

# MIND THE GAP: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF SCHOLARLY CONCEPTIONS AND STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FIRST DRAFTS IN WRITING PEDAGOGY

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In Writing Studies, ongoing scholarship emphasizes drafting as a crucial stage of the writing process, one through which writers engage in social and cognitive development. However, while scholars' theoretical models of composing are well developed, less is known about how students themselves define and experience the notion of a "first draft." Through interviews with four college sophomores reflecting on their high school experiences with first drafts, this study reveals that students largely perceived drafts as burdensome assignments for teacher surveillance rather than as integral tools for meaningful revision or critical thinking. Participants' self-constructed definitions spanned from skeletal outlines to nearly finished papers, demonstrating a striking misalignment between scholarly conceptions of first drafts and students' lived perceptions of them within writing pedagogy. By foregrounding student perspectives, this study highlights a critical pedagogical gap: without explicit instruction, students miss the cognitive and developmental benefits of drafting, suggesting the need for clearer, theory-informed teaching of first drafts.

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## INTRODUCTION

From the very first days of writing in the classroom, students are taught that first drafts are an integral part of the writing process. Whether for an essay, research paper, or short story, first drafts are seen as the necessary starting point, and teachers often assign these drafts for submission before the final version. Ask any student this, however: What is a first draft? What is the purpose of a first draft? More importantly, what are the benefits of writing a first draft?

I predict that these questions would stump most students, myself included.

I think back to the days of my high school English and History classes, earnestly listening to the teacher introduce our next writing assignment until I hear the words "first draft"; instantly, my eagerness is replaced with dread. "First drafts are due on Monday, but don't worry, it's just a draft," they say, as if it is the simplest part of the process.

I loved writing, and I looked forward to mulling over the prompt, contemplating my

thoughts, frantically typing out my thoughts into an unintelligible Google Document, and eventually forging a polished paper to submit to my teacher. The key to this process, however, was that it was done in complete privacy. The mental chaos that ensued every time I wrote a paper remained behind closed doors, and all my teacher would see was the neat, finalized paper I submitted at the end. First drafts, on the other hand, felt like someone was telling me to write while holding a microscope up to my brain or putting me on stage with spotlights pointed at me. Melodramatic or not, I despised the words “first drafts” for what I felt like was the complete invasion of privacy they entailed.

More importantly, the dread that overtook me when I heard the words “first draft” was in part fueled by the fact that I had no idea what a first draft was supposed to be—this vague, ambiguous, formless cloud of a concept that was thrown around so often in classrooms but conveniently never accompanied by an explanation. Being assigned a first draft meant that I had to decide whether to rush an entire paper in just two days and pass it off as a “draft,” or to waste my time creating an artificial record of a writing process just to meet my teacher’s expectations—all of this turmoil for a subsequent completion grade, often with no proper feedback. In all honesty, I had no idea what a first draft was, and I felt like it was far too late for me to ask.

I have a feeling that I am not the only one who has felt this way, and that many students strongly lack information surrounding the definition and purpose of a first draft. The

definition and purpose of a first draft are intrinsically linked, as students’ perceptions of its function and value are largely shaped by the presence—or lack thereof—of a clear conceptual understanding. The issue arises, in turn, if a student lacks a conceptual understanding of a first draft and its intended function could therefore be undermined by the student’s misconceptions. To explore this potential gap in conceptual understanding, this paper investigates how high school students define a “first draft,” the extent to which their definitions align with scholarly conceptions, and how an absence of a shared definition could influence their engagement in meaningful revision. In this article, I begin with a literature review that outlines multiple perspectives on the definition and role of the first draft, including an examination of various Writing Studies theories, since discussions of the first draft are inherently embedded within broader composing frameworks; this synthesis provides essential context for understanding the diverse conceptualizations of first drafts within the field. I will then present my research findings taken from interviews with four college students reflecting on their experiences with first drafts in high school. Accordingly, this study will critically examine the connections and discrepancies between students’ perceptions of the first draft and the definitions and purposes of first drafts established in formal scholarly research. By exploring student perceptions of the first draft, this study aims to analyze gaps between students’ perceptions and established academic conceptions of first drafts, which can inform pedagogy to align student and instructor

