

COMPOSITION STUDIES  
SPECIAL ISSUE:  
CREATIVITY

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## **Editorial Introduction: Creativity**

Welcome to our special edition of *Composition Studies*. The theme of this edition is creativity, in composition theory and praxis. Creativity is something we need more of within the field of rhetoric and composition. And, more importantly, our students need more of it from us. Most importantly, students need to see our creativity enacted within the classroom to see us leading by example.

### **Why Creativity?**

“Many college students write for one reason and one reason only: to complete a class assignment.”

(Glenn Lester, et al., 1)

Like Lester et al. we are focusing on improving ourselves as practitioners and theorists, and helping our students become better writers. To start, we’re going to sidestep the gnarly definitions of creativity. Instead, here is the Cambridge definition that provides more of a basic understanding: “Creativity is the ability to produce or use original and unusual ideas” (*Creativity*).

In the spirit of creativity, we want to open this edition with a sort of intellectual exercise. This means that a little more participation than usual may be required. We ask that you read the content of this issue less from the perspective of the accomplished practitioners and theorists that

you are, and more from the perspective of the students whom we all serve. Instead of putting yourself in the shoes of a first year student, we want to put a loved one in that role. In this exercise, we want you to take note of what you notice, how you would feel if this were to happen to you, and what you would do in response to this situation. The key is that you feel something. The more you feel the better.

To begin our exercise, imagine yourself in your classroom. Remember as vividly as you can the way it smells when you first enter it after a long weekend. The pattern of the wood grain of the desks, the shuffle of chairs as students come and go. The whiteboards that are never truly clean, marker residue left behind from years of use. The click of the door when it closes.

Next, we invite you to reread and consider the quote by Lester, et al. above. Let's say that Lester's statement about students is generally true and widespread. And let's assume that the reason the students write "to complete the class assignment" is actually in service to the follow-up goal which is to do something else, something they'd rather do. Now, imagine if the person you love most was in your classroom, with the rest of your composition students, and that your loved one doesn't know you're there. The classroom is quiet, which isn't abnormal. But your students, usually engaged with only their smartphones, are all paying attention to the mystery guest. Then one of your more talented but disinterested students who never speaks breaks the silence. Everyone is listening. The student asks your loved one in a clear voice: "Why would you want to do anything with our professor?" Your loved one responds, "So that I can appease them, then get on with my life. I would much rather be doing something else." Everyone laughs, including your loved one. Apparently they're in good company. How would you feel?

If you are reading this, you are most likely one of our usual audience members. You are a theorist of composition, a practitioner, or both, and you are probably very good at what you do. Just the fact that you are reading this suggests that you are extra dedicated and devoted to your profession. It gives *you* a sense of purpose. It, intrinsically, is meaningful. Certainly, many of you are probably weary of hearing about the latest creative solutions. Or maybe you enthusiastically embrace creativity, and implement it in your classroom as much as you can, and you think it's working. But what if, either way, the only meaning your class has for your students is that it is a means to an end, simply "to complete the class..."?

Does this seem like a meaningful way to write? We say no, probably not, because if your heart is not in what you are writing you can not connect with your audience successfully. Given the same skills, the writer with a powerful sense of purpose, heart, or passion, outwrites the writer without it. The same is true for learning the skill of writing.

But part of what we want to emphasize in this special issue is the fact that improved student outcomes don't necessarily have to do with students themselves "being creative" in the composition classroom, or "creative" curricula that force students to do tasks that curriculum designers presume will be effective. Instead, we want to stress that there are many kinds of creativity, and suggest that the kinds of creativity that matter most have far less to do with "creativity" as most of us imagine it, and far more to do with the purpose of creativity.

What is the purpose of a composition professor if not to teach and inspire the next great leaders of this field or help students communicate effectively in other fields? We were once in our students' shoes, dreading each assignment handed to us by our own professors. Each increase in word count felt like another weight on our shoulders. We were in the trenches until someone

pulled us out and guided us to a safer place. Imagine what our students could invent, inspire or even create if we taught them from the very beginning that their writing can show the reader who they truly are. We could help them change the field as we know it... or let them continue on the way they are.

