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## SITES OF INVENTION

### *Genre and the Enactment of First-Year Writing*

Genres themselves form part of the discursive context to which rhetors respond in their writing and, as such, shape and enable the writing; it is in this way that form is generative.

AVIVA FREEDMAN, "Situating Genre"

We need to be aware not only that genres are socially constructed but also that they are socially constitutive—in other words, that we both create and are created by the genres in which we work.

THOMAS HELSCHER, "The Subject of Genre"

[A genre's discursive features] are united within the relatively stable discursive "type" to offer us a form within which we can locate ourselves as writers—that is, a form which serves as a guide to invention, arrangement, and stylistic choices in the act of writing.

JAMES F. SLEVIN, "Genre Theory, Academic Discourse, and Writing in the Disciplines"

Reflecting on the concept of invention in the classical rhetorical tradition, Jim Corder writes that "*inventio*, by its nature, calls for openness to the accumulated resources of the world a speaker lives in, to its landscapes, its information, its ways of thinking and feeling. . . . *Inventio* is the world the speaker lives in" (1994, 109). Similarly, Sharon Crowley writes that "invention reminds rhetors of their location within a cultural milieu that determines what can and cannot be said or heard" (1990, 168). Invention takes *place*, which is why classical rhetoricians recommended the *topoi* or commonplaces as the sites in which rhetors could locate the available means of persuasion for any

given situation. As heuristics for invention, the *topoi* were thus rhetorical habitats—"language-constituted regions" (Farrell 1996, 116) and "resources, seats, places, or haunts" (Lauer 1996, 724)—which framed communal knowledge and provided rhetors with shared methods of inquiry for navigating and participating in rhetorical situations. Invention, as such, was not so much an act of turning inward as it was an act of locating oneself socially, a way of participating in the shared desires, values, and meanings already existing in the world. As Scott Consigny explains, the *topoi* were both "the *instrument* with which the rhetor thinks and the *realm* in and about which he thinks" (1994, 65; my emphasis). The *topoi* helped rhetors locate themselves and participate within common situations.

In much the same way, genres are also instruments and realms—habits and habitats. Genres are the conceptual realms within which individuals recognize and experience situations at the same time as they are the rhetorical instruments by and through which individuals participate within and enact situations. The Patient Medical History Form, for example, not only conceptually frames the way the individual recognizes the situation of the doctor's office; it also helps position the individual into the figure of "patient" by providing him or her with the rhetorical habits for acting in this situation. Likewise, George Washington "invents" the first state of the union address by rhetorically situating himself within the conceptual realm of an antecedent genre, the "king's speech," which provides him not only with a way of recognizing the situation he is in, but also a way of rhetorically acting within it. And similarly, D. H. Lawrence is motivated to invent his autobiography differently as he perceives and enacts it within different genres. As such, why individuals are motivated to act and how they do so depends on the genres they are using. These genres serve as the typified and situated *topoi* within which individuals acquire, negotiate, and articulate desires, commitments, and methods of inquiry to help them act in a given situation, thereby inventing not only certain lines of argument (*logos*), but also certain subjectivities (*ethos*—think of the subject position Washington assumes

when he writes the “king’s speech) and certain ways of relating to others (pathos—think of the relation Washington sets up between himself and Congress, and, as a result, how Congress reacts to Washington).<sup>1</sup> Conceived thus, invention does not involve an introspective turn so much as it involves the process by which individuals locate themselves within and devise ways of rhetorically acting in various situations. In this way, invention is a process that is inseparable from genre since genre coordinates both how individuals recognize a situation as requiring certain actions and how they rhetorically act within it.

Genres, thus, are localized, textured sites of invention, the situated topoi in which communicants locate themselves conceptually *before* and rhetorically *as* they communicate. To begin to write is to locate oneself within these genres, to become habituated by their typified rhetorical conventions to recognize and enact situated desires, relations, practices, and subjectivities in certain ways. I will now consider one such genre-constituted environment within which teacher and students “invent” various situated practices, relations, and subjectivities as they (re)locate themselves from one genre-situated topoi to the next: the first-year writing course.

In *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, Wayne Booth speculates on a theory of interaction and self-formation similar to the one I have been proposing in my discussion of genre and agency. “What happens,” he wonders, “if we choose to begin with our knowledge that we are essentially creatures made in symbolic interchange, *created in the process of sharing intentions, values, meanings?* . . . What happens if we think of ourselves as essentially participants in a field or process or mode of being persons together?” (1974, 134; my emphasis). In this chapter, I will examine the first-year writing course from the perspective of Booth’s question, describing and analyzing the first-year writing course as an activity system coordinated by a constellation of genres, each of which constitutes its own topoi within which teachers and students assume and enact a complex set of desires, relations, subjectivities, and practices. By investigating

how teachers and students make their way through these genres, we can observe the complex relations and repositioning that teachers and students negotiate as they participate within and between genred discursive spaces. Invention takes place within and between these genred spaces, as one genre creates the timing and opportunity for another. When they write their essays, for example, students are expected to perform a discursive transaction in which they recontextualize the desires embedded in the writing prompt as their own self-sponsored desires in their essays. Invention takes place at this intersection between the acquisition and articulation of desire. By analyzing the syllabus, writing prompt, and student essay as genred sites of invention, I hope to shed light on how students and teachers reposition themselves as participants within these topoi at the same time as they enact the activity system we call the first-year writing course.

#### THE FIRST-YEAR WRITING COURSE AND ITS GENRES

In the previous chapter, I discussed how a site of activity (for example, a physician's office) is coordinated by a variety of genres, referred to as "genre sets" (Devitt 1991) or "genre systems" (Bazerman 1994a), each genre within the set or system constituting its own site of action within which communicants instantiate and reproduce situated desires, practices, relations, and subjectivities. Within a site of activity, thus, we will encounter a constellation of related, even conflicting situations, organized and generated by various genres. David Russell, adapting Vygotsky's concept of activity theory to genre theory, has described this constellation of situations that make up an environment as an "activity system," which he defines as "any ongoing, object-directed, historically conditioned, dialectically structured, tool-mediated human interaction" (1997, 510). Examples of activity systems range from a family, to a religious organization, to a supermarket, to an advocacy group. As Russell defines it, an activity system resembles what Giddens calls "structure." Like structure, an activity system is constituted by a dialectic of agents or

subjects, motives or social needs, and mediational means or tools (what Giddens refers to as “structurational properties”). Each element of the dialectic is constantly engaged in supporting the other, so that, for instance, agents enact motives using tools which in turn reproduce the motives that require agents to use these tools and so on. As Russell explains, “activity systems are not static, Parsonian social forces. Rather, they are dynamic systems constantly re-created through micro-level interactions” (512). In their situated, micro-level activities and interactions, discursively and ideologically embodied as genres, participants in an activity system are at work “operationalizing” and, in turn, reproducing the ideological and material conditions that make up the activity system within which they interact. Each genre enables individuals to enact a different situated activity within an activity system. Together, the various genres coordinate and synchronize the ways individuals define, interact within, and enact an activity system.

