



INTRODUCTION

Freshman Composition in the United States, 1885–Present

For more than a century now, the most required, most taught, and thus most taken course in U.S. higher education has been freshman composition. Although its title has varied over both time and space (here First Year Writing, there College English), its basic purpose and configuration have not, remaining remarkably stable over a span of 125 years and across the diverse terrain of North American postsecondary education. The course was more or less invented at Harvard in the 1870s and '80s, when required, year-long instruction in English composition for first-year students, centered on the writing of weekly themes, replaced the primarily oral, traditionally multilingual education in rhetoric that had been distributed across all four years of the older, classical curriculum. The idea of a required course in writing, focused on the “mother tongue” and located at the threshold of higher education, spread rapidly in the fast-growing, newly industrialized and urbanized United States of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. By 1900, according to Robert Connors, freshman composition was “standard at almost every college in America.”¹

The course has maintained its prevalence ever since. If there was experimentation with the requirement in the 1920s and '30s, the surge in postsecondary student numbers immediately after World War II returned it to prominence just in time for the real enrollment boom of the late 1950s and early 1960s. And although the course's standing declined somewhat in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the reduction in educational requirements of all kinds, it rebounded quickly

in the aftermath of the national literacy crisis of the mid-1970s. In the 1980s, it was as pervasive as ever, and by the turn of the twenty-first century, “English composition” accounted for more credit hours than any other course in the U.S. postsecondary curriculum.² As former Harvard president Derek Bok put it in 2006, “No other single course claims as large a share of the time and attention of undergraduates.”³

The continued prominence of freshman composition in higher education today is striking for many reasons, not least of which are the dramatic changes in society, schooling, and writing that have taken place since its founding. The last quarter century alone has seen the rise of the personal computer, the explosion of the Internet, and the rapid spread of digital communication devices, together constituting what may be the biggest transformation in literacy since the invention of the printing press. The academy has changed, too, not only in terms of technology but also in the continuing loss of a common intellectual culture, the ongoing decline in public funding, and the growing consumerist attitude among students. In such a world, a required course in expository writing, taken by all students in their first year, might seem outdated. And yet freshman composition persists and even thrives. At schools like my own, it remains the only course required of every undergraduate on campus. What’s more, it is arguably both source and beneficiary of the many new projects in literacy development that have sprung up on college campuses recently, like writing centers and writing across the curriculum programs, fostered in part by the size and success of first-year writing even as *their* energy has helped reinvent *it*.⁴

The ubiquity of freshman composition in U.S. postsecondary education is remarkable for another reason: because it is so anomalous when viewed from an international point of view. If universities all over the world have courses like history of China, introduction to biology, and macroeconomic theory, freshman composition remains peculiarly American—in fact, it is one of the distinguishing features of the entire U.S. higher education system. True, the course has made some inroads in other Anglophone countries, like Canada and New Zealand, and its links to the European rhetorical tradition make it at least a plausible, if not actual, presence on that continent. But in general, the course remains largely unique to the United States.

Of course, higher education in America is extremely diverse, and freshman composition is no exception. Not all colleges and universities require it; not all students take it even at institutions where it is required; and the course differs, often radically, from institution to institution. There are different assumptions behind it, different attitudes toward it, different ways to staff and

teach it, and different relations between it and other projects on campus—including literary studies, technical and professional communication, creative writing, public speaking, and the so-called content areas. Recent figures on course-taking in U.S. colleges and universities exemplify this variation: freshman composition is clearly less commonly taught, for example, in selective institutions than in nonselective ones.⁵

It also varies by region. If the course began at Harvard in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it soon developed a strained relationship with the nation's elite colleges and universities, especially those on the east and west coasts. Freshman composition flourished, however, in the U.S. heartland: in community colleges, land-grant public universities, branch campuses of state higher education systems, and other more or less “open” institutions of higher learning, especially in the nation's broad middle. This geographic bias is evident in the ubiquity of the first-year writing requirement in the U.S. Midwest; in the Illinois home of both the National Council of Teachers of English and the Conference on College Composition and Communication; in the presence of the biggest and best “comp-rhet” graduate programs in places like Ohio State and Purdue; and in the midwestern provenance, historically speaking, of the discipline's most influential teachers and scholars.⁶

And yet, recent developments in postsecondary education suggest that attention to writing is increasing, deepening, and diversifying everywhere, showing up in contexts that had disdained or ignored it before. There has been growth, for example, in postsecondary writing centers, writing across the curriculum programs, and writing studies curricula in Europe. And writing programs themselves have revived at elite U.S. universities like Stanford and Duke. The fact is, despite the dramatic changes in literacy that have taken place over the last century, the course's anomalous situation internationally, and its awkward fit even in the U.S. academy, first-year writing continues to be very widely taught in the United States and, increasingly, beyond.⁷

Its basic configuration is relatively easy to describe. For more than a century, and nearly everywhere it has existed, freshman composition has been a stand-alone course in expository writing at the college level; required of all or nearly all students on campus; and taken early in their undergraduate careers as both measure of their entering literacy skills and preparation for the demands of their future academic, professional, civic, and personal lives. It's an educational project characterized, in other words, by features that are all rather remarkable in the context: first, *generality* (that is, independence from any particular academic discipline, specialization, or body of knowledge); second, *universality*

(that is, applicability to all or nearly all students on campus, regardless of background or aspiration); and third, *liminality* (that is, location at the threshold of higher education—between high school and the major, the everyday and the expert).

For an improbably long time and across an extraordinarily broad range of contexts, these and other features have given the course both its surprising sociocognitive potency and its seemingly inherent vulnerability.

But how could a course so anomalous in its own context spread so rapidly across the varied landscape of U.S. postsecondary education and survive, even flourish, over such a long period of time? To answer that question, we need to leave the academy—in particular, the specialized disciplines where knowledge accumulates and courses are conceived—and make our way toward *society*, toward the everyday culture surrounding higher education. That's because, for most of its history, freshman composition has been driven not by the knowledge-making and -testing activities of a community of experts, but by “social fiat,” by the “perceived social and cultural needs” of the world outside the academy.⁸ In this, the course was and remains relatively unique in U.S. higher education. Unlike virtually every other postsecondary course—introduction to chemistry, history of China—freshman composition is not part of a generally recognized “content area,” and until recently, it lacked every accoutrement of academic professionalism: graduate programs, undergraduate majors, peer-reviewed journals, faculty chairs, and so on. The course was shaped instead by anxiety among the general public about the ability of young people to write correctly and well in the national language. That anxiety was the wellspring of freshman composition's nineteenth-century birth, and it is the main reason for the course's continuing presence in U.S. higher education today.

