

Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz

## **The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year**

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Why do some students prosper as college writers, moving forward with their writing, while others lose interest? In this essay we explore some of the paradoxes of writing development by focusing on the central role the freshman year plays in this development. We argue that students who make the greatest gains as writers throughout college (1) initially accept their status as novices and (2) see in writing a larger purpose than fulfilling an assignment. Based on the evidence of our longitudinal study, we conclude that the story of the freshman year is not one of dramatic changes on paper; it is the story of changes within the writers themselves.

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*There is a feeling of loss freshman year, the feeling of not being connected anywhere. For 18 years I lived at home. Now home is not really home anymore, and college isn't really home either.*

—Deepak

**S**eptember 7, 1997—a balmy Sunday, the kind of afternoon that New Englanders welcome after late August's gelatinous heat. From an airplane, Harvard Yard appears peaceful, even pastoral. But to the 1,650 freshmen shifting in their folding chairs, the sense of doubt about starting college is palpable.<sup>1</sup> Speaking straight to their opening-day anxieties, Harvard President Neil Rudenstine tries to reassure: "Do not feel surprised if you think you are a displaced person, because that's what you are; and do not worry if all your classmates seem

more at home than you, because they are not." As Rudenstine speaks, students look around, many wondering if they will be the admissions committee's *one* mistake.

Throughout the ceremony, dignitaries mount the podium to offer good wishes and advice—remember to create new friends, take intellectual risks, call home—and to remind students that they are becoming part of a great tradition, one that has been shaped by the words of its students. Even months before they arrived on campus, in a letter to the Class of 2001, President Rudenstine had asked the students to consider the role writing might play in their college educations, encouraging them "to write a great deal . . . and experiment with different kinds of writing—because experimentation forces one to develop new forms of perception and thought, a new and more complex sensibility."<sup>2</sup> But how to follow Rudenstine's advice, particularly at the threshold of college, when freshmen are no longer surrounded by the comfort zones of family and structured routines and are suddenly required to manage their time, deciding if they will spend all or none of it studying?

Thresholds, of course, are dangerous places. Students are asked as freshmen to leave something behind and to locate themselves in the realms of uncertainty and ambiguity. It doesn't take long for most first-year students to become aware of the different expectations between high school and college writing, that something more is being offered to them and, at the same time, asked of them. The defining academic moment of the first semester is often the recognition, as one freshman put it, that "what worked in high school isn't working anymore." The first year of college offers students the double perspective of the threshold, a liminal state from which they might leap forward—or linger at the door.

### **The Harvard study of undergraduate writing**

What happens to students as they make their way beyond this threshold? Do they graduate as stronger, more confident writers than they were four years earlier when, as freshmen, they entered college? Do they experience writing as a unique form of learning, as our profession claims, or do they see it as another school assignment, a form of evaluation equal to but more time-consuming than exams? For the 12.4 million college students in the United States, papers are assigned and written in good faith because faculty believe the commonplace that writing teaches students to think. Yet what is missing from so many discussions about college writing is the experience of students. Do students

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experience writing as learning and thinking and, if so, under what conditions? If we asked undergraduates to describe their experiences in courses *with* and *without* writing assignments, what would we, their teachers, learn? In short, what lessons do students offer us about why writing matters? To answer these questions—to get a glimpse beyond the classroom, behind the page, and between the drafts—the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing followed more than 400 students (25%) of the Harvard Class of 2001 through their college careers to see undergraduate writing through their eyes.<sup>3</sup>

Working within the tradition of longitudinal research, our study was designed to collect as many different primary sources of information about students' undergraduate writing experiences as possible, especially the artifacts of their college writing culture: assignments, feedback, papers. We wanted to capture changes and continuities in students' attitudes and writing abilities, information that could be measured through student surveys and gathered through interviews and analysis of student writing. We were particularly interested in the ways in which students talk about writing and how that language shifts over four years.

Three weeks into their first semester, the entire class of 2001 was invited to participate in the study. Participation was voluntary, consisting of five Web-based surveys, two in the freshman year and one in each subsequent year; for completing each survey, students received a coupon for a free pizza. Four hundred twenty-two students joined the study, and 94% of the original sample stayed with it until graduation. From our sample of 422 students, 65 were randomly selected to be part of a subsample, the group we studied in depth. In addition to completing the surveys, these students were interviewed each semester, and they brought to their interviews each semester's writing, complete with instructor feedback and assignments.

For four years, the study followed a predictable rhythm, with interviews and surveys during the academic year and a hum of activity in the summer as our research team analyzed survey data from 400 students, read the stacks of papers written by the students in the subsample, and then wrote case studies of each student in the subsample to help us synthesize the range of materials assembled. By the end of four years, we had collected more than 600 pounds of student writing, 520 hours of transcribed interviews, and countless megabytes of survey data. Our challenge in following more than 400 students has been to learn as much as possible about individual students, while also keeping in mind

the big picture of undergraduate writing with its spectrum of writing practices—to look for patterns across students' undergraduate writing experiences and to learn from each student what might be idiosyncratic and what might be generalizable.

To date, scholars in our field—Marilyn Sternglass, Anne Herrington, Marcia Curtis, and Lee Ann Carroll—have described, through their in-depth case studies, the slow, uneven nature of writing development and demonstrated the value of longitudinal studies to provide a wider perspective than research focused upon just one college course or one undergraduate year. By working with a larger sample and a different set of questions, we hope to extend the conclusions our colleagues have reached about writing development, while also showing the important role the freshman year plays in this development.<sup>4</sup> Whereas these studies have focused attention upon the freshman writing course, we have chosen to look elsewhere in the university, to examine the writing students produce first year in courses other than their required writing course.

