

***YOUNG SCHOLARS IN WRITING* FEATURE: YOUNG SCHOLARS IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING**

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Following on the success of *YSW*'s 2008 inaugural feature on first-year writing, the editorial board unanimously endorsed our proposal to run the feature again for the 2009 volume. With word of the feature spreading, this year's submissions were greater in number and arrived from a wider variety of institutions. The scope of projects undertaken was broader as well, including rhetorical analyses of current events (see Post and Faber in this issue), "The Politics of Language" (see Fernando E. Mejia Ledesma in the regular section of this issue), and empirical studies of writing processes, learning styles, and institutional structures. Clearly our first-year students are conducting research worthy of a *YSW* Feature dedicated to this group. For this and so many other reasons, we couldn't be more pleased.

But the FYF also reminds us how much such a project demands of first-year writers. As we sat down to compose this introduction, we found ourselves asking what it takes for first-year college students to create the kind of work we see in the first-year feature. What we are asking of students here is incredibly hard and incredibly time consuming. The question becomes not why some students might have difficulty reaching our requisite deadlines but how in the world the writers who do make it *can*. And they do! In our more tired moments, we have talked with each other about the "wing-and-a-prayer" nature of encouraging first-years to give this work a try. Drawing inspiration from some characterizations that have been made of NASA's attempts at the moon with 1965 technology, Doug at one point opined to Shannon that "We're encouraging these students to take on work that by any right they can *barely* do on their best days. And just like us, their lives are not comprised of one best day after another." If we were to list all the factors that make this work so challenging for first years, our list would likely echo factors challenging the publication of undergraduate research more generally: working with these first-years via long-distance electrons alone, rather than being able to sit with them at a table and talk face-to-face about the writing; juggling the complications of students' lives and their varied interests, among which "scholarly publication" usually ranks fairly low, especially in the summer after their first year of college; notable violations of the principle of zones of proximal development, as first-years skip at least two or three in working on these projects; and normal maturation processes and enculturation demands that mitigate against first-years even understanding the gravity of what they're attempting. As composition teachers, after all, we often struggle to help our students understand that texts are people "talking," rather than stone writs from a deity. What right have we to expect that they will so quickly make the move to *be* those "people talking"?

Yet writers such as the two you will see in the current FYF and those making up our inaugural feature really seemed to take most of the "wing-and-a-prayer" out of the experience. We won-

dered why. In considering the experiences and processes of students who have published in the first two first-year features, we see some common denominators in how these writers are succeeding in this very difficult task.

We note that, on the basis of a good grounding and encouragement from faculty, the writers of these articles are able to position their work from the beginning as, in some way, meaning to speak not *just* to the assignment at hand but instead to a knowledge community they are able to imagine themselves as part of. And we know that every one of these articles begins with a teacher of first-year composition saying, “Hey, I thought your paper was super. You should submit it to *YSW*.” And then walking their student through that process.

We see in these pieces that the writers are able to think beyond the confines of their early drafts, both in preparing pieces for submission and then in responding to our requests for revision. The implications here can’t be overstated: these first-year writers have a willingness and an ability to *conceive of* being able to say more or other (even in response to specific questions), to imagine their draft as malleable rather than “locked.”

And in thinking about changes to their work, the writers were willing and able to understand revision not as “fixing” but as *development* driven by further discovery and by re-thinking the context in which their ex-course-paper would need to work in, the existing conversation it would be entering. They could see how they were “re-purposing” their work from classroom assignment to an audience both more amorphous and more concrete.

Another common denominator we see is these writers’ ability to interact with reviewers and editors—they were comfortable with and practical about talking to us, letting their ideas bubble steadily, and incorporating that development-talking into their writing. (They were also pretty good with deadlines!) It is difficult to express, without offering the e-mails and chat transcripts, just what excellent conversations and intellectual exchanges we have with these writers, as we start to feel like their partners in their intellectual ventures. We can think of few more amazing moments than when a writer shoots us an e-mail with a real strategy question about a piece that is put in better terms than we could have. Magic. And they can do this!

We would not deny for a moment that these are special students, different in their abilities and attitudes than perhaps the majority of our first-year writing students. Nonetheless, we wonder how much is innate and how much is simply the result of encouragement in the first, early steps of interaction and conversation. We suspect that students who *want* to try a project like this to begin with will often find that the pursuit of the project and their further interaction with teachers, reviewers, and editors will itself make them quite good at it. And so we wonder how many students would want to try such a project if they knew “it” existed to begin with.

Reflecting on his experience with this process in preparation for publication in the inaugural issue of this FYF, then first-year student Eric Pleasant agreed: “I can say that the revision process was extremely educational and pleasant. Through the process, I learned as much about writing as I have in the classroom. The feedback I received at each stage served to strengthen my project and was always very courteous, enlightening, and appreciated. The process, at times, was strenuous but it was also very positive.” Lauren Augino, another author from the inaugural FYF, writes: “My advice to anyone interested in such a project is to take a deep breath when you get frustrated and don’t ever be afraid to discuss things with your editor. When you work together and discuss changes, it makes the piece that much better. I was very surprised at how much I learned and grew with my paper and overall, it was a very positive and rewarding experience that I am very proud

to have followed through with.” Food for thought as we continue taking the work of writers like Pleasant and Augino and our current writers Maria Post and Katie Faber as examples of what is possible, and think about fostering more of it.

With an increasing number and variety of submissions, it made sense for this year’s first-year feature to implement a peer-review system of students and Faculty Advising Editors to recommend which submissions merited further development and acceptance to the feature. Five writers were invited to revise their submissions, and at the Volume 6 press deadline, two were completed. Of the three who were unable to complete these revisions in time, two made major headway on revisions significant enough to submit to the regular research section of a future *YSW* issue. All five are dedicated scholars who have shown us, once again, why the FYF is worth pursuing.

As it turned out, not only were the two pieces completed for this FYF written by classmates in the same FYC class at the same institution, but both pieces were rhetorical analyses of addresses given by President Barack Obama during the course of his campaign. In her article “Obama’s Speech at Howard: Becoming King,” Maria Post analyzes Obama’s “civil rights” speech given Sept. 28, 2007, at Howard University, positing it as a key moment in Obama’s establishment of himself “as a member and a leader of the black community,” increasing the viability of his candidacy among African-American voters. Post’s rhetorical analysis demonstrates how Obama’s speech replicates a number of the rhetorical strategies employed by Martin Luther King, Jr., in order to help the audience identify Obama (and themselves) as inheritors of the civil rights movement, Joshua to King’s Moses. Taking us farther back in the campaign, Katie Faber focuses her article “We the People” on Obama’s February 10, 2007, speech on the steps of the Old State Capitol in Springfield, IL, in which he announced his candidacy for the presidential election. Faber’s rhetorical analysis of this address seeks to understand Obama’s popularity with young voters. She identifies a number of textual rhetorical features which, she argues, create a sense of inclusion, energy, and moment that voters in their 20s proved to be so motivated by throughout Obama’s campaign. Both pieces demonstrate, again, what first-year scholars can achieve in inquiry-based writing projects that mean to contribute to scholarly conversations in Writing Studies.