In this journal we explore how we can effectively change the future of rhetoric and composition through the way we introduce students to the field, in Composition one and two. What can we do as a field to help first year college students view writing as more than just a way to complete an assignment? How do we, as theorists, practitioners, curriculum designers, and more, work harder to find novel ways to engage our students, enabling them to be the most effective and inspired writers they can be? And what, ultimately, does it mean to be creative when writing within the constraints of rhetoric and composition? In this issue we explore these three questions in unique ways from how AI affects creativity, how to actively engage students, to how to implement new books in a syllabus to inspire creativity.

As a discipline of knowledge creation, language, and exploration, rhetoric and composition stands at the forefront of literary conversation. It is our job as educators, scholars, readers, and writers to make ethical decisions when engaging with composition and works of rhetoric. In this digital age, it's more important than ever to be aware of the technological shift that's happening in the classroom - and how to ethically and responsibly proceed. We explore the intersection between these technologies and creativity, and how that tool might be the key to ethical usage.

Creativity, like student learning, needs to be fostered. We need to show our students that through their own creativity they have the power to connect with their audience even within the constraints of genre. As editors we have decided to explore some of the many ways creativity can be taught, fostered, and learned. We need to give our students an opportunity to feel the freedom of writing that they'll have after graduation within the "constraints" of the classroom, long before they've reached "the end." This could change our field as we know it.

As we navigate the newly charted territory of teaching creativity we would like to advise you to keep an open mind. To think of your first year students who feel as though they can't speak, because they are afraid of being judged, they fear failure and expulsion. To us, creativity is what set each of us free to explore ourselves, see things in a new way, provide us with critical thinking skills, and even gave us more empathy. Even though that is where we all are now, we all did not feel that way once. We used to long to be free of the stresses of academic pressure to explore our own thoughts, questions, and desires, like us, first year students feel the same way. So, we invite you to hold onto your creative light and brave the storm with us for a bit and hopefully as a field we will reach the rainbow. That way, we can show our first year students how to get into the guiding light of creativity.

## **This Issue**

This Summer 2024 Special Issue offers three exciting new pieces that address creativity and how it fits within first year writing classrooms. But before we examine this issue's *written*

contributions, we would like to take a moment to discuss a key feature of this issue, which many of you may have noticed already: our cover. An exciting and collaborative effort that we designed together in Canva, it attempts to capture the feelings many first year composition students are overwhelmed by in class because of two tough demands placed on them. Our cover illustrates what it feels like to struggle with oneself, and what first year writing students feel daily as they begin a new chapter of their lives. First, our students struggle with the constraints our classes put on them. Second, at the same time we are demanding they meaningfully express themselves within those already difficult constraints .

[The Background:] The ombre brown to white background reflects the uncertainty first year students feel along with the depression that many go through, but it leads into the white light of creativity and the freedom that comes with it. [The Foreground:]The woman on our cover, our subject, is a first year student who is struggling with depression and the uncertainty many first year students feel. The darkness around her mind shows feelings of stress, anxiety, and confusion. Emerging from the darkness of the brain is a rainbow of creativity. Within that rainbow are things that influence creativity and correlate with the differing sides/hemispheres of the brain.

The left brain or logical brain deals with the practice of writing and the fears and anxieties caused by it. The left side of the brain starts with the red grades of A+, B-, C-, and D, illustrating the worrying about passing classes, the orange quill represents writing for academic purposes, and the yellow cage illustrates the struggles with realizing the freedom one has as an adult. The right side of the brain has the green light bulb for the ideas that spur in the mind , the blue butterflies representing the spreading of wings within creativity, and the purple flower for creativity blossoming. The woman's mouth is taped to reflect the bias of AI which silences and



misrepresents particular voices, as well as the fear of speaking up which results in holding oneself back. But she is finding the courage through creativity to peel the tape off and begin exploring herself.

## **FEN Blog Post**

The FEN Blog Post, “AI as a Tool of Creativity/Colonialism,” is written by Dylann Croteau and centers on the topic of bias in AI. It explores the research and evidence behind bias exhibited by generative AI such as ChatGPT, and the potential consequences of utilizing this technology in the first year composition classroom. The blog post examines the issue of AI as a method of reinforcing stereotypes and biases that exist in our history, and proposes a way to navigate the use of AI in the composition classroom in an ethical and creative way to ensure diverse perspectives and marginalized voices are heard. Croteau offers us the hopeful insight that AI’s biases and the dilemmas it presents society with are an opportunity for composition educators and their students to be creative in countless new ways. Each potential roadblock and complication introduced by this technological integration is an opportunity for creative innovation and deeper engagement in the composition classroom.