Russell’s description of an activity system helps us conceptualize both how genres interact within a system of activity and how they help make that system possible by enabling individuals to participate within and in turn reproduce its related actions. The genres that constellate an activity system do not only organize and generate participants’ activities within the system, however. They also, as Russell describes, link one activity system to another through the shared use of genres (1997; 2002). Participants in one activity system, for instance, use some genres to communicate with participants in other activity systems, thereby forming intra- and intergenre system relations. By applying the concept of activity system to school settings, especially to the interactions among micro-level disciplinary and administrative activity systems that together form the macro-level activity system of the university, Russell provides us with a model for analyzing the first-year writing course as one activity system within a larger activity system (the English department), within an even larger activity system (the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences), within an even larger activity system (the university), and so on. The constellation of genres within each of these related systems

operationalizes the situated actions of participants within that system in order “to create stabilized-for-now structures of social action and identity” (Russell 1997, 514). The genres that coordinate each of the micro-level activity systems within a macro-level activity system function interactively as a series of uptakes, with one genre creating an opportunity for another, as in the example of the Department of Defense, in which requests for proposals generate funding proposals, which generate contracts, which generate reports and experimental articles, and so on (520). At the same time, not everyone involved in an activity system is or needs to be engaged in all its genres. As Russell explains, “in a typical school, for example, the teacher writes the assignments; the students write the responses in classroom genres. The administrators write the grade form; the teachers fill it out. The parents and/or the government officials write the checks; the administrators write the receipts and the transcripts and report to regents” (520). In this scenario, the various participants (teachers, students, parents, administrators) are all involved in micro-level activity systems which interact in close proximity to one another and which together comprise the macro-level activity system called a school. In what follows, I will focus on one particular micro-level activity system within a college or university: the first-year writing course.

Like other college or university courses, the first-year writing (FYW) course takes place, for the most part, in a physical setting, a material, institutionalized site most often situated within a building on campus.<sup>2</sup> It is a place a teacher and students can physically enter and leave. But as in the case of the physician’s office, the classroom is not only a material site; it is also a discursive site, one mediated and reproduced by the various genres its participants use to perform the desires, positions, relations, and activities that enact it. For example, one of the first ways that a classroom becomes a FYW course (or any other course for that matter) is through the genre of the syllabus, which, as I will describe shortly, organizes and generates the classroom as a textured site of action which locates teacher and students within a

set of desires, commitments, relations, and subject positions. At the same time, the syllabus also manages the set of genres that will enable its users to enact these desires, relations, and subjectivities. In this way, the syllabus and its related FYW course genres orient teachers and students in a discursive and ideological scene of writing which locates them in various, sometimes simultaneous and conflicting positions of articulation. The choices teachers and students make in this scene emerge from, against, and in relation to these positions. As such, “the classroom is always invented, always constructed, always a matter of genre” (Bazerman 1994b, 26). When we only identify students as writers in the writing classroom, then, we are ignoring the extent to which teachers (as well as those who administer writing programs) are also writers of and in the writing classroom—writers of the genres that organize and generate them and their students within a dynamic, multitextured site of action. The FYW course, thus, is a site where writing is already at work to make writing possible. Seen in this light, the FYW course is not as artificial as some critics make it out to be. It may be artificial when, chameleon-like, it tries to mimic public, professional, or disciplinary settings, or when it tries to imagine a “real” external audience for student writing. But the classroom in its own right is a dynamic, textured site of action mediated by a range of complex written and spoken genres that constitute student-teacher positions, relations, and practices.<sup>3</sup> As they reposition themselves within and between these genres, teachers and students acquire, negotiate, and articulate different desires, which inform the choices they make as participants in the FYW course.

The set of written genres that coordinates the FYW course includes, but is not limited to, the course description, the syllabus, the course home page, student home pages, the grade book, the classroom discussion list, assignment prompts, student essays, the teacher’s margin and end comments in response to student essays, peer workshop instructions, student journals or logs, peer review sheets, and student evaluations of the class. These “classroom genres” (Christie 1993; Russell 1997) constitute the various

typified and situated topoi within which students and teacher recognize and enact their situated practices, relations, and subjectivities. I will now examine three of these classroom genres, the syllabus, the assignment prompt, and the student essay, in order to analyze how writers reposition and articulate themselves within these sites of invention. By doing so, I hope to demonstrate the extent to which, when they invent, writers locate themselves in a complex, multilayered set of discursive relations, so that by the time students begin to write their essays they do so in relation to the syllabus, the writing assignment, and the various other genres that have already located them and their teachers in an ideological and discursive system of activity.

### *The Syllabus*

In many ways, the syllabus is the master classroom genre, in relation to which all other classroom genres, including the assignment prompt and the student essay, are “occluded” (Swales 1996). According to Swales, occluded genres are genres that operate behind the scenes and often out of more public sight, yet play a critical role in operationalizing the commitments and goals of the dominant genre, in this case, the syllabus. As such, the syllabus plays a major role in establishing the ideological and discursive environment of the course, generating *and* enforcing the subsequent relations, subject positions, and practices teacher and students will perform during the course. In some ways, the syllabus, like the architecture students’ sketchbooks described in the previous chapter, functions as what Giltrow calls a “meta-genre,” an “atmosphere surrounding genres” (2002, 195) that sanctions and regulates their use within an activity system. It is not surprising, thus, that the syllabus is traditionally the first document students encounter upon entering the classroom. Immediately, the syllabus begins to transform the physical setting of the classroom into the discursive and ideological site of action in which students, teacher, and their work will assume certain significance and value. That is, within the syllabus, to paraphrase Giddens, the desires that inform the structure of the course



become textually available to the students and teacher who then take up these desires as intentions to act. No doubt, the syllabus is a coercive genre, in the same way that all genres are coercive to some degree or another. It establishes the situated rules of conduct students and teacher will be expected to meet, including penalties for disobeying them. But even more than that, the syllabus also establishes a set of social relations and subjectivities that students and teacher have available to them in the course.