understanding and ensure the purposes of first drafts are met.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The question of how drafting fits into the writing process relates to the broader inquiry of how writers compose. Early theories of the composing process include the “Cognitive Process Theory of Writing” from the 1980s, which is when early researchers started examining the process rather than solely the product of writing, thereby establishing drafting as an important practice. In the Cognitive Process Theory, Linda Flower and John Hayes conceptualize writing as a problem-solving activity occurring within the mind of the individual writer. Flower and Hayes conclude that writing is a “goal-driven” thinking process made up of interrelated, “hierarchical” activities (Flower and Hayes 375) which they modelled as a series of mental stages—planning, translating, and reviewing—that writers cycle through in a systematic way (Flower and Hayes 370). Although it predates the formulation of this theory, Sondra Perl’s *Understanding Composing* can be seen as an important complementary contribution by questioning the traditional notion that writing is a linear process; instead, she advocates the idea that writing is a “recursive process” as writers “return to substrands of the overall process” (Perl 364), therefore, reinforcing the notion that drafting is a cognitive process.

The cognitive model was soon challenged by postmodern and social-constructionist perspectives, including those of James Berlin and

Lester Faigley. In “Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories,” Berlin asserts that the notion of the autonomous writer “sheds personal and social concerns in the interests of [...] empirical reality” (Berlin 775) and argues that the individual writing process cannot be purely individual, as the cognitive model posits, because the individual is always influenced by cultural and societal positioning. Faigley similarly critiques the cognitive process theory in “Competing Theories of Process: A Critique and a Proposal,” affirming that “processes of writing are social in character instead of originating within individual writers” (Faigley 528). As academic discourse shifted toward social context in response to these critiques, cognitive approaches were decentered in research and processes like drafting were increasingly overlooked. The cognitive model, however, was the inspiration for assigning first drafts in the classroom and although it has been decentered in research, its continued stronghold in teaching practices creates a persistent gap between scholarly perspectives and student experiences.

Nevertheless, scholars like Pamela Takayoshi have cautioned against the complete dismissal of cognitive models of composing. In “Writing in Social Worlds: An Argument for Researching Composing Processes,” Takayoshi presents a more integrative approach to the individual-social discourse, arguing that “contemporary writers’ composing processes explicitly weave together culture, the individual, and literacy” (Takayoshi 552). She also notes that existing research is “inadequate” (Takayoshi 552) in properly explaining the composing

process, suggesting that it overlooks important procedural components in stages such as drafting.

Drafting as a process has been examined through multiple lenses, including as a cognitive stage, a review negotiation, or material records of writing in progress—but the definition and purpose of the “first draft” itself has largely been left to the discretion of individual writers and scholars. As Faigley notes, a central challenge to writing scholarship lies in the fact that “conceptions of writing as a process vary from theorist to theorist” (Faigley 527), which has plagued the field over time. Given the field’s struggle with stable, universal definitions, it is unsurprising that definitions of “drafting” and the “first draft” vary wildly among scholars. Several of these differing conceptions will be outlined to highlight a crucial gap in the literature: the lack of attention to how students themselves perceive the purposes of first drafts.

One such explanation of drafting includes Eric Branscomb’s “drafting” stage outlined in “Types of Conferences and the Composing Process.” According to Branscomb, the components of the writing process can be divided into 5 categories: Prewriting, Drafting, Revising, Editing, and Proofreading (Branscomb 28). In the Prewriting stage, students are concerned with creating and conceptualizing their ideas. In the Drafting stage, the paper is completely written and all but finalized with the exception of revising, editing, and proofreading which aim to fully polish the piece (Branscomb 28). In this way, it is inferred that Branscomb perceives the line between “draft”

and “final version” as thinly divided by the beautification that takes place in the latter 3 stages of the writing process, and “drafting” encompasses the entire process of writing out the paper.

