

Understanding the Learned Conceptions of Writing that First-Year Students Bring to College

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Professors, writing center tutors, and peers often observe that many students struggle with college-level writing, particularly during their first year. While the struggle itself is easy to observe, its origins are not as easy to identify. To better understand why students find difficulty in the transition from high school to college-level writing, I conducted qualitative research involving an analysis of 221 incoming first-year students' descriptions of "good" writing. Through learning what students' conceptions of writing are upon entering college, and measuring those conceptions against the writing practices supported by writing-studies research, it should be possible to pinpoint the areas in which students need further development in order to be successful college-level writers.

Any transition creates a necessary period of adjustment before one finds success. This adjustment may happen with little or great difficulty, over varying lengths of time; it might occur naturally, or with explicit attention or instruction. The transition to postsecondary writing is one many students struggle with, and in some cases the "adjustment period" lasts the duration of a college career. During my year as a writing fellow at Moravian College, a small liberal arts college in the northeastern United States, I've worked with students who have varying knowledge of and confidence levels with writing, having to adjust my thinking in order to give feedback helpful to individual students. (At Moravian, writing fellows are trained undergraduate writing tutors detailed to First-Year Writing (FYW) and writing-intensive courses, working closely with the course instructor, attending class meetings, and helping students with writing assignments.) My thought processes shift

when I read a paper composed by a student who acclimated to college writing rather easily, as compared to a paper composed by a student who struggles at the sentence level. While students are not to blame for varying writing abilities, the variance creates a particular challenge for those who teach, assess, and assist with FYW courses.

An important factor in considering the students' writing abilities is the writing education they've received prior to college. In a study conducted by Karen Soiferman, students reported that throughout their secondary education they primarily composed "one-off" assignments, meaning they would write in a variety of genres but complete only one assignment per genre. As a result, students felt they did not "master" any one genre. Further, students were not allowed to revise their writing after receiving feedback, and with "one-off" assignments, they did not see how to apply teachers' comments to future assignments. Feedback, then, held little meaning. Soiferman

argues that there is a difference between “getting students to write” and “teaching students to write,” and advocates for more explicit writing instruction in high school classrooms. This begins with further informing teachers about how students learn to write, rather than relying on one’s own writing knowledge to teach writing. In noting the difference between knowing how to write and knowing how to teach writing, Soiferman suggests, as a start, teaching students how to revise. But in the meantime, colleges are admitting class after class of students unfamiliar with incorporating feedback into revision and future assignments, which is an essential aspect of successful transfer of writing knowledge. Knowledge transfer in the context of writing has been the subject of a lot of recent scholarship, and the field’s understanding of transfer is still developing. In “Digital Writing, Multimodality, and Learning Transfer,” Ryan Shepherd argues that learning-transfer is not a “transfer” of knowledge at all, but rather an appropriation of preexisting knowledge to an unfamiliar rhetorical situation. If students are able to note the similarities between familiar and unfamiliar situations, they will be able to transfer writing knowledge with minimal difficulty. Writing transfer is an especially vital field of study in the context of the transition from high school to college, as students encounter a number of new genres and rhetorical situations. From what I have observed, and hear from others, many students struggle to successfully transfer knowledge from the genres they composed in high school to those they encounter in college. Because of this, researchers and FYW instructors are working to discern how to “teach for transfer” so that they can best prepare students to write for the rest of their college careers and beyond.

A first step in teaching for transfer is understanding a student’s current knowledge,

so that one can then teach how that knowledge can be appropriated by other contexts. We cannot change students’ previous writing experiences, but we can alter FYW instruction by better understanding students’ existing notions of writing, addressing more directly any gaps. In this article I report on an IRB-approved study I conducted in 2018 which involved a detailed analysis of summer assignments completed by Moravian’s class of 2021 prior to their first college course. This assignment asked students to describe the characteristics of “good writing,” a piece of “good writing” they composed, and the writing process they undertook to produce it. My analysis shows what aspects of writing appear to be valued by incoming students. I discuss my findings with regard to relevant research in the field of writing studies, considering implications for FYW instruction.