It is curious that, as significant a genre as it is, the syllabus has received so little critical attention (Baecker 1998, 61). In fact, to the extent that it is discussed at all, the syllabus is mostly described in “how to” guidebooks for novice teachers. For instance, both Erika Lindemann’s *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* (1995) and Robert Connors and Cheryl Glenn’s *The St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing* (1995) describe the syllabus in terms of its formal conventions, listing them in the order they most often appear: descriptive information such as course name and number, office hours, classroom location, significant phone numbers; textbook information; course description and objectives; course policy, including attendance policy, participation expectations, policy regarding late work, etc.; course requirements, including kinds and sequence of exams and writing assignments; grading procedures; any other university or departmental statements; and then a course calendar or schedule of assignments. In addition to presenting these conventions, Lindemann and Connors and Glenn also describe the purpose of the syllabus, acknowledging its contractual as well as pedagogical nature. Lindemann, for example, cites Joseph Ryan’s explanation of the informational and pedagogical purposes of the syllabus:

Students in the course use the syllabus to determine what it is they are to learn (course content), in what sense they are to learn it (behavioral objectives), when the material will be taught (schedule), how it will be taught (instructional procedures), when they will be required to demonstrate their learning (exam dates), and exactly how their learning will be assessed (evaluation) and their grade determined. (1995, 256–57)

In this sense, Lindemann claims that “syllabuses are intended primarily as information for students” (256).

Connors and Glenn, however, recognize the more political function of the syllabus. For them, “the syllabus, for all intents and purposes, is a contract between teacher and students. It states the responsibilities of the teacher and the students as well as the standards for the course” (1995, 10). The syllabus, then, informs the students and the teacher, protecting both from potential misunderstanding. It also informs the “structure of the class” by developing “a set of expectations and intentions for composition courses” (10–11). In other words, the syllabus establishes the course goals and assumptions as well as the means of enacting these goals and assumptions—both the structure of the course and the rhetorical means of instantiating that structure as situated practices. As Connors and Glenn remind teachers, the syllabus is “the first written expression of your personality that you will present to your students” (10).

Neither Lindemann nor Connors and Glenn, however, go on to analyze exactly how the syllabus locates teachers and students within this position of articulation or how it frames the discursive and ideological site of action in which teacher and students engage in coordinated commitments, relations, subjectivities, and practices. What effect, for instance, does the contractual nature of the syllabus have on the teacher-student relationship? What positions does the syllabus assign to students and teacher, and how do these positions get enacted and reproduced in the various situations and activities that constitute the FYW course? An analysis of the typified rhetorical features of the syllabus, especially its use of pronouns, future tense verbs, and abstract nominalizations, helps us begin to answer some of these questions.<sup>4</sup>

One of the more obvious characteristics of the syllabus is the way it positions students and teachers within situated subjectivities and relations. The student is frequently addressed as “you” (“This course will focus on introducing *you* to . . .”), as “students” (“*Students* will learn . . .” or “The goal of this course is to introduce *students* to . . .”), and as “we” (“*We* will focus on learning . . .”) quite

often interchangeably throughout the syllabus but at times even within the same section. For example, one teacher addresses her students in the “Course Objectives” section as follows: “Over the course of the semester, *you* will develop specific writing strategies which will help *you* adapt *your* writing skills to different contexts and audiences. Also, *we* will discuss how to approach and analyze the arguments of other writers, and how to either adapt or refute their views in *your* writing.” This interchange between “you” and “we” on the pronoun level reflects a larger tension many teachers face when writing a syllabus: between establishing solidarity with students and demarcating lines of authority (Baecker 1998, 61). This tension is especially heightened in FYW courses which tend to be taught mostly by inexperienced teachers, most often graduate students who are themselves struggling with the tension between being teachers and students. Diann Baecker, drawing on Mühlhäusler and Harré’s work (1990) on pronouns and social identity, applies this tension within pronouns to the social relations they make possible in the syllabus. Pronouns such as “you” and, in particular, “we” not only create social distinctions among communicants; they also “blur the distinction between power and solidarity and, in fact, allow power to be expressed as solidarity” (Baecker, 58).

It is perhaps this desire to mask power as solidarity that most characterizes the syllabus, a desire that teachers, as the writers of the syllabus, acquire, negotiate, and articulate. Positioned within this desire, the teacher tries to maintain the contractual nature of the syllabus while also invoking a sense of community. On the one hand, the teacher has to make explicit what the students will have to do to fulfill the course requirements, including the consequences for not doing so. On the other hand, the teacher also has to create a sense of community with the students so they can feel responsible for the work of learning. This balance is difficult, and, as we saw in the above example, many teachers will awkwardly fluctuate between “you” and “we” in order to maintain it. The following excerpt from another syllabus also reveals this fluctuation:

The goals of the course are two-fold. During the initial part of the semester, *we* will focus on learning to read critically—that is, how to analyze the writing of others. The skills that *you* will acquire while learning how to read an argument closely . . . will be the foundation for the writing *you* will do for the rest of the course. *Our* second objective . . .

This “we”/“you” tension reflects the balance the teacher is attempting to create between community and complicity. As Baecker explains, citing Mühlhäusler and Harré, “*we* is a rhetorical device that allows the speaker(s) to distance themselves from whatever is being said, thus making it more palatable because it appears to come from the group as a whole rather than from a particular individual” (1998, 59). The “we” construction tries to minimize the teacher’s power implicit in the “you” construction by making it appear as though the students are more than merely passive recipients of the teacher’s dictates; instead, they have ostensibly acquiesced consensually to the policies and activities described in the syllabus. The teacher, then, uses “you” and “we” in order to position students as subjects, so that without knowing it, they seem to have agreed to the conditions that they will be held accountable for. In this way, the syllabus is an effective contract, incorporating the student as other (“you”) into the classroom community (“we”) at the same time as it distinguishes the individual student from the collective. What the “you”/“we” construction seems to suggest is that “*we* as a class will encounter, be exposed to, and learn the following things, but *you* as a student are responsible for whether or not you succeed. *You* will do the work and be responsible for it, but *we* all agree what the work will be.”

In her research, Baecker finds that “you” is by far the most common pronoun employed in syllabi (1998, 60), a finding supported by my own analysis. This “you,” coupled with the occasional “we,” the second most common pronoun, works as a hailing gesture, interpellating the individual who walks into the classroom as a student subject, one who then becomes part of the

collective “we” that will operationalize this activity system we call the FYW course. As Mühlhäusler and Harré explain, it is “largely through pronouns and functionally equivalent indexing devices that responsibility for actions is taken by actors and assigned to them by others” (1990, 89). When a teacher identifies the student as “you,” he or she is marking the student as the “other,” the one on whom the work of the class will be performed: “You will encounter,” “You will develop,” “You will learn.” But who exactly prescribes the action? Passive constructions such as the following are typical of the syllabus: “During the semester, *you* will be required to participate in class discussions,” “*You* will be allowed a week to make your corrections.” But who will be doing the requiring and the allowing? The teacher?