Another noteworthy approach is Peter Elbow’s idea of the “direct writing process” for producing a first draft, as presented in his book *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. In this approach, the writer divides their available time in half, with the first half dedicated to freewriting “without worrying about organization, language, correctness, or precision” (Elbow 26), and the second half dedicated to revising. During freewriting, writers should write down everything they can think of that might belong to their writing task, including incidents that come to mind for a story, images for a poem, or ideas and facts for an essay (Elbow 13). Elbow encourages the writer not to “waste any time or energy on how to organize it, what to start with, paragraphing, wording, spelling, grammar, or any other matters of presentation” (Elbow 27). In this writing process, the “first draft” is the product of the freewriting—“fragmented and incoherent” (Elbow 28) free-flowing thoughts that have not been refined yet, with nothing scribbled out or replaced. This notion requires the writer to develop “an increased tolerance for letting mistakes show” (Elbow 28), which Elbow argues will benefit the writer overall when they are able to see all of their thoughts laid out before starting to revise. Elbow’s conception of the first draft further complicates the landscape of definitions by framing the first draft as a deliberately unrefined stream of

thinking, which sharply contrasts with product-focused models.

In a different vein, Dan Melzer and John Bean introduce the idea of a rough draft as a “brouillon” in “How Writing is Related to Critical Thinking.” The authors define “brouillon” as “to place in disorder, to scramble” (Melzer and Bean 18) in French, and they expand on this idea to suggest that the writing process begins as “a journey into disorder” where chaos is eventually forged into an essay (Melzer and Bean 18). Notably, while other sources only touch on the idea of the first draft in their discussions of the drafting process, Melzer and Bean are among the few who place it at the center of their analysis—they highlight that English has no equivalent word for a “brouillon”; instead, the commonly-used “draft” signifies that the beginning of the writing process is already a smoothed and polished end of sorts because “draft” connotes that the writing has already been organized. Melzer and Bean argue that the word “draft” itself creates an inherently “impoverished” writing process where students do not understand that writing begins with a disorderly mess that is then “wrestled into form” (Melzer and Bean 18); consequently, this illustrates that if both a “rough draft” and a final draft are smooth and polished, the distinction between the two becomes unclear.

Further along in their writing, Melzer and Bean highlight the importance of teaching “writing” as “thinking.” They note that even for the most experienced writers, writing is a torturous process because “meaning is not what you start out with but what you end up with” and that writing is not a way to transmit

a message but is actually to “grow and cook” a message, as argued by Peter Elbow in “Writing without Teachers” (Elbow 5). Instead of instilling in students that the writing process is neatly categorized into one rough draft and one final version, with an arbitrary and undefined line drawn between the two, Melzer and Bean argue that writing should be presented as a messy process of drafting and redrafting. In this way, students learn that the drafting process is the thinking process, and Melzer and Bean believe that this would help provide better structure and understanding to the elusive “first draft.”

Alternatively, in “What is a Literary Draft?,” Pierre-Marc De Biasi draws the arbitrary definition of a rough draft as “a working manuscript written with the intention of correcting it for use in the composition or final polishing of a text.” De Biasi highlights that the broad scope of this definition lends it a wide range of applicability, but also the defect of “reduced intelligibility” because of its loose specifications (De Biasi 26). Importantly, De Biasi arrived at his definition of a rough draft only by intertwining the term with “brouillon,” presenting his reasoning as a definition of a “rough draft [brouillon]” (De Biasi 26). Echoing the ideas of Melzer and Bean, this underscores that “rough draft” in itself is too vague to stand alone as a definition without the more precisely conceptualized “brouillon.” De Biasi maintains that the definition of a “rough draft” today has a “broad margin of uncertainty,” one that has been reduced to a generic term designating the “negligible domain of all that precedes the finished version of the text” (De Biasi 27), which

erases what he believes lies in the beauty of a draft.

Expanding on the beauty of a draft, De Biasi explains that he perceives a rough draft as “privileged insight” into a writer’s mind; in line with Menzer and Bean’s notion of writing as thinking, De Biasi argues that a rough draft is a sort of “text laboratory” (De Biasi 29) that displays a writer’s thought process as they develop their writing. This thought process is evidenced through each scribble, insertion, hesitation, burst of speed, and moment of writer’s block that exists on the pages of a draft. De Biasi argues that examining these details is insightful for the writer, who can better understand their thoughts, as well as for a scholar or general reader who is curious about the development of a piece of writing. Although this notion was developed in the days of handwritten essays, tools such as “Activity Log” and “Edit History” on digital writing platforms allow the same insight into the “day-by-day story” (De Biasi 29) of the writing through the rough draft. In this article, De Biasi provides a definition of a “rough draft” that he contends is imperfect, then shifts to a more dynamic definition of a rough draft as a “text laboratory.” De Biasi’s view of first drafts as a record of thought in motion adds to the spectrum of competing definitions of the first draft.