The story we tell, then, is of freshman writing at one college, but it is also a larger story about the central role writing plays in helping students make the transition *to* college. We learn much from first-year students about their common struggles and abilities beyond our classrooms: that freshmen who see themselves as novices are most capable of learning new skills; and students who see writing as something more than an assignment, who write about something that matters to them, are best able to sustain an interest in academic writing throughout their undergraduate careers. Whether they enter college as strong or weak writers, freshmen voice the challenge of writing in an unfamiliar genre—the genre of academic writing—in similar ways. On the threshold of college, freshmen are invited into their education by writing.

### **The role of writing freshman year**

*You can say that you went to lecture or went to discussion section, but when you hold in your hand sixteen papers that you have written your freshman year, then you feel that you have accomplished something.*  
—Jeanna

*When you are not writing papers in a course, you take more of a tourist's view of a subject because you don't have to think in depth about any of the material.*  
—Lisa

In his letter to the Class of 2001, President Rudenstine encouraged students to use college as a time to “write a great deal . . . experiment with different kinds of writing.” And Harvard freshmen, for the most part, have multiple opportunities in almost every course to write a great deal. Most find themselves writing anywhere between fourteen and twenty papers their freshman year, in addition to lab reports, response papers, and a range of writing produced outside of class for their extracurricular activities. Humanities and social science students write more than science students, but even science students, some of whom claim to choose their courses to avoid writing, find their freshman year to be writing intensive.

We wanted to understand the role writing plays in the lives of freshmen. Writing is, after all, hard work, especially when students are urged to “experiment”: to question, evaluate, and interpret ideas they are trying to comprehend for the first time. The outcome is never certain, especially at the beginning of college, when students feel that their papers are a “shot in the dark,” and when they receive feedback such as, “what you say, you say very nicely, but what exactly are you saying?”

At the end of freshman year, we put this question to students: “What would this year have been like if you had not written *any* papers?” “Well,” many students responded, “I would have gotten a lot more sleep,” or “I would have had a lot more time.” But then, as if they couldn’t imagine such an alternate universe—“college without papers?”—both strong and weak writers spoke vividly about the many different but complementary roles writing plays in their first year of college. Here is a sample of their responses:

If I hadn’t written, I would have felt as if I was just being fed a lot of information. My papers are my opportunity to think and say something for myself, a chance to disagree.

Writing adds depth. If I hadn’t written, some of the depth of this first year would have been missing. I showed myself to be a credible thinker.

Once you write a paper, you begin to see so much more; and the more you see, the more interesting the course becomes.

One of the greatest surprises of this study (something for which we were completely unprepared) was the buoyancy of students after a year in which they are asked to refashion themselves as writers, a year in which as novices they need to figure out the expectations of college writing while producing paper after paper. We could imagine students saying that college writing is

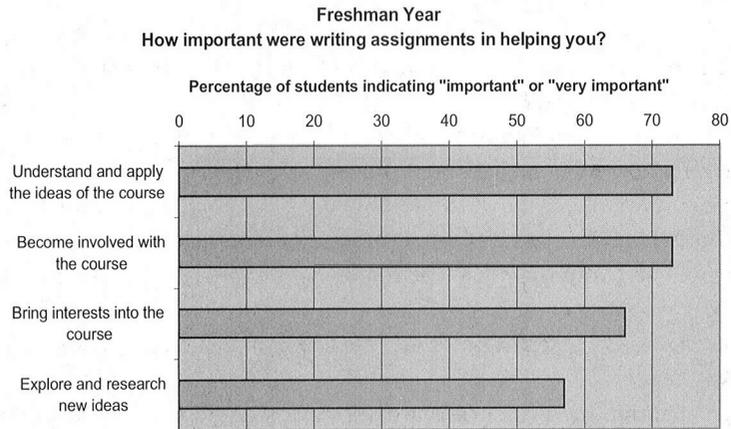
difficult, that it takes up more time than they ever expected, or that it deprives them of sleep. And we could imagine that students in small seminars, where writing plays a central part, might have been more enthusiastic about writing than students who write papers in large lecture courses. But we were genuinely surprised that students across disciplines and in varying course sizes use similar language when talking about the role of writing freshman year. And we were even more surprised that the comments of the weaker and stronger writers are indistinguishable, except that the weaker writers often speak with even greater passion about the role of writing in helping them make the transition to college, in giving them the confidence “to speak back to the world.”

We were also unprepared for the pride of accomplishment that many freshmen experience, the joy of holding in their hands the physical representation of their thinking, the evidence that they have learned something in-depth. Unlike lectures or discussion sections, their papers are concrete, tangible. As one student put it, “I knew nothing about this subject at the beginning of the semester. Now I’ve written a twenty-five-page paper about it, and everything I have learned is here, stapled together forever.” For freshmen, who change so rapidly, writing is a mirror that helps reflect who they are as students, allowing them to see themselves in their own words. One student echoes many when she describes the enormous pleasure of a completed paper:

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The hardest part of writing is when you get the assignment and you think to yourself, “oh, no, oh my goodness—there is no way I’ll be able to write this paper.” It seems so impossible. You clench your teeth, throw yourself into it, stay up late, and it is awful. Sometimes it is all you can think about. Then, all of a sudden, you have something in your hands. . . . You get this high, seeing that you have actually produced something, something that you actually care about and that you are excited about. You thought you couldn’t do it, and you did. And you did it well. Your writing is improving, and your thinking is improving, and you can see it, and hold it in your hands.

The survey data was as consistent as students’ interview responses. When we asked our 422 students at the end of their freshmen year, “How important are writing assignments?” they answered with the responses displayed in the following graph.