Not really. As much as the syllabus locates students within positions of articulation, it also positions the teacher within a position of articulation. The teacher’s agency is seldom explicitly asserted through the first person singular; Baecker finds that “I” comprises an average of 24 percent of total pronoun usage per syllabus (1998, 60). More often, teachers mask their agency by using “we.” Yet this “we” implicates the teacher into the collective identity of the goals, resources, materials, and policies of the course so that the teacher as agent of the syllabus becomes also an agent on behalf of the syllabus. The syllabus, in short, constructs its writer, the teacher, as an abstract nominalization in which the doer becomes the thing done. This is in part the genred subjectivity the teacher assumes when he or she writes the syllabus. For example, writers of syllabi rely on abstract nominalizations and nominal clauses to depict themselves as though they were the events and actions that they describe. Take, for instance, these typical examples: “Missing classes will negatively affect your participation grade,” “Good class attendance will help you earn a good grade,” “Acceptable excuses for missing a class include . . . ,” “Each late appearance will be counted as an absence,” “Guidance from texts constitutes another important component,” “Writing is a process,” “Conferences give us a chance to discuss the course and the

assignments,” “Plagiarism will not be tolerated.” In these examples, we find objects, events, and actions that are incapable of acting by themselves treated as if they in fact are performing the actions. When a verb that conveys action in a sentence is transformed into a noun, we have the effect that somehow the action is performing itself—is its own subject, as in “missing classes” or “attendance.” Rather than being the identifiable agents of the syllabus they write, teachers become part of the action they expect students to perform. This way, students come to see teachers less as prescribers of actions and more as guiding, observing, and evaluating student actions. As such, activities become substitutes for the agents who perform them, activities that teachers recognize and value and students subsequently enact.

The syllabus, therefore, is not merely informative; it is also, as all genres are, a site of action that produces subjects who desire to act in certain ideological and discursive ways. It establishes the habitat within which students and teachers rhetorically enact their situated relations, subjectivities, and activities. Both the teacher and the students become habituated by the genre of the syllabus into the abstract nouns that they will eventually perform. It is here, perhaps, that the syllabus’s contractual nature is most evident, as it transforms the individuals involved into the sum of their actions, so that they can be described, quantified, and evaluated. No wonder, then, that the most dominant verb form used in the syllabus is the future tense, which indicates both permission and obligation, a sense that the activities and behaviors (the two become one in the syllabus) outlined in the syllabus are possible and binding. To be sure, the overwhelming number of future tense verbs present in the syllabus (“you will learn,” “we will encounter”) indicate that it is a genre that anticipates or predicts future action. Yet the discursive and ideological conditions it initially constitutes are already at work from day 1 to insure that these future actions will be realized.

The syllabus, in short, maintains and elicits the desires it helps its users fulfill. When a teacher writes the syllabus, he or she is not

only communicating his or her desires for the course, but is also acquiring, negotiating, and articulating the desires already embedded in the syllabus. These desires constitute the exigencies to which the teacher rhetorically responds in the syllabus. For example, the contractual nature of the syllabus, especially the way it objectifies agency by constituting actors as actions which can then be more easily quantified and measured, is socio-rhetorically realized by such typified conventions as the “we”/“you” pronoun constructions, the abstract nominalizations, and the auxiliary “will” formations. By using these rhetorical conventions, the teacher internalizes the syllabus’s institutional desires and enacts them as his or her intentions, intentions that he or she will expect students to respect and abide by. The teacher’s intentions, therefore, are generated and organized rhetorically by the generic conventions of the syllabus. Teachers invent their classes, themselves, as well as their students by locating themselves within the situated topoi of the syllabus, which functions both as the rhetorical instrument and the conceptual realm in which the FYW course is recognized and enacted. Indeed, the syllabus, as Connors and Glenn warn teachers, *is* “the first expression of your personality,” but the syllabus does not so much convey this a priori personality as it informs it.

The syllabus, then, helps establish the FYW course as a system of activity and also helps coordinate how its participants manage their way through and perform the various genres that operationalize this system, each of which constitutes its own site of invention within which teachers and students assume and enact a complex set of textured actions, relations, and subjectivities. Within this scene of writing, one such genre, the assignment (or writing) prompt, plays a critical role in constituting the teacher and student positions that shape and enable student writing.

### *The Writing Prompt*

While it does receive scholarly attention, mainly in handbooks for writing teachers such as Lindemann’s (1995) and Connors and Glenn’s (1995) (see also Murray 1989 and

Williams 1989), the writing prompt remains treated as essentially a transparent text, one that facilitates “communication between teacher and student” (Reiff and Middleton 1983, 263). As a genre, it is mainly treated as one more prewriting heuristic, helping or “prompting” student writers to discover something to write about. As Connors and Glenn describe it, “a good assignment . . . must be many things. Ideally, it should help students practice specific stylistic and organizational skills. It should also furnish enough data to give students an idea of where to start, and it should evoke a response that is the product of discovering more about those data. It should encourage students to do their best writing and should give the teacher her best chance to help” (1995, 58). Indeed, the most obvious purpose of the writing prompt is to do just that, prompt student writing by creating the occasion and the means for writing.

To treat the writing prompt merely as a conduit for communicating a subject matter from the teacher to the student, a way of “giving” students something to write about, however, is to overlook the extent to which the prompt situates student writers within a genred site of action in which students acquire and negotiate desires, subjectivities, commitments, and relations before they begin to write. The writing prompt not only *moves* the student writer to action; it also *cues* the student writer to enact a certain kind of action. This is why David Bartholomae insists that it is *within* the writing prompt that student writing begins, not *after* the prompt (1983). The prompt, like any other genre, organizes and generates the conditions within which individuals perform their activities. As such, we cannot simply locate the beginning of student writing in student writers and their texts. We must also locate these beginnings in the teachers’ prompts, which constitute the situated topoi that the student writers enter into and participate within. As Bartholomae notes, a well-crafted assignment “presents not just a subject, but a way of imagining a subject as a subject, a discourse one can enter, and not as a thing that carries with it experiences or ideas that can be communicated” (1983, 306). This means that the



prompt does not precede student writing by only presenting the student with a subject for further inquiry, a subject a student simply “takes up” in his or her writing, although that certainly is part of its purpose. More significantly, the prompt is a precondition for the existence of student writing, a means of habituating the students into the subject as well as the subjectivity they are being asked to explore so that they can then “invent” themselves and their subject matter within it.

