

## COMPOSITION

Composition is an activity (what we do when we write), an institutional practice (a type of assigned first-year writing within a required undergraduate college course), and, nowadays, it's also a course of graduate study that represents a field of specialists who call themselves compositionists (and sometimes rhetoricians). *Composition* is a term that has been in regular use since the late 1970s, and it describes a still-developing and multidisciplinary field (see North 1987). Those in composition studies

draw on research in composing practices, theories of reading and writing, linguistics and literature, and the history of rhetoric. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg's *The Bedford Bibliography* (2003) provides both a useful overview to the field as well as an extensive annotated bibliography of readings that together represent the variety of texts found on degree reading lists in contemporary graduate composition programs.

Most creative writers become teachers of college composition as part of their MA, MFA, or PhD degree work. The first-year writing course (formerly freshman composition, with its developmental or basic writing pre-freshman equivalent) became a core one- or two-term sequence in most American colleges and universities by the mid-twentieth century and remains the course that is most often taught by graduate teaching assistants within English departments today. These literature, creative writing, or composition graduate students are given some-to-minimal preparation for such teaching (via a summer pedagogy course, a one-week in-service orientation, and/or a one-day introduction to the assigned textbook and department syllabus). Historically, at schools where two terms of writing are offered, tenured literature faculty, who are also sometimes required to teach composition, often have opted to teach the second-term course because they could organize this class as a reading course. In this incarnation, the second-term writing course turned into an introduction to literary genres, a way of teaching both more familiar to and more valued by these faculty members. In a composition program with a composition-trained director, however, these courses are more often organized as writing courses that include a mixture of reading theory, introduction to critical or cultural theory, and/or research or argumentation. (See also "Reading.")

During the 1950s and 1960s, the first-year writing course—then freshman composition—was modally organized; that is, students were asked to compose a sequence of essays in prescribed forms: description, narration, exposition, and persuasion. In these courses the focus was on the text, the written product, and not on the processes of composing those texts. During the 1960s and 1970s, research into composing practices of basic and professional writers (as well as an examination of narrative accounts offered by creative writers) led to the deeper understanding of writing as a recursive activity and to the development of process pedagogies. These included teaching practices that encouraged students to develop writing fluency and metacognitive awareness of their writing processes. Students were taught to develop topics, share initial drafts in small-group and collaborative settings, and to revise and complete writing portfolios.

In many of these courses, the focus shifted from the production of texts to the development of *students as writers*. At this time, composition classrooms came to more closely resemble the graduate creative writing workshop course, while the graduate creative writing workshop became a model for undergraduate creative writing courses, which, in turn, began to be informed, in some cases, by composition theory, research, and practice (see Bishop 1998).

Writing in 1986, Lester Faigley outlined three broad categories of composition research: expressive, cognitive, and social. Expressive theories were complicated by cognitive research and cognitive research, in turn, was amplified by social theories of instruction. At the end of the century, social theories of composing were dominant, though process practices were still challenging modal (current-traditional) curriculums around the country. Process theory and practice, however, face challenges from both cultural and postprocess theorists who are in tune with movements in critical theory that are prominent in English literature departments. Such movement—the rise and fall of models and groups aligned to those models and the evolving theories of writing based on developing research into composing practices—speaks to the growing disciplinarity of the field of composition. This evolution asks compositionists to look at why their particular discipline has developed as it has, just as it should prompt creative writers to inquire where they might fit into those discussions.

In the early 1970s, an abundance of graduating literature PhDs encountered a lack of positions, and many of these graduates either left the academy or took on untenured adjunct teaching, sometimes moving from one institution to another. Frequently, these gypsy scholars found work teaching large numbers of first-year writing students, whose enrollment fueled English departments by providing teaching assistantships for graduate students as well as a limited number of term positions for adjuncts. Traditionally and still, adjuncts perform highly specialized and professional work but often at very low salaries, and they are rarely offered benefits or job security. (See also “Adjunct and Temporary Faculty.”)

In departments that do not recognize the MFA as a terminal degree, creative writers who have not yet published a book often form a large part of this adjunct composition teaching pool. Unfortunately, because MFA programs have not generally offered an introduction to composition teaching—much less pedagogy courses in creative writing—and because English literature departments generally hold the teaching of teaching writing in low esteem, creative writers typically align themselves with their

colleagues in literature. (See Starkey 1994 and Scholes 1986 for a discussion of English department hierarchies.)

