

# ENHANCING TRANSFER FROM FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION: A PEDAGOGY OF SHORTER ESSAYS

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The cyclical nature of the “Why Johnny Can’t Write” crisis means that as writing teachers, we’re often in a position of explaining how first-year writing requirements are relevant and necessary. While that social pressure is in many ways helpful in preserving the first-year writing requirement at colleges and universities across the country, we also face pressure to solve these so-called literacy problems in all of our students. As writing instructors, we know that one or two semesters is not enough time to finalize good writing practices, that students need to write in all of their classes, and that our colleagues in other departments need to model writing in their own disciplines so that students can build on what they learn in first-year writing.

Our students arrive on our doorsteps with a different understanding of literacy than previous cohorts (see Grabill et al. 2010). This is not news; the recent ongoing and persistent effort to incorporate electronic literacies into the composition classroom speaks to our understanding of literacy changes all around us. Recent cultural changes, like the explosion of online social media, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and high-stakes testing, and even texting, mean that it might be time to revisit some of the ways that we assign writing in the first year. Curricula involving online writing, service learning initiatives, and the incorporation of social media have blossomed in recent years. One thing that I suspect we’ve overlooked, however, is the question of the length and depth of what we assign our students. In an informal survey of colleagues around the country, I found that many institutions default to three or four essays per semester, usually from four to

eight pages in length, depending on the type of assignment. More often than not these three assignments ask students to write in different genres (analysis, researched argument, persuasion, etc). Granted Elizabeth Wardle has questioned whether any of those genres are “real” writing situations (“Mutt Genres”), and Barbara Little Liu has complicated even our use of the term genre in this context; however, it seems that these modes of essay-writing are fairly common across the country.

In this essay I argue that one way to accommodate our students’ changing literacies and increase the effectiveness of First Year Composition (FYC) without necessarily making our courses easier or less demanding is to assign shorter, more frequent essays. Rather than assign one four-page analysis essay, we could assign two two-page analysis essays. Breaking down our assignments in this way would offer a host of benefits that allows students to practice more than once in a given type of writing before being asked to move on to the next type. This kind of repeated, more focused practice offers students the opportunity to consider the connections between different assignments, and offers instructors a chance to more effectively intervene in students’ perceptions of FYC and their assignments.

Composition teachers face an ever-present pressure to help students become successful writers, but as Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Disciplines (WID) programs increase, we also face disciplinary questions about the effectiveness of our first-year courses. Studies in education and knowledge transfer show that students aren’t always able to move knowledge and skills from one subject area to another, and when they do, it’s incredibly difficult to measure. This has led some scholars to argue that we shouldn’t be teaching first-year writing at all (Smit), or that we should be teaching a different course entirely (Downs and Wardle). While the studies on transfer (students’ ability to carry forward skills and knowledge from one course to the next) can become discouraging, they actually provide good insights into how we might continue to shape our curricula. Composition scholars studying transfer have begun to

ask questions about what students learn and how they see connections between their courses, as well as how other faculty members expect students to approach writing assignments. While it can be overwhelming to think of the myriad ways we *could* change our curricula to *maybe* accommodate the way our students learn, there is one change that might answer several of our concerns about student learning and transfer: We can offer more opportunities for students to transfer writing strategies from one essay to the next in our own courses. First-year writing curricula tend to create a progression from understanding others' writing into doing one's own writing. We need to give students the opportunity to practice the first aspect more. With three or four assignments of different genres, students often only have one attempt at each type of writing situation—even if we assign drafts—and we grade them more explicitly on how they've written rather than on how they've understood the genre or the writing they're asked to do. Really I'm talking about content vs. form here. While we might differentiate between the strength of the ideas and the clarity of the writing, it is often difficult for students to understand how both of these components work together successfully. And faculty outside of composition often expect us to focus far more on the form than the content. If we break our courses down into more focused and more frequent assignments, then we have the ability to demonstrate more concretely how the form and the content of writing are connected, which can lead to clearer transfer. In this article, I'd like to review studies of transfer in writing and provide a course outline that might address some of the concerns raised by their results.

### **Transfer and First-Year Writing**

Transfer has become something of a buzzword in composition, with good reason. Although the relevance and usefulness of FYC has been generally assumed in American higher education for the last fifty years, the rise of WAC and WID requirements has demonstrated that there might, in fact, be gaps between what we teach and what students take away from FYC. Several recent

studies have begun the work of determining what and how we can teach students that will stay with them once the first semester or year is finished.