The form in which that anxiety has most often expressed itself is the literacy crisis, a recurring phenomenon in U.S. history, manifest every generation or so in a flurry of articles and papers about the appalling condition of adolescent writing skills. From “The Illiteracy of American Boys” (1897) to “Why Johnny Can't Write” (1975), from “A Nation at Risk” (1983) to “The Neglected ‘R’” (2003), American leaders since the Civil War have regularly looked out over the adolescent population and seen, in terms of writing, a mess: poor spelling, bad grammar, careless punctuation, awkward style. In response, they have routinely declared a literacy crisis: detailing decline, predicting disaster, and casting aspersions. According to Robin Varnum, five separate literacy crises “have disturbed the course of our educational progress” since the Civil War, occurring respectively at the end of the nineteenth century, during both world wars, fol-

lowing the launch of *Sputnik 1*, and from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s.⁹ This periodization is debatable, of course; some scholars even argue that the United States has been in a “perpetual” literacy crisis for much of its history.¹⁰

Evidence for this latter claim comes, in part, from the similarity of the discourses surrounding these events. Take the first literacy crisis, usually dated around 1870–1900 and fomented in part by the four reports published by the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric of Harvard’s Board of Overseers. When English composition was first included in Harvard’s admissions exam in 1874, the college faculty was stunned by the poor quality of applicants’ written English. Asked to “write a short English composition, correct in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and expression,” on a subject like “the character of Sir Richard Steele” or “the Duke of Marlborough as portrayed by Thackeray,” half the applicants failed.¹¹ Commenting on the exams in 1879, Professor Adams Sherman Hill complained of “bad spelling, confusing punctuation, ungrammatical, obscure, ambiguous, or inelegant expressions.”¹² A decade later, the situation had not improved: in 1892, half the candidates for admission again “could not write their mother-tongue with ease or correctness.”¹³ And even those who were admitted to the college had problems; in 1897, the oversight committee argued that the most noticeable feature of papers written in English A was their “extreme crudeness both of thought and execution.”¹⁴

The discourse surrounding the literacy crisis of the late twentieth century was not much different. In 1975, after a decade of declining scores on national scholastic aptitude tests, *Newsweek* published its famous cover story “Why Johnny Can’t Write.” It included a sentence that would be quoted ad nauseum in the coming years: “Willy-nilly, the United States educational system is spawning a generation of semiliterates.”¹⁵ Eight years later, the situation had deteriorated further—at least if you believed the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report, which estimated that as many as 40 percent of America’s minority youth were “functionally illiterate.”¹⁶ A more recent national commission argues that most students today “cannot write well enough to meet the demands they face in higher education and the emerging work environment.”¹⁷ They are unable “to create prose that is precise, engaging, and coherent”—the very writing required in a “complex, modern economy.”

Now, declarations of such literacy “breakdowns” have almost always turned out to be exaggerated—or worse. Of the mid-1970s crisis, Richard Ohmann wrote that, when one looked carefully at the evidence, the “decline in literacy” was actually “a fiction, if not a hoax”; Robin Varnum said the problem was not so much falling standards as rising expectations; and James Gee argued that the

real crisis was one of social justice, “rooted in the fact that we supply less good schools to poorer and more disadvantaged people, and better ones to more mainstream and advantaged people.”¹⁸ I’ll have more to say about this skepticism below. For now, I will simply note that evidence for broad-based changes in literacy levels is notoriously hard to gauge; there is as much reason to believe that, over time, *more* people have come to writing, in *more* genres and media, with *greater* fluency, as the reverse.¹⁹ Still, the belief that young people in the United States “can’t write” and that the situation is deteriorating is persistent and widespread. And for most of the last 125 years, it has helped fuel demand for first-year writing courses.

A typical literacy crisis includes several elements. First, there are the individuals and groups who raise the alarm: who detect, decry, explain, and sometimes even try to solve the crisis they perceive. Above, I named them “American leaders,” but they might more accurately be described as spokespersons for, or members of, the educated elite: that is, the upper middle class or, more precisely, the “professional-managerial class” (PMC), a group that arose in the United States between, roughly, 1890 and 1920 and today plays a crucial role in this and all other advanced capitalist societies. According to Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich, the class consists of “salaried mental workers,” such as teachers, lawyers, doctors, engineers, graduate students, accountants, managers, scientists, advertisers, and other “culture producers,” and makes up about 20 to 25 percent of the U.S. population.²⁰ Although the boundaries between it and other groups are fuzzy, the PMC cannot simply be lumped in with the working class, say Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, because it exists in an “antagonistic relationship” to that class, having emerged through the “expropriation of the skills and culture once indigenous to the working class.”²¹ At the same time, it is not part of the ruling class because its members do not own the means of production, and their commitment to the “technocratic transformation of society” often puts them at odds with capital—even as they play an important role in reproducing “capitalist culture and capitalist class relations.”²² For our purposes here, the key markers of the PMC are its devotion to higher education—Barbara Ehrenreich later defined the “professional middle class” as “all those people whose economic and social status is based on education, rather than on ownership of capital or property”—and its affiliation with professional life, “the characteristic form of self-organization of the PMC.”²³

The PMC’s sensitivity to issues of literacy is perhaps unsurprising given the role that reading and writing play in contemporary higher education and professional life. But its tendency to look out at the literacy skills of its fellow subjects,

especially the young, and see only decline is striking and requires explanation. According to Bronwyn Williams, the tendency is a function of middle-class anxieties about status and privilege. When the middle class reads, says Williams, it does so highly attuned to signs of cultural capital, evidence that the writer has acquired the “refined virtues” of the upper classes.²⁴ The rich, of course, can afford not to actually display those virtues, since they have economic capital to fall back on; but the middle class has nothing but cultural capital to distinguish itself from the masses—in language as in all else. That is why the “illiteracy” it sees in the general population so often turns out to be little more than breaches of linguistic etiquette.²⁵ The PMC often claims that what it is looking for is *critical skill*: sophisticated analysis and synthesis of data, compelling logic, precision in the presentation of ideas, and so on. But what seem to most energize it are improprieties of form and deviations from conventional behavior—that is, errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and mechanics.²⁶ The errors themselves may change, but their superficial nature and the anxiety they produce have remained constant for 125 years.