Among the more unconventional interpretations, Gamze Çavdar and Sue Doe invert traditional understandings of drafting in their article “Learning through Writing: Teaching Critical Thinking Skills in Writing Assignments.” Çavdar and Doe argue that the “draft” is actually a complete, finalized version of the

writing, which students are then asked to revisit, rethink, and rewrite accordingly in a second round of submissions that actually constitutes the final version (Çavdar and Doe 300). They claim that this enables students to understand that their “thinking is not over” about the subject material upon submission of their paper, and in this way, their first submission functions as a draft even though the writing is in and of itself a finalized piece (Çavdar and Doe 305). Çavdar and Doe posit that this promotes critical thinking as students are forced to treat their presumably “finalized,” submitted thoughts as still open to critique, challenge, and rework. This reconceptualization—moving first drafts away from preliminary attempts and more towards tools for critical thinking—underscores just how fluid and contested the term “first draft” can be.

As evidenced by this research, the term “first draft”—while central to widespread discussions of the drafting process—was viewed through a plethora of conflicting frameworks with no clear consensus. Each of these articles attempts to define a first draft, and they cover a range of perspectives; some offer a direct definition of a first draft, while others require the reader to interpolate one from their discussion of the drafting process; some authors admit outright to the struggle of defining a first draft and eventually settle on the fact that it is not something that can be arbitrarily defined—instead, they believe that a first draft embodies the process of thinking whereas the final version is the product of said thinking, a complex definition that requires substantial explanation and reasoning. As such, these

sources are evidence of the range of definitions of first drafts that are circulating throughout writing studies.

Notably, I could not find any sources that examine students' own understanding of a first draft as the literature seems to lack focused attention on how students construct this concept in their own minds. This gap is especially pertinent given that scholars themselves have yet to agree on a uniform conceptualization of a first draft, creating disorder and confusion that could easily hinder students from reaping the full benefits of drafting. With so little research on how students see first drafts, that possibility remains an open question: How do high school students define a "first draft," and to what extent do their definitions align with scholarly conceptions within Writing Studies? How do students' definitions of a "first draft" influence their engagement in meaningful revision practices?

## METHODS

To explore these questions, I conducted an IRB-exempted study\* by interviewing four college sophomores who all attended the same small, private high school in Northern Virginia. These students were recruited through a class group chat, where I sent a message stating that I was conducting IRB-exempted research for a college English class and was interested in learning more about student perceptions of

\* This study was reviewed and determined to meet the criteria for exempt human subjects by the University of Wisconsin–Madison Institutional Review Board.

first drafts. To be eligible participants, students must have attended the aforementioned high school from grades 9-12 in order to ensure uniform high school writing instruction across all participants; they also must have been assigned a first draft at least once in high school, must have actually submitted the first draft assignment, and must remember their experiences enough to discuss them. While twelve students responded, only four met all of the eligibility criteria, and I assigned them pseudonyms to preserve anonymity: Caleb, Eleanor, Jonah, and Roselyn. All four students were either 19 or 20 years old at the time of the interviews and met all of the eligibility criteria.

Students were asked to reflect on their high school experiences with first drafts, specifically ones where no teacher feedback was provided on the draft. This clarification was important in order to elicit students' unfiltered conceptions of first drafts, free from the influence of positive or negative teacher feedback that might shape their perceptions of their own writing process. At the start of each interview, I briefed each student on the purpose of my study, and I emphasized that their participation was entirely voluntary. Additionally, I obtained their oral consent to audio record the interviews and to take notes for documentation purposes. The interviews were approximately thirty minutes each and were conducted over FaceTime to accommodate long distance. The following seven questions were asked in each interview:

1. How often did you have to submit the first draft before the final version of the paper?

2. When you were assigned a first draft, what were your initial thoughts and why?
3. What do you think a first draft is?
4. What do you think is the purpose of a first draft?
5. What do you think your teachers intended to accomplish by assigning a first draft?
6. Talk me through your drafting process; when would you start it, and when did you feel like you had a completed draft?
7. Had a teacher ever formally outlined to you what a first draft is or what their expectations were for a first draft?

