

WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition¹

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“Yet what these writers should learn is, characteristic of the profession, the subject of perennial disagreement.”

—Lynn Bloom

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION BY KATHLEEN BLAKE YANCEY

In the spring of 1996, several compositionists on the Writing Program Administration listserv WPA-L began to discuss four general questions:

1. Why is it that first-year composition programs seem to vary so widely?
2. Is this perception accurate? Do our programs in fact vary widely?
3. Seen another way, what might our programs have in common? What concepts and practices might our programs share?
4. Given sufficient commonality, would it be possible to articulate a general curricular framework for first-year composition, regardless of institutional home, student demographics, and instructor characteristics? Could we do this in a way that doesn't prescribe or infringe?

The short answer to the last question is yes, as embodied below in the “WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition.” Getting to this answer—and this document—was an interesting, and, in some ways, anomalous process. The original listserv discussants were joined by at least 25 other volunteers. Together, and in

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multiple venues—principally, on their own listserv and at many conferences, among them NCTE, CCCC, WPA, and Computers and Writing—this loosely confederated group began to craft a statement about what first-year students should both know and do: what we called an “Outcomes Statement.” This collaborative authoring of a common set of outcomes drew on theory as well as practice, on a keen sense of language as well as an appreciation for difference, on a willingness to foreground possibility and to take a risk. Also important was this group’s status, or lack thereof; unlike other such efforts, this one was neither established nor commissioned by a professional organization.

The Outcomes Group did understand, however, that if this document were to influence first-year composition programs, it would be useful to have it sanctioned by an official disciplinary organization. In part because the discussion originated on the WPA listserv, and in part because composition programs signify particularly for writing program administrators, the Outcomes Group, as the collaborative group began calling itself, asked the Council of Writing Program Administrators to adopt the Statement. In April 2000, after the document was published on the web and in the organization’s journal, and after response was solicited and considered, the Executive Board of WPA adopted the Statement. That, in brief, is the document’s history.

Perhaps as interesting is a question about why anyone outside of Composition Studies might be interested in this document. Several reasons are probably self-evident.

First, while first-year composition isn’t always a universal requirement, it does persist as a nearly universal experience at colleges and universities across the country. Given the ubiquity of first-year comp, then, it’s useful to see some common assumptions undergirding all our programs, to be able to see, in other words, how our individual programs both participate in and depart from the statement represented here.

Second, this document, particularly given its WPA-sponsorship and its publication here, takes on increasing historical value. It speaks to the nature of first-year composition at this moment in time, and it does so in a way that is unprecedented. Never in the history of American education has a disciplinary group sought to define and articulate what it is that we *expect* from students who complete first-year composition. For the first time in American postsecondary education, then, we have a document that represents fundamentals of the first-year composition curriculum.

Third, in addition to its value as an historical document, such a statement can help us think more systematically about what it is that we include in our curriculum—and what we exclude. Notably absent in the statement, for instance, is any discussion of the role of digital technology in composition programs. Currently, it’s both an interesting and an open question as to whether this will change in the future.

Fourth, and very pragmatically, the Outcomes Statement has been and will continue to be used to inform composition programs. Sometimes, it is used as a context for specific programs; to create a new program, to revise an extant one. Sometimes

the Statement is used to create a dialogue among different faculty, for instance those at high schools and colleges, about what it is that we expect of students. Sometimes it is used to inform others—administrators and members of the public particularly—about what is that we do in our composition classrooms.

Fifth, and not least, then, such a statement can be used politically, and it's a verbal sword that cuts both ways. As several members of the Outcomes Group have discussed, this kind of document, precisely because it seeks to make visible what we do, makes us all vulnerable—our programs and our faculty and our institutions (indeed, often the profession). Without such a statement, however, we often find ourselves equally vulnerable. Moreover, our short experience with actually using the document, to talk to administrators about the quality of the curriculum, for example, and to high school teachers about what college composition is and is not, is that it helps rather than hurts. Such a document allows us to *argue for*—the role of genre in first-year composition, for instance, and for smaller class sizes, and for the role that faculty outside of English must play in fostering student literacy—as well as to resist that which does not further the cause of student education.

What may be glaringly absent here is any discussion of the document's relationship to outcomes, to assessment, and to accreditation visits: to the general concern among all institutions of higher education about accountability. Certainly, the Statement can be used in this context as well; such a use would be entirely within the intent of the document. But this purpose was not the primary intent of the Outcomes Group as it sought to find common ground. Rather, our purpose was curricular. In calling the document an “Outcomes” Statement, however, we achieved two rhetorical advantages. We could focus on expectations, on what we want students to know, to do, to understand. And we could assign to individual campuses the appropriate authority for standards; they may determine *how well* these expectations will be met—should they choose to adopt the outcomes at all.

Ultimately, then, the Outcomes Statement is a curricular document that speaks to the common expectations, for students, of first-year composition programs in the United States at the beginning of the 21st century. Central to the document is the belief that in articulating those expectations and locating them more generally, we help students meet them, and we help assure that the conditions required for meeting them are realized.

OUTCOMES

Rhetorical Knowledge

By the end of first-year composition, students should

- Focus on a purpose
- Respond to the needs of different audiences

- Respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations
- Use conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation
- Adopt appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality
- Understand how genres shape reading and writing
- Write in several genres

Faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn

- The main features of writing in their fields
- The main uses of writing in their fields
- The expectations of readers in their fields

Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing

By the end of first-year composition, students should

- Use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating
- Understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources
- Integrate their own ideas with those of others
- Understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power

Faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn

- The uses of writing as a critical thinking tool
- The interactions among critical thinking, critical reading, and writing
- The relationships among language, knowledge, and power in their fields

Processes

By the end of first-year composition, students should

- Be aware that it usually takes multiple drafts to create and complete a successful text
- Develop flexible strategies for generating, revising, editing, and proof-reading
- Understand writing as an open process that permits writers to use later invention and re-thinking to revise their work
- Understand the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes

- Learn to critique their own and others' work
- Learn to balance the advantages of relying on others with the responsibility of doing their part
- Use a variety of technologies to address a range of audiences

Faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn

- To build final results in stages
- To review work-in-progress in collaborative peer groups for purposes other than editing
- To save extensive editing for later parts of the writing process
- To apply the technologies commonly used to research and communicate within their fields

Knowledge of Conventions

By the end of first-year composition, students should

- Learn common formats for different kinds of texts
- Develop knowledge of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics
- Practice appropriate means of documenting their work
- Control such surface features as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling

Faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn

- The conventions of usage, specialized vocabulary, format, and documentation in their fields
- Strategies through which better control of conventions can be achieved

NOTE

1. The Outcomes Statement was originally published in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 23.1/2 (Fall/Winter 1999): 59–63 and is reprinted here by permission of the Council of Writing Program Administrators.