When students indicate that writing assignments are "important" or "very important" because they provide opportunities to become involved with a course (73%), understand and apply the ideas of the course (73%), bring their interests into a course (66%), explore and research new ideas (57%), or discover a new interest (54%), what exactly do we learn?<sup>5</sup> One way to answer this question is to listen to students describe courses where *no* writing is assigned. Courses without papers are most often described as "requirements gotten out of the way," or as encounters with "plops of information" that students are required to "regurgitate on exams" but never digest for themselves. Or as one student reported, "Without writing you don't really belong to a course and don't make it your own."

Probably the most striking metaphor for the experience of taking a class without writing comes from a student who describes a linguistics class in which she felt as if she had been an academic "tourist," never asked "to think in-depth about any of the material." She went on to explain, "We had exams in the course, but when you have an exam you are answering somebody else's particular questions, not your own. You have to regurgitate the information the professor gives you in response to the question he creates." In imagining a freshman year without writing, students speak directly about the connection between writing and learning: "I did my best learning when writing papers; the ideas I have written about are the ideas I know best," one student comments. Another says, "Writing lets you think and shows you how you think about thinking." In so many of

these responses, freshmen equate writing with “in-depth” learning and thinking or note the absence of depth, like our student, the academic tourist, when no writing is assigned. One freshman observes:

The ideas that I remember, the ideas that I can really grasp, are the ones I have written about. No matter how many lecture notes I have taken, no matter how many lines I have highlighted in my textbooks, it is the texts I have responded to with my own words that I am most able to remember. The process of writing fixes a text in my mind and makes it more than a series of things I have read.

From both interview and survey responses, we learn that writing serves many functions freshman year, both academic and social, to engage students with their learning. These are indeed gratifying responses for faculty across the disciplines who assign writing and spend countless hours responding to the words of their students. More significant, though, is that so few freshmen talk about this kind of learning as an end in itself. The enthusiasm so many freshmen feel is less for writing *per se* than for the way it helps to locate them in the academic culture, giving them a sense of academic belonging. When faculty construct writing assignments that allow students to bring their interests into a course, they say to their students, *This is the disciplinary field, and you are part of it. What does it look like from your point on the map?* And freshmen respond by writing their way into a small corner of academia, gradually learning to see themselves not as the one mistake of the admissions committee but as legitimate members of a college community.

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### **Characteristics of freshman writing: the novice-as-expert paradox**

*I feel as if my ideas have to be so new and exciting—it's college after all.*  
—Emily

When one senior was asked to look back at her freshman writing, she commented that in her first year of college she felt as if she were being asked “to build a house without any tools,” an apt metaphor to describe the writing experiences of freshmen who often continue to use the same writing hammer they used in high school, even as they realize its inadequacy. Freshmen are

required to become master builders while they are still apprentices—to build as they become familiar with the materials and methods of construction. They are asked to develop expertise in new subjects and methodologies, while still learning how to handle the tools of these disciplines and decipher their user's manuals.

Consider the situation of Maura, a first-semester freshman, asked to write the following assignment in a course on comparative religious ethics:

The final writing assignment should be a five-page paper using the resources of the four religious traditions we have discussed in class to address the puzzle about behavior identified and illustrated by Peter Unger in his book *Living High and Letting Die*. You should, of course, first give a brief account of the puzzle which Unger identifies. Then try to use the resources of Zen Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism, and Early Confucianism to suggest ways of addressing the problems that result from the dispositions which Unger discusses . . . Finally, ask what we should learn about the proper tasks of Comparative Religious Ethics from Unger.

This is Maura's fourth paper for her religion course and her tenth for the semester, one that requires more from her than all the others because it asks her to "synthesize the ideas and theories of the course and see the big picture." She is asked to perform many tasks at once: identify and explain the puzzle in Unger's argument, which has not been discussed in class; pull forth the underlying assumptions of four religious traditions, three of which she knew nothing about prior to the course; and apply these to Unger's argument—"a huge topic to address in five pages," as Maura notes. Even more difficult, she comments, is the challenge of "imagining how a Zen ethicist or the Pope would respond to Unger, when there are no references to the Pope or to Buddhism in Unger's book." For Maura, who describes herself as "deeply religious," the comparative methodology of the course adds an additional challenge, asking her to see beyond her own faith, to consider "religion as an academic field of study."

Maura's experience reveals much about the paradox of being a freshman writer, of writing simultaneously as a novice and an expert. In asking students to unravel puzzles and see the "big picture" for themselves, assignments such as Maura's ask freshmen to develop expertise in new subjects and methods while still apprentices. When students are new to a topic, they often don't know what information is important or how different pieces of information relate to each other. Everything is given equal weight. Without the benefit of experience, students overestimate or underestimate the importance of a single source

and have difficulty synthesizing sources to see the “big picture.” As one freshman taking her first medieval history course reports, “I have so much to read, so how do I have time to figure out what I think about any topic?” In the face of so much new information, her response is to write a fourteen-page paper with seventy-six footnotes, including a footnote to document the existence of the Middle Ages. About these footnotes, she comments: “I feel it is safer to use authorities who know what they are talking about.”

Reading through 200 pounds of freshman writing, we became aware of the pull and push of forces that produced the words we analyzed. Students are pushed to practice the new conventions of college writing: to consider questions for which they don't have answers, or to write for readers who aren't already converted to their way of thinking, and to accept their own minds as capable of synthesizing and making judgments about dense ideas. And, at the same time, they are pulled by the familiarity of their high school model, their default mode, especially at 3:00 a.m., when the uncertainty of new material and methodologies looms large. Harvard freshmen are given a wide range of writing assignments (to synthesize an entire course in one paper, as Maura is asked to do, or even, as many courses encourage, to “come up with your own topic”), not elementary tasks for students who must construct themselves as authorities in fields about which they know very little. These assignments ask students to work with challenging sources, argue their own ideas, and integrate their arguments into a larger scholarly debate.