These questions were chosen to address gaps in existing research and to explore whether the scholarly confusion surrounding the definition of a first draft is reflected in students' perceptions. Altogether, these questions uncover the range of student conceptions regarding first drafts, from definitional clarity to the perceived function of a draft in writing development. Based on insight provided by students or trends I was noticing in my interviews, I adapted follow up questions specific to each student to help me further analyze my results.

In presenting my findings, I chose to organize them by individual participant, including a summary of each interview and highlighting the key themes that emerged. This decision reflects the highly personal and subjective nature of writing and drafting; rather than fragmenting participants' experiences by reporting responses to isolated questions, I opted to present each as a cohesive case study to reflect the idea

that a person's conception of a draft is inseparable from their understanding of its purpose. Since the interview questions were designed to work together in revealing participants' broader cognitive and affective frameworks, presenting the data by individual participants captures a more holistic understanding of their perspectives. I then analyzed my findings using Johnny Saldaña's thematic analysis model, highlighting themes such as a lack of conceptual clarity, alignment and misalignment with the literature, student drafting practices, teacher influence, and the lack of consensus present in both student and scholarly conceptions of drafting.

## RESULTS

The first interview was with Caleb, who explained that he was assigned first drafts fairly often in both his English and History classes. He said he felt annoyed when required to write one because it felt like extra work, and he knew his product would be a "last minute, half attempted waste of time." Caleb typically procrastinated working on his drafts until the day before they were due. He did not find first drafts very useful, which he blamed partly on his own time management skills and partly on his preference for outlines over first drafts. According to Caleb, a first draft "compels you to write more even when you're not necessarily ready," and it "requires you to think through the paper" which he did not want to do until he was sitting down and writing the final version. In contrast, he appreciated outlines over first drafts because they give him "direction with no obligation." They were less detailed,

had only topic sentences and bullet points, and were a quick, simple “plan” of the paper. Caleb did not recall any teacher explaining to him what a first draft was, although he admitted that he might have simply forgotten and he assumed that at some point they were described as “to help write the paper in general.” He always worried about what teachers would think about him when they read his first draft, and he never saw his first drafts as truly reflective of what his final paper was going to look like.

The second interview was with Eleanor, who shared that she was assigned first drafts for about half of all of her writing assignments. When assigned a first draft, she generally felt it was “probably good” because it pushed her to start the paper and gave her more time to work on it before the final version was due. She viewed first drafts as a way to “ensure against procrastination.” In her view, the purpose of a first draft was “getting students to think about the paper and putting ideas down,” as well as giving teachers a way to encourage students to “have something in early” before the actual deadline. Despite recognizing these benefits, Eleanor admitted that she rarely started her drafts any earlier than she would have without the requirement; instead, she typically completed the entire draft in one sitting and without much effort. Eleanor defined first drafts as “a meaty outline” often including some sources and bullet points. Her first drafts did not have an introduction or conclusion, and she would focus more on outlining her main points with “all the core information, but no extra stuff.” Eleanor said her teachers never explicitly explained what a first draft was, assuming

instead that students already knew. Occasionally, teachers would provide guidelines—such as page requirements or whether bullet points were acceptable—but she noted that she never received any “concept explanations” about what a draft is actually supposed to be. If bullet points were allowed, she would quickly compile an outline and submit that as her draft; if full sentences were required, she would simply write the whole paper, submit it as a draft, and then return later to edit for grammar. She admitted that the only time she ever wrote a first draft was when it was required by her teachers.