The bearers of “illiteracy” in these crises are usually adolescents and young adults—that is, inexperienced writers. Unfortunately, they are often seen by the PMC less as inexperienced than as deficient.²⁷ They are also frequently raced, classed, and gendered.²⁸ In fact, what seems to most reliably provoke a literacy crisis in this country is widened access to higher education for previously excluded groups.²⁹ “Each time the American educational system has rapidly expanded,” wrote Richard Ohmann in the midst of the 1970s crisis, “there has been a similar chorus of voices lamenting the decline in standards and foreseeing the end of Western civilization.”³⁰ And yet what those voices are really lamenting is the greater inclusivity of U.S. society itself. When Ohmann looked at the dip in ACT scores between 1965 and 1975, for example, he noticed that the decline took place almost entirely among women, who went from 45 to 55 percent of test takers. He inferred that “this means young women are less excluded from education now: many who would not have had a go at college then are doing so now. Presumably this new group is less well prepared than the women who used to choose higher education. If so, the “decline in literacy” translates partly into an *increase* in equality and social justice.”³¹

Literacy crises like those described here are associated with more than just expansions of higher education, of course. The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed a broad shift in the economic and cultural makeup of this country, as the United States moved from an agrarian to an industrial economy, from majority rural to majority urban residence, and from market to monopoly

capitalism. The last half of the twentieth century likewise saw dramatic changes: the shift from an industrial to a service economy, from majority urban to majority suburban residence, and from monopoly to late or global capitalism.³² Both periods also witnessed high rates of immigration, as well as uneasy extensions of the middle class. And these were periods when literacy was changing, too: the late nineteenth century saw the rise of industrialized print, and the late twentieth century widespread digital communication.³³

So if anxiety about adolescent writing, especially among the professional middle class, is perpetual, changes in the economy, society, and culture do appear to exacerbate that anxiety. But regardless of whether we see literacy crises in U.S. history as perennial or punctuated, the discourses surrounding them probably tell us less about our students and their failings, or our language and its deterioration, than about ourselves and what it means to live in a complex, fast-growing, multicultural society. In such a world, literacy is diverse and dynamic, even if many adults resent and resist that flux, pretending against all evidence that the “rules” of writing are constant and univocal. Those same adults tend to forget how they themselves learned to write, misattributing their own fluency to things like sentence diagramming or “natural” talent. Unsurprisingly, they often evaluate texts, and writers, more on matters of form than meaning, and they do so more for some texts, and some writers, than others. And, finally, they tend to believe that the literacy skills of their own and others’ children are deficient and in decline.

One response to such “decline” is to argue that the historical expansion of postsecondary education in this country is a mistake and that whole groups of young adults should probably not be going to college, at least not on an academic track. For most members of the PMC, however, curtailing access to education is unacceptable given their devotion to the very idea of meritocracy. The most common response to the literacy crisis, then, is to call for improvements in the quality of primary and secondary schools, which are seen as currently failing to equip young people with the basic skills needed for higher education and work. Thus, the perpetual literacy crisis is also a perpetual blame game. In fact, during the first literacy crisis, in the late nineteenth century, freshman composition was explicitly seen as a *temporary* solution to writing deficiencies, one that would wither away once the high schools started doing a better job preparing students for the demands of the academy and society. Mike Rose has called this the “myth of transience,” the belief that “if we can just do x or y, the prob-

lem will be solved—in five years, ten years, or a generation—and higher education will be able to return to its real work.”³⁴

For many college English professors, however, *any* responsibility for writing instruction, even temporary, was a bitter pill to swallow. As Professor Hill put it in 1879, “For [Harvard] to teach bearded men the rudiments of their native tongue would be almost as absurd as to teach them the alphabet or the multiplication table.”³⁵ Similarly, the Harvard Committee on Composition and Rhetoric complained in 1892 about “a large corps of teachers engaged and paid from the College treasury to do that which should have been done before the student presented himself for admission.”³⁶ A few years later, committee member E. L. Godkin ended a speech with this peroration: “College is the place in which to become acquainted with literature. It is not the place to acquire dexterity in the mere daily use of the mother tongue.”³⁷

Unfortunately, according to Rose, no one ever seemed to notice that this scenario, of colleges teaching composition only until the high schools improved, “has gone on for so long that it might not be temporary.”³⁸ He continues:

In fact, there will probably always be a significant percentage of students who do not meet some standard. . . . The American higher educational system is constantly under pressure to expand, to redefine its boundaries, admitting, in turn, the sons of the middle class, and later the daughters, and then the American poor, the immigrant poor, veterans, the racially segregated, the disenfranchised. Because of the social and educational conditions these groups experienced, their preparation for college will, of course, be varied. Add to this the fact that disciplines change and society’s needs change, and the ways society determines what it means to be educated change.³⁹

Thus, the course designed to solve a short-term problem in adolescent literacy skills gradually insinuated itself in the academy, finding a permanent home in the curriculum and adapting itself to needs other than those first imagined for it, in some places even coming to function as a kind of introduction to college itself.

Even more surprising than the survival of freshman composition after a century on the margins of U.S. higher education has been the rise of a bona fide intellectual discipline to support it. At the beginning of the twentieth century, “writing was the most often taught of college subjects and by a great measure the least examined,” but by the end of that century, it was the subject of professional conferences, peer-reviewed journals, scholarly book series, and funded research projects.⁴⁰ Most striking of all was the rise of the PhD in “composition-rhetoric.” If there were no advanced degrees in “comp-rhet” granted during the

entire period from 1865 to 1945, the postwar period changed that dramatically.⁴¹ By the early 1990s, there were more than twelve hundred comp-rhet doctoral students in the United States, studying in seventy-two different graduate programs, together granting more than one hundred PhD's a year.⁴² And even that number was apparently insufficient to meet the demands of the job market. According to the Modern Language Association, a third of the fifteen hundred or so English language and literature faculty positions advertised annually in the United States use "composition and rhetoric" as a search term, more than for any other term, including both "British" and "American literature."⁴³ Given these numbers, the field may actually be underproducing PhD's, an astounding claim given the state of the academic job market in general.⁴⁴

The teaching, study, and administration of first-year writing have been dramatically improved during this process. And the field of "comp-rhet" has come to define itself in ways that go well beyond that single course, becoming an active and capacious site for research and teaching throughout U.S. higher education.

And yet, freshman composition and its attendant field remain curiously unknown, invisible to both the general public and other academics. What's worse, when they are noticed, they are often disparaged and dismissed. Why? Because accompanying the belief that young people in the United States are ill-prepared for the writing required of them in college and on the job is the notion that the acquisition of such skills is a rather basic proposition. According to this view, writing is simply the transcription of speech, itself merely the outward sign of interior ideas and impulses. Learning to write is thus little more than learning the rules of graphic correspondence: how to produce and arrange the visible marks needed to represent one's meaning to nonpresent others. Such skill should be acquired early in one's schooling since it is mainly a mechanical, rather than an intellectual, accomplishment.

Now, everyone admits that there is nothing mechanical about the written expression of literary artists; but ironically, that skill is also seen as unassimilable to traditional academic curricula. The reason in this case is not that the skill is basic, but that it is inaccessible, dependent on such factors as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions" or the creative musings of genius.⁴⁵ Learning to write, in other words, is either basic or wonderful, accessible to all or only a few, a matter of memorizing rules or of tapping into rare talents of expression. There appears to be no middle ground: no course of study stretched over time and

leading to the gradual acquisition of a fluency that is schooled but within the reach of all. The set of assumptions that makes such a project unthinkable has served the interests of fluent adult writers because it mystifies their skill, enhancing its value even as it obscures its source. But it has distorted writing for everyone else, treating it as perfunctory, rule driven, and uninteresting.