The Present Study

My research analyzed 221 anonymous samples of writing from first-year students in the class of 2021 at Moravian College. Moravian has 2000 students, with an average high school GPA of 3.54 and composite SAT scores averaging between 1010 and 1210. All incoming first-years complete a summer assignment, which involves responding to a common reading and writing an introductory letter to the professor of their FYW course. In the letter, students are asked to answer a number of questions, among them,

Based on what you have learned about writing thus far in your education, what are the characteristics of good writing? How do you know when writing is good? Describe a piece of “good writing” that you have composed in the past and the process that you underwent to produce that writing.

Through the Writing at Moravian program, I was given access to 221 of these responses with identifying information removed, and coded them using grounded theory. Analyzing emergent patterns in conjunction with writing studies scholarship brings us toward better understanding conceptions of writing many students carry in their transition from high school to college. By comparing these generalized conceptions to writing knowledge necessary for success in college writing, areas in which students need the most support can be emphasized in FYW.

Methodology

To analyze the large volume of text I was working with, I decided the most effective approach would be to develop codes using grounded theory. Per the *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, grounded theory “refers to a set of systematic guidelines for data gathering, coding, synthesizing, categorizing, and integrating concepts to generate middle range theory” (Charmaz 2023). The “middle range theory” Charmaz describes is developed through the analysis of the dataset itself, so interpretation based in grounded theory differs from many other forms of research in that it does not test the validity of previously established theories (Birks and Mills 2).

For my research, I had to create codes that would address my multiple lines of inquiry. I completed my textual analysis using the program *atlas.ti*, which allowed me to highlight quotes from student writing and attribute codes to them. My analysis evolved into three areas: definitions of “good” writing, genre, and writing processes. I created multiple codes for each area concurrently. Table

1 lists the codes I attributed to instances in which students described what they perceive to be characteristic of “good” writing, plus codes for genre and process.

The frequencies of most codes were converted into percentages of the total number of student responses (N=221), with the following exceptions. First, after the initial attribution of the “genre” code, I read through the extracted quotes to quantify and subsequently analyze the genres the students would tend to discuss. “Genre” appeared 209 times, as not all students mentioned a piece of writing previously composed and a small number of students mentioned multiple genres. The percentages for this category were calculated using the total number of times genre was mentioned, rather than the total number of responses, because I was more concerned with the frequency with which the genres were discussed, rather than the percentage of students who discussed them. Second, as with “genre,” I further analyzed quotes coded as “writing process” in order to gather information as to how students approach writing, and whether or not these approaches would be effective when writing for college coursework. Students discussed research, revision/multiple drafts, planning, peer revision, teacher revision, “sectioning” (writing one or a couple sections of a piece at a time, with breaks in between sections), free writing, and parent revision. I converted each category into percentages of the total number of student responses. Finally, I took a particular interest in students’ understanding of rhetoric at this stage of their educational development, exploring it further below.

Table 1
Codes for student perceptions of “good” writing

Code	Description
Concise	Instances in which students either explicitly stated the importance of concision or referenced length as a negative characteristic of writing.
Content	Instances in which students discussed ideas related to subject knowledge, answering prompts, or how “interesting” a piece of writing may be to the reader.
Conventions	Instances in which students either directly referenced “conventions,” or stressed the importance of correct grammar and/or spelling.
Organization	Instances in which students directly reference “organization,” or discussed aspects of organization (i.e. transitions, the “flow” of a paper, etc.) while describing “good” writing.
Passion	Instances in which students discussed feeling passionate about one’s work, or the importance of emotionally connecting to one’s writing.
Rhetoric	Instances in which students referenced the word “rhetoric” while describing “good” writing, regardless of whether they then elaborated on the concept or whether the term was used correctly. Also, instances in which students discussed the importance of writing according to audience and/or purpose.
Sources	Instances in which students stated explicitly that using sources in writing contributes to making it “good.” This code was not attributed to instances in which students, when describing their writing processes, said that they did research involving online or other sources.
Style	Instances in which students discussed varying sentence structure, “voice,” or word choice.
Genre	A more general code assigned to instances in which students discussed a piece of “good” writing they composed in the past. (See explanation in text.)
“Writing Process”	A code assigned to descriptions of a student’s writing process. (See explanation in text.)