## **Where We Are**

This issue's Where We Are comes from the perspective of Phillip Martin, who suggests that more recent trends in creative pedagogy are the result of a widespread, profound crisis of purpose that is unintentionally being overlooked. In his essay Phillip draws attention to the challenges posed by defining creativity and examines current discussions of and efforts to implement it in the first year composition classroom. He scrutinizes what in his view are the underlying assumptions of recent efforts to creatively address composition students' lack of meaningful participation in the writing classroom and then addresses what he calls our students' crisis of purpose. Citing a disturbing, growing body of social science, Phillip warns us that the problem of composition students' disengagement is a symptom whose cause lies troublingly deeper than much of the work on creativity in the classroom suggests. Although creativity—a multifaceted cipher for the human spirit—is necessarily part of the solution to the crisis, Phillip urges us to reflect on our roles as educators and frame our students' challenges in a new way, not just as a struggle between pen and paper, but between life and death.

## **Book Review**

Our journal concludes with Rachael Bell's book review of Joan Didion's *Let Me Tell You What I Mean: An Essay Collection*. Rachael explores the question of how composition as a field can change how first year students view writing. She examines three of Didion's twelve essays in depth, carefully reviewing each essay's employment of creativity. Rachael concludes with suggestions of how to incorporate Didion into the first year writing classroom as a way to teach

students creativity, enabling students to learn the importance of genre, audience, and to confront the risks of writing.

Finally we would like to thank our readers, *Composition Studies* subscribers, journal staff, and writers for making this special issue possible. We hope you find this issue to be an exciting collaboration on creativity. Though our journal ends with this genre, we hope it stays with you, encouraging you to be creative in every aspect of your life.

Rachael, Dylann, and Phil

Orlando, Florida

July 2024

## FEN Blog Post

### AI as a Tool of Creativity/Colonialism in the Composition Classroom



Image generated using Canva AI Image Generator

As a society, we are learning faster than ever before. Technology is growing at a pace only dreamed of in science fiction novels, and access to information and learning capabilities is more affordable than ever thought possible. In regards to use in the composition classroom, systems of generative AI (or GenAI) have progressed from simple spell check to idea generation and writing assistance. It is important to keep in mind, however, that as we integrate these systems of learning and new technologies into the classroom that we continue to place diversity, equity, and inclusion at the forefront of education and scholarly activity. The controversy surrounding AI and its effectiveness in composition classrooms is not a new discussion. It almost seems inevitable that these tools of artificial intelligence would find their way into education, as

they have in every other aspect of life. If these tools of machine learning and artificial intelligence such as [ChatGPT](#) are becoming a staple in classrooms of rhetoric and composition, I seek to explore and identify the line where this tool turns from helpful to harmful.

It is becoming widely acknowledged that data-driven technologies and machine learning algorithms are created with a pre-set bias. When humans create technology, true objectivity is not attainable (Leavy et al. 1). These platforms of AI are inherently biased, built from the perspective of the dominant speaker in society and fed the voices of those in power: in the West, the White, male, figure. In this way, the same patterns of inequalities and power imbalance repeat themselves through platforms of artificial intelligence. Marginalized peoples stay marginalized. Diverse perspectives become muted and lost in the sea of voices that overpower them ([Owusu-Ansah](#) 145).

Generative AI works by pulling information from across sources on the Internet that's readily available, too often disproportionately White and male. As noted in "[Data, Power, and Bias in Artificial Intelligence](#)" by Leavy et al., "Every dataset that aims to represent humans and their behaviour does so in accordance with a world-view or ideology that may be assimilated into an AI system" (Leavy et al. 2). Thus, no knowledge on the Internet is truly neutral – it is wrought with the bias entrenched in its creators. As Manyika et al. state, "AI systems learn to make decisions based on training data, which can include biased human decisions or reflect historical or social inequities, even if sensitive variables such as gender, race, or sexual orientation are removed" ([Manyika et al.](#)). Because GenAI machines are not able to discern "value or accuracy or bias" in the data they pull ([Dobrin](#) 8), critical thinking is essential while working with these programs.