The modern anxiety about literacy and young adults, the motivating impulse of freshman composition, is therefore often accompanied by the belief that literacy instruction for that group is, properly speaking, a remedial subject. Despite half a century of research and practice calling this belief into question, it retains its hold on public opinion and continues to both motivate and destabilize freshman composition itself. Unfortunately, disparagement from outside the field is often matched by an odd kind of self-loathing within. Once introduced to high theory and advanced research, newly minted PhD's in "comp-rhet" sometimes chafe at the seemingly narrow confines of the first-year course. Years of advanced study have led them to want what other fields have: full, autonomous departments awarding degrees at every level, with multicourse curricula, independent research programs, and scholarly profiles that are irreducible to the expertise needed to teach a single, "basic" course. Decades of research have also produced in them profound skepticism about the very idea of "General Writing Skills Instruction," the notion that eighteen-year-olds can be taught to write in one or two semesters.⁴⁶ In other words, while the general public continues to endorse the idea of "learning to write" even as it reduces that process to the acquisition of a basic skill, the field of composition-rhetoric itself, charged with superintending that education, no longer fully believes in its flagship project. We are thus faced with the curious situation of the most widely required and taught undergraduate course in U.S. higher education backed by a professional community that no longer fully endorses it.

In fact, throughout its 125-year history, freshman composition has probably been more vulnerable to complaint, disparagement, and even elimination than any other project in U.S. higher education. The attacks have been strikingly similar regardless of when and where they occurred. We've already encountered the earliest and perhaps most persistent criticism of the course—that it simply doesn't belong in college. But other charges have been equally damning: according to the 1892 Harvard report, reading and "correcting" freshman themes is "stupefying" work, "drudgery of the most exhausting nature"; the teachers who end up with the job, wrote Yale professor Thomas Lounsbury in a much-cited 1911 article, are thus unlikely to be well qualified for it.⁴⁷ Students, meanwhile, "loathe" the course and, as Michigan professor Warner Rice put it in 1960,

are ill motivated to do well in it.⁴⁸ Finally, the course simply doesn't work: to teach writing apart from content, wrote Columbia professor Oscar Campbell in 1939, is "intellectually dishonest as well as futile."⁴⁹ And even if it could be shown to have positive effects, one or two semesters is not enough to accrue them.⁵⁰

All these arguments were marshaled in a scathing broadside against the course published in the November 1969 issue of *College English* by Leonard Greenbaum, an English professor at the University of Michigan. In the article, Greenbaum claimed that the single most distinctive feature of freshman composition was the "tradition of complaint" that had accompanied it since its founding, a tradition that revealed, he argued, anxiety both within and without the profession regarding the course. In tracing the history of that anxiety, Greenbaum also summarized the main arguments against composition itself: it was a tedious and disagreeable course to teach; the only instructors who could be compelled to teach it were the least qualified to do so; it positioned writing in an intellectual vacuum; and there was little evidence that it actually improved student skills—in fact, it probably contributed to increased dislike and fear of writing. For these and other reasons, the course has been perennially subjected to calls for its elimination. Greenbaum made his own take on all this abundantly clear: "I'm for abolition, too," he wrote.⁵¹

Given the complex narrative told so far—of the perpetual literacy crisis that has characterized public perceptions of adolescent writing in this country since the late nineteenth century; of the stand-alone course in composition that emerged out of that crisis and is today the most widely taught course in U.S. higher education; and of the "tradition of complaint" that has accompanied that course from the beginning, both within and without its own field—one would think that histories of higher education in the United States would have devoted some time and space to freshman composition. In fact, the course has been almost completely ignored.

Take histories of "general education"—the suite of required courses usually taken in the first two years of college and meant to provide all students on campus with a shared cultural heritage, or at least common exposure to a range of fields and skills, before they concentrate on their major course of study. Studies of "gen ed" have been focused for more than half a century now on the long-standing tension in U.S. postsecondary education between the ends of breadth and depth, between distribution or core requirements for all, on the one hand, and major requirements for each, on the other.⁵² Freshman composition, unfortunately, doesn't really fit either category; it's more about activity, application,

and skill than content, whether broad or deep. Historians of general education have tended therefore to ignore it.

Similarly, histories of English studies often completely ignore writing instruction.⁵³ From the point of view of most scholars of British and American literature, in fact, the study of English in the United States *is* the study of reading, though historical evidence clearly shows that college-level “English” in this country began as much with, and has been as much about, writing and rhetoric as literature and philology. Histories of modern rhetorical theory, meanwhile, often act as if written composition doesn’t exist, and compositionists who write about the history of rhetoric sometimes seem embarrassed by their own field.⁵⁴ Linguists, creative writers, critical thinking advocates, and other scholar-practitioners who would seem to have a stake in first-year writing sometimes seem surprised that it even exists.

As for histories written by compositionists themselves, enormous progress has been made in understanding the long, complex story summarized here—in fact, according to Brereton, “historians of composition have created the single most impressive body of knowledge about any discipline in higher education.”⁵⁵ And yet the field as a whole, I would argue, has tended to marginalize the very part of the story that I’ve dwelled on here—the social anxiety that has historically motivated (and disparaged) first-year writing—treating it as important only in the early years of the discipline. From this point of view, composition began developing into a bona fide academic field in the 1950s and ’60s and then gradually built a sophisticated body of knowledge through the 1970s and ’80s, by which time it had more or less achieved full disciplinary status. The message of such histories is that we’ve now made it.

The discipline has good reason, of course, for wanting to present itself as a fully autonomous academic field. After all, scholars in the field suffer when it is not so seen. Many grant agencies still don’t list “composition” as a field of study. Tenure, hiring, and other decisions are still often based on disparagement and misunderstanding. And people still sometimes ask compositionists, “But what’s your area of *research*?” So it’s understandable that the field would have a chip on its shoulder. But is it possible that comp-rhet is under the spell of its own “myth of transience”? That, just as freshman writing will eventually wither away once the high schools finally do their job, the field’s lack of disciplinary status will also turn out to be temporary, a situation that improves once writing studies is granted the academic respect it deserves?

But what if comp-rhet will *never* be a true discipline? What if, like the freshman course, it’s a project that will never fit comfortably in the academy? And what if there is some benefit in that? What if there is virtue in the very

aspects of the field that impede full disciplinarity? “Composition is a good field to work in,” David Bartholomae once wrote, “but you have to be willing to pay attention to common things.”⁵⁶ What if the field has not yet learned to take those “common things” seriously? And what would happen if it did?