The third interview was with Jonah, who said that he was assigned drafts at least once in every writing class he took. He admitted that he didn’t take first drafts very seriously, though they still made him nervous because he knew his teachers would read them, and so he wanted them to be good. Overall, Jonah didn’t see any benefits to first drafts and described them as more of a “burden” than anything else. In his view, the purpose of assigning a draft was for teachers to “get students going on a paper”; according to him, “they don’t really care about the content of the paper, and they just want to make sure that their students will make the deadline.” For Jonah, his writing counted as a “first draft” once he had all his ideas down on paper, including an introduction, a thesis statement, and at least two body paragraphs, “basically like an outline,” as he put it. He used a casual and informal tone in his first drafts, explaining that he wrote as if he were “talking to a friend and just gossiping about the subject material.” Jonah tended to overthink his first drafts and never knew when a first draft was

really “done” because he would always think of something else he could have added. In his own words, he would submit his first draft when he was sure it “didn’t sound stupid.” He said that he was “probably told at some point” what a first draft was, but that he could not recall the definition. He noted that teachers made it clear that students could ask them privately if they had questions about a first draft, but they never explained the concept to the class as a whole—it was entirely up to the students to seek clarification, which he never did.

The fourth interview was with Roselyn, who said she was assigned first drafts in high school only for lengthy English papers or capstone History research papers. Roselyn strongly disliked first drafts as they felt like “another assignment to do...more work.” She felt that teachers were simply asking students to “prove that they’ve been thinking about the paper.” Although she saw how this was intended to set students up for success, she says it was largely ineffective because she would typically turn something in for the first draft then not touch the paper until the night the final version was due. When asked how she defined a first draft, Roselyn replied, “I don’t actually know what that is, to be honest.” She felt like there was nothing between an outline and a final version. In her mind, she either had to “write anything” to turn in “some embarrassing attempt,” then write the real paper later, or she would write the full paper from the start, submit it as the first draft, and make some minor edits before turning it in as the final version—she chose the first route more often than the latter. Roselyn also shared that she had never received

instruction on the purpose of a first draft; she explained that she had taken a lot of advanced writing classes in high school where teachers did an excellent job teaching how to think and how to write, but not about the process that bridges the two. She recalled learning in 9th grade that a first draft is “what you think is the completed version before going back and making edits,” but that this definition felt “extremely inadequate” for the level she was writing at because it was oversimplified, unrealistic for a busy high school student, and she felt like her writing “never fit with the process of creating a ‘first draft.’”

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The results from my interviews offer critical insight into how each student conceptualizes first drafts within the writing process, revealing both the presence or absence of clear definitions and the ways these understandings shape their perception of a first draft’s intended purpose. Exploring these perspectives illuminates the diverse roles that first drafts played in students’ writing experiences, an area that remains largely unexamined in existing scholarly research.

The interviews revealed that none of the four students possessed a consistent, explicit definition of a “first draft.” There was a remarkable amount of hesitation, confusion, and “I don’t actually know” in these students’ answers to the interview questions as they all realized that they did not have a ready definition for a first draft—the consequence of this, whether they had never been given one or that

they were given one so long ago that they could not remember it, is that each of these students approached their first draft assignments with their own, individually formulated definition of a first draft, echoing De Biasi's observation that the term carries a broad margin of uncertainty and is often reduced to all that precedes the finished version of a paper. This lack of clarity is compounded by teachers rarely providing conceptual explanations, reflecting Faigley's critique that process terms in writing scholarship are often inconsistently defined and left to individual interpretation. As a result, students relied on self-constructed definitions, ranging from notions of a "meaty outline" to views of a draft as a nearly finished paper. While the former definition does not align with any research discussed in the present study, the latter aligns with Branscomb's model, in which drafting is almost indistinguishable from the final stage save from the beautification that occurs in between. The absence of a shared definition reinforces the present study's concern that writing teachers often assume that students inherently understand the term "first draft," despite a lack of common meaning in both scholarship and classrooms.