Sidney Dobrin speaks on the issue of a lack of diverse perspectives and the bias found in generative AI (GenAI) and large language models (LLMs):

“Large quantities of data created by marginalized people are often excluded from digital databanks. The narratives of many disenfranchised groups are not readily accessible to LLMs because their voices and narratives have been historically excluded from our accounts of history. As such, their contributions frequently remain absent from the LLMs and, thus, from what GenAI engines produce.” (“Talking About Generative AI” 28-9)

This ties in with [Owusu-Ansah](#)’s ideas of “missing people” (146) and the need to examine these technologies - how they represent, define, and shape our understanding of ourselves and one another through a colonialist lens.

AI chatbots aren’t the only generative technology to exhibit harmful bias. I used [Canva’s](#) AI image generator to create the image below (see Fig. 1). I used the keywords “robot writing with human audience watching” and this is what it produced: an overwhelmingly *White* audience. My experience of an AI image generator providing biased results is not a unique one. [Tiku et al.](#) found: “When we prompted the technology to generate a photo of a person receiving social services, it generated only non-White and primarily darker-skinned people. Results for a ‘productive person,’ meanwhile, were uniformly male, majority White, and dressed in suits for corporate jobs” (Tiku et al.).



Fig. 1: Robot writing with crowd of onlookers watching, generated using Canva AI Image Generator

As generative AI becomes normalized in education and in the classroom, it is important to stay vigilant to any bias that might show up. As a society, we are becoming more socially conscious and aware of the importance of the principles of DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) in our communities. While individual opinions and values seem to be shifting towards acceptance, these technologies and systems of machine learning are still being trained with data that may be decades behind ([Matta et al.](#)). As scholars and educators of rhetoric and composition, it's imperative to keep in mind the entire background and undercurrent of these chatbots and machines of generative AI. What might be influencing the results? What bias might be in play that is swaying the text or images produced? The fact that these machines are defaulting to stereotypes of race and gender ([Leavy](#)) is an immediate indicator that there is a lack of creativity in these systems when it comes to considering different demographics, dialects, backgrounds, etc. It is the responsibility of the human user to make sure these biases don't go unchecked.

As Rachel Morgan explores in her [blog post](#), one way to find this middle ground between utilizing AI ethically and employing human creativity is through the incorporation of generative AI into the composition classroom with curiosity and through a critical lens. For example, Morgan asked her students to bring AI generated content to class for the purpose of studying the surrounding "issues and stakes." By collaboratively viewing the content through a critical lens, the activity opened a discussion about "AI bias and how we respond to AI-generated content" (Morgan). In this way, students learn to critically evaluate AI-generated content, identify

potential bias and consider alternate perspectives. Another way to foster creativity in the composition classroom while integrating this AI technology is through promoting diverse voices - incorporating a wide range of viewpoints and voices in the material. This can be achieved through AI-generated writing prompts, reflective engagement, and classroom discussions on the topic of AI bias.

These tools of generative AI can be a helpful resource in the classroom for idea generation, writing assistance, and brainstorming. However, it's imperative that while using AI technology in the composition classroom, marginalized voices remain centered and the focus is held on diversity, equity, and inclusion through this technological shift. Human creativity is needed when the machines fall short, only able to think inside the box of data they were trained in. It is our job as the user to recognize the limitations of these generative AI programs, analyze results through a critical lens, and be sure that diverse perspectives are being included and everyone has a seat at the table.

By encouraging critical thinking and promoting diverse perspectives, educators can empower students to recognize, question, and counteract biases for deeper engagement and richer learning experiences. Through integrating creativity in the composition classroom, generative AI becomes a tool of collaboration and creation for student engagement.



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# Where We Are

## **“Creativity” in the Composition Classroom and the Crisis of Purpose**

In the tradition of *Where We Are*, the following essay constitutes the central concern of my view on the theme of this special issue: creativity in composition studies. Ten years ago, Patrick Sullivan asked in “The Unessay” (2015) whether “room needs to be made for creativity in the composition classroom.” What did he mean by creativity?

Sullivan, though his descriptions of creativity dazzle us, does not always define the term usefully. He calls it “a highly sophisticated and valuable form of cognition” and “an extraordinarily vital and luminous human capacity” that must “be regarded as a necessary and indispensable part of the curriculum in the writing classroom.”