As situated *topoi*, writing prompts are both rhetorical instruments and conceptual realms—habits and habitats. They conceptually locate students within a situation and provide them with the rhetorical means for acting within it. We notice examples of this in assignments that ask students to write “literacy narratives,” narratives about their experiences with and attitudes relating to the acquisition of literacy. Teachers who assign them usually presume that these narratives give students the opportunity to access and reflect on their literacy experiences in ways that are transformative and empowering, ways that describe the challenges and rewards of acquiring literacy. What these assignments overlook, however, is that literacy narratives, like all genres, are not merely communicative tools; they actually reflect and reinscribe desires and assumptions about the inherent value and power of literacy. Students who are asked to write literacy narratives come up against a set of cultural expectations—embedded as part of the genre—about the transformative power of literacy as a necessary tool for success and achievement. Kirk Branch, for instance, describes how students in his reading and writing class at Rainier Community Learning Center struggled to invent themselves within the assumptions of these narratives. Aware of the social motives rhetorically embedded within these narratives, Branch explains, students wrote them as much to describe their experiences with literacy as to convince themselves and others of the transforming power of literacy. For example, commenting on one such student narrative, titled “Rosie’s Story,” Branch concludes,

“Rosie’s Story” *writes itself* into a positive crescendo, a wave of enthusiasm which tries to drown out the self-doubt she reveals earlier. “Rosie’s Story” does not suggest an unbridled confidence in the power of literacy to solve her problems, but by the end of the piece she drops the provisional “maybes” and “shoulds” and encourages herself to maintain her momentum: “Just keep it up.” Her story, then, reads as an attempt to quash her self-doubt and to reassert the potential of literacy in her own life. (1998, 220; my emphasis)

In the end, it seems, the power of genre and the ideology it compels writers to sustain and articulate wins out. Rosie does not seem to be expressing some inherent intention as she writes this narrative. Rather, she seems to be locating herself within the desires embedded within the literacy narrative, desires that inform how she recognizes and performs herself in the situation of the reading and writing class. To claim, then, that her narrative begins *with* and *in* her is to overlook the extent to which she herself is being written by the genre she is writing.

We notice a remarkable example of how genres shape our perceptions and actions when Lee, a student in Branch’s class, writes in his literacy narrative: “Furthermore Mr. Kirk gives us our assignments and he has always wanted us to do our best. He said, ‘If you hadn’t improved your English, you wouldn’t have got a good job.’ Therefore I worry about my English all the time” (Branch 1998, 221). “Does it matter,” Branch wonders afterwards, “that I never said this to Lee?” (221) Apparently, Branch does not have to say it; Lee’s assumption about literacy as a necessary tool for success is already rhetorically embedded in the genre of the literacy narrative as understood by the student, an assumption that Lee internalizes as his intention and enacts as his narrative when he writes this genre. It is within the situated topoi of the genre that Lee “invents” his narrative.

Often, teachers of writing overlook the socializing function of their writing prompts and consequently locate the beginnings of student writing too simply in the students rather than in the prompts themselves. What these teachers overlook—and writing

teacher guides are no exception—is that students first have to situate and “invent” themselves in our prompts before they can assume the position of student writer. In fact, as we will discuss momentarily, it is the prompt that tacitly invokes the position that student writers are asked to assume when they write, so that students read their way into the position of writer via our prompts. Given this, it is perhaps more than a little ironic that most guides to writing effective assignment prompts emphasize the importance of specifying an audience *in* the prompt while more or less ignoring the students as audience *of* the prompt. As one of her five heuristics for designing writing assignments, for instance, Lindemann includes the following: “*For whom are students writing?* Who is the audience? Do students have enough information to assume a role with respect to the audience? Is the role meaningful?” (1995, 215). Here, the student is perceived only as potential writer to the audience we construct in the prompt. But what about the student as audience to the teacher’s prompt, the position that the student first assumes before he or she begins to write? The assumption seems to be that the student exists a priori as a writer who has only to follow the instructions of the teacher’s prompt rather than as a reader who is first invoked or interpellated into the position of writer by the teacher’s prompt. This process of interpellation involves a moment of tacit recognition, in which the student first becomes aware of the position assigned to him or her and is consequently moved to act out that position as a writer.

The prompt is a genre whose explicit function is to make another genre, the student essay, possible. Within the FYW course activity system, it helps to create a timeliness and an opportunity for student writing in what Yates and Orlikowski, following Bazerman, refer to as “kairoitic coordination” (2002, 110). In coordinating this interaction, the writing prompt functions to transform its writer (the teacher) and its readers (the students) into a reader (the teacher) and writers (the students). It positions the students and teacher into two simultaneous roles: the students as readers and writers, the teacher as writer

and reader. First of all, the prompt rhetorically positions the teacher as both a writer and a reader. As he or she writes the prompt, the teacher positions him or herself as reader for the student text that the prompt will eventually make possible. The challenge that the prompt creates for the teacher is how to create the conditions that will allow students to recognize him or her not as the writer of the prompt, but as the eventual reader of their writing. That is, the teacher has to find a way to negotiate a double subject position, a subject subject, one who is doing the action (the subject as writer) and one on whom the action is done (the subject as reader). One way the teacher manages this double position is through a series of typified rhetorical moves and statements. For example, the following phrases are typical of prompts: “You should be sure to consider,” “You probably realize by now that,” “As you have probably guessed,” “As you all know.”<sup>5</sup> These are loaded phrases, because they not only offer suggestions the teacher-writer is giving to the student-readers; they also offer hints about what the teacher-writer will be expecting as a teacher-reader. When the teacher writes, “You probably realize by now that one effective way to support YOUR evaluation of those reviews is to offer examples from them in the way of quotes,” he is telling the students something about him as an audience. He is basically saying, “Look, I care about using quotes to support evaluation, so if you want to write an effective evaluation for me, use quotes.” Writing “one effective way” allows the teacher-writer to covertly express what he cares about as a reader. The next example is even more covert—and clever. After describing the assignment to the students, the teacher writes:

To do this, *you should be able* to explain why the scene is central to the story’s plot, what issues are being dealt with, and how or why the characters change. *The trick here* is to employ as many specific details from the story as possible. *You have the responsibility* to explain to your audience why you made the decision you did. (my emphasis)

The teacher who begins this prompt as a writer describing the assignment to the students as readers here begins to emerge as a

reader to the students as writers. “You should be able to” is a subtle, or perhaps not so subtle, way of letting students know what he as a teacher-reader expects from their writing. “The trick here” is even more effective, because it allows the teacher to enact the role of reader while seeming to be an objective observer giving helpful advice. In fact, however, there is no “trick” involved here, just a calculated rhetorical way for the teacher to let students know that he as a reader cares a great deal about the use of specific details. The only “trick” at work here is how the teacher creates the illusion that the writer addressing them is not the same person as the reader who will be reading their writing. It is this rhetorical sleight of hand that the prompt makes possible.

