

## YOUNG SCHOLARS IN WRITING FEATURE:

### YOUNG SCHOLARS IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING

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*Young Scholars in Writing* launched four volumes ago with the goal of giving voice to undergraduate researchers in writing studies who not only showed promise but were already doing research that contributed to the profession's conversations on writing and writing instruction. Now, in volume 5, the editorial board has decided to look for work that fits that definition among the "youngest"<sup>1</sup> scholars in the academy, students in first-year composition courses.

In doing so, *YSW* joins a growing trend in FYC: not only teaching, and asking students to produce, scholarly inquiry that participates in the broader project of the academy, but having students make the subject of that inquiry *writing itself* in its varied fields: discourse, literacy, language, rhetoric, composition, and writing studies. (See, for example, the 2007 *CCC* article "FYC as Intro to Writing Studies" by Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle.) The CCCC special interest group "The Subject Is Writing" is further testament to the growing number of writing professors and programs interested in this approach. Considering this in conjunction with extant FYC curricula in which students perform ethnography of various discourses, it seems that FYC students should certainly be starting to turn out research on subjects of interest to *YSW*.

Our question before launching the feature was, simply, would any of this research truly extend beyond writing-to-learn to offer meaningful contributions to the field? Could first-year writers really have anything of value to say to writing scholars? The idea for a feature on first-year writing was born from the recognition that, as difficult as producing quality research may be for juniors and seniors, the barriers for first-year writers are exponentially greater. Not only do first-year writers—by virtue of their position as new college students—lack background in the scholarship of the field they're writing into, usually they are not far along in coming to understand the act of scholarly inquiry *itself* as something distinctly other than transmitting information compiled from secondary research. We imagined—and still do—that the very best first-year research might only be as good, in absolute terms, as moderately successful research completed by more experienced majors in fields related to writing studies. By creating a separate arena for first-year writing to compete on its own terms, we could ensure that outstanding first-year research did not go unnoticed among the excellent work from senior undergraduates that *YSW* seeks.

Publishable first-year research doesn't happen on its own. It begins with extensive curricular support from the class in which it originates. Among fifteen submissions from eight institutions, there was a palpable difference between work done in writing courses that help students

learn principles of rhetoric and good writing-from-sources, and in writing courses that teach principles of scholarly inquiry and contribution to scholarly conversations, and whose subject matter is itself writing, literacy, and discourse. When students were explicitly assigned to produce contributions to scholarly conversations on these subjects, and shown carefully how to do it, their work was much better suited to the expectations here at YSW. In this light, it becomes less surprising that three of the accepted submissions originated in the feature editors' own programs. (Readers can be assured both that editors recused themselves from decisions regarding their own students and that YSW's editor provided independent review and approval of our acceptance decisions.) Our interest in editing the feature arises, after all, from our investment in FYC programs in which students create such research, and from our experience both in helping students develop such research and in recognizing its quality.

One reality that is difficult for first-year writers to fully grasp is the *distance* between published writing and its early drafts. We now know four first-year writers with said grasp. As editors experienced with how early drafts of this kind of freshman inquiry tend to look, we understood from the beginning that even drafts with the greatest potential would require very extensive revision. Many of our acceptance decisions were based on judgments of how much revision a piece would require, crucially, *outside* the daily and weekly support structure of a classroom. Would first-year writers be able to revise effectively with only occasional contact with their original teachers and long-distance, electronic interaction with their faculty advising editor? In a note to Editor Laurie Grobman, Shannon Carter summarized the efforts of the four writers invited to revise their submissions: "These first-year students are certainly committed to this publication effort. They've all worked very hard—making some difficult revisions, [. . .] adding additional research, and making other complex rhetorical, ideological, and intellectual moves. [. . .] This experience has proven to me that first-year students are capable of some impressive intellectual work, even beyond the course-based, teacher-supported stuff."

So, we know these first-years are real writers. And that brings us back to the original question: do they have anything to *contribute* to the field's scholarly conversations? It's true that first-years are simply not as widely read as scholars even two or three years their seniors. And it's true that the idea of joining an ongoing conversation is still so new to first-years that their work with sources can lack the depth and refinement of more experienced scholarly writers. But our first-year writers make up for this with perspective. They're framing questions in ways that more experienced scholars don't think to—for instance, Lauren Augino's question, based on the reading experiences of high schoolers and early college students, of what makes a "classic" novel *classic*; or Erika Jackson's question not simply about the effects of praise on literacy, but on the mechanisms that link praise to physical pleasure and encourage people to continue seeking positive literacy experiences. Not only do young scholars' perspectives influence the questions they think to ask, their status changes the way they relate to their informants and research participants. Three of the writers here—Augino, Jackson, and Eric Pleasant, in his ethnography of his mid-1980s Waco punk subculture—are drawing on surveys of peers and contemporaries; and the fourth, Emily Strasser, draws primarily on previous school experiences in her argument, *pace* Stanley Fish, for the importance of college writers' personal investment in the content of their writing.

Strasser's commentary points up a third aspect of the perspective provided by first-year scholars of writing: not just first-hand experience, but *present* experience. When someone like

Fish, decades away from being a college student, advocates an approach to writing instruction, our field benefits from the perspective of those, like Strasser, whom the approach immediately affects—writing students. While literacy scholars can tell us how praise improves students’ literacy acquisition, it takes a student herself to tell us how that praise feels and *why* it helps students improve, as Jackson does. When a scholar like Deborah Brandt posits the notion of literacy sponsors, it is up to other scholars to apply her theory in new settings with other participants; the more studies we have like Pleasant’s, careful and thorough examinations of the literacy sponsors of specific discourses and subcultures, the better able the field is to validate and refine the original research. And while many literary theorists have asked, and answered, the question of what makes a classic, Augino offers an interesting contrast between those “ideal” answers and the everyday answers that non-specialists provide.

This opportunity to see through the eyes of students—not as participants in our research, but as authors of their own—is invaluable because they can ask, see, and think things that we, years and decades away from them, cannot. And, yes, we think these four articles demonstrate that first-year researchers are able to make genuine contributions to the field’s understanding of literacy, writing, and writing instruction.

So we look forward to future editions of this feature. We know that many FYC courses and programs are already asking their students to do this kind of research, and we hope to see work from many more of them submitted for the next volume. We truly hope, too, that the articles we publish here will inspire FYC instructors and program directors to consider a similar approach: this is the work that first-year writers can do when we ask it of them and support them in developing it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As is the case with previous volumes, “young” here refers not to the age of the scholars but to their experiences with academic conversations in and for university settings.