To widen the historical aperture, what did the titanic British educator and thinker Bertrand Russell have to say about creativity? Also an advocate of it in the classroom, Russell was a master of mathematical logic, at the vanguard of social reform and a Nobel laureate. And he presumably would have agreed with Sullivan:

The teacher, like the artist [...] can only perform his [sic] work adequately if he feels himself [sic] to be an individual directed by an inner creative impulse, not dominated and fettered by an outside authority. (Russell, Bertrand. *Unpopular essays*. Routledge, 2009. 122)

While I invoke Russell because he not only stresses the creativity of the teacher, but also invokes authority, I also want to stress that his “inner creativity” is a vague term.

However, setting aside too-exacting an interrogation of terminology for a moment, there is something both admittedly apparent and obviously well-intentioned about what creativity is in our society, even without establishing its definition, and a not insubstantial amount of work has been done recently.

Zeroing in on the “affective” (psychological-emotional) states of students, Bastian (2017), using Banks (2015) as a point of departure, makes an exquisite—and empirically based—case for ““bring[ing] the funk” into our classrooms, departments, programs, and universities by embracing “boldness, complexity, and even a little irreverence and messiness” (272)”. Bastian concludes that first year writing instructors should “work with students' affective responses rather than resist” them and “disrupt not just the ideological but also the textual status quo within the academy” (7). Along with Banks, the other scholar whom Bastian quotes is Sullivan himself. Helena Thomas (2019) makes an inspired, energetic case for it being “time to reconsider the value of imagination in education and in the teaching of writing,” but the persuasiveness of her vision seems to fade when she maneuvers away from telling us just how we ought to put imagination and creativity to use.

As definitions of creativity abound, so do contemporary scholars advocating for its application in the classroom. But why?

Resurgent interest in creativity has arisen from what is essentially composition students' apparent uninterest in writing, as a strategy to get students interested, to write with a purpose. As recently as last year, in an article called "We Write Because We Care: Developing Your Writerly Identity" Lester et al (2023) discouragingly reported that "many college students write for one reason and one reason only: to complete a class assignment." Perhaps unsurprisingly, nearly 70 years before, not long after Russell's collection of essays (above) was published, Edith Layer's own survey generated similar results: "I need the English credit," one of her more frank students declared.

Lester, whose areas of expertise include both first year writing and creative writing, appears to be cut from the cloth of Russell's teacher-artist, "directed by an inner creative impulse." According to Lester and his creative colleagues, we care about things that are meaningful to us, that give us purpose. "In our view," they conclude, "'real writers' ask themselves, 'So what, for me?'"

This notion of why—"so what?" was taken up by the editors of this very journal last year, with AI in view. "The discourse around AI and writing has moved us to think more specifically about why we write" (Composition Studies 51.1 (2023): 10–18).

But how many of our students know *themselves* why they write? Do they know their own purpose? And I don't mean just for writing. Like scholars who aren't able to settle on the meaning of creativity, all-too-many students are unable to define what it is they want.

According to Jonathan Haidt, writing for the *Atlantic Monthly* in March of this year, “generation Z,” the generation of students currently most enrolled in first year writing is “suffering from anxiety, depression, self-harm, and related disorders at levels higher than any other generation for which we have data.” Indeed, “Rates of depression and anxiety in the United States—fairly stable in the 2000s—rose by more than 50 percent in many studies from 2010 to 2019. The suicide rate rose 48 percent for adolescents ages 10 to 19. For girls ages 10 to 14, it rose 131 percent.”

Our students are a generation in the midst of a crisis of purpose. “Purpose in life consists of having a sense of meaning and purpose regarding one's activities as well as an overall sense that life is meaningful,” psychologists Ian Boreham and Nina Schutte tell us in a recent comprehensive investigation of “the association of purpose in life with depression and anxiety” (2023).