The prompt, therefore, allows the teacher to occupy two subject positions at once: writer/coach and reader/evaluator. As a result, and at the same time, the prompt also constitutes the students as readers and writers. The students are prompted into position or invoked as writers by the prompt, within which they read and invent themselves. Indeed, every prompt has inscribed within it a subject position for students to assume in order to carry out the assignment. In FYW prompts, these roles can be quite elaborate, asking students to pretend that “you have just been hired as a student research assistant by a congressperson in your home state” or “you have been asked by *Rolling Stone* to write a critique of one of the following films.” The prompts do not stop here, however. They go on to specify to students how they should enact these roles, as in the following example, in which the teacher asks students to pretend that they are congressional aides:

You must not explain what you “think” about this subject; the congressperson is more interested in the objective consideration of the issues themselves. And *of course*, you shouldn’t recommend whether or not your employer should support the bill; *you are, after all, only an aide.* (my emphasis)

Words such as “of course,” “obviously,” “after all,” “remember,” and “certainly” all typically appear in prompts. Their function is to establish shared assumptions; however, we have to question

just how shared these assumptions really are. How shared, for example, is the “of course” in the above example? Does the student-writer share this knowledge about congresspersons or is this a subtle way in which the prompt writer coerces complicity? The fact that the teacher-writer goes to the trouble of mentioning it suggests that perhaps the knowledge is not so obvious, that, in fact, “of course,” “certainly,” and “as we all know” are rhetorical means of presenting new information in the guise of old information (Pelkowski 1998, 7). If this is the case, then what we are witnessing is the prompt at work constituting the students as writers who assent to the ideology presented in the prompt, just as we saw in the case of the literacy narratives.

To a great extent, students have to accept the position(s) made available to them in the prompt if they are to carry out the assignment successfully. As all genres do, the prompt invites an uptake commensurate with its ideology, just as we saw in the example of the first state of the union address in which George Washington’s choice of the “king’s speech” prompted an appropriate congressional reply mirroring the echoing speeches of Parliament. While there is room for resistance, for students to refuse to accept the shared assumptions the prompt makes available to them, Pelkowski reminds us that “the power structure of the university denies students the ability to offer alternative interpretations of prompts. . . . Rather, an alternative interpretation of the assignment is not seen as such, but as a ‘failure to respond to the assignment’ (the F paper is often characterized in this way in statements of grading criteria)” (1998, 16). The writing prompt, in short, functions as a site of invention in which teacher and student create the conditions in which they will eventually interact as reader and writer.

### The Student Essay

The very coercion masked as complicity that we observe in the syllabus and writing prompt is also at work when students begin to write their essays. This time, though, rather than being objects of this discursive move, students are expected to become

its agents. In this way, students learn to enact the desires they acquire as participants within the FYW course and its system of genres. For example, one of the tricks teachers often expect students to perform in their writing involves recontextualizing the desires embedded in the writing prompt as their own self-generated desires. That is, students are expected to situate their writing within the writing prompt without acknowledging its presence explicitly in their writing so that it appears as though their writing created its own exigency, that somehow their writing is self-prompted. This rhetorical sleight of hand appears most visibly in the introductions of student essays, because it is there that students are asked to create the opportunity and timing for their essays in relation to the opportunity and timing as defined by the writing prompt. Experienced student writers know that they must negotiate this transaction between genres and do so with relative ease. Less experienced student writers, however, sometimes fail to recognize that the prompt and essay are related but separate genres, and their essays can frustrate teachers by citing the prompt explicitly in a way that shatters the illusion of self-sufficiency we desire students to create in their writing. In what follows, I will look at several examples of student essays to examine to what extent and how students negotiate this difficult transaction between genres as they function as agents on behalf of the prompt and agents of their own writing.

Yates and Orlikowski's work on the function of *chronos* and *kairos* in communicative interaction can help us interrogate the relation between the writing prompt and the student essay. They describe how genre systems choreograph interactions among participants and activities chronologically (by way of measurable, quantifiable, "objective" time) and kairotically (by way of constructing a sense of timeliness and opportunity in specific situations) within communities (2002, 108–10). In terms of *chronos*, the writing prompt assigns a specific time sequence for the production of the student essay, often delimiting what is due at what time and when. In this way, the writing prompt defines a chronological relationship between itself and

the student essay. At the same time, however, the writing prompt also establishes the *kairos* for the student essay by providing it with a timeliness and an opportunity. In this way, the writing prompt defines a recognizable moment that authorizes the student essay's *raison d'Être*. Participating within this *kairotic* relationship between two genres, the student must, on the one hand, recognize the opportunity defined for him or her in the prompt and, on the other hand, reappropriate that opportunity as his or her own in the essay. Carolyn Miller describes this interaction as "the dynamic interplay between . . . opportunity as discerned and opportunity as defined" (1992, 312). Engaged in this interplay, the student writer must discern the opportunity granted by the prompt while writing an essay that seemingly defines its own opportunity. As such, the student writer needs to achieve and demonstrate a certain amount of generic dexterity, functioning within a genre system while masking its interplay. I will now look at some examples of how student writers negotiate this discursive transaction.

The following examples, from a FYW course, are all written in response to the same writing prompt. The students had read and discussed Clifford Geertz's "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," had been assigned to take on the "role of 'cultural anthropologist' or 'ethnographer,'" had conducted some field observations, and were then prompted to write, "in the vein of Geertz in 'Deep Play,'" a

claim-driven essay about the "focused gathering" [a term that Geertz uses] you observed. Your essay should be focused on and centered around what you find to be most significant and worth writing about in terms of the "focused gathering" you observed. . . . Some issues you might want to attend to include: How does the event define the community taking part in it? What does the event express about the beliefs of the community? What does the event say about the larger society?