In fact, it might seem illogical or unfair to ask novices to perform the moves of experts. One could imagine another pedagogical approach that recognizes freshmen as beginners and asks them to write a series of exercises that are more technically suitable to their skills—to construct paragraphs or two-page reports, instead of being asked to write ten-page arguments, or even not to write at all. Sometimes freshmen themselves wonder about the usefulness of writing papers their first year. In our first survey we asked students, “Why do you think faculty assign writing?” One student responded, “I don't see the point of papers being assigned in college, at least in introductory-level courses . . . students in these courses are extremely unlikely to contribute much to the body of knowledge in a given field. We don't have the depth of knowledge to write about anything substantial.”

How do first-year students fashion themselves into authorities when they feel as if they don't have the “depth of knowledge to write about anything substantial?” Our analysis suggests two answers: First, freshmen need to see them-

selves as novices in a world that demands “something more and deeper” from their writing than high school. Many students feel shaken by the idea of becoming a novice because it involves so much uncertainty, especially those who would prefer to wait to write until they can “contribute to the body of knowledge in a given field.” Being a novice, though, doesn’t mean waiting meekly for

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the future, nor does it mean breaking with the past. Rather, it involves adopting an open attitude to instruction and feedback, a willingness to experiment, whether in course selection or paper topics, and a faith that, with practice and guidance, the new expectations of college can be met. Being a novice allows students to be changed by what they learn, to have new ideas, and to understand that “what the teacher wants” is an essay that reflects these ideas.<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, those freshmen who cling to their old habits and formulas and who resent the uncertainty and humility of being a novice have a more difficult time adjusting to the demands of college writing. Even students who come to college as strong writers primed for success have difficulty when they refuse to be novices. These students often select courses to “get their requirements out of the way,” blame their teachers for their low grades, and demonstrate an antagonistic attitude toward feedback. They feel as if there is a “secret code” to academic writing or that college itself is a kind of game whose rules—“what the teacher wants”—are kept secret to them, only glimpsed through the cryptic comments they receive on their papers.

Second, we also observed that freshmen build authority not by writing *from* a position of expertise but by writing *into* expertise. As apprentices, they learn to write by first repeating the ideas they encounter in the sources they read and the teachers they admire, using the materials and methods of a course or discipline in demonstrated ways before making them their own.<sup>7</sup> We found that even the strongest freshmen writers were not able to stand back and offer overarching claims or interpretations. The prevalence of the descriptive thesis in freshman writing—the thesis that names or reports on phenomena rather than articulating claims based on an analysis of the evidence—is symptomatic of the novice-as-expert paradox. The ubiquity of the descriptive thesis freshman year suggests that learning happens in stages; ideas need to be ingested before they can be questioned. Students need to immerse themselves in the material, get a sense of the parameters of their subjects, familiarize themselves

with the kinds of questions asked of different sets of evidence, and have a stake in the answers before they can articulate analytical theses. All of this takes time, more time than any freshman can possibly devote to a subject. The descriptive thesis is not a flaw in freshman writing but a symptom of a novice working on an expert's assignment.

Similarly, as novices, most freshmen have neither the tools to pry open their sources nor the familiarity with them to ask "why" questions instead of "what" questions. They tend to describe and summarize their sources, letting the sources speak for themselves, wondering, "How do I say something different from what the source already said?" Yet even if freshmen cannot question a source, they find the act of rehearsing and repeating the ideas of a source to be new and validating. Freshmen might not be able to fashion their own tools or even know which tool to use under what condition, but they learn by holding the expert's tools in their hands, trying them out, imitating as they learn. They *may* need seventy-six footnotes to construct a fourteen-page paper the first time they write in a particular discipline. Yet these papers, even when they are derivative and less than ideally constructed, are, in the context of freshman year, highly ambitious and important for future writing development. They give freshmen their first feeling for real academic work. As more expert juniors and seniors, many students talk with equal pride about a different kind of ambition, the counter-intuitive discovery of working with something small, learning to probe deeper and wider, and ultimately saying more. It will be two years and dozens of papers before most students are able to embrace this kind of ambition by finding a genuine question in a source, a gap in the scholarship, the way experts do. Even if asking freshmen to do the work of experts invites imitative rather than independent behavior, it is the means, paradoxically, through which they learn to use writing tools of their own and grow passionate about their work.

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### **Confronting the novice-as-expert paradox: a course in moral reasoning**

*We begin with a story: you are the driver of a trolley car, and you have to decide quickly whether to turn your car and kill one person crossing the tracks, or avoid turning your car and kill five*

*workers. What is the moral principle you use to justify your action? Now imagine you are an observer watching the trolley car from a bridge. You could push a man over the bridge and sacrifice his life to save the five workers. Can you apply the same principle from the first case to the second? What is the moral difference between the two cases?*

So begins Professor Michael Sandel on the first day of his moral reasoning course—Justice—introducing students to the methodology of the course, moving back and forth between concrete cases and abstract philosophical principles. Justice, taught each fall semester to 700 students (more than 10,000 since Sandel first taught the course in 1980) is particularly compelling to freshmen, who, at a moment of great transition in their lives, are fascinated by subjects that ask them to contemplate the limits and responsibilities of their new freedom. Moral reasoning gives students a new view of familiar subjects, inspiring freshmen to question their beliefs by steeping them in the historical and philosophical traditions in which these beliefs have been debated.

