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### RE-PLACING INVENTION IN COMPOSITION

#### *Reflections and Implications*

It is strange that in institutions where every other department represents the well-garnered scholarship of the ages, in this department alone it should so often be thought enough to put a pen into the student's hand and say, as the angel said to John, "Write." . . . It is strange indeed if we, as teachers of rhetoric, have nothing higher to do than to correct bad spelling and clean up slovenly sentences.

JOHN GENUNG, "The Study of Rhetoric in the  
College Course"

An educational process in an important sense is a process of initiation: an initiation, that is, into the ways of working, or of behaving, or of thinking . . . particular to one's cultural traditions. . . . Learning the genres of one's culture is both part of entering into it with understanding, and part of developing the necessary ability to change it.

FRANCES CHRISTIE, "Genres as Choice"

So far, I have argued that genres maintain the desires they help writers to fulfill, and I have analyzed how, through genres, writers position themselves within, negotiate, and articulate these desires as recognizable, meaningful, consequential actions. Because they situate writers within such positions of articulation, genres, when analyzed, contribute to our understanding of how and why writers invent—how, that is, writers participate in and become agents of the agency at work on them when they write. In previous chapters, I have examined genres in this way, as sites of invention. In this chapter, I speculate on

what it would mean to apply this view of genre and invention to writing instruction, especially first-year writing courses. In particular, I argue that teachers can and should teach students how to identify and analyze genred positions of articulation so that students can locate themselves and begin to participate within these positions more meaningfully, critically, and dexterously. Genre analysis can make visible to students the desires embedded within genres; and by giving students access to these desires, we enable them to interrogate, enact, and reflect on the relations, subjectivities, and practices these desires underwrite. In what follows, I will describe what such a genre-based writing pedagogy might look like and how, by practicing it, we can re-imagine and justify the function and place of first-year writing instruction in the university.

#### FIRST-YEAR WRITING AND THE PLACE OF COMPOSITION

John Genung wrote the words I cite in the above epigraph in 1887 (reprinted in Brereton 1995). The department to which he was referring was the newly founded Department of English and the course is what we now commonly recognize as first-year composition or first-year writing (FYW). I cite these words not to reflect on their antiquatedness, but to acknowledge the extent to which today, nearly a hundred and fifty years after its inception, scholars and teachers in composition studies can still look at the FYW course with the same bewilderment Genung did in 1887. We may not be as devoted today to correcting bad spelling and cleaning up slovenly sentences, but we are as much at a loss in articulating the goals of the FYW course as were its first teachers. As I was first drafting this chapter, in fact, administrators, teachers, and scholars of writing were heatedly debating on the Writing Program Administrators discussion list (WPA-L) the recommendations outlined in the most recent outcomes statement for FYW courses. As this listserv discussion and countless other exchanges at our conferences and in our journals suggest, those involved in the teaching and administration of the FYW course still struggle to agree on what the course

outcomes ought to be and how best to achieve them. The course continues to have little to no disciplinary identity: its goals undefined, its place in the English department marginal at best, and its relationship to writing in the disciplines (WID) programs uncertain. Yet the course remains the most frequently taught in U.S. colleges and universities, and one of the few that carries a universal requirement. And despite the fact that some universities are beginning to consider making the course an elective rather than a requirement, and some composition programs have begun to separate from English departments to form departments of their own, the FYW course is not likely to disappear anytime soon.

Among the various and often contradictory rationales its advocates have advanced over the years for justifying the composition requirement, Sharon Crowley lists the following: to develop taste in students, to improve their formal and mechanical correctness, to provide them with a liberal education, to prepare them for their professions, to develop their personalities and “personal voices,” to help them participate as able democratic citizens, to teach them textual analysis, to encourage them to become more critical thinkers, to introduce them to the composing process, to introduce them to academic disciplines and discourses, and, more recently, to encourage them to critique dominant cultural ideologies and to resist systems of oppression (1998, 6). Clearly, the course can try to do everything and end up, as its critics argue, doing very little. If there is, however, one goal upon which most writing teachers, university faculty, administrators, and the public can agree today, it continues to be that the course ought to teach students how to “master grammar, usage, and formal fluency” (Crowley 1998, 7). We ought to wonder, though, along with John Genung, why we cannot aspire to a higher goal.

Due in part to its undefined goals, the universally required FYW course, a mainstay of English departments and a tenuous part of their identity for a little more than a hundred years, has recently come under more scrutiny than ever before by those, especially within composition studies, who question its place and

its purpose. Victor Vitanza (1999) and Susan Miller (1997) have questioned the “cultural studies” turn the course has taken at many universities, claiming that such a turn shifts the course’s emphasis from the production of texts to their interpretation, a hermeneutic search for cultural and textual meanings more befitting the work of literary studies than composition. Rhetoric, these critics argue, is not a spectator sport. Even more recently, Sharon Crowley (2000; see also 1995) and others have begun to question why the course should remain a universal requirement in most U.S. colleges and universities, arguing in part that the course’s requirement has not only stifled WID initiatives, but has also contributed to the exploitation of lecturers, graduate teaching assistants, and other part-time instructors who regularly teach it.