Earlier, I introduced features of freshman composition that make it anomalous in the academic context: its generality, universality, and liminality. Is it possible that these and other features are also the source of the course’s potency? After all, composition is the only course in U.S. higher education that comes more or less untethered to a traditional academic discipline, that doesn’t therefore have to introduce students to a particular body of knowledge, that is relatively unburdened by the “content fetish” that characterizes the rest of the academy.⁵⁷ It’s also, arguably, the only truly activity-based course in higher education and the only one genuinely focused on students themselves: their opinions, their backgrounds, their hopes and aspirations, their language. And, located as it is on the threshold of students’ adult lives, composition is also uniquely positioned not only to help them write their way into the academy but also to help them become full members of their own society without being tyrannized by it.⁵⁸ It’s also, on many campuses, the only course required of all students and thus can work against the fragmentation the rest of the academy actually promotes.

But it’s still, after all, a *course*. If the field of composition has had some influence on the teaching of English K–12, it remains a thoroughly postsecondary phenomenon. It may be linked to “common things,” in other words, but it’s still a project of higher education—a site of study, practice, and learning *for adults* (albeit mostly young ones). As we’ll see in this book, first-year writing is a space not only for acculturation but also for growth, change, even critique. If it’s an educational project uniquely beholden to social convention, it’s also a site where young people can begin to develop their own voices. If it’s a space unusually susceptible to social influence, it’s also by design free of predetermined content.⁵⁹ And if it’s a course thoroughly saturated by history, it’s a project that has also been unusually stable over time.

Perhaps this is the key to freshman comp’s power as an educational project: its remarkable *commonness* within the uncommon environment of the academy. It may also be what makes the course so vulnerable to critique and even abolition. After all, the course imposed by social and cultural forces can always be deposed by them as well.

One of the most dramatic events in the history of freshman composition in this country—indeed, one of the most dramatic events in the history of U.S. higher education—occurred in November 1969 in Madison, Wisconsin, on the main campus of that state’s public university system.⁶⁰ At the time, the University of Wisconsin (UW) was 121 years old, and, like other midwestern land-grant universities, it had grown rapidly, if unevenly, in the hundred years spanning the last half of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth. But the boom of the late 1950s and early 1960s was exceptional. In those years, UW experienced unprecedented growth in its student enrollment, its faculty hiring, and its physical plant. For professors and graduate students, it was a time of rampant specialization, unrelenting focus on research, and seemingly unending federal largesse. It was also a period of rapid growth in the size and diversity of the undergraduate population and the resources dedicated to their education. Every part of the university seemed to be expanding, diversifying, and flourishing. As UW’s official historians would later put it, it was the campus’s “golden age.”⁶¹

The late 1960s changed all that. The U.S. economy began to contract as the costs of the war in Vietnam and new social programs at home continued to mount. Opposition to the war itself grew louder, and domestic unrest on a variety of issues became more violent. The baby boom started to slow. And students and faculty began to turn on one another. On campuses, the years 1966 to 1971 were tense and divisive. Antiwar protests, civil rights demonstrations, union battles—they rocked colleges and universities across the country.

One hotbed for tension at UW was the huge English Department, and many of its deepest conflicts swirled around the two-semester Freshman English course, English 101 and 102.⁶² The course was required of every undergraduate on campus, a group clamoring (if inchoately) for relevance and freedom in their studies; it was taught by a cadre of politically active, newly unionized graduate teaching assistants (TAs), anxious about their future in a society they now saw as morally bankrupt and an academy whose decade-long spending (and hiring) spree was clearly coming to an end; and it was directed by an English faculty who affiliated not with first-year writing but with the advanced study of British and American literature and who, given the disaffection of the two groups mentioned above, felt themselves under siege by the late 1960s.

In November 1969, shortly after Leonard Greenbaum published his article about freshman composition’s “tradition of complaint,” the English Department at UW voted 27 to 8, with 4 abstentions, to cease offering the second semester of Freshman English, English 102, beginning in fall 1970, essentially abolishing a campus-wide composition requirement that had been in place for nearly a cen-

tury.⁶³ In justifying its move, the faculty argued that improved high school preparation made the requirement unnecessary and that any remaining responsibility for writing instruction should be borne by students' major departments.

The abolition of Freshman English at UW actually occurred in two stages: in the spring of 1968, the department rescinded the requirement for the first-semester course, English 101, keeping it on the books for the small number of students who were thereafter said to need it but allowing the majority of freshmen to proceed straight to English 102. Then, a year and a half later, in November 1969, the department eliminated outright the second course, thus effectively, and unilaterally, abolishing the university's writing requirement altogether.

These decisions were not minor: in the decade prior to 1968–69, three to four thousand students a year took six credit hours each of freshman composition at UW, a huge undertaking that employed scores of graduate TAs from English, occupied countless hours of faculty training and supervision, and constituted a major part of the undergraduate experience at the university and one of the largest and most important undertakings in the school as a whole. In fall 1970, by contrast, the number of undergraduate students taking any first-year writing course at all was in the low hundreds, and the number of English graduate students was reduced dramatically.

Nor was the abolition a momentary blip: the remedialization of the first course and the elimination of the second held, despite fervent and broad protest, and for the next quarter of a century there was no real writing requirement at UW, putting the university out of step with its peer institutions and preventing the English Department there from fully joining the "composition revolution" of the 1970s. In fact, it was not until the early 1980s that the department hired a tenure-track faculty member trained in composition studies, not until the early 1990s that it began to offer a graduate degree in composition studies, and not until 1996 that something like a universal writing requirement was revived at UW.⁶⁴

Nor did this case of abolition take place in an out-of-the-way institution with no tradition in or commitment to the teaching of writing. From 1898 to 1968, for nearly three-quarters of a century, UW's freshman composition course had been a vital, professionally run program, in a university with a prominent public mission and an English Department with a long record of thoughtful attention to writing and rhetoric, including a role in national debates about first-year composition itself. The reduction and then elimination of the Freshman English requirement at UW were thus high-profile events, playing out on a very public stage, in one of the largest departments on campus, at a leading

institution of higher learning, during one of the most turbulent times in the country's history.

And yet, for all the significance of these events, and the drama of their unfolding, the story of the abolition of Freshman English at UW has never really been told. It has been recounted in print only once, in a couple of paragraphs in the fourth volume of *The University of Wisconsin: A History*, published in 1999.⁶⁵ This silence is all the more surprising given the amount written about 1960s-era Madison and the later prominence of some of the “freshman comp” teachers of the time, from Lynne Cheney to Ira Shor.⁶⁶

That's not to say that the events in question were forgotten. In fact, a particular narrative about the elimination of the second-semester course survived and continues to be recounted orally in the hallways of the university. According to that narrative, English 102 was abolished in the fall of 1969 because the graduate TAs who taught it were not doing their job; they had become more interested in politically indoctrinating their students and disrupting the university than in actually teaching writing. Given the number of TAs and the general tumult of the time, the faculty decided that the best course of action was to drop the course altogether, justifying their decision with the two-part argument mentioned above, which claimed improved skills among entering students and a campus-wide responsibility for writing instruction.