For a study of undergraduate writing, moral reasoning courses are fascinating. When freshmen identify their best writing experiences, in both our survey and interviews, they talk about these courses more than any others. Even our weakest writers speak passionately about the ways in which these courses changed their thinking, showing them how to “structure and defend” their ideas and giving them a “voice” and “confidence to speak back to the world.” One representative student told us, “I feel passionate about the issues in Justice, but if I hadn’t written the papers, I would have been shooting out opinions randomly.” What is it about the course’s methodology that teaches students to “structure and defend” their ideas in writing? How do the writing assignments move students from “shooting out opinions” to giving them the “confidence to speak back to the world?” How, in other words, does it make novices into experts?

Sandel makes clear that the course is not only about the moral reasoning of philosophers but also about the moral reflections of the students in the course. Beyond presenting students with classical and contemporary theories of justice in texts by Aristotle, Kant, Locke, Mill, Nozick, and Rawls and with the application of these theories in arguments about affirmative action, income distribution, and free speech, his lectures challenge students to consider questions such as these: If surrogate motherhood commodifies women’s labor, does paid military service do something similar with soldier’s bodies? He en-

gages with students one-on-one in lecture, inviting them to provide the criteria to assess or defend their own positions. His goal, as he tells students, is to “awaken the restlessness of reason” by asking them to consider questions that are urgent because “we live some answer to these questions each day.” He transforms Sanders Theater, a lecture hall with seating capacity for 1,166 students, into an intimate town meeting of passionate citizens engaged in applying philosophical arguments to real-life situations with real-life consequences.

Like the lectures, the two writing assignments in Justice give students practice in moral reasoning by asking them to enter an existing debate: Should there be a market in human organs? Is the use of race as a factor in identifying criminal suspects morally comparable to the use of race as a factor in college admissions? Students are instructed not to conduct research but to draw on their own critical reflections as informed by the theories presented in the course. In addition to the two seven-page papers, students write two response papers in which they explore the meaning and significance of one sentence or one passage of a philosopher’s work by focusing on a specific textual problem or puzzle. All of these writing assignments emphasize an unresolved problem that students must weigh in on, a live debate about textual meaning or a course of action. How do we resolve the paradox in Aristotle’s conception of the good life? How can we argue for the use of race in affirmative action but argue against it for racial profiling? In entering a live debate—a conversation in which more than one view is acceptable and for which there are no easy answers—freshmen see that something is at stake in their work, that their writing is not simply “academic.”

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For students accustomed to the five-paragraph model of writing, entering a debate or unraveling a puzzle represents an entirely new way of writing. To write about philosophy, to practice moral reasoning, is to write in an argumentative mode. Even the texts students analyze are structured as arguments. The assignments encourage students to begin within these arguments by summarizing and assessing them but to move beyond the familiar territory of summary and give “something more”—their own reasoning.

Justice capitalizes on students’ paradoxical status as novices. New to philosophical writing, they are also experts who come to the course with their own moral reflections. Students are invited into the enterprise of moral reasoning as colleagues whose ideas and experiences are welcomed, but who need to

assess and adjust their thinking as they engage with theorists who have also written about these questions. Students are granted a right to speak out of their expertise, but they are also given the responsibility of considering other interlocutors who “live some answer to these questions each day.” Their sense that they are playing in the intellectual big leagues was wonderfully articulated by one student: “To think that I, a freshman, could be asked to find a flaw in Aristotle’s reasoning, that it was just me and Aristotle on the page—what a sense of power.”

Yet the course recognizes its responsibility to these students, novices who are new to writing philosophical arguments and to the challenging sources of the course. Through a four-page handout developed by Sandel and his teaching assistants, students are introduced to the basic tools for writing philosophical arguments: how to identify debates and disagreements among sources, question and evaluate sources, define key terms, engage counter arguments. They are also given a structure for writing philosophical arguments: begin with a thesis, outline a debate, synthesize competing positions, notice questions and implications which arise from this synthesis, explain how these questions might be answered, offer counter arguments, and propose solutions. In encouraging students to use this structure, which mirrors Sandel’s method in his lectures, the course relieves students of the responsibility of inventing the field for themselves.

The Justice assignments are difficult for first-semester freshmen, and those who are most articulate about the challenges are weaker writers, for whom the methods are the newest. The requirement to think critically about a text they are reading for the first time, rather than simply summarize its views, is the most demanding aspect of the assignments. One freshman observed: “These assignments are an entirely new world. I need to argue a point of view, use evidence, and not accept things just because I have read them.” Equally challenging, especially for students who come into the course with strong opinions, is to learn how to trust their opinions as a basis for formulating an idea, while at the same time learning the difference between an opinion and an idea.

If Justice is successful in moving students from “shooting out opinions” to “structuring and defending ideas,” it is because the course self-consciously addresses the novice-as-expert paradox of freshmen writers. If students feel they have found their “voice” in writing for Justice, it is because the assignments cultivate that voice by insisting they take an active stance toward the texts and ideas they write about. Asking freshmen to enter a debate by identifying disagreements among sources, synthesizing competing positions, and

posing counterarguments urges them to practice conceptual moves that push them beyond their high school models. Even if they gravitate toward sources that affirm their opinions or speak from the position of their sources, students gain important practice with the tools of academic argument. In a year of so much uncertainty, freshmen thrive in a course where they are urged to trust their own intuitions, writing their way *into* expertise about something that matters to them.<sup>8</sup>