Students' responses also revealed various points of alignment and misalignment with the writing theories described in the literature review. Eleanor and Roselyn often treated drafts as nearly complete papers, aligning with Branscomb's view of drafting as essentially the full text minus polishing. Jonah mentioned using an informal, conversational tone in his drafts, which could resemble Elbow's "direct writing process" that recommends writing

freely without concern for correctness; however, Jonah still aimed for a product that "didn't sound stupid," meaning that his approach was more product-oriented than exploratory which counters Elbow's intentions. Caleb felt that outlines gave direction whereas first drafts were "too close to the real thing,"—a misconception noted by De Biasi—and confirmed that he had been submitting outlines as his first drafts. None of the students described recursive movement between planning, translating, and reviewing as outlined in Flower and Hayes's Cognitive Process Theory; instead, they largely regarded drafting as a discrete step towards their final paper. Likewise, no one embraced Melzer and Bean's or De Biasi's notion of drafting as "a journey into disorder" or a "text laboratory," with most producing skeletal outlines that themselves are inherently pre-organized products rather than exploratory messes, or "brouillon." Ultimately, these results reveal that while some writing theories align more readily with student perceptions, most are fundamentally absent from their understanding.

Concerning student attitudes and behaviors in drafting, students often framed it as a chore which influenced their limited engagement with meaningful revision. All four students recognized drafting's potential as a solution to procrastination, partially aligning with Flower and Hayes's idea of drafting as a goal-oriented process; however, all of them admitted that their behavior remained unchanged, revealing a gap between the perceived benefits of drafting and actual practice. This gap could mean that procrastination itself is potentially

not perceived as a significant enough drawback to make drafting a compelling practice. Furthermore, Caleb, Roselyn, and Jonah viewed drafting as “extra work”—even burdensome at times—reflecting Çavdar and Doe’s critique that students often see drafting as redundant when its purpose is unclear or does not align with their workflow. As such, students’ preference for outlines over drafts suggests a tendency toward bare-minimum compliance in a “burdensome” task, rather than embracing Melzer and Bean’s vision of drafting as an active thinking process. Conversely, to avoid the burden of extra work when outlines were explicitly prohibited, they sometimes wrote the entire paper upfront which resulted in a superficial revision process; regarding their revision practices, Roselyn, Jonah, and Eleanor all used the terms “proofreading” and “editing” to describe the differences between their final versions and the “drafts” for which they had simply written the full paper. When asked what they meant by “proofreading” or “editing,” all of them said that they focused on sentence-level errors and grammar; none stated that they revised any global concerns such as theme, organization, argument, or analysis. Such minimal level revisions occurring after the draft stage supports De Biasi’s concern that when drafts are overly polished, the developmental potential of the drafting process is lost. These findings emphasize that until drafting is more clearly connected to meaningful revision goals, students will continue to underutilize its potential to improve their work.

Overall, students’ approaches to drafting appeared to be shaped less by a cognitive

understanding of the writing process and more by external, social-constructivist factors; specifically, they wrote drafts to satisfy external assignments, not to help them write better papers. All four students saw first drafts, first and foremost, as a way for teachers to make sure that students were not procrastinating on their papers. Jonah even went as far as saying that teachers “don’t care about the content of the paper,” and that their sole focus was ensuring that students have something written down. For some, particularly Caleb and Jonah, anxiety about how their work would be judged overshadowed any sense of the draft as a space for experimentation, running counter to Elbow’s and De Biasi’s vision of drafting as a safe stage for exploratory thinking and development. Across interviews, the teacher’s role was viewed primarily as evaluative rather than collaborative, reinforcing the idea that drafts were checkpoints for assessment rather than opportunities for growth. Generally, students’ drafting behaviors were largely shaped by teacher guidelines, grading criteria, and looming deadlines—when bullet points were permitted, they submitted outlines; when full sentences were required, they produced completed papers. All of these patterns reflect Faigley and Berlin’s social-constructionist claim that writing processes are shaped by external classroom culture, and that composing is inseparable from its social context and the writer’s positioning within it.

The literature’s lack of consensus on what constitutes a “first draft” is directly reflected in students’ inconsistent and often conflicting conceptions of the term. None of the students’

experiences aligned with Takayoshi's integrated cognitive-social approach, which emphasizes combining individual thinking processes with the social contexts that shape writing. Instead, their experiences reinforced the present study's critique that, without explicit instruction on drafting, students rely on inaccurate perceptions. This confirms the gap identified in the literature review between the ways drafting is theorized in scholarship and how it is understood and enacted at the student level.