There are taped interviews in the university's Oral History Program, dating back to the early 1970s, that seem to bear out this unofficial story, which blames radical TAs for the abolition of the course. And there is an extensive collection of primary documents in the English Department, including minutes of committee meetings, official correspondence, and memos to and from the dean of the College of Letters and Science, which seems to confirm it. These materials are rich and useful, but they provide only a partial view of the events in question. The English Department's official records, for example, reflect almost exclusively the senior faculty's point of view about Freshman English. The Oral History Program is similarly biased toward tenured faculty, including not a single interview with an English Department teaching assistant from the late 1960s.⁶⁷ There are almost no records anywhere, meanwhile, concerning how undergraduate students experienced these courses or the changes to them.⁶⁸

This book began as an attempt to recover those voices. When I arrived at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in fall 1998 to take a position as an assistant professor of English, I was surprised by the relatively small size and

generally muted profile of freshman composition (English 100) there. After all, my new professional home was a storied English Department on the flagship campus of a world-famous, midwestern, land-grant, state university. It should have had a more substantial writing program, I thought, with a more robust administrative structure, a larger teaching staff, more tenure-stream faculty, a higher profile in the English Department and on campus, and more sustained traditions behind it.

Now, the situation could be explained in part, I surmised, by the program's youth. After all, English 100 was only a year or two old in 1998—itself something of a shock. But youth didn't explain everything. After I had been there a few years, it became clear that "comp" was probably never going to be as prominent or as well supported at UW as at comparable programs in other Big Ten universities. The composition faculty at Madison was the smallest in its peer group. And only a third of students at the university ever took a first-year writing course, certainly one of the lowest proportions among comparable institutions. I was puzzled: how could *this* be freshman comp at one of the premier midwestern land-grant universities in the country, the very heart of my field?

So I started to ask around. And when I did, I began to hear stories about the 1960s, about radical TAs using Freshman English to politically indoctrinate their students. Because of such misconduct, I was told, the course had been abolished and the university's writing requirement rescinded for nearly a quarter of a century. What I heard about all this, however, came entirely from senior faculty members who had survived the trauma of that era. Other than their stories, there didn't seem to be much institutional memory concerning the old freshman course; I heard nothing from the TAs' point of view, and I never saw anything about the episode in print. So the question began to nag at me: what really happened to freshman composition at UW during the late 1960s?

At first, I envisioned a small study designed to answer that question, conducted with a few graduate students and culminating in a journal article or book chapter of some kind. But even that modest idea was a long time bearing fruit. Finally, in the spring of 2003, when I was invited to guest-teach a graduate research methods course for three weeks, I designed a unit on local history that used UW's own Freshman English course as ground for the students and me to excavate together. The idea was to focus on primary documents and be open to whatever we might discover about composition at UW, at any point in its history. In fact, some of the first documents we found concerned the English Department's surprising national prominence in composition instruction in the early decades of the twentieth century, when the celebrated handbook author Edwin Woolley directed Freshman English.

That group of students uncovered something else in the spring of 2003, which had a dramatic impact on how this project unfolded. Deep in the files of the English Department, they found a faded, two-page memo, dated October 13, 1969, recording the minutes of a meeting about UW's Freshman English program. Written by stewards of UW's Teaching Assistants Association (TAA) and distributed to that group's English Department members, the memo recounted a heated exchange between nearly one hundred graduate TAs and two faculty members—the chair of the English Department and the director of Freshman English—about English 102, the second semester of the required freshman course. The minutes began by airing a disagreement between one of the TAs and the chair over the use of a nonsanctioned text in class. As the document proceeded, however, that disagreement broadened to include other disputes, and it escalated quickly into personal denunciation and ideological recrimination. At the end of the meeting, according to the minutes, the assembled TAs voted to take over the Freshman English Policy Committee, then under faculty control. At that point, the chair left in frustration, and the memo drew to a rapid close.

The document remains to this day an unnerving artifact for me, and much of this book can be seen as an attempt to explain it—how that meeting came to be, what happened in its aftermath, and what those events reveal about the history and nature of my own field.

Unfortunately, the three-week research unit quickly came to a close, and we all moved on to other things. And yet I found myself hooked on the 1960s. I began reading everything I could about Madison during that era. David Maraniss's haunting book about October 1967, *They Marched into Sunlight*, with chapters set alternately in Vietnam and Madison, came out about this time. It led me to Barry Brown and Glenn Silber's documentary *The War at Home*, also set in Madison, which in turn led me to Tom Bates's *Rads*, a stunning account of the 1970 bombing of Sterling Hall on the UW campus. It was also about this time that I discovered the oral history archive at UW, which included interviews with key faculty members from the 1960s. And I came across the fourth volume of the official history of UW, by David Cronon and John Jenkins, published in 1999, which included chapters on the Vietnam War era. As I learned more about the place and time, I began to realize that part of the story of 1960s Madison was missing from these accounts: the huge Freshman English course, which—because it was taught in small sections to nearly every undergraduate on campus; because it was staffed by graduate TAs, themselves both students and teachers; because it centered on reading and writing in general rather than on disciplinary “content”; and because it was thus unusually

open to influence from its own time and place—was an especially rich source for studying higher education in that moment of radical change.

So I began to imagine a research project about late 1960s Freshman English at UW, centered on the TAs who taught the course and based on archived documents and oral history interviews. In September 2004, I applied for a grant from the UW-Madison Graduate School to pay two students to help me do the primary research. The application was accepted, and after putting out a call, I hired Rasha Diab and Mira Shimabukuro, two talented doctoral students in rhetoric and composition at UW-Madison. We set to work. Through the spring and summer of 2005, Rasha, Mira, and I unearthed documents and talked to former UW TAs from the 1960s. We located the TAA archive and read intently the two issues of its short-lived journal *Critical Teaching*; we pored over the English Department's own records, including committee minutes stretching back through most of the twentieth century, documents that were astonishingly detailed precisely for the period—the late 1960s—we were most interested in. We listened to the audiotapes stored in the university's Oral History Program and conducted our own original interviews with former TAs and junior faculty members. As the summer wore on, we began to realize that we were accumulating a wealth of untapped data about a fascinating chapter of U.S. history. It was a thrilling experience.

When we later shared our research in a presentation to English Department faculty and graduate students in the spring of 2006, two things became clear: First, there was still intense interest in and continuing controversy about the 1960s, at least among academics in Madison, Wisconsin. Forty years after the events in question, the topic elicited raw emotions. Second, the material we had accumulated, and the depth with which we were beginning to talk about it, had quickly exceeded the article-length parameters I had imagined for this research.