### **Writing that matters: a paradigm shift**

When asked what advice she would give future freshmen, one student responds: "See that there is a greater purpose in writing than completing an assignment. Try to get something and give something when you write." This idea, that a student might "get something" other than a grade and that there might be a "greater purpose in writing than completing an assignment," represents the most significant paradigm shift of the freshman year. When, just three weeks into the freshman year, we asked students, "Why do you think faculty assign writing?" the most common responses focused upon evaluation—"so that professors can evaluate what we know"—and upon an abstract notion that "writing is an important skill in the real world." What is missing from these responses is any sense that students might "get something" other than a grade or career advancement, or that they might "give" something to their professors beyond a rehearsal of the course material. These early responses stand in stark contrast to those given at the end of the year, when so many students report that writing allows them not only to bring their interests into a course but also to discover new interests, to make writing a part of themselves. When students begin to see writing as a transaction, an exchange in which they can "get and give," they begin to see a larger purpose for their writing. They have their first glimmerings of audience; they begin to understand that they are writing for flesh-and-blood human beings, readers who want them to bring their interests into a course, not simply teachers who are poised with red pens, ready to evaluate what they don't know. One student describes her great surprise freshman year when she realizes, after receiving detailed feedback, "someone is actually reading my papers, someone who is trying to understand what I care about in a subject."

If there is one great dividing line in our study between categories of freshmen writers, the line falls between students who continue throughout the year not to see a "greater purpose in writing than completing an assignment" and freshmen who believe they can "get and give" when they write—between stu-

dents who make the paradigm shift and those who don't. Students who continue to see writing as a matter of mechanics or as a series of isolated exercises tend never to see the ways writing can serve them as a medium in which to explore their own interests. They continue to rely on their high school idea that academic success is reflected in good grades. When one such student is asked about his best writing experience freshman year, he responds, "Do you

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want me to tell you about the paper I got the best grade on?" If freshmen focus on college writing as a game, where someone else makes up the rules and doles out the grades, it doesn't matter if they write twenty papers or ten. Practice and instruction are, of course, important

during freshman year; the more a student writes, the more opportunities she has to become familiar with the new expectations of academic writing and to use writing to discover what is important to her. But it is not practice *per se* that teaches reciprocity. Students who refuse to be novices, who continue to rely on their high school methods and see writing as a mere assignment, often end up writing versions of the same paper again and again, no matter how different their assignments.

What characterizes the experience of freshmen who discover they can "get and give" something in their writing? Looking closely at the ways in which freshmen describe their best writing experiences, we see the crucial role faculty play in designing and orchestrating these experiences, whether by creating interesting assignments, mentoring through feedback, or simply moving aside and giving students freedom to discover what matters to them. The paradigm shift is more likely to occur when faculty treat freshmen as apprentice scholars, giving them real intellectual tasks that allow students to bring their interests into a course.

Yet for freshmen, another force is at work, one that shapes their course selection, engagement with faculty, or choice of writing assignments. In the transitional first year, students often discover themselves as subjects of inquiry when they think about their ethnic, racial, religious, or sexual identities for the first time. One student from New Mexico, for instance, speaks of having "culture shock," the sudden awareness of her culture that comes from leaving it. She describes her first-semester course in Chicano Literature:

Chicano culture was just something I figured was a part of me, but now I'm really examining it, and trying to form my own identity. I like being in a class where I

hear other people's points of view rather than being surrounded by the culture and the stereotypes that I've grown up with. I'm trying to decide for myself what I agree with and what I don't.

Another student speaks of her decision freshman year to learn more about her mother's Italian heritage:

When I arrived at college, I realized that there is no social group called "Children of Fifth-Generation British Americans," which is what I am on my father's side, but there is an Italian Cultural Club, so I joined the club and got involved. I also started taking Italian and an art history course on Michelangelo, and even wrote about Italian cooking practices in an anthropology paper.

Free to set their own intellectual agendas, many freshmen, particularly those who grew up in relatively homogeneous communities, set off to explore their identities by selecting courses that enable them, however covertly, to study themselves. It is most frequently in these courses that novices discover they can "give and get" something through writing.

When we asked students about their best freshmen writing experience, they described opportunities to write about something that matters to them, whether in Chicano literature or Italian, political science or computer science. Maura, for instance, used many of her freshman papers to think through her doubts about religion and her own social conscience.

Since she does not refer to herself in her papers, her professors might not notice the connection between her writing and her religious identity, but she returns in course after course to themes of individuality, responsibility, and culpability. As a senior looking back on her freshman papers, she comments, "I spent much of my freshman year trying to figure out what I am contributing to the world through the study of religion. I was disenchanted by academia and struggled to understand what a life of action versus a life of contemplation would look like. My papers helped me think through some of these issues."

To understand the importance of the paradigm shift freshman year, let's look at the story of one freshman, Jeremy, a deeply religious student for whom academic writing is a medium in which to voice his innermost spiritual doubts.

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### The paradigm shift: Jeremy

Jeremy grew up on an apple farm in rural Michigan and identifies himself as the first student in thirty-one years to attend Harvard from his high school. He is proud of his status, while at the same time overwhelmed by the range of diverse opinions and beliefs he encounters when he arrives on campus. Dormitory life provides him with his first culture shock: "I arrived in Wigglesworth Hall and met my roommates: an atheist, a Mormon, a Jew, and a Native American. All of them had very different backgrounds and different spiritual beliefs. I grew up as a Mennonite and was taught to see the spiritual world as black and white: either one was a Christian, and on the road to heaven, or one was not, and on the road to hell." This confrontation with diversity and the challenge it poses to his faith spills out of Jeremy's dorm into his course selection and finds its way into almost every paper he writes.