Perhaps the most serious challenges to the FYW course, however, have been those that question its place in the teaching of writing. Linda Bergmann (1996), Charles Hill and Lauren Resnick (1995), Carl Lovitt and Art Young (1997), Elaine Maimon (1983), David Russell (1991), and others argue, for instance, that the course does not prepare students for the disciplinary writing skills they need in their majors and careers, suggesting that “what students learn about writing in composition courses . . . is how to write in composition courses” (Bacon 2000, 590). Carl Lovitt and Art Young describe how, as more and more colleges and universities require writing-intensive courses across the curriculum and in the disciplines, English departments face increasing pressure to justify the FYW course, especially since the “overly restrictive conceptions of first-year composition courses have, in many instances, undermined the ability of such courses to contribute to the goals of university-wide writing programs” (1997, 113). Critics of the required writing course question whether a course housed in the English department and taught and administered mainly by English department faculty, part-time instructors, and graduate students can truly meet the discipline-specific rhetorical needs of the university and the professions. These critics wonder if writing skills are as transferable as we once thought they were—indeed, whether we can

even talk about “good writing” outside of its social and rhetorical contexts. They also question the course’s accountability, in particular, whose interests are being served by the universal requirement. These critics may have reason to be suspicious. As Linda Bergmann explains, once we in English departments “have the students safely registered in our classes, we teach them, deliberately or not, consciously or not, the things we really consider important: the standards, values, and conventions of our *own* disciplinary discourse” (1996, 58; Bergmann’s emphasis). Such criticism, as well as recent movements to relocate writing programs outside of English departments, suggests that the FYW course has reached a critical impasse in its history. In response, we who study, teach, and administer it must address the course’s responsibility to the university, especially its relationship to WID, as well as its location within the Department of English if we are to justify its continued existence.

In this chapter, I offer a genre-based approach to FYW instruction as a way to address the course’s responsibility to WID and to justify its location within English. Such an approach, as I will argue, requires us to re-place invention from the writer to the genred sites of action in which the writer participates. This move calls for a rhetorical view of invention, one that builds on and adds to the work of Richard Young, Janice Lauer, and those who have followed them over the last forty years (see chapter 3). But despite such work, rhetoric (and an understanding of invention based on it) remains marginalized in writing instruction. This is not surprising given the history of FYW instruction. After all, the FYW course emerged at about the same time as the English department did, which was also at about the same time that rhetoric, a cross-disciplinary course of study, began to lose its stature in the new American university. The complicated history of the required writing course and its relationship to English studies and the new university has already been told at length by historians such as James Berlin (1987), John Brereton (1995), Robert Connors (1997), Sharon Crowley (1998), Susan Miller (1991), and Thomas Miller

(1997), and I do not pretend to retell it here. In what follows, I only wish to highlight how the displacement of rhetoric by composition within English departments may have contributed to the present impasse in FYW instruction and to describe how a genre-based understanding of invention might help us work through this impasse. As I argued in earlier chapters, by locating invention within genred sites of action, we treat invention rhetorically, as a way of being and acting in the world in relation to others within certain circumstances. And when we teach invention in this way, we teach students how to locate themselves within and participate in the textured worlds that surround them, within and beyond the academic disciplines. This genre-based approach to invention can connect FYW courses with WID in productive ways, ways that can help justify the function of FYW and its place within English departments.

#### RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION?

It is common for us today to refer to “rhet-comp” as an academic discipline, but this label might actually hide some of the tensions between rhetoric and composition, tensions that first emerged about the time when the FYW course was established in American universities in the late nineteenth century. Historians have described various factors that accounted for the emergence of what came to be known as freshman English in the period between 1870 and 1900, among them, a gradual shift from orality to literacy; a concomitant interest in belletristic writing, especially written in the vernacular; a dramatic increase in the number of students as a result of the Morrill Act of 1862, which introduced masses of new students to the newly created state universities; the first American literacy crises in the late 1880s; and the influence of the German university system, which served as a model for the specialized, elective-based, research-oriented, and disciplinary nature of the new American university (Berlin 1987; Brereton 1995; Connors 1997). All these factors conspired to create the conditions for the FYW course. As Robert Connors explains, rhetoric, which had

enjoyed nearly two thousand five hundred years of power and prestige as an academic field of study, could not survive under the conditions that saw the new American universities displace the traditional colleges. For one thing, the German universities, which trained so many of the Ph.D.'s who eventually returned to establish the new American universities, did not offer advanced degrees in rhetoric. Those who studied in Germany returned social scientists, chemists, psychologists, mathematicians, and philologists, but not rhetoricians (Connors 1997, 178–80). The advanced, research-based rhetorical training needed to sustain rhetoric as a discipline in the new American universities was not available. In addition, the German model was detail-oriented and empirical. Rhetoric, however, is more an art than a science, so it fared badly, eventually becoming displaced by philology—which involved more empirical analysis of the development and structure of languages—as the main research focus of English studies (Connors 1997, 178). It was philology, not rhetoric, that provided the theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings for the creation of the English department within which “freshman composition” developed.