Not only does the prompt assign students a subjectivity (the role of cultural anthropologist), but it also grants them an



opportunity to transform their observations into an argument. In taking up this opportunity, the students perform a range of transactions between their essays and the writing prompt. Below, I will describe a sample of these transactions, starting with essays in which the writing prompt figures prominently (so that the coercion is visible) and concluding with essays in which the writing prompt is recontextualized as the student's own self-generated opportunity.

In those examples where students fail to enact the desired relationship between the prompt and the essay, the writing prompt figures explicitly in their essays, fracturing the illusion of autonomy that the essay, although prompted, tries to maintain. In the most obvious cases, such as the following, the student narrates explicitly the process of the essay's production:

In my last literary endeavor [ostensibly referring to an earlier draft of the essay] I focused on one facet of the baseball game that I had gone to see. This time I am going to try to bring a few more topics to the table and focus on one thing in particular that I feel is significant.<sup>6</sup>

In this excerpt, the student appears to be narrating the prompt's instructions (stated as "be focused on and centered around what you find to be most significant") as he fulfills them. That is, he is telling us what he has been asked to do from one stage of the assignment sequence to the next as he does it, thereby making the coercion visible, as in the words, "This time I am going to try to . . ." Purposefully or not, the student in this case fails to perform the desired uptake between the prompt and his essay so that the prompt essentially speaks through him.

In a similar but less explicit way, the next essay also fails to reappropriate the prompt's defined opportunity as its own, so that the essay remains overly reliant on the prompt. The essay begins:

Cultural events are focused gatherings that give observers insights to that certain culture. Geertz observes the Balinese culture and gains insights on how significant cockfighting is to the Balinese: including issues of disquieting and the symbolic meaning behind

the cockfights. My observations at a bubble tea shop in the International District also have similarities with Geertz's observations of the Balinese cockfight on the cultural aspect.

The phrases "cultural events" and "focused gatherings" locate the language of the prompt in the essay, but the first sentence simply rewords the language of the prompt rather than recontextualizing it as part of the essay's own constructed exigency. The question that would likely come to most teachers' minds, even though they already know the answer, would be, "So what? Why do we need to know this?" Similarly, in the second sentence, the only way to understand the relevance of the transition into Geertz is to know the prompt, which makes that connection. By the time the student describes her own observations in the third sentence, too much of the prompt's background knowledge is assumed, so that, for the logic of these opening sentences to work, a reader needs the prompt as context, yet this is the very relationship that the prompt and essay wish to downplay.

Compare the opening sentences of the above essay to the opening sentences of the following essay:

When you want to know more about a certain society or culture what is the first thing that you need to do? You need to make and analyze detailed observations of that particular society or culture in its natural environment. From there you should be able to come up with a rough idea of "why" that particular culture or society operates the way it does. That's exactly what Clifford Geertz did. He went to Bali to study the Balinese culture as an observer.

As in the earlier example, this excerpt borrows the language of the prompt, but rather than rewording that language, it reappropriates it. This time, the reader meets Geertz on the essay's terms, after the student has provided a context for why Geertz would have done what he did. The same exigency that motivated Geertz becomes the student's exigency for writing his essay. Crude as it might be, the question that begins the essay performs the sleight of hand I described earlier, in which the

student recontextualizes the question the prompt asks of him and asks it of his readers as if this is the question *he* desires to ask. In this way, the student becomes an agent of the agency at work on him. The student, however, seems unable or unwilling to sustain this uptake, for in the very next paragraph, he fractures the illusion he has begun to create. He writes:

A couple of weeks ago I decided to go visit some friends in Long Beach Washington. Since it was something different from the norm of people in my class analyzing concerts and baseball games I decided to do my paper on Long Beach. I didn't have to look far for a cultural event to observe because the little ocean-side town was having a parade. . . . I pretty much took the Geertz approach and just tried to figure out what was going on.

Here, the student not only slips out of his assigned role as a "cultural anthropologist" by acknowledging his position as a student, along with other students writing a paper for class, but he also makes visible the coercion that prompted his essay when he writes that it did not take him long to find a cultural event to observe. Suddenly, he identifies himself as someone who has been prompted to find an event. At the same time, although he does refer to Geertz in the previous paragraph, the student's statement, "I pretty much took the Geertz approach," appears to be addressed to a reader who knows more than what the student has already explained about Geertz. That is, the statement imagines a reader who is familiar with the prompt that directed the student to take the Geertz approach in the first place. After all, the prompt asks students to write an essay "in the vein of Geertz."

In the previous example, we witness a student who begins to negotiate but does not quite sustain the complex interplay between the genred discursive spaces of the writing prompt and the student essay. In the next couple of examples, we observe students who manage this discursive transaction by recontextualizing the desires embedded in the prompt as their own seemingly self-prompted desires to write.

The following student begins her essay by describing the activities and interactions that typically occur at her church, thereby performing her role as a cultural anthropologist. Her third paragraph, which follows two paragraphs of observations, marks a transition. She writes:

What purpose does all this serve? Geertz states in *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*, “the cockfight is a means of expression.” (Geertz pg. 420) In much the same way the Inn [the name of the church] is the same thing. It is a gathering for college aged people to express their faith in God.

By asking, “What purpose does all this serve?” this student asks the question that the prompt asks of her. In so doing, she makes it appear as though the inquiry that follows stems from her own curiosity. In the context of this appropriation, Geertz is not so much a figure she inherits from the prompt as he is a figure she invokes to create an opportunity for her essay to analyze the significance of the Inn. The student recontextualizes the opportunity as well as the authority from the discursive space of the prompt to the discursive space of the essay.

The next student performs a similar uptake, and does so with greater elegance. The student begins her essay by describing underground hip-hop music and the function it serves for its listeners, and then poses the question: “Is music created from culture, or is culture created from music?” The second paragraph begins to compare hip-hop to symphonies. The student writes:

On a different note, a symphonic band concert creates a congregation of different status people uniting to listen to a type of music they all enjoy. “Erving Goffman has called *this* a type of ‘focused gathering’—a set of persons engrossed in a common flow of activity and relating to one another in terms of that flow.” (Geertz 405) This type of “focused gathering” is an example of music created from culture. “Focused gatherings” provide different emotions according to preference. The flocking of similar interests in the form of “focused gatherings” makes up a culture. Similar values are

shared to create one group of equals producing music for the same reason.” (my emphasis)

By posing the question, “Is music created from culture, or is culture created from music?” the student creates an opportunity for her essay rather than inheriting that opportunity from the prompt. This is the question the *student* is asking. In the above excerpt, the student does not rely on the prompt’s authority to justify the claim that “a symphonic band concert creates a congregation of different status people uniting to listen to a type of music they all enjoy.” Instead, she appropriates the authority the prompt grants her to assert this claim. Only in the context of her authority does Geertz then figure into the essay. Notice how cleverly the student uses the quotation from Geertz to make it appear as though his description of a “focused gathering” was meant to define her focused gathering, the symphonic band concert. The determiner “this” no longer modifies the cockfight as Geertz meant it to; instead, it refers back to the concert, which is the student’s subject of inquiry. In a way, this move creates the impression that the student found Geertz rather than having been assigned to use Geertz. There is very little evidence of prompting here.