As a high school student, Jeremy thought of writing largely in terms of mechanics (spelling and grammar) and the ability to present facts succinctly. By the end of his first semester at college, however, he believes that writing, like his education generally, should help a student "dig into yourself, dig into your past." He is drawn to courses in comparative religion; the writing assignments are difficult, but they give him many opportunities to "dig," to rethink his most deeply held religious convictions. He describes his best freshman writing experience in one such course, Hindu Myth, Image, and Pilgrimage, where, as he describes it, "we had discussions about *dharma*—doing what is right—that would spill out of the classroom, into the hallways, continue in the dining hall, and find their way into my papers. I loved writing about something I care about and seeing myself and my voice in my papers." In Jeremy's favorite writing assignment from that class, he is asked to analyze a Hindu image. The following is an excerpt from his paper, entitled "Real Love in the Heart":

This image is of Hanuman, a devotee of Rama. It is a wall painting in Banaras painted by local artists. In the image Hanuman is opening his heart with his hands. Inside his heart we see Rama and Sita, Hanuman's lord and his wife . . . This image has stuck in my mind since I first saw it. I have seen many slides, pictures, paintings, and images of Hinduism, but nothing compares to this one for me. I can try to explain many parts of the image and different things I see in it, but nothing can compare to the intangible—the way I feel. I am devoted to Christ and I think that if one were to look into my heart, they could see Christ just as by looking at Hanuman's heart one can see Rama and Sita. This image helped me see the similarities in both my religion and the Hindu religion.

This passage, so clearly written by a novice, reveals the essence of Jeremy's freshman-year questions: How can I express my own beliefs while writing about other religions? And is the spiritual world as black and white as I was brought up to believe? While Jeremy's assignment asks him to analyze an image, he instead outlines *his* process of understanding the image—that he comes to understand and appreciate the image only when he sees how it relates to his religion. He locates the ultimate significance of the image in the way it makes him feel, as if the purpose of the assignment is to explain why he was drawn to the image, preempting any need for analysis. The paper provides a platform on which he can affirm his Christian faith, a way for him to assure himself freshman year that if his family and congregation back home peek into his heart, despite his encounters with diversity and his shaken faith, they will still see his love for Christ.

Jeremy spends his entire freshman year questioning his religious identity, wondering what truths he can hold on to, while discovering writing as a medium through which he can explore his questioning. Trying to figure out who he is and what he believes, he finds every possible chance to insert his personal experience into his work. In an essay about George Orwell for his Expository Writing course, he writes about the ways in which Orwell's questions have influenced him: "Everyone questions everything at college. Each day another thing I used to see as an immovable truth in my life is severely shaken. I often wonder what will last—is there anything absolute that I can hold on to?"

During his freshman year, Jeremy's twenty-one papers give him repeated opportunities to practice the "questioning mind set" that he describes as the key difference between high school and college writing. At the end of the year, he muses, "When you write you can really embrace different ideas and be more open-minded. If you only have true/false or multiple choice exams then everything is black and white. Writing papers lets you think and shows you how you are thinking."

Jeremy's freshman experiences offer us two important lessons. First, though the paradigm shift freshman year is vital for writing development, being passionate about material isn't enough to produce good writing. Personal connection is an important place to start, especially freshman year, for it motivates students and keeps them interested in writing. But the claim that stu-

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dents need to care deeply about a subject to write well simplifies a complex issue. Jeremy's personal investment in his sources propels his writing but prevents him from developing the critical distance he needs to analyze and evaluate them on their own terms or to offer an argument of interest to others, rather than an expression of his personal opinions. We see from his experience that some kinds of distance can be productive for students, especially when they write about strongly held beliefs. Distance helps students see that religious or political positions are debatable and can be argued in an academic context, rather than simply asserted as true.<sup>9</sup>

Second, Jeremy's experiences show us that significant changes in students' attitudes toward writing do not necessarily correspond to changes in the writing itself. The story of the freshman year is not one of dramatic changes on paper; it is the story of changes within the writers themselves. When Jeremy tells us, "writing papers lets you think and shows you how you are thinking,"

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we are surprised when as readers we don't always see his thinking on the page. But writing development isn't always happening on the page during freshman year, an important fact to consider for those who require concrete evidence—a one-time measure at the end of a first-year writing course—

as a way to assess student learning. In fact, such gaps between what a student knows about writing and what the student can actually do can be observed throughout all four years, when students are introduced to new disciplinary methods, or when they attempt their first research projects, making it difficult to measure writing development at any *one* point in a student's college career. Nevertheless, changes in attitude and practice freshman year are essential to progress. Only those students who see a greater purpose in their writing are able to sustain an interest in academic writing over their four years of college. And only through a sustained interest can students develop a "questioning mindset" or acquire the breadth of knowledge necessary to learn the disciplinary approaches that enable them to move from being novices to being experts. Despite the fact that students' passion can prevent them from achieving critical distance, without passion students are unable to make any but small gains in their writing, and they write essays their senior year that are not appreciably different from those they wrote as freshmen.

### **Sustaining interest in academic writing**

No story about college writing is complete without acknowledging that even with the best pedagogy, some students make very few gains in their writing. For all the students in our study, learning to write has been a slow process, infinitely varied, with movements backward and forward, starts and stops, with losses each time a new method or discipline is attempted. Writing development is painstakingly slow because academic writing is never a student's mother tongue; its conventions require instruction and practice, lots of imitation and experimentation in rehearsing other people's arguments before being able to articulate one's own. The surprise of the study is not that students learn the conventions of academic writing. The surprise is that some students are able to sustain an interest in academic writing throughout college, while others lose interest, despite the quality of their instruction and opportunities to prosper. From a longitudinal perspective what matters is not who is ahead at the end of freshman year (Jeremy clearly was not) but who sustains an interest in academic writing throughout college, moving forward, despite the setbacks. In the big picture of writing development, the story closely resembles Aesop's fable of the tortoise and the hare: those who end the strongest are often the slowest and most encumbered at the start. The longitudinal perspective gives us enough time to ponder why students such as Jeremy, a tortoise, moved forward with his writing, while other students who began college as much stronger writers stalled in their development, content to rely on methods that work reasonably well, replacing old formulas with new ones.