So, in the summer of 2006, my funding now exhausted and working largely on my own, I made a unilateral decision: rather than keep cutting an ever-expanding story to fit the confines of the essay genre, I would expand the narrative into a book. The summer looked blissfully free in terms of practical responsibilities: my oldest child was out of the country; my younger one had joined a pool and was swimming all day long; I had finally finished a draft of an earlier, unrelated book project; and I was now between jobs, having resigned my faculty position at Wisconsin and accepted one at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, where I would move in August. So for three months, I worked full-time on the UW story. By the end of the summer of 2006, when

I left Madison for a new life on the East Coast, a first draft of the manuscript was complete. Without quite setting out to do so, I had recounted not just the events of the late 1960s, but the whole story of composition at UW, from the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth century: 150 years of stability and upheaval, innovation and stagnation—perhaps the fullest account available of a writing course in a North American university.

It was also clearly now about more than just that one course. Having read widely in the history of my own field, I knew that what had happened at UW was not entirely out of sync with the broader story of freshman composition in this country. Add to that my own complicated relationship with composition, my sensitivity to its role in contemporary English departments and university general education programs, and my scholarly background in the history and theory of rhetoric, and I was primed to see in the story of this specific course broader lessons about freshman composition and higher education in general.

I thus follow here a long tradition in historical research of trying to tell a general story by focusing on a particular one. This is, in other words, a case study, which involves gathering and analyzing data about an individual example as a way of studying a broader phenomenon. It is done on the assumption that the example (the “case”) is in some way typical of the broader phenomenon. The case may be an individual, a city, an event, a society, or any other possible object of analysis. The advantage of the case-study method is that it allows more intensive analyses of specific empirical details. The disadvantage is that it is sometimes hard to use the results to generalize to other cases.⁶⁹

I hope the advantages of such a method will be evident in the book itself: the narrow focus afforded by concentrating on such a well-bounded topic, the rich detail provided by access to such large amounts of data concerning that circumscribed world, and the continuous narrative arc made possible by holding nearly everything else constant. It is this specificity, I believe, that makes history come alive here (to the extent that it does). The details concerning these real people, living in this real place, working in a real program in a real institution, and interacting with others through the complexities of their lives together, give the story authenticity and, I hope, value. As John Brereton once wrote, in our attempts to understand the past, *theory* is relatively easy to get at; what often gets left out is *detail*, “the everyday fabric of history.”⁷⁰

That detail enabled me to tell what I believe is a surprisingly gripping story, but also to avoid reducing my research subjects (whether people, places,

projects, events, or even whole eras) to stereotype. My main methodological goal, in fact, was (as much as possible) to let the documents collected and the interviews conducted speak for themselves, without heavy theoretical or ideological overlay. In fact, except for the introduction and conclusion, there isn't much overt theoretical reflection here. And I don't spend a lot of time situating the history of UW's Freshman English program in a grand narrative of national scope. Overviews and surveys have their uses; what I wanted to do, rather, was stay close to the ground, privilege the local and particular, and build the project up from primary sources.⁷¹ Now, admittedly, I exert agency here; the focus on the TAs, for example, clearly affected the conclusions reached. But I try to be explicit about why I made the choices I did, and I refer to alternative interpretations of these events and the data on which they rely.

But of course none of this rebuts the traditional criticism of the case study, which is that researchers using such an approach often fail to make the individual case relevant for others, to make their conclusions, based on their research, more broadly applicable to other cases. The study might reveal in rich, detailed, and comprehensive ways a particular person, place, time, program, or event, but it's not clear what the research community as a whole, or the public at large, learns from such work about the world beyond that case. To put this in the form of a question and bring us back to the project at hand: what will readers learn from this study, focused on a single course at a single institution, about freshman composition in general, about the 1960s at large, or about U.S. higher education more broadly?

First, I believe this study tells us new things about the history of freshman composition. In particular, it helps compositionists across the country make better sense of a period that, oddly, has not been well accounted for in our disciplinary histories, narratives that have tended, in my opinion, to privilege the decades from 1946 to 1966, when "comp-rhet" emerged as an academic discipline, and 1971 to 1991, when the process paradigm established itself as the dominant approach to teaching writing in this country, but have largely skipped over the handful of tumultuous years in between, from 1967 to 1970.⁷² Consequently, much has been written about composition's professionalization, from the 1949 founding of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) to the 1963 publication of Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer's *Research in Written Composition*,⁷³ the rise of the so-called new rhetorics of the late 1950s and early 1960s, including the 1963 CCCC panel on the "New Rheto-

ric” and the 1965 publication of Edward P. J. Corbett’s *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*; and the gradual emergence in the late 1960s and early 1970s of the process paradigm in the teaching of writing, including Gordon Rohmann’s pioneering 1965 work on prewriting, the 1966 meeting of British and American English teachers at Dartmouth, and the groundbreaking work of Janet Emig, Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, and others in the early 1970s.⁷⁴

But as important as all these trends were in the field’s development during the last half of the twentieth century, *none* shows up in the sources we uncovered about Freshman English at the University of Wisconsin during the Vietnam War era.⁷⁵ The few references we found to “rhetoric” were almost all pejorative; there is little indication that writing research or composition pedagogy might be an intellectual or academic field in its own right; and there is almost no mention at all of “process.”⁷⁶ Is it possible that the field has overstated the role of certain intellectual and pedagogical movements during the last half of the twentieth century and overlooked others that, at least at UW in the late 1960s, were more significant? Have we missed something historically crucial, in other words, between 1966 and 1971, between the Dartmouth seminar on the teaching of English and the publication of Janet Emig’s *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*?

In the mid-1960s, after all, Freshman English at UW, as elsewhere, was still under the sway of a “current-traditional” paradigm that had been developed nearly a century before, amid a rapidly expanding postsecondary educational system in North America that was designed to prepare students for an urban, industrial, print-based economy dependent on widespread skills in “standard” English written prose.⁷⁷ It was a paradigm that proved remarkably durable and can still in fact be detected in writing instruction today.

But by the late 1960s, with massive changes under way in the global economy, in the social, political, and cultural conditions of the United States, and in the modern North American research university, that paradigm was proving to be both limited and limiting. Unfortunately, no new approach had emerged to replace it. In 1968 and ’69, therefore, the freshman course at UW was essentially set adrift: the faculty in the English Department were no longer interested in it; those directing it were treated, in general, as low-level administrators and not provided the resources needed to accomplish the huge task before them; many of the graduate student TAs who shouldered its burdens were deeply ambivalent about it; and the students taking it were often resentful of the requirement and the mechanical way the course was often taught. What’s worse, no new theoretical paradigm had appeared that could change any of this: the

so-called new rhetoric had not made the slightest inroad at UW; the alleged professionalization of writing studies was nowhere in evidence; the “process” movement was years away.