In the remainder of the above excerpt, the student appears to perform what Fuller and Lee have described as an interiorized uptake, in which the student becomes positioned, through her interaction with the writing prompt, as a desiring subject who speaks from that subjectivity (2002, 222). In this case, the student internalizes the authority embedded in the prompt as her own authority in statements such as, “The flocking of similar interests in the form of ‘focused gatherings’ makes up a culture. Similar values are shared to create one group of equals producing music for the same reason.” The student has appropriated the subjectivity assigned to her and now speaks from that position as a “cultural anthropologist.” Fuller and Lee refer to this process of negotiation as “textual collusion,” a term they use to describe how writers and readers move “around inside

relations of power” (215). More so than her peers, this student seems able to negotiate the textured relations between the prompt and the essay, repositioning herself in the interplay between genred spaces so that she becomes an agent of the agency at work on her.

Invention takes place at the intersection between the acquisition and articulation of desire. When teachers assign students a writing prompt, they position students at this intersection so that part of what students do when they invent their essays involves recontextualizing the desires they have acquired as their own self-prompted desires to write. As such, teachers expect students to manage the interplay between coercion and complicity that we saw teachers perform in the syllabus (manifested in the “you” and “we” formations). Not all students, as we see in the above examples, are able to perform this sleight of hand with the same dexterity. And the reason for this, I would argue, has partly to do with the fact that some students do not know that this transaction requires them to move around between two genred sites of action, each with its own situated desires, relations, subjectivities, and practices—in short, its own positions of articulation. When they conflate these two worlds, students not only fracture the illusion of self-sufficiency the essay desires them to maintain, but students also fail to reposition their subjectivity and their subject matter within the discursive and ideological space of the essay. One way teachers can help students reposition themselves within such spheres of agency is to make genres analytically visible to students so that students can participate within and negotiate them more meaningfully and critically. In the next chapter, I will delineate my argument for such an explicit genre-based writing pedagogy.

#### SUMMARY

Writing involves a process of learning to adapt, ideologically and discursively, to various situations via the genres that coordinate them. Writing is not only a skill, but a way of being and acting in the world in a particular time and place in relation to others.

The FYW course bears this out. As an activity system, it is sustained and coordinated by its various genres. Teachers and students assume ways of being and acting in the classroom not only because of its material setting—although that certainly does play a major part (see Reynolds 1998)—but also because of its multitextured sites of action as they are embodied within and between genres. As such, the writing that students do in the FYW course does not just begin with them by virtue of their being (enrolled) in this setting; it begins, rather, in the textured topoi that are already in place, shaping and enabling the writing that students as well as teachers do. As such, the environment of the classroom—or any other environment for that matter, including the doctor’s office—is not only an ontological fact, but also a generic fact. It exists largely because we reproduce it in our genres, each of which constitutes a different but related topoi within which students and teacher function, interact, and enact subjectivities and practices. Since we reproduce the FYW course in the ways we articulate it, there is really little that is artificial or arbitrary about it, at least not in the way that Paul Heilker describes the FYW course as being artificial:

Writing teachers need to relocate the *where* of composition instruction outside the academic classroom because the classroom does not and cannot offer students real rhetorical situations in which to understand writing as social action. (1997, 71)

Part of my argument in this chapter is that the FYW course *is* a “real rhetorical situation,” one made up of various scenarios within which students (and their teachers) recognize one another, reposition themselves, interact, and enact their situated practices in complex social and rhetorical frameworks. Once we recognize this, once we acknowledge that the FYW course, like any activity system, is “not a container for actions or texts” but “an ongoing accomplishment” (Russell 1997, 513), we are on our way to treating the FYW course as a complex and dynamic scene of writing, one in which students can not only learn how to write, but, as we will discuss in the next chapter,

can also learn what it means to write: what writing does and how it positions writers within systems of activity. Participating in the textual dynamics of the FYW course is as “real” a form of social action and interaction as any other textual practice.

As we have observed throughout the last two chapters in such genres as the PMHF, the social workers’ assessment report, the résumé, the course journal, the “king’s speech,” the greeting card, the syllabus, the writing prompt, and the student essay, genres position their users to perform certain situated activities by generating and organizing certain desires and subjectivities. These desires and subjectivities are embedded within and prompted by genres, which elicit the various, sometimes conflicting, intentions we perform within and between situations. To assume that the writer is the primary locus of invention, then, is to overlook the constitutive power of genre in shaping and enabling how writers recognize and participate in sites of action.

Rather than being defined as the agency of the writer, invention is more a way that writers locate themselves, via genres, within various positions and activities. Invention is thus a process in which writers act as they are acted upon. The Patient Medical History Form is a case in point. So are the examples of George Washington and the first state of the union address, the example of the social workers’ assessment report, and the example of the student essay in relation to the assignment prompt. All these examples point to the fact that there is more at work in prompting discourse than simply the writer’s private intentions or even, for that matter, the demands of the writer’s immediate exigencies. After all, George Washington responded to the exigencies of an unprecedented rhetorical situation not by inventing something new, but by turning to an antecedent genre, the “king’s speech,” which carried with it a rhetorical form of social action very much at odds with his more immediate exigencies. The available genre, rhetorically embodying social motives so powerful as to override the inspired democratic moment at hand, not only shaped the way Washington recognized and acted within his rhetorical situation, but the way Congress did too.



We notice a similar phenomenon at work in the example of the writing prompt. The writing prompt does not merely provide students with a set of instructions. Rather, it organizes and generates the discursive and ideological conditions which students take up and recontextualize as they write their essays. As such, it habituates students into the subjectivities they are asked to assume as well as enact—the subjectivities required to explore their subjects. By expanding the sphere of agency in which the writer participates, we in composition studies can offer both a richer view of the writer as well as a more comprehensive account of how and why writers makes the choices they do. As I will argue in the next chapter, teaching invention as a process in which writers access and locate themselves critically within genres not only can enrich the teaching of writing, but can also better justify the place and purpose of FYW courses in postsecondary education.