Results

Table 2 includes the frequencies for the eight codes involving “good” writing. Percentages represent the proportion of students who indicated these elements as important characteristics of good writing.

Table 2
Students defining good writing

Code	Percent of all responses
Content	76%
Conventions	46%
Style	42%
Organization	20%
Concise	18%
Passion	17%
Sources	14%
Rhetoric	7%

Using the percentages gathered from the 209 times genres were referenced, I created the graph in Figure 1. Some students did not mention any genres, while a small number mentioned more than one. “Miscellaneous genres” refer to those that were not applicable to the other categories and were not referenced more than once, thus they did not warrant their own category. The “Lab Report,” despite only being mentioned once, was included as its own category because I wanted to highlight the overall lack of references to scientific writing.

Figure 1
Genres discussed by students

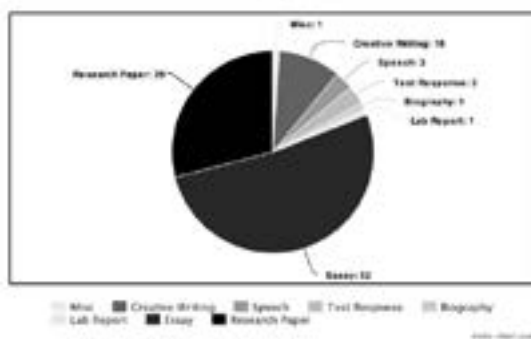


Table 3 further divides the “Essay” response category in Figure 1 into subcategories of student-specified essay types. If students did not specify what type of essay they composed, the response was included in the “General” category.

Table 3
Essay categories (percentages rounded)

Essay Types	Percent of All Essays
General	60%
Literary Analysis	16%
College Application	14%
Narrative	5%
Five-Paragraph Essay	2%
Descriptive	2%

As discussed previously, quotes which received the code *Writing Process* were further analyzed to develop subcategories that refer to different aspects of the writing process. Each category’s frequency (among total student responses, N=221) is displayed in Table 4.

Table 4
Student references to writing process

Process Category	Percent of All Responses
Research	53%
Revision/Multiple Drafts	50%
Planning	38%
Peer Feedback	30%
Teacher Feedback	12%
Sectioning	10%
Freewriting	7%
Parent Feedback	3%

Finally, I noted that 13 percent of students either described or directly referenced the Five-Paragraph Theme (FPT) while describing the characteristics of “good” writing. This includes the instances represented in Table 3.

Discussion

The results of this study reveal patterns in student conceptions of “good” writing and how it is composed. While not all of them can be linked to a struggle to write at the collegiate level, there are consistencies that could be considered detrimental to students’ ability to successfully transition from high school to college-level writing. To discuss these, I’ve divided the following section in accordance to the general topics of my analysis: how students define “good” writing, the genre of writing they discuss when recounting a piece of “good” writing they composed, and the writing process they underwent to produce their piece of “good” writing.

Defining “Good Writing”

What is noticeable initially about students’ definitions of “good” writing is that a large majority emphasized the importance of content. This was discussed in a variety of ways, as at times students explicitly referenced content, while others stressed that one should “know what they’re talking about” when approaching a writing assignment. It was surprising to see students discuss content more often than conventions, as anecdotally I’ve noted that when students call themselves “bad writers,” it is often followed by talk of struggling with grammar.