In writing instruction, the shift in focus from production to product, from invention to arrangement, mirrored the displacement of rhetoric by philology within English studies. The English department built its research program around textual interpretation, not production, thereby marginalizing the teaching of how and why texts come to be and privileging the finished product as a timeless, fixed, even spiritual entity full of meanings to be scrutinized and deciphered (S. Miller 1991, 21–22). With the displacement of invention and the turn toward interpretation within English studies, rhetoric slowly lost its place within the English department. Aided by the influence of Hugh Blair’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (first published in 1783), newly minted English scholars transformed rhetoric into criticism (T. Miller 1997, 227), a transformation we recognize to this day. In this context, rhetoric as a four-year course of study was displaced by composition as a required, freshman-level, two

semester course (Brereton 1995, 13), so that between 1865 and 1900 the new American university transformed from “an intensely rhetorical world” (Connors 1997, 9) with rhetorical study not only a part of the curriculum but also a part of students’ extracurricular activities to a “diverse, large, fragmented university organized by academic disciplines” (Brereton 1995, 3–4). Within this new university culture, rhetoric, interdisciplinary by nature, could not be sustained as a central activity. As Connors explains, “it had no real place in the new universities, and its fall correlates exactly with their rise” (1997, 178).

The move from rhetoric to composition was marked not only by a shift from speaking to writing, but also by a shift from a civic to an interiorized subjectivity (Connors 1997, 44). In writing courses, this move from “objective, centripetal writing tasks to subjective, centrifugal tasks” (Connors 1997, 296), what Thomas Miller has described as a move toward “a tasteful self-restraint and a disinterested perspective on experience” (1997, 43), was reflected in the “essay of manners and taste,” which became the genred site for the formation and enactment of a bourgeois subjectivity characterized “by the disinterested perspective of the critical commentator whose personal character is revealed in a polished style, restrained sense of polite decorum, and critical attention to how gestures and expressions reveal individuals’ sensibility” (T. Miller 1997, 47). Against the backdrop of this interiorized perspective, informed by romantic theories of genius and originality as well as the “philological and exegetical traditions that emphasized the autonomous writer and the text as individually held intellectual property” (Lunsford and Ede 1994, 420), the writer’s subjectivity became and, as I argued in chapter 3, largely continues to be the subject of writing instruction.

What remains constant over the nearly 150-year history of the FYW course, a time during which composition displaced rhetoric as the guiding principle, is that writing came more and more to describe a process of learning (about oneself, one’s experiences, one’s subject, one’s world) rather than a process of being and acting in the world.<sup>1</sup> This move from writing as



rhetoric to writing as composition—what Thomas Cole describes as the rise of the “expressionistic notion of the uniquely adequate verbalization of a unique idea” (1991, 21)—has had a great deal to do with the modern decline of rhetoric. It has also, as I have suggested above, had a great deal to do with the ascent of the writer, so much so that we could profitably argue that the composition course as we know it today exists first and foremost not to introduce students to the ways of academic discourse (which is how some teachers and administrators of the course advertise its mission) but to develop and articulate the writing self, what Francis Christie has described as “the concern for the individual, and for the development of that individual, confident of opinion, capable of independence of action and of self expression” that has so long occupied the responsibility of English teachers (1988, 23).

And so, as Susan Miller describes, the FYW course and the process movement that largely informs it continue to “focus on the author/writer, not on the results of authorship or of writing” (1991, 98). That is, many teachers of the course continue to ignore the social and rhetorical effects of writing, not only on its audience but on its writers as well. As I have been arguing, though, writers are always affected by and affect the conditions in which they write, especially as these conditions are discursively embodied by genres—acting as they are acted upon by the genres they write. Within genre, the writer rhetorically acquires certain desires and subjectivities, relates to others in certain ways, and enacts certain actions. Genres, in short, rhetorically place their writers in specific conditions of production. It is within these conditions of production, within genres, that invention takes place. By redirecting the trajectory of the writer’s inquiry from the self to the rhetorical conditions within which the self is constituted, this view of invention challenges us to rethink why and how we teach FYW. Essentially, it asks us to take more of a rhetorical than a process-based approach in FYW, one in which students are encouraged to look outward, at how already existing discursive and ideological formations such as genres coordinate

ways of thinking and acting in different disciplinary contexts, ways that student writers can interrogate, adopt, and eventually learn to enact and/or resist when they write. The primary goal of such a FYW course would be to teach students how to locate themselves and their activities meaningfully and critically within these genred positions of articulation. Such a rhetorical view of invention, I argue, allows us to justify FYW as a site in which students can begin to learn how to navigate disciplinary contexts rhetorically, thus forging real links to WID rather than consciously or unconsciously serving mainly the aspirations of English departments. By teaching students that invention is as much a public as it is a private act (an act of [re]positioning as much as of expressing oneself), we teach them how to make visible for themselves and to practice in their writing the rhetorical habits that inform the disciplinary and professional habitats within which they will function. It is in this ability to teach students how to locate and invent themselves rhetorically within various sites of action (a rhetorical, metacognitive literacy)—an ability to heighten awareness of disciplinarity and rhetoric—that the future of FYW is most promising and justified.