Still, the teaching of general education reading and writing at UW in the late 1960s was, for many of its instructors, a serious—and relatively autonomous—intellectual and social project that demanded and rewarded reflection, experimentation, and self-evaluation. In the UW Freshman English program, the most important development during these years was the rise of a short-lived but potent pedagogy, simultaneously critical and humanist, developed almost entirely by English graduate student teaching assistants working by and among themselves, and reflective of (but not reducible to) the new world created by the war in Vietnam, the civil rights movement, the struggle for ethnic studies programs, and the other political, cultural, and ideological transformations of the time—as well as by the changing socioeconomic conditions of the 1960s and the new university that had materialized in response to them.⁷⁸

It was a pedagogy that promoted relevance as the key criterion for selecting and evaluating educational materials and tasks, that advocated a radical decentering of classroom authority away from the teacher, that used “emergent” curricula responsive to the day-by-day life of the course and the growing human beings involved in it, and that rejected conventional grading as the ultimate assessment of student work.

It was a pedagogy that was also profoundly unacceptable to the tenured faculty in the English Department at the time, who were unwilling either to relinquish control over the freshman course or to take an active interest in it. They responded to the new world of postsecondary literacy education, therefore, by retreating into advanced, specialized literary study and abandoning, almost overnight, the department’s long-standing commitment to general education writing instruction.

The second main contribution of this project, I hope, is the illumination it provides on the 1960s in general, especially the momentous changes in higher education that took place during that decade. In fact, as I argue here, the most important influence on writing instruction at UW during this time was not any new theory or pedagogy of composition, but the massive cultural, demographic, political, economic, and institutional changes that were taking place in the country at large, changes felt especially acutely on college and university campuses and affecting general education courses, like first-year composition, more

than any others. The story of English 101 and 102 at UW in the late 1960s, in other words, needs to be told in the context of the changing material conditions of U.S. higher education and North American society during those years, when a rapidly expanding and increasingly diverse student population, mounting federal support for education and research, and a relative liberation of both politics and culture came up against massive civil unrest, foreign war, and the growing anxiety, disillusionment, and alienation of young people.

I show here, for example, how, during the 1960s, growing pressure on English Department faculty to specialize, expand their graduate programs, and develop stronger research profiles coincided with increasing needs in undergraduate general education at the time, a contradiction that was resolved, temporarily and uneasily, by expanded reliance on graduate student teaching assistants, whose rising numbers signaled a perilous overextension of the profession. In all this, the year 1969 turns out to have been a key year, a “hinge,” or moment of rupture, and the freshman composition course a more important cultural, institutional, and pedagogical battleground than we have previously thought.⁷⁹

But to understand what happened in the English Department at UW in 1969, we need to put that year in the wider context of “the long sixties,” a period stretching from around 1957 to around 1974—from the launch of *Sputnik* to the end of the Vietnam War, “from the heyday of the Beat movement and the rise of popular youth culture to Watergate.”⁸⁰ It is a period that historians are increasingly using to mark a kind of watershed era in the history of the West.⁸¹ The period is bookended, economically, by two recessions (1957–58 before and 1973–75 after), at least in the United States; but it cannot be characterized therefore as simply an era of growth between two contractions. That’s because “the long sixties” itself needs to be divided into at least two subperiods: an early time of expansion, prosperity, and liberalization (say, 1957–64) and a later time of decline, unrest, and reaction (1965–74), the latter years effectively setting up “the long downturn” that began in the mid-1970s and continues, arguably, today.⁸²

Looked at from this wide-angle view, “the long sixties” functioned as an extended, complex, dramatic transition in the West—a kind of borderland between modernism and postmodernism, monopoly and late capitalism, print and digital literacy, and the industrial and the service economy. It was also a consequential period for the North American university, with the clash between “research” and “teaching,” mentioned above, constituting one battle in a broader war for the heart and soul of higher education in this country. As I argue here, freshman composition was an important, if overlooked, front in that war, and studying it can tell us much about the story of modern U.S. postsecondary edu-

cation, not only because first-year writing has often been, in general, a site where the contradictions in our academic institutions play themselves out, but also because we can see in it, at least in terms of general education, how the old conservative order (at its peak in the mid-1950s) collapsed, a radical alternative emerged (in the 1960s) but then also collapsed (around 1969), and then a new paradigm—more liberal than the old order but more congenial to the new service economy than the radical alternative—began to take shape (in the early 1970s). In the terms of first-year writing, this is the story of the demise of current-traditional rhetoric and the birth of the process movement.

And that brings us to the third, and I believe the most important, lesson of this book, which concerns freshman composition itself. Let's briefly return, then, to Leonard Greenbaum's 1969 article on the "tradition of complaint" that has accompanied freshman composition in this country since its birth. If Greenbaum's goal was to inaugurate a new period of anticomposition ferment, to add to the prior periods recounted in the essay, he was not entirely successful.⁸³ There is some evidence for a nationwide reduction in the freshman English requirement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, mostly likely as part of a general turn away from course requirements at the time; but the changes were modest and largely reversed by the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁸⁴ But what Greenbaum could not know was that prominent proposals to abolish the course would reappear a quarter century *after* his article appeared, in, for example, Sharon Crowley's 1991 call to eliminate the universal requirement, and continue right up to the present (see, for example, David Smit's 2004 *The End of Composition Studies*).⁸⁵

One might disagree with these pronouncements, but it's hard to ignore the fact that they exist; that they recur with remarkable regularity; and that they have been based for more than a century now on a surprisingly stable set of arguments, some of which even defenders of the course concede. In other words, we are dealing here with an educational project that has probably produced more criticism than any other curricular effort in the postsecondary academy. In fact, it's hard to imagine another course so firmly ensconced in our colleges and universities that is under such constant threat of elimination, or at least disparagement, even at the hands of its own professors.

And yet, oddly, given how threatening the phenomenon of abolitionism is, and how historically self-conscious composition studies has become during the last generation, the field has produced very few case studies of actual abolition. Most of the writing on this topic, in fact, has taken the form of either polemics

for or against the course in general or surveys of others' arguments for or against it, a la Greenbaum.⁸⁶ What the field lacks, however, are rich, careful empirical studies of actual first-year composition courses, requirements, and programs under stress, told in a way that situates the courses and the opinions and decisions regarding them in their particular spatiotemporal contexts but also allows for reflection on the long-term effects and broader implications of those opinions and decisions.

I offer the following narrative, then, not only to help correct local misrepresentations of the history of Freshman English at the University of Wisconsin but also to help compositionists at large better appreciate the role of "the long sixties" in the story of their discipline and to help everyone involved in higher education make better sense, even today, of "freshman comp," a course that is, at once, inherently unstable and enormously resilient, constantly at risk of marginalization and yet surprisingly central, even inescapable, at key moments in our nation's cultural, intellectual, and material history.