Most studies of transfer thus far have happened in the field of education and educational psychology, although recent studies have emerged in composition studies and in English as a Second Language (ESL). The most frequently cited definitions for educational transfer come from Perkins and Salomon, who discuss transfer in terms of near and far transfer, or low road and high road transfer (23). They describe near transfer as consisting of simple conversions such as driving a large van instead of a small car. The basic principles are the same, and the driver can easily recognize them and adapt. Far transfer is more complicated, and is in some ways the entire point of education. In far transfer one applies knowledge across markedly different areas or arenas. FYC is an example of far transfer, as we don't teach students the exact strategies and skills that will be easily recognized in all of their future writing assignments. Instead, we're teaching students conceptual ideas about writing in one situation (our classes) that we're hoping they'll be able to recognize in other situations. Perkins and Salomon note that in order to facilitate this kind of complex transfer we need to teach specifically toward its occurrence, rather than hoping that it occurs spontaneously. They use the term "bridging" to describe it, advocating that teachers "point out explicitly the more general principles behind particular skills or knowledge or, better, provoke students to attempt such generalizations themselves" (29). In writing classes this might mean being much more transparent about the contextual nature of writing assignments and requirements than we are used to doing. In order to facilitate bridging, we may need to speak explicitly about the limitations of what we teach (the differences between citation systems, for example) while at the same time providing connections between our assignments and those seen elsewhere in the university. That is, rather than simply teaching MLA documentation styles, most composition instructors probably explain the similar purposes of different citation systems and how

to find any given one in a handbook. This bridging between what we're teaching in the moment and what students will be expected to know later is what can lead to knowledge transfer.

In first-year writing, we're very familiar with the problems that stem from an inability to perform far transfer. As early as 1990, Joseph Williams and Gregory Colomb demonstrated the specific, predictable problems that are likely to appear when writers face unfamiliar situations. They noted that writers at all levels tend toward the concrete and minimize analysis as they try to find their way into a subject matter (102). Since then, that idea has been repeated in many places, often as a means of reminding us and our non-composition colleagues that reasonable expectations for novice writers may help us better understand their struggles. Williams notes that the curricular implications of this persistent breakdown calls for teachers to "make the students self-conscious about their own academic and professional progress . . . and to anticipate those predictable anxieties—the temporary deterioration of performance and the specific forms it will take" (109). However, we can also look at this as another problem with transfer. Writers who are unable to generalize from one rhetorical situation to another have greater difficulty knowing where to begin or how to use the skills from previous writing tasks in a new one. In that light, a curricular solution might be to foster that awareness through a repetition of similar writing situations, which would allow students to gain a greater mastery and understanding of a specific rhetorical situation before moving on to a new one. If a composition course assigns only three essays over a semester, and the essays move from analysis to research, each major essay is, in fact, a new situation, requiring a period of readjustment to expectations. This might mean that even though we're adjusting our expectations to the realities of our students' capabilities (expecting some regression between assignments), we're not really helping them master a writing situation, nor are we teaching them how to read various writing situations and approach them from a more expert standpoint. If we don't create

situations where students can gain mastery, students will be less likely to move a particular skill or habit forward.

Various scholars have investigated transfer in writing and found conflicting results. For the most part, there is a sense that transfer does happen, but not in terribly predictable ways. In a study of students enrolled in an ESL writing course, Mark Andrew James found that there are significant variations in what kinds of knowledge students transfer from one writing task to the next, and that there is often a discrepancy between skills that students report transferring and transfer which seems to happen unconsciously. James also found that transfer was not necessarily restricted by discipline (science writing only transferring to other science courses) or by task type (synthesis or explanation), but occurred across these boundaries (“An Investigation” 198). James reminds us that further studies of transfer should include investigations not only into what skills and knowledge students take with them, but how they use that information. If we assign more frequent essays, we can create more opportunities not only to study transfer from one course to the next, but within our own courses, which is where transfer needs to begin.