#### RETHINKING WRITING INSTRUCTION: AN ARGUMENT FOR A GENRE-BASED APPROACH TO FYW

The WID movement for years has been promoting and developing discipline-specific writing research and instruction, research and instruction rooted in the ideological and discursive contexts of various disciplines within the university. This movement, reflecting research into the social bases of writing, suggests that we need to teach writing in its disciplinary and professional contexts, where writing is not only a means of communication—the acquisition of certain communicative skills—but also a means of socialization into disciplinary values, assumptions, relations, and practices. Such research raises questions about the efficacy of FYW and its focus on general writing skills. Yet rather than considering this move toward disciplinary writing as a threat to the existence of FYW, I think we as scholars, administrators, and

teachers of the course ought to embrace this movement as an opportunity for us not only to justify FYW, but also to rethink its purpose and its place. FYW does not need to stand as an alternative to or in opposition to WID. As Charles Hill and Lauren Resnick rightfully maintain, it is nearly impossible to re-create disciplinary conditions in the FYW course, but this should not mean, as Hill and Resnick go on to suggest, that the course “can do little to prepare students for writing within the various professional contexts they will be entering after graduation” (1995, 146). The fact that the FYW course cannot re-create the various ideological and discursive formations that underwrite disciplinary and professional contexts does *not* mean that the FYW course cannot prepare students for writing within these contexts. It can. By functioning as a kind of rhetorical promontory from which we teach students how to read and negotiate the boundaries of various disciplinary and professional contexts, the FYW course can become the site in which students learn how to access, interrogate, and (re)position themselves as writers within these disciplinary and professional contexts. In this way, FYW can function as a complement, perhaps even as a prerequisite, to WID, a site within the structure of the university that enables students to reflect critically on and at the same time to write about the university’s disciplinary structures.<sup>2</sup> Genres, I argue, can serve as the “passports” for accessing, analyzing, navigating, and participating in these disciplinary structures.

At the end of *Textual Carnivals*, Susan Miller suggests that as teachers and scholars of writing, we need to be “disclosing connections between specific social and textual superstructures and highlighting how writing situations construct their participant writers before, during, and after they undertake any piece of writing” (1991, 198). I agree that this should be a primary goal of FYW, and a genre-based writing pedagogy can help us achieve it. As discursive and ideological formations, genres allow teachers and students to examine the connections between social and textual superstructures. At the same time, genres also enable teachers and students to observe how individuals situate themselves in

positions of articulation within such superstructures. As such, a genre approach enables us to teach students that writing is more than just a communicative tool, a means of conveying ideas from writer to reader. Writing is not only a skill; it is also a way of being and acting in the world at a particular time, in a particular situation, for the achievement of particular desires. Rather than teaching students some vague and perhaps questionable notion of what “good” writing is, a notion that most likely cannot stand up to disciplinary standards or scrutiny, we gain more by teaching students how to adapt as writers, socially and rhetorically, from one genred site of action to the next. Such repositioning is a critical part of learning to write successfully, as we saw in chapter 5, where students negotiate between the writing prompt and the essay as they learn to write in FYW courses. We ought to promote the idea that good writers adapt well from one genred site of action to the next. The rhetorical art of adaptation or repositioning should become central to our teaching of writing, especially our teaching of invention, which would then become the art of analyzing genres and positioning oneself within them. In what follows, I will describe an approach to writing instruction in FYW that combines genre analysis and invention in such a way as to help student writers begin to access, identify, and participate within genred sites of action.

Genre analysis encourages students to identify and examine the situated desires, subjectivities, relations, and practices that are rhetorically embedded in disciplinary and professional genres. Using genre analysis, we can ask students, for instance, why scientific genres such as lab reports typically use passive sentence constructions, especially when such a rhetorical construction is typically discouraged in humanities, especially in English courses. What does this typified rhetorical feature of the genre reveal about those who use it and their disciplinary (dis)positions, relations, and practices? What position of articulation does the lab report, through the use of this rhetorical feature, maintain for its users? By asking such questions, rather than dismissing outright the passive voice as an undesirable rhetorical

strategy or treating it as an arbitrary convention, we locate the passive voice within the discursive and ideological sites of its use—within the scientific genres in which this linguistic construction helps organize and generate scientific practices. Of course, the passive voice alone does not reveal the complex textured sites of scientific activities; to examine these sites, genre analysis, as I will describe momentarily, would need to include identifying a wide array of textual patterns. But early in the course, we can start by making an analysis of the passive voice the occasion for a writing assignment, in which, for instance, we invite students to interview faculty in the sciences, collect samples of lab reports (and other scientific genres), and then analyze and write about what desires, relations, positions, and practices the passive voice generates and organizes in the sciences. In my courses, for example, students have discovered that the passive voice actually serves a crucial disciplinary function in scientific inquiry, reinforcing the scientific imperative that the material world exists objectively, independent of human interaction. They have learned that a scientist assumes the position of one who observes and records what happens, and the passive voice rhetorically enables and reflects this position. Indeed, the passive voice suggests that actions occur largely through their own accord, and the scientist simply describes them. By extracting the actor's role from the action in a sentence such as "Twelve samples were introduced," scientists retain the necessary, even if fictive, objectivity they need to conduct their activities—indeed an objectivity that is critical to a scientist's disciplinary identity. Through their research and our discussions, students learn that the lab report, then, is not merely a means of communicating experimental results; it is also a means by which scientists reproduce and enact scientific subjectivities, desires, and practices—the way they function in the world as scientists. Working as a class, students begin to recognize that the lab report, like any other genre, is a site of action within which users rhetorically acquire, negotiate, and articulate situated desires, subjectivities, and practices. Students

in FYW courses can, and I think should, be taught and encouraged to recognize genre as such a site. And they can and should be taught how to use this genre knowledge to develop a rhetorical awareness and agility that will help them navigate disciplinary and professional boundaries as writers long after they leave the FYW course.