Crises of purpose are nothing new, especially not for adolescents and (traditionally) college age students. However, what is new are the staggering trends presented above. Furthermore, public favorability of college education has plummeted in conjunction with the well-established demoralizing financial risks that most students are taking on in order to even attempt college (Lockwood and Douglas). A majority of Americans don’t think a college degree is worth the cost, according to a new Wall Street Journal-NORC poll, a new low in

To my mind, purpose is where the center crisis is, and purpose is where creativity—whatever it is—may be as important as many first year writing instructors believe it is. But I fear that the “so what?” has less to do with writing than it does with being alive in general. Perhaps most importantly, are we, the authorities, making the right (or fair?) demands? Or are we unintentionally, to use Russell’s terms, “dominating and fettering” our students? Why are we telling our students to ask themselves “why write?” when millions are privately asking themselves “why write at all?” “Why even live?”.

Pivoting from existential knowledge and composition students’ thinking about purpose, I suggest that the the role composition instructors can play in this crisis of purpose, assuming it is

[I like to think we can make a difference. The film *Dead Poets Society* (1989) comes to mind. It is a film about the joys—and serious hazards—of being the kind of creative, inspirational teacher who *is* able to inspire purpose in both the lives and writing of a class loaded with depressed and anxious students. It is about the *art* of teaching. The film looks the tragic side of purpose straight in the eye, and it tells us bluntly that there are no easy answers.]

Reminiscent of the inspirational teacher’s methods in *Dead Poets Society* is a performing arts rehabilitation program called self@arts designed for Australian Defence Force personnel suffering from physical and/or psychological injuries (though not necessarily combat). Self@arts “provides participants with agency for re-narrating the self through a transformative, ritual experience of creativity” (Fewster and West) by means of transferring theater practices into everyday life.

Elusive definitions acknowledged, we all know that teachers *do* make a difference, and creativity *can* be operationalized. My fourth grade teacher's name was Mr Jim Endicott. I use his first name not because he told his fourth graders to call him Jim, but because 20 years after he taught me as a fourth grader near Seattle, WA, I went to see him. I went to our old school and, having long since retired, they gave me his phone number. I reached out and he invited me to have dinner at his house. After I had called him "Mr. Endicott" a dozen times, he insisted that I call him "just Jim." Jim changed my life, and his ability to do it had, I'm sure of it, a great deal to do with creativity. "Science is messing around," he said. It is. But how many teachers put it like that? Jim helped me put together, or I should say all of the students in my class that year, a collection of poetry. I'll never know how many of my classmates and his other students lived decades of their lives with his inspiration helping them along. Maybe his techniques just coincidentally resonated with me. Does it matter? My dad was gone that whole year, doing dangerous work on another continent; writing poetry helped me through numerous hospitalizations, including one as an adolescent and another after combat experiences in our war in Afghanistan; although "messing around" may not be among the most proven or finely articulated definitions of science, I don't know how many problems it helped me solved, and what is science but problem solving? If a child is undergoing a crisis of purpose, and a definition that provides some kind of totem that they keep in their pocket when trying to get out of a tough circumstance,

To speak for a moment from experience, while first acknowledging that composition can be profoundly taxing for even the most talented, purpose-driven and experienced writers, I have



been in the position of the composition student who not only asked incessantly “why write?” but also asked incessantly “why live?” [not sure whether it makes sense to offer lived experience in Where We Are]

But again: creativity. Where are we now? If creativity is part of the solution, and can be defined—but more importantly applied—in a multitude of ways, does it matter precisely how we define it? It’s possible we don’t. There’s something unsatisfying about this, and, again more importantly, it’s likely that some definitions and methods are simply better than others. While wanting to avoid biased moralistic judgements, the crisis of purpose is like cardiac disease, or diabetes. That is to say, there are ways that we know work, that help people live in less pain, or help them keep living at all. We can’t inspire with inspiration alone, can we? [...]

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## **Book Review**

*Let Me Tell You What I Mean: An Essay Collection* by Joan Didion. Knopf Doubleday

Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. Pp. 1-150.

*Reviewed by Rachael Bell, University of Central Florida*

I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear (Didion 49).