While the focus on content is promising, the percentages for the other areas are fairly low, which causes concern in multiple areas. In particular, only 17 percent of students felt that it is important to be passionate about one’s work. As noted by Anne Beaufort in *College Writing and Beyond*, “For most students ... the primary purpose for writing in a compulsory writing course is completing the tasks necessary to get the needed grades, the credits toward graduation, etc.” (38). If

students cannot attribute value to their writing outside of getting good grades, and if they cannot conceive an audience other than their professor/classmates, they will struggle to engage with their writing. This is especially prevalent in students who are self-proclaimed “bad writers” or do not particularly enjoy writing, as they have the potential to close themselves off to growth through engagement and may instead “go through the motions” to complete writing assignments.

Another surprisingly low percentage is that of students who considered using sources as an important element of “good” writing. As will be discussed in the following subsection, 87 percent of students described writing in academic genres, many of those being essays and research papers. Knowing this, it is both interesting and slightly unnerving that students do not note the importance of incorporating research into their writing, especially when considering the emphasis on strong content in “good” writing. While I do not believe that students are under the impression that they can produce well-informed research papers without the use of sources, I question students’ perceived importance of research when approaching writing. In recognizing that my analysis focuses on writing samples from students who were not aware that their responses would be used in this way, I assume it’s possible that students may have not taken the time to create an exhaustive list of their ideas of “good” writing. However, students have likely chosen to include in their definitions those aspects that come easily to mind, and thus hold the most importance. So, while the lack of references to the use of sources in writing is not likely due to the fact that students don’t use sources in their writing, I still

wonder what attributed level of importance sources really have. Are students conducting outside research in order to become well-informed about a topic before beginning to construct the talking points in their writing, or are they constructing their talking points and seeking out sources to support their argument while ignoring possibly powerful counterarguments? This is a question that can only be answered through further inquiry about students' research habits.

The category that I find most interesting, however, is "rhetoric." Despite comprising only seven percent of student responses, the way in which students have described rhetoric in the context of "good" writing raises a couple of questions. The quotes that I have coded as "rhetoric" either explicitly mention the word, or discuss writing rhetorically by considering audience, purpose, and the rhetorical appeals. However, in the two instances where students say only to "use rhetoric," I wonder how they know to implement rhetoric into their writing and whether or not they are simply using a word they know instructors probably want to hear. Even in the 13 instances where students said to use logos, pathos, and ethos, I would be curious to see how effectively they can use these appeals, and what the appeals mean to them in the contexts of various genres.

This leads to further questions: when students describe "good" writing, do they know how to write with these qualities? It is easy for a student to say that "good" writing is concise, or has a distinctive "style" (whatever that may mean to the student), or is organized with conventions of standard academic English, but it is not so easy to write an organized, stylized, concise, and conventionally correct piece. Knowing what aspects may contribute to "good" writing is not equivalent to the

ability to produce "good" writing, even according to their own definitions. Further research will need to be conducted in order to determine how well students produce writing that adheres to what they define to be "good."

Genre

When discussing the results for genre, it is first important to note that while there were 221 student responses, genres were referenced 209 times, including the instances in which a single student mentioned multiple genres. There were students who disregarded the second half of the question and provided their definitions of "good" writing without discussing a piece of writing they composed. Even so, as Figure 1 shows, students gravitate toward a few distinct genres when discussing their own writing. The noticeable majority is the essay, which I have further divided into subcategories in Table 3. There seems to be a pattern of thinking among students that discussing writing equates discussing the pieces students compose in order to have their writing assessed, which is very telling as to what students consider to be writing. The percentage of students discussing creative writing was surprisingly low, though I wonder, once again, if students are discussing the writing that they believe their instructors would want to hear about. This creates an interesting dichotomy where students are thinking rhetorically by considering their audience (their FYW professor) while completing the assignment, but are also responding in ways that limit their ability to fully showcase their knowledge about writing. This is similar to the previously discussed issue with the "rhetoric" category: If students are using the "hot-button" words that they believe instructors want to hear, then they are writing rhetorically by

considering their audience, yet this strategy does not show whether or not students are actually *awarely* knowledgeable about rhetoric and what it means to write rhetorically.