In my writing courses, I often begin with a collective genre analysis exercise even before I have explained to students what genre analysis involves. I bring in samples of a genre such as the lab report or the obituary or the greeting card, and I pose the question: what does this kind of text tell us about our culture? In fact, much of what I have learned and describe about the obituary (in chapter 2) and the greeting card (in chapter 4) builds on and adds to these early class discussions. I want students to begin to understand how genre analysis makes sites of activity and the positions of articulation they frame rhetorically visible and accessible to inquiry. Such analysis involves doing a sort of textual archeology, what John Swales has described as “textography” (1998), in which students identify and analyze genres’ contexts of use through their rhetorical features. As one FYW student elegantly describes it in the introduction of her genre analysis paper, “the study of genre is not limited to what is clearly seen or presented, such as format, structure, or word choice used in the genre, but extends to the analysis of underlying meanings and social function that can be inferred from the specific features.”

In simplest terms, genre analysis involves four steps: collecting samples of the genre, identifying and describing the context of its use, describing its textual patterns, and analyzing what these patterns reveal about the context in which the genre is used. The following heuristic, which I reprint with slight modification from Amy J. Devitt, Anis Bawarshi, and Mary Jo Reiff’s *Scenes of Writing: Genre Acts* (in progress), describes these steps.<sup>3</sup>

## Guidelines for Analyzing Genres

### 1. *Collect Samples of the Genre*

If you are studying a genre that is fairly public, such as the wedding announcement, you can just look at samples from various newspapers. If you are studying a less public genre, such as the Patient Medical History Form, you might have to visit different doctors' offices to collect samples. If you are unsure where to find samples, ask a user of that genre for assistance. Try to gather samples from more than one place (for example, wedding announcements from different newspapers, medical history forms from different doctors' offices) so that you get a more accurate picture of the complexity of the genre. The more samples of the genre you collect, the more you will be able to notice patterns within the genre.

### 2. *Study the Situation of the Genre*

Seek answers to questions such as the ones below.

*Setting:* Where does the genre appear? Where are texts of this genre typically located? What medium, context? With what other genres does this genre interact?

*Subject:* What topics is this genre involved with? What issues, ideas, questions, etc. does the genre address? When people use this genre, what is it that they are interacting about?

*Participants:* Who uses the genre?

*Writers:* Who writes the texts in this genre? Are multiple writers possible? How do we know who the writers are? What roles do they perform? What characteristics must writers of this genre possess? Under what circumstances do writers write the genre (e.g., in teams, on a computer, in a rush)?

*Readers:* Who reads the texts in this genre? Is there more than one type of reader for this genre? What roles do they perform? What characteristics must readers of this genre possess? Under what circumstances do readers read the genre (e.g., at their leisure, on the run, in waiting rooms)?

*Motives:* When is the genre used? For what occasions? Why is the genre used? Why do writers write this genre and why do readers read it? What purposes does the genre fulfill for the people who use it?

### 3. *Identify and Describe Patterns in the Genre's Features*

What recurrent features do the samples share? For example:

What *content* is typically included? What is excluded? How is the content treated? What sorts of examples are used? What counts as evidence (personal testimony, facts, etc.)?

What *rhetorical appeals* are used? What appeals to logos, pathos, and ethos appear?

How are texts in the genres *structured*? What are their parts, and how are they organized?

In what *format* are texts of this genre presented? What layout or appearance is common? How long is a typical text in this genre?

What types of *sentences* do texts in the genre typically use? How long are they? Are they simple or complex, passive or active? Are the sentences varied? Do they share a certain style?

What *diction* is most common? What types of words are most frequent? Is a type of jargon used? Is slang used? How would you describe the writer's voice?

### 4. *Analyze What These Patterns Reveal about the Situation*

What do these rhetorical patterns reveal about the genre and the situation in which it is used? Why are these patterns significant? What can you learn about the actions being performed through the genre by observing its language patterns? What arguments can you make about these patterns? As you consider these questions, focus on the following:

What do participants have to *know or believe* to understand or appreciate the genre?

Who is *invited* into the genre, and who is *excluded*?

What *roles* for writers and readers does it encourage or discourage?

What *values, beliefs, goals, and assumptions* are revealed through the genre's patterns?

How is the *subject* of the genre treated? What content is considered most important? What content (topics or details) is ignored?

What *actions* does the genre help make possible? What actions does the genre make difficult?

What *attitude toward readers* is implied in the genre? What attitude toward the world is implied in it?