The many negative attitudes toward freshman composition have been challenged only in the last thirty years as degree programs in composition and rhetoric began to develop a profile on the national English department scene, in part because of the increase of jobs for all English degree holders in this very area. By the early 1980s, many institutions were offering the MA and PhD degree in composition, notable among these are the programs at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, the University of New Hampshire, Carnegie Mellon, Ohio State, Texas Christian, Rutgers, Syracuse, Miami Ohio, Penn State, the University of South Florida, and the University of Nebraska. At the largest universities around the country, large-scale writing programs (with first-year writing programs of over three thousand students and up to one hundred graduate teaching assistants and adjuncts) have undertaken the more systematic pedagogical training of teachers and graduate students, and many now offer exciting and diverse graduate course offerings, including courses in the history of rhetoric, composition theory and practice, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, ESL, cyberliteracy and computer-assisted instruction, basic writing, literary and composition theory, and reading theory. Every several years, the journal *Rhetoric Review* surveys and reports on these programs and their course offerings.

Large-scale writing programs are often run by trained Writing Program Administrators (WPAs), who hold degrees in composition studies and are supported by and support in turn campus writing centers and computer-assisted classrooms. Since 1949, college composition instructors have been organized via the Conference of College Composition and Communication (CCCC), a conference within the parent organization, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Currently, CCCC has over eight thousand college-level members and NCTE over ninety thousand kindergarten- through college-level members. Information on both organizations—their annual conventions and their activities to promote the interests and working conditions of teachers of writing—can be found at the NCTE Web site: [www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org). (See “Associated Writing Programs” for a discussion of the equivalent organization for teachers of creative writing.)

These days, composition and rhetoric are engaging fields of study that offer graduates in this area regular opportunities for university-level employment. Many who run those programs note that an increasing

number of MA- and MFA-holding creative writing graduates are now continuing on for a PhD in composition because that field is offering interesting avenues for enhancing a creative writer's understanding of his or her own writing practices and supporting his or her work as a writing teacher. In tandem with the rise of degree programs, composition presses now provide a growing body of publications for the field; prominent among these are the National Council of Teachers of English, Boynton/Cook, Oxford University Press, Southern Illinois University Press, and Utah State University Press. Journals such as *Writing on the Edge* publish articles of interest to both creative writers and compositionists, and major journals in composition—*College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Journal of Advanced Composition*, *Composition Studies*, *Rhetoric Review*—also publish an occasional creative writing oriented essay or article.

In addition to referring to the *Bedford Bibliography*, those interested in recent developments would do well to consult the last several years of the above journals as well as the ERIC database through a local university library. Those who wish to join the many vibrant ongoing electronic conversations about writing can access a number of online lists. Among the most popular listeservs are the WPA-L ([www.wpacouncil.org/wpa-l](http://www.wpacouncil.org/wpa-l)), H-Rhetor ([www.h-net.org/~rhetor/](http://www.h-net.org/~rhetor/)), and TechRhet ([www.interservice.org/lists/techrhet/](http://www.interservice.org/lists/techrhet/)). Interested teachers should also refer to online journals such as *Kairos* ([english.ttu.edu/kairos/](http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/)) and *English Matters* ([chnm.gmu.edu/ematters/](http://chnm.gmu.edu/ematters/)) and online resources such as Paul Matsuda's links page ([pubpages.unh.edu/~pmatsuda/resources.html](http://pubpages.unh.edu/~pmatsuda/resources.html)) and [rhetcomp.com](http://rhetcomp.com).

A good history of rhetorical theory can be found in Bizzell and Herzberg's *The Rhetorical Tradition* (1990) and useful introductions to classroom issues and management are Thomas Newkirk's collection *Nuts and Bolts* (1993) and Lad Tobin's *Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Class* (1993). Victor Villanueva's *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory* (1997) collects key texts of the field in one volume. Paul Heilker and Peter Vandenberg's *Keywords in Composition Studies* (1996) introduces readers to the most compelling discussions in composition, those that have dominated the journals, classrooms, and conferences, and Joseph Harris also approaches the field through keywords and discussions in *A Teaching Subject* (1997).

Narrative histories of composition are available in Duane Roen, Stuart Brown, and Theresa Enos's *Living Composition and Rhetoric* (1999) and Joseph Trimmer's collection *Narration as Knowledge* (1997). Three other engaging edited collections include Susan Hunter and Ray Wallace's *The*

*Place of Grammar in Writing Instruction* (1995) (new teachers of writing are always pressed to address the “grammar question”); Art Young and Toby Fulwiler’s *When Writing Teachers Teach Literature* (1995), which represents an intersection of interests between writing and literature teachers; and David Starkey’s *Teaching Writing Creatively* (1998), which does the same for the intersection of creative writing and composition. Many creative writers may already be familiar with Peter Elbow’s vastly influential *Writing without Teachers* (1973, 1998), which arguably marks the beginning of the writing process movement and still yields pleasure and insight to the student of creative writing about to enter or begin teaching her or his first writing workshop.