core issues of

formulaic writing, lack of instruction on entering the discourse, and lack of student voice. Strategies from a creative writing class can resolve these issues. Various types of writing assignments and discussion on craft criticism provides an approach to writing that isn't formulaic and encompasses the student's opinions and ideas more effectively. Instructors can explicitly show students theories, approaches, and papers that teach students the path to entering the discourse community. Creative writing strategies empower the student voice through recognition of their place in the academic community and the creation of a safe space for student to explore their own voice. Combined, these suggestions can contribute to students feeling more competent in writing because the tools for success will be explicitly presented to them and the variety assignments will engage student understanding of the purpose of writing for the academic discourse.

Both students and instructors benefit from resolving these issues. Students, once given these tools to approach writing, will begin to write engaging pieces of work. Instructors will not have to suffer through formulaic essays that lack student voice and opinion. Creative writing links students with their instructors, through these various methods set out by Smitherman and Girard, and allows a mutual understanding of the expectations which party has of the other. Merging the first-year composition class and the creative writing class fosters a class that serves both the instructor's and students' purposes: instructors successfully transition students into the academic community and students successfully learn how to communicate their ideas, thoughts, and opinions in writing.

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