Notice how the heuristic guides students from the situation to the genre and then back to the situation. First, it asks students to identify the situation from which the genre emerges. Students do this through interviews and observation, trying to identify where and when the genre is used, by whom, and why. After that, students are asked to analyze what the genre tells us about the situation. Such analysis involves describing the genre's rhetorical patterns, from its content down to its diction, and then making an argument about what these patterns reveal about the desires, assumptions, subjectivities, relations, and actions embedded in the genre. In short, students are invited to revisit the situation through the genre that reflects, organizes, and maintains it. As the heuristic suggests, genre analysis enables students and teachers to open a temporary analytical space between the genre and its situation, a space in which students can access and inquire into the interplay between rhetorical and social actions as well as the desires, subjectivities, and relations enacted there. Genre analysis allows teachers to create this analytical space within FYW.

Below are a couple of brief examples of student genre analyses, the first from a FYW course I taught a few years ago and the second from a FYW course I observed last year taught by an advanced graduate student. In the first example, the student elected to study the genres used by nurses in a hospital. After conducting interviews and observing the situations in which the genres are used, the student decided to perform a comparative genre analysis of the screening forms used by registered nurses and nurse practitioners. She examined the different rhetorical patterns of the two genres and then, building on what she had learned from her interviews, analyzed and demonstrated how the genres, in their different rhetorical patterns, reflect, on the one hand, different attitudes about what nurse practitioners and registered nurses do and cannot do, and, on the other, the different positions nurse practitioners and registered nurses occupy within the hospital, including their relation to each other and their patients.

In the second, more recent, example, a student studied the Medical Incident Report that paramedics routinely write after responding to a medical call. Through interviews, the student learned that the report records the time of the call, who responded, the amount of time spent at the scene, as well as pertinent medical information about the patient and the treatment. In addition, the report serves to record the paramedic's performance in the case of potential lawsuits. The student also learned that paramedics dread writing these reports, going so far as to trade the responsibility for chores. After moving from the situation to the text, the student then returned to the situation through the text. She described and analyzed the report's features, including its use of trauma codes and abbreviations, its compact textual spaces for recording information, and its short and terse sentences. These features, she argues, invite an impersonal, seemingly unbiased description of the event. Remarkably, the student concludes that the presence of this genre reminds the paramedics of what is expected of them. It is one of several genres that frame how paramedics experience their work. The student describes this intertextuality as follows:

When the call goes out, the firefighter and paramedics receive the minimum amount of information over the scanner. On the way to the scene, the paramedics are already formulating what they may find, based on what they heard over the scanner. This "seeing" comes from words. Once on the scene . . . the [paramedic] must either continue with the preexisting plan, or throw it out based on what they can see. When writing the [report], the paramedics know that they are doing so in order that others not present at the incident will be able to "see" what happened and therefore make judgments on the patient's behavior, treatment, and how well the paramedics responded.

Through genre analysis, the student in this case has used the genre of the Medical Incident Report to gain access into the complex, multitextured world of paramedics, and to describe how this textured world frames the way paramedics see and are seen.

Once students and I establish that genres can tell us things about those who use them, and after students have had a chance to analyze a genre of their choosing, I have then instructed students to form semester-long groups, each adopting a specific academic discipline (for example, an economics group, a chemistry group, a psychology group, and so on). Working in groups, students study the discipline through its genres. They interview faculty and students in the discipline to find out what sorts of texts they write and what function writing serves. They then collect sample genres from the discipline, and, working individually, each student analyzes one of the genres following procedures I have described above. Based on that analysis, students then establish a claim about what the genre reveals and then write an argument essay that presents and develops that claim with evidence from the analysis.<sup>4</sup>

Genre analysis gives rhetoric a central focus in FYW courses. Rather than having students write about topics such as race, gender, gay rights, the environment, animal rights, flag burning, the death penalty, the media, and so on (important topics all), we can encourage students instead to write about how different genres position writers to write about these topics—to write, that is, about writing: how genres affect writers' rhetorical choices, what genres desire might be motivating these rhetorical choices, what attitudes are embedded in writers' rhetorical choices, how rhetorical choices affect meaning, and so on. Students still write arguments, but these arguments are about writing, about the rhetorical choices writers make and how their genred positions of articulation organize and elicit these choices. Indeed, which genre my students choose to study is not as relevant as what they learn about invention by analyzing and writing about it. Invention, as I have defined it, takes place within and grows out of such a rhetorical awareness. We can make the teaching of invention a great deal less mysterious if we base it in a process of genre analysis that allows students to inquire into and position themselves within the discursive and ideological frameworks of genres. This is how I propose we teach invention in FYW courses.

Through genre analysis, we can teach FYW students to recognize how rhetorical habits are dynamically connected to disciplinary habitats.<sup>5</sup> As advocates of WID argue, this recognition should go a long way in dispelling some of the guesswork and mystery that students so often experience while writing. In my classes, students learn that when they write in a certain genre, they are participating in a textured site of action, which means they are engaging in certain desires which underwrite certain commitments, subjectivities, relations, and practices. If they are able to begin identifying what these desires are—that is, if they are able to analyze how these desires are rhetorically constituted—then they will be able to invent themselves and participate in the genred sites of action more meaningfully and critically as writers, as we saw in the examples of the social work student learning to write an assessment report in chapter 4, and the FYW students navigating between the textured worlds of the writing prompt and student essay in chapter 5. An explicit knowledge of genres can lead students to make more effective rhetorical decisions because they will have a better sense of what purposes their rhetorical choices are serving. That is, rather than guessing, they will be more likely to predict the effects of their rhetorical strategies, including the position they will need to assume in order to produce these strategies. Through genre analysis, then, we not only make students aware of different rhetorical conventions and what they reveal, but we also make students aware of how these different conventions position them as writers, the kinds of positions they need to assume as they reproduce these conventions. Such analysis allows students, to borrow a phrase from Victor Villanueva, to achieve a kind of critical cultural literacy (1993) in which they learn the rules of the genre game and participate in it at the same time. This can be empowering for students.