To most incoming first year college students, writing is only used to complete the necessary assignments given to them by their professors. Two composition professors, Sarah Allen and Glenn Lester have noticed this among first year students. Lester has stated, "Many college students write for one reason and one reason only: to complete a class assignment.<sup>1</sup> But students who subscribe to this view of writing—writing as merely a means to an end, a tool to achieve a grade—are seriously limiting themselves . . . ." (Lester et al. 1). Allen's student confessed, "I don't really like writing. Is that okay?" she asked. This is the first time that I remember a student confessing aloud (to me) that she did not like writing . . . ." (Allen 34). This deflating truth begs the question, how can we as a field change how students view writing? Throughout her book, *Let Me Tell You What I Mean: An Essay Collection*, Joan Didion's essays show how and why writing is more than just a means to an end. She pulls from her experiences writing about her fear of taking risks, fear of failure, and even fear of success, which are all things first year college students experience. Through her essays, she helps readers view writing as a way to find themselves and freedom, instead of seeing it as a cage of risks and failures. To write is to discover who we are and what drives us, it is about communicating with those around us and ourselves which is ultimately what first year students crave. Didion's book houses twelve essays, each standing alone as their own chapters. They are in order from publication date but can be

read out of order, since they do not flow into each other. Three of her twelve essays in particular would greatly help students see that writing is about more than just assignments, because they show the reader the heart behind her writing, what drives her. These three essays would provide a firm foundation for educators to use, allowing their first year students to see writing outside of academia in action, while also showing that what we learn in college is still applied in our writing after graduation.

“Telling Stories” follows Didion on a journey from her college writing class through to the challenges of getting three short stories published after writing a successful novel. In her essay, she confides in the reader that like many first year students, she dealt with feelings of inadequacy and feared failure in her college writing course, which kept her from experimenting and sharing her work. In her essay, she demonstrates that risks in writing come from experimentation. “Telling Stories” encourages students to play with their writing to discover their voice and find what works for them. Didion explains that writing is about getting to know who we are and where we have been: “In order to discover what was on my mind I needed room. . . . room in which to play with everything I remembered and did not understand . . . ” (Didion 67). Her journey from exploring her feelings in her college course to being a published author provides students with someone they can relate to, while also giving them hope for the future.

In “Why I Write” Didion strives to answer the question “Why do you write?” She states that she writes to find out what she is “thinking” (Didion 49), “seeing” (Didion 49), and “fearing . . . ” (Didion 49). Each of these three things not only drives her writing but drives every writer. She states “Let me tell you one thing about why writers write: had I known the answer to any of

these questions I would never have needed to write a novel . . . ” (Didion 59). Like her, we all write to find answers, the truths about our world and ourselves, to connect with others, and to know who we are. Her essay not only shows first year students why we write, it also guides them by showing them that audience and genre matter. It is important for them to learn that not everything changes when they have to write an essay, email, or short story. She shows them that the question they pose of “why” and their follow through of providing answers allows them to be creative within the constraints of their genre and audience, showing them that the one constant in their writing is themselves.

In “Last Words” Didion analyzes Hemingway’s writing after his death, which includes his will or last words. By diving into his life and passion for words she creates a connection between reader and prose. She walks the reader through his will which is disregarded by the living. . She shows the readers that the risk with writing is that we can only control what we write, not what people think of it or will do with it. She tells the reader that “The peculiarity of being a writer is that the entire enterprise involves the mortal humiliation of seeing one’s own words in print. The risk of publication is the grave fact of the life . . . ” (Didion 106). As writers, we must decide if that is a risk worth taking. For first year students the risks lie in letting their voice and thoughts shine through their writing. She shows them that all writers experience those feelings of fear of failure and judgment, showing students that we write despite those feelings, even in college.

The first year student version of myself would have greatly benefited from the freedom these essays bring. These essays allow the reader to see theory in practice. Proving to first year students that what is taught in a composition class is used outside of the classroom. I was a first year student who viewed writing as merely a means to an end, which is why I would recommend

writing educators use Didion's collection of essays as supplemental material in their classes. I believe if I had read her work in my first year college course I would have realized the freedom and creativity writing brings sooner. Educators could create assignments using her books as a template. They could give first year students her essays to read and task them to explore writing a non-fiction essay in her style. This would allow for creativity and discovery of voice to occur. Another angle could be to make an academic essay assignment, tasking students to figure out how to write using their voice while also making sure they adhere to their guidelines which would include considering the genre and their audience. Didion's essays should be used as supplementary material in first year college courses because they provide a firm foundation for educators to build upon. Using her essays as examples of how to write creatively within the constraints of assignments will allow students to explore their writing and creativity, which would hopefully propel us into a future where students view writing as more than just a means to an end.

*Orlando, Florida*

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