Further, it was surprising to see only one student describing scientific writing, and no students describing mathematical writing. While I can imagine that mathematical writing isn't necessary prevalent in secondary education, I would assume that at least one lab report was assigned to students throughout their high school careers. Given that there are sections of First-Year Writing at Moravian with STEM-related themes, and that students select their FYW courses based on interest, it would make sense that the students enrolled in those sections would be predisposed to success, or confidence, in scientific writing. This, however, was not evident in the results, and there may be a couple of explanations as to why. First, science and math teachers may be less educated on how to teach writing, and thus might not focus on teaching or assessing through writing. A resulting lack of emphasis on writing in such disciplines might lead students not to think of writing done in these courses as truly "writing." My thinking is that students have a tendency to conflate "writing" with "English class," as that is where they are most heavily exposed to writing instruction and assessment. It's also possible that without a focus on writing instruction and assessment in STEM subjects, students may lack confidence in their ability to write in what are thus less familiar genres. So when asked about a piece of "good" writing they produced, they may gravitate to English assignments, despite English topics and genres deviating from their interests or dispositions. After all, they have been asked to describe a piece of writing they produced

that they believe is "good," not what they are interested in writing about. This distinction is important, as I can imagine that if students were asked what writing genres or topics interest them, the data would look wildly dissimilar to the current set. So, while I believe the explanations explored here are both plausible, they are borne merely from speculation and would require further, more specific research.

There are a few categories within the "Genre" results that I consider to be problematic. First of these, of course, is the Five-Paragraph Theme (FPT), which was explicitly referenced twice, but described more frequently. The five-paragraph essay may promote negative transfer (Beaufort), which occurs when students are unable to adapt their prior knowledge to new rhetorical situations, and instead alter the intended genre to fit what is more familiar. In the case of the FPT, professors may see students writing all of their assignments using the FPT format, even if the assigned genre is a journalistic article or scientific paper. With this in mind, students considering the FPT to be what best represents their writing ability is concerning. While the FPT can be useful as a starting point to provide structure to struggling writers, its emphasis in secondary writing education is not motivated by its perceived importance as a foundation for student writing ability. As discussed in Bruce Bowles's chapter in *Bad Ideas About Writing*, "The Five-Paragraph Theme Teaches 'Beyond the Test,'" the FPT receives heavy focus in secondary writing education due to the importance of standardized testing. Instructors have to construct their curriculum in accordance with what will teach students to score higher on standardized tests, and the FPT's formulaic nature, which

involves an introductory paragraph ending with a three-pronged thesis statement, three body paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph, allows for testing companies to score writing more efficiently, and with higher inter-rater reliability. Bowles says of the FPT, “It imparts a hollow, formulaic notion of writing to students that emphasizes adherence to generic features rather than focusing on quality of content, informed research practices, effective persuasive techniques, and attention to specific contexts in which students will compose” (221).

With these ideas and writing practices ingrained in students, attempting to adjust to college-level writing is particularly difficult. College courses require genre knowledge, research methods, and rhetorical awareness that students have likely never practiced before. If students do not possess the necessary habits of mind to adjust to these new expectations, instructors may see negative transfer occur as students attempt to fit their assignments into the familiar conventions of the FPT. These students may struggle with adapting prior writing knowledge to the new situations emerging in their college classes, demonstrating a lack of flexibility as writers. Rhetorical flexibility is what allows students to grasp unfamiliar genres and write in new ways. This idea is explored by Sarah Swofford in her article on high-school influences on writing development: “Rhetorical flexibility ... is an important feature of students’ continued writing development, because it enables them to connect the writing they learned in college with their understandings of how they will continue to grow as writers” (273). Students who have only been exposed to the FPT and believe that its conventions are those of “good” writing will struggle to

adjust their thinking to include new genres with new conventions.