Because writing is not only a communicative but also a social act, involving communicants in social relations and actions, it necessarily involves a process of repositioning. Individuals, for example, become social workers, patients, and students in part

by learning how to position themselves rhetorically within such genres as the assessment report, the PMHF, and the syllabus. Invention is the process through which writers locate themselves within these genred positions of articulation. Invention and repositioning go hand in hand. For this reason, some critics of the explicit teaching of genre argue that it is impossible to study and teach genres outside of their disciplinary habitats, since to write genres effectively requires not just formal knowledge of their rhetorical features but also social knowledge of their disciplinary assumptions (see Giltrow and Valiquette 1994). In addition, they argue, since we learn to write genres tacitly as part of being and acting in a certain discipline, teachers cannot expect students to learn genres in the artificial context of the classroom (see Freedman 1993a; 1993b). Certainly, as FYW teachers we cannot possibly initiate our students into the various disciplinary genres of the university, let alone the various professional genres they will encounter outside the university. We have neither the time nor the expertise to do so. What we can do, however, is teach our students how to become more rhetorically astute and agile, how, in other words, to use genre analysis as a way to become more effective and critical “readers” of the sites of action within which writing takes place. Such an analytical skill *is* transferable and does not require immersion in disciplinary cultures. In many ways, it is a skill our students already possess, since to survive as social beings we must all possess at least a modicum of rhetorical awareness. When they enter a room, especially an unfamiliar room, for example, most students first survey or “scope out” the scene. They first analyze who is in the room, how different people are dressed, how the room is structured, who is talking to whom, in what way, on what subject, and so on. Such an analysis of the scene enables them to position themselves and participate within it more effectively. Students are already rhetorically perceptive and adjust at times with uncanny ease from one discursive and ideological context to the next—from their dorm lives to their classroom lives to their family lives and so on. As teachers of writing, we can build upon

these skills by teaching students that genre analysis (the process of “reading” a site of action as it is rhetorically embedded in its genres), invention (the process of positioning oneself within these genred sites), and social activities (the choices a writer makes and their effects within these genred sites) are connected in the act of writing.

Unfortunately, most students have not been taught to understand writing as “one of the activities by which we locate ourselves in the enmeshed systems that make up the social world” (Cooper and Holzman 1989, 13). They do not see writing, particularly academic writing, as being as socially embedded as the rest of their discursive lives, and so do not bring their rich social and rhetorical skills to bear on their writing. This is due in part, I think, to the way that invention continues to be taught largely as a private act in many FYW courses. However, if we can teach students to recognize and write about how “the enmeshed systems that make up the social world” are rhetorically embedded within genres—if, that is, we can help students recognize that genres are very much like rhetorical and social spaces (or *topoi*) they locate themselves and participate within—then we can go a long way towards helping students more effectively and critically to invent themselves and participate as writers within the various disciplinary scenes of the university. Such a recognition grounds writing instruction not only in the processes of textual production, but also in what texts do in the world—their function and effects. This kind of rhetorical approach teaches students how to write by first teaching them how to place themselves within the different enmeshed systems that are reflected and maintained textually in different genres.

At the same time as it helps connect FYW and WID, a genre-based writing pedagogy also justifies the place of FYW in English. We do not need to be social workers or scientists or doctors to know how to inquire into assessment reports, lab reports, or Patient Medical History Forms. As scholars and teachers of English, we are, more than anything else, experts in language use: what language does, how it does it, to what ends,

where, when, and why. As a result, we are uniquely qualified to teach students how to inquire into various disciplinary and professional genres, in some ways perhaps even more so than those who use them on a daily basis (see C. Miller 1999; Maimon 1983). As Richard Coe has written, “genres embody attitudes,” but since “those attitudes are built into generic structures, they are sometimes danced without conscious awareness or intent on the part of the individual using the genre” (1994a, 183). By moving a genre from its context of use to the analytical space of the FYW course, genre analysis enables teachers and students to temporarily make conscious, scrutinize, and practice the unconscious attitudes that are embedded within genres.