A major conclusion of our study is that students who initially accept their status as novices and allow their passions to guide them make the greatest gains in writing development. As novices who care deeply about their subjects, these students have a reason to learn the methodologies of their chosen disciplines, encouraged to believe that following their own interests is important to their success as students. And as they become more comfortable with these methodologies, they begin to see how disciplinary inquiry can help them build their own fields of expertise. Jeremy, for instance, learns to locate his questions within a wider circle of readers, seeing himself as part of an ongoing critical discussion about what compels people to accept or reject their faiths, a discussion that is legitimate in itself, not just a topic that tells him more about himself. His personal involvement gets redefined as an investment in the academic enterprise of writing prose that is public and shared rather than private and idiosyncratic. The road from personal writing to argument is not easy or quick for Jeremy, or for any of the students in our study, but the accu-

mulation of experience and expertise translates into an academic focus that gives students ownership over their college educations.

The longitudinal perspective offers up another paradox of writing development: what fuels development freshman year is not always enough to sustain it throughout college. While being a novice first year is vital for writing development, being a perpetual novice throughout four years is detrimental. To move forward with their writing, students need to shed the role of novice that was at one time the key to their success. Many of

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the students who stalled as writers were what we call globetrotters, moving from course to course, constantly breaking new ground in new subjects every time they write, never cultivating the disciplinary expertise in content and method that is necessary to question sources, develop ideas, and comfortably offer interpretations. And while passion is important to fuel writing development, it is not enough to sustain it. If students are only writing to understand their personal experiences, if their expertise comes only from their personal connection with the material, or if they see the personal and academic as opposites, their writing remains a form of self-expression, and they generally lose interest in academic writing by junior year. For Jeremy, who wanted to know what sustains belief after religion, the chance to write about these questions repeatedly in a cluster of courses and through a range of disciplines offered him the opportunity to gain great purchase with his material, while discovering other thinkers interested in similar questions. He was able to move forward with his writing because he learned to ask questions that mattered to him and to others—to have *both* a personal and intellectual stake in these questions.

Studying undergraduate writing lets us inside students' learning, shows us the complexity of a set of experiences called "college writing," and complicates our understanding of the relationship between writing and learning. According to students' own reports, when they do not see a larger purpose for writing other than completing an assignment, when they become complacent, or when they remain perpetual novices throughout college, the conditions for learning or thinking do not always exist. But when students are able to see what they can "get" and "give" through writing, they speak passionately about writing as the heart of what they know and how they learn; writing is not an end in itself but is a means for discovering what matters.

A liberal arts education envisions college as a time for students to learn how to think broadly and deeply, to ask questions and be questioned. To be asked to write in college is to be asked to see farther, wider, and deeper, and ultimately to develop one's own lenses through which to see the world. Writing does not shape a student's education in one course or one year. It is the cumulative practice and sustained instruction—the gaining of expertise—that gives students opportunities to participate in the world of ideas, first as novices and later as experts. The story of the freshman year, then, is the story of students' first steps toward discovering that academic writing can be a generous and democratic exchange. It is the story of the role that writing plays in welcoming students into the academy, showing them they have much to give and much to gain.

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### **Notes**

1. A note about terminology: though at most colleges the convention is to use the gender-neutral phrase "first-year students," Harvard College retains the term "freshmen."
2. Rudenstine went on to say in his letter to the Class of 2001: "Whatever your chosen field of study, you will not be able to proceed very far unless you constantly master new vocabularies, experiment with new forms of syntax, and try to see how precisely and sensitively your use of words can begin to reflect the very best movements of your own mind and imagination operating at their peak."
3. To learn more about the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing, please see <<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos>>.
4. Marilyn Sternglass followed nine students through City College in New York City; Anne Herrington and Marcia Curtis followed four students through University of Massachusetts/Amherst; and Lee Ann Carroll followed twenty students through Pepperdine University in Malibu, California.
5. These numbers are consistent with the findings of Richard Light and his assessment projects at Harvard. In his research, Light looked at writing as one aspect of

the entire undergraduate experience. We don't know from Light's research, though, if freshmen were more or less likely than seniors to report levels of engagement with courses that assigned writing.

6. In Lee Ann Carroll's longitudinal study, she describes students as novices but does not argue, as we are here, that for freshmen to move forward with their writing they need to *see* themselves as novices.

7. David Bartholomae has written persuasively about the codes of academic writing and the ways in which students have to "assume privilege without having any" if they are to succeed as academic writers. Our aim here is to show how "assuming privilege" means, often, admitting what you do not know, rather than pretending to possess expertise.

8. Lee Ann Carroll suggests in her study that students prosper when faculty provide "scaffolding" to help them learn the expectations of new disciplines. Sandel's course is an example of *how* scaffolding provides the necessary support for novice writers. Sandel's course is also an example of the kind of "challenging academic setting" that Sternglass suggests students need in order to develop "a greater ability to handle more complex reasoning tasks."

9. Anne Herrington and Marcia Curtis argue for the important role writing plays in helping students locate their spiritual, sexual, and academic identities, demonstrating how the four students in their study were more engaged with their writing when they used their assignments to study themselves. In our study, we also found that students were more engaged with their writing when they used their assignments to figure out what mattered to them personally and intellectually. But we also observed that when students only use writing to study themselves, they become stuck as writers, unable to move forward. Only those students who were able to find a way to connect their interests with those of a discipline, to look beyond the personal to the public, were able to move from being a novice to an expert.

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