The other genre category that may be concerning is the “Test Response.” Although comprising only three percent of responses, the mere inclusion of this category is surprisingly and potentially troublesome. Test responses are often short essays written within a short period of class time, with very little planning or revision. An example of this genre in practice would be the essay portion of the SAT, which allows students only fifty minutes to respond to a prompt (College Board). As with the FPE, the idea that some students consider test responses to exemplify their best writing may index some very ineffective writing processes. Following through with some form of “complete” writing process, which is comprised of research, planning, writing, and revising (though nonlinear and recursive), is not possible in a short time frame. In order for students to complete writing assignments to the best of their ability, they need to be dedicated to, and attribute value to, the writing that they produce. Fundamental to success in postsecondary writing is the use of writing processes guided by the writing assignment. In an environment that values well-informed writing, moving beyond regurgitated knowledge toward formation of new knowledge, writing a paper in an hour is insufficient. The test response is a problematic genre because it does not expect nor even really allow for the creation of new knowledge within writing; it is rather a placeholder for students to repeat memorized information, or at least a memorized format dedicated to repetition of the known, in a short time frame and confined space. Test responses focus on “right” versus “wrong,” as opposed to “effective” versus “ineffective.” If students carry with them

the idea of “getting it right” in writing when they go to college, they will struggle to attribute purpose to their writing beyond getting a good grade. Without such purpose, not only will writing quality suffer but students are not as likely to fully engage with the subject matter of their courses.

Writing Processes

As previously stated, the writing processes utilized by students greatly impact the quality of writing they are able to produce. What is initially noticeable about the writing process results is that none of the percentages are much higher than 50, meaning there is no one thing that most students report doing. Most surprising of what they do report are the low percentages for Research and Revision. Under most circumstances for statistical analysis, percentages of 50 or higher would be considered substantial. However, with 87 percent of students discussing academic writing (the sum of all genres mentioned by students except speech and creative writing, Fig. 1), to see only 53 percent of students then make note of research and 50 percent discuss revision is disappointing. The lack of students describing research as a part of their writing processes is especially troubling, and raises a couple of questions: Did the students who did not mention research write without researching, or did they simply not think to include that process phase? What do students know about research in the context of writing, and are they gathering background information or engaging with other thinkers on their subject? Do their assignments require the use of outside sources? Do they not think of the research they do as an aspect of writing? Without explicitly asking, it is difficult to know. However, as I argued

earlier, there is something to be said about how students respond to open-ended questions such as the one being analyzed in this article: what students initially think of, and in turn what they include in their responses, can reasonably be connected to what they most value in regard to these topics. Students who don't value research as a part of the writing process, needless to say, will have a hard time writing in college.

I also find the various “Feedback” categories interesting, particularly “Peer Feedback” and “Teacher Feedback.” While most students did not discuss either type, among those who did, peer feedback was discussed more than twice as often as teacher feedback. This aligns with Karen Soiferman's observation that “in my discussions with pre-service teachers, they told me that they did not want to let their students re-write assignments because that would mean more marking for them. They did not see the point of having to mark assignments twice, which would lead to a heavier workload” (5). Teachers may instead use peer review to ensure students receive feedback during drafting. While this is already not an ideal use of peer response, it is also ineffective if students are not guided in providing useful feedback. Students can greatly benefit from being able to both give and incorporate feedback, as reading others' writing may cause them to think about what makes writing in the context at hand effective or ineffective, which can then be useful in their own composing. Maryam Bijami et al. discuss this idea in “Peer Feedback in Learning Writing,” paraphrasing Nooreiny Maarof et al.: “Learners can learn more about writing and revision by reading other's drafts critically and their awareness of what makes writing successful and effective

can be enhanced, and lastly, learners eventually become more autonomous writers” (94). However, it is unlikely that they will be able to maximize their experiences with peer revision without explicit instruction on giving feedback. It may also be beneficial to tell students directly that they can use peer review to provide themselves with further insight as to what they can do to improve their own writing, beyond the suggestions made by their peers.