My goal in using genre analysis in FYW is not the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge per se. My goal, rather, is to encourage students to understand invention as rhetorically grounded, so that invention involves a process in which writers (re)position themselves and participate within discursive and ideological formations.<sup>6</sup> In short, I use genre analysis as an invention technique, a heuristic which does not so much ask students to imagine themselves as the starting point of writing as it encourages them to write by inquiring into and then situating themselves within genred positions of articulation. As situated *topoi*, genres thus serve as the *loci* of invention, the habits as well as the habitats for acting in language. In fact, I am continuously surprised at how astute students are in recognizing the positions of articulation embedded in the genres they study. One student, whom I cited in chapter 4, revealed how the PMHF constructs the patient as an embodied object; others analyzed how wedding invitations rhetorically position the bride as property, how different genres within a hospital locate registered nurses and nurse practitioners into different positions, how different grade reporting genres (from traditional report cards to the more recent grade continuums) position students as different kinds of learners, and so on. Most importantly, students recognize how these positions are constructed rhetorically within the genres they study. They may never become doctors or social workers or

teachers or brides, but they have learned something valuable, I think, about how writing works to make these positions possible. This knowledge can travel with them to any genred space they encounter. I consider such knowledge of genre as central to a knowledge of invention, the first step in helping writers learn how to position themselves and participate meaningfully and critically within different genred sites of action.

Once students are done practicing genre analysis, I have at times asked them to write some of these genres, thereby moving from analysis to production of texts. Again, I confess I am less concerned with what genres students write, and more concerned with how they rationalize their rhetorical choices when they write these genres. For this reason, I require students to submit a rationale along with their written genres. In this rationale, students essentially make an argument on behalf of their rhetorical choices as these are informed by what they have come to know about the desires, subjectivities, relations, and practices embedded in the genre. This rationale becomes especially significant in those cases where students choose to resist and or transform a genre based on what they have learned about it. In such cases, students can explain which genre features they have chosen to resist and why, thereby speculating on the effects and consequences of their changes. This sort of metarhetorical skill can help students navigate what Lovitt and Young have described as “the rhetorical and social realities of either academic or nonacademic writing” (1997, 116). Indeed, this is the sort of skill that I think Frances Christie refers to when she writes, “Learning the genres of one’s culture is both part of entering into it with understanding, and part of developing the necessary ability to change it” (1988, 30). Such a metarhetorical awareness of genre can serve students beyond the FYW course and into the various writing situations they will encounter in the university and beyond.

There persists a frustrating assumption that FYW is a contentless course, that it has no inherent subject. In this chapter, I have tried to demonstrate that FYW *does* have a subject; it is writing.



Writing is the subject of FYW. Not just the process of writing, but writing itself—what writing does, how it works, and why—should be the subject of FYW. In other words, FYW should become a course in rhetoric, a course that uses genres to teach students how to recognize and navigate discursive and ideological formations. We can do more to help our students write in and beyond the disciplines by teaching them how to position themselves rhetorically within genres so that they can more effectively meet (and potentially change) the desires and practices embedded there. Such a pedagogy challenges us to locate invention at the intersection between the acquisition and articulation of desire where writers and writing take place. By locating the FYW course at this nexus, we stand a better chance of justifying both the course's relationship to WID and its very existence within the English department and the university.

#### CONCLUSION

Since beginnings are continuations, the end of this book is destined to become the beginning of another. So in that spirit, let me conclude by returning to the subject of beginnings with which this book began. In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad describes what amounts to be such a return, a journey toward beginnings—the *heart* of darkness. The narrator, Marlow, describes his journey up the Congo in this way: “Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest *beginnings* of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings” (1988, 35; my emphasis). In some ways, this is a colonialist fantasy that imagines the colonized space as site of origin for the colonizers’ self-(re)production. But beginnings are a problem in this novel. First is the question of where or when the story begins. Does it begin on board the *Nellie*, the moored sailing vessel on which Marlow begins his narrative? Or does it begin earlier, with the frame-narrator’s narrative of Marlow’s narrative? Better yet, does the story begin even earlier than that, prior to the *Nellie* and the frame-narrator, with Marlow’s fictitious experiences in the Congo? Or does it begin earlier even, in

Conrad's "Congo Diary," which he kept while he served as a captain of a steamboat on the Congo? Or does it begin with the colonialism that brought Conrad to the Congo in the first place and shaped his experiences there? These questions suggest the extent to which beginnings always take place in relation to other beginnings—in the midst of other beginnings.

*Heart of Darkness* does not only problematize its own beginnings, however; it also questions the very nature of beginnings as unprecedented origins, as what Edward Said terms "divine" beginnings. Marlow journeys up the Congo in search of Kurtz, who signifies an essence of something buried deep in the "heart" of darkness. Marlow's is a search for beginnings, for what Derrida calls a "transcendental signified" (1992, 1118) represented by Kurtz. But what Marlow actually discovers when he finally locates Kurtz is that such a transcendent, unified, self-generated beginning does not exist. What he realizes instead is that Kurtz is a sign or "word," so that the scene of beginnings becomes a scene of interpretation. Beginnings exist as moments of interpretation, not origination, just like signs only mean as they are interpreted. Kurtz only means as Marlow interprets him, so that each beginning is an interpretation and a continuation of another beginning, a series of secular, dialogical beginnings functioning in relation to one another in much the same way that Bakhtin describes utterances as "filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances" (1986, 91).

In the same way, I have argued that writers and writing begin in relation to genres, the discursive and ideological conditions that writers have to position themselves within and interpret in order to write. By encouraging student writers to recognize beginnings as genred positions of articulation, and by teaching students how to inquire into these positions, we enable them to locate themselves more critically and effectively as writers within these beginnings. That is, we teach them how to begin their own writing in relation to these already existing beginnings.