At best, first drafts pushed students to get a head start on their papers and avoid last-minute procrastination as suggested by Eleanor and Jonah. At worst, first drafts felt like an added burden—just another assignment and another opportunity to procrastinate—wrapped in vague confusion about what exactly they were supposed to submit. Roselyn went as far as saying that first draft assignments required her to create a piece of writing completely independent of her actual paper just to “appease the teacher.” Caleb shared that even when he submitted an outline as a first draft, he often scrapped it entirely and took his final paper in a completely different direction. For these two students in particular, there seemed to be a clear disconnect between the first draft and the final version; the first draft might as well have been its own independent assignment given how little influence they felt it had on their final papers. In every case, all four students were missing out on many of the benefits of the writing process proposed by scholars, leading to the inherently impoverished writing process that Melzer and Bean, Çavdar and Doe, De Biasi, and Takayoshi cautioned against.

## CONCLUSION

Students' understanding of a first draft's purpose is fundamentally shaped by how clearly its definition is conveyed. In the absence of this clarity, the intended function of the first draft is compromised as students' misconceptions shape their approach to the writing process. Evidently, there is a strong disconnect in writing pedagogy between how scholars define a first draft—which itself lacks consensus—and how students themselves define a first draft. Even at best, no student definition seemed to grasp the full beauty and purpose of a first draft as argued by Melzer and Bean or De Biasi; none mentioned viewing a draft as an illuminating process of thinking, nor did they view it as a keepsake text laboratory. Instead, based on the interview findings, students largely regarded drafts as burdensome and confusing. While not largely generalizable, these findings could offer insight into the effectiveness of existing writing pedagogy in high school, and whether students' disdain towards the drafting process could be alleviated with more teacher guidance into what a first draft really is.

All four students reported that teachers rarely, if ever, explained the philosophy behind drafting; because teachers usually provided logistical requirements, but not conceptual explanations, students developed individual, inconsistent, and often reductive definitions of a first draft. From the social constructionist lens, this easily distorts drafting into procedural compliance rather than a meaning-making process; most students defined a draft in terms of its polish relative to the product

of their final paper, not as a process tool for thinking and exploration. Students generally assumed the purpose of a draft was for teacher surveillance of progress rather than for their own cognitive development, undermining the individual goal-setting in Flower and Hayes's model. Misconceptions of the drafting process therefore develop and persist in the classroom, making it the necessary site for change.

Asking every teacher in the world to settle on a definition of a first draft when scholars themselves cannot settle on one is unrealistic, but at the very least, teachers can make sure to set guidelines clearly and explain what they mean when they assign a first draft, both in format and in concept. For example, elementary-level teachers could rely on a more clear-cut definition of a first draft, such as the product of the “direct writing process.” In higher level classes, where students are better able to understand abstract conceptualizations of a first draft, teachers could choose to introduce writing as thinking per Melzer and Bean, text laboratories per De Biasi, or second-final drafts per Çavdar and Doe. Interestingly, Roselyn's complaint that the typical high school “first draft” process was “inadequate” for her writing level, and that she lacked instruction in the process bridging writing and thinking—which is precisely how Melzer and Bean conceptualize drafting, and how Flower and Hayes frame the cognitive model's benefits—offers

promising evidence that high school students may be receptive to intentional instruction on drafting theories at this level of complexity. In either case, the teaching of first drafts requires significant revision and enhancement if the objective is to ameliorate students' otherwise negative perceptions of writing. Scholars have identified the value in the process of creating a first draft, but this value is evidently untapped in the current writing pedagogy. Addressing this disconnect could alleviate pressure, provide clarity, promote critical thinking, and help students better understand themselves as writers and thinkers.

My first encounter with writing and drafting theory in college English fundamentally changed me as a writer and gave voice to so many unrealized thoughts that previously vexed me regarding the process of writing. It is erroneous that this discourse—the intention, meaning, and process behind writing—is often restricted to scholars and only those who intentionally pursue advanced writing classes, especially since writing is intrinsically connected to the process of thinking, which benefits everyone when refined. With that, it is in students' best interests for teachers to introduce first draft assignments intentionally, clearly, and with purpose so that students experience the writing process as illuminating as it ought to be.

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