This instruction could also serve as an important introduction to metacognitive practices within writing. While I did not expect students to use the word “metacognition” in their responses, it was still surprising to see that no metacognitive practices were referenced, even in the form of reflection. Metacognition, I would argue, is one of the most important skills a writer can develop throughout their academic career, because if a student becomes aware of their own writing processes, they can make adjustments that lead to substantial improvement. In “Five Essential Principles About Writing Transfer,” Jessie Moore states, “Successful writing transfer occurs when a writer can transform rhetorical knowledge and rhetorical awareness into performance” (4). Metacognition leads to the rhetorical awareness necessary for successful writing transfer and can determine how well students are able to transition from high school to college-level writing. Moore’s fourth principle of writing transfer thus states that through explicit instruction of rhetorical concepts, including improved metacognitive awareness, university programs can “teach for transfer.” Asking students to reflect on their writing processes and what they found to be effective or ineffective is so beneficial because much of what they discern is applicable to future writing assignments, even across genres.

An awareness of the components of a writing process that works, coupled with the knowledge of what aspects of such a writing process students may need to better incorporate into their own practices, will undoubtedly improve student writing.

Conclusion

While there is no one pedagogical method guaranteeing that students will be adequately prepared for college-level writing, there are suggested approaches to writing that can be utilized with students in order to increase their chances of success. The *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, developed in 2011 by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project, outlines eight “habits of mind” that are necessary for students to succeed in postsecondary writing: flexibility, openness, responsibility, creativity, engagement, persistence, curiosity, and metacognition. While most students are likely predisposed to possess one or more of these qualities to some degree, explicit instruction to develop each can make students more successful writers.

The habits of mind that students bring to college inform their ability to successfully transfer writing knowledge gained from high school, as Moore notes in explaining that writing curricula geared toward fostering writing transfer at the college level need to take into account the confidence levels and identities of students (7). This idea is particularly important in the context of my research, as I have worked to better understand the habits of mind regarding writing that first-year students are bringing to Moravian in order to suggest possible adjustments to FYW courses and pedagogy.

The *Framework* is an excellent resource for FYW instructors *and* their students, as the descriptions of each habit of mind provide awareness of skills in need of development. In the case of the students, this is an opportunity to practice metacognitive skills, while for the instructor, this resource can inform the approach taken to FYW courses.

Ultimately, of course, no singular solution will ensure that students no longer struggle with writing as they enter college discourse communities. There are far too many factors that institutions cannot control, so when students reach the college level, the current best way to make sure they transition smoothly is to observe their current knowledge level and meet them where they are. Observing students' opinions of "good" writing provides insight on their knowledge, which could be incorporated into the planning and teaching of FYW courses. While I can in no way claim to be an expert in writing education, connecting my analysis to learning-transfer scholarship enhances our view of current first-year students and how to better support their writing development.

Moving forward, we can pursue the lines of inquiry outlined earlier, in order to further enrich the field's understanding of first-years' conceptions of writing. First, comparing students' definitions of "good"

writing to their own writing samples would let us assess whether students write according to their own definitions, or if they are simply using terms they think professors want to hear. Further, surveying students about how their ideas of writing have changed throughout the first year of college may illuminate how effective FYW courses are and what can be adjusted.

Importantly, this study could be replicated at other institutions, to the field's benefit. The student population at Moravian College may differ from other institutions, and would not be representative of first-year college students as a whole. Replicating this study would create a more holistic view of students' writing conceptions as they enter college. The information uncovered could then be used to adjust FYW courses to better prepare students to write in college. As Steve Graham and Dolores Perin argue, "Writing well is not an option for young people—it is a necessity" (3). Writing is too vital a college ability to allow students to matriculate without being able to write effectively. While changing high school writing curricula may be out of reach, understanding students' conceptions of writing helps us give them the best chance to succeed at college writing, which translates to success in college and beyond.

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