One way to learn about how students use their FYC experience is to speak with instructors in other disciplines. In an article in the *WPA* journal, Ronda Leathers Dively and R. Gerald Nelms report on their exploratory research into attitudes among FYC instructors and Writing Intensive (WI) instructors on their campus. The authors surveyed FYC instructors to find out “what specific concepts, strategies and skills [were] reportedly being emphasized and practiced in our numerous sections of English 101 and English 102” (220). In the second stage the researchers conducted focus groups with writing-intensive course instructors across campus to determine which of those concepts, strategies and skills were transferring onward, and of those that were not, what might be done to encourage transfer (220). After surveying the FYC instructors the authors were able to conclude that the majority of students were being exposed to process theory and research, persuasive, or analytical papers. However, the study

authors also found that despite this, there was a considerable amount of diversity in their FYC courses and subsequently, “writing intensive instructors in other departments *cannot* rest assured that students entering their courses have engaged in similar composing scenarios or have mastered a standardized base of composing knowledge” (225). This realization is important, largely because I doubt it is unique to the school in question. No matter how structured the FYC curriculum, syllabus, or textbooks may be, the existence of different teachers means that writing will be discussed, assigned, and evaluated in ways that are not always outwardly similar. While anyone who regularly teaches second-semester composition might be painfully aware of this situation, instructors in other departments may not. This reality may contribute to the seemingly random nature of student transfer.

The focus groups that Dively and Nelms conducted with WI faculty also revealed several issues that might impede transfer from FYC to WI courses. One was that in many cases, the concepts focused on in FYC (particularly supporting a thesis or argument) did not seem to be transferring. This may be related to the observation that students seemed intent on compartmentalizing courses and unwilling or unable to draw distinct connections from one course to another. Study participants also pointed out the sheer difficulty of teaching both content and writing in the course of the semester, and the confusion that arises from a lack of shared vocabulary to discuss writing. It is this last point that really illuminates some of the difficulties with transfer from FYC to WI courses, especially when assignments require far transfer. The writing program faculty in this study focused heavily on persuasion, which the WI faculty assumed meant asking students to take a clear position on a single, often binary-inducing topic. Further discussion revealed that what writing faculty called persuasion, the discipline faculty called “explaining your reasoning” (227). These differences in terminology are part of what contribute to the student perception that each course is a completely separate entity from the next. If

FYC courses are to begin fostering the kind of transfer that may avert this thinking, we need to provide students with more opportunities to practice writing as well as ongoing conversations about the contextual nature of writing. And really ideally, we would work to develop a shared vocabulary about writing, at least at the institutional level. Although a fully shared vocabulary is unlikely, and probably not feasible, at least understanding the differences can help us have more productive conversations about writing.

One possible framework for a shared vocabulary comes from Michael-John DePalma and Jeffrey M. Ringer's notion of dynamic transfer. They argue that our traditional definitions of transfer often function as a terministic screen that "deflects writing specialists' attention away from the moves students make to *reshape* and *reform* learned writing skills to fit new tasks" (137). Rather than focus on specific, traceable skills transferred directly from one writing task to another, DePalma and Ringer advocate that we study transfer as a dynamic, adaptive process in which students reinterpret their knowledge about writing to work in new contexts. If we look at transfer as a process in which we want students to engage, then we might be better able to articulate ways that our courses are relevant to writing in other courses.

### **Perception and Meta-Awareness**

Although recent studies of transfer have yielded mixed results, we can draw some conclusions about writing transfer. First, we can see from many of the studies (particularly Wardle 2007) that a meta-awareness of writing situations often leads to better transfer of writing abilities. Not only teaching writing, but also teaching *about* writing in the university seems to help students better understand how to approach new writing situations. Other studies have found that student perception matters a great deal in terms of transfer, which suggests that consciously managing student perception might also positively affect transfer.

One way that composition programs have traditionally tried to get around the regressions that come with novice writing has been



to have students write about their own lives—a subject in which they have some expertise. This system, however, does not address what we might presume to be the underlying goal of FYC—to provide students with the knowledge and tools to be successful writers beyond the FYC classroom<sup>1</sup>. While it might seem more transitional to ask students to write from their experiences, doing so can actually create a different set of problems (James, “Influence”). Several studies on transfer have shown that the way students perceive various writing tasks has a significant influence on what they do and do not transfer from one task to the next. One study found that students have a tendency to view courses as discrete units, and another study even found that students tended to view writing done in English classes as irrelevant to the writing required in their disciplines (Bergmann and Zepernick, Dively and Nelms). If we want students to use what they learn in FYC as they move through their college courses, we need to demonstrate how the writing they do in our classes is, in fact, connected to writing they do elsewhere.

In a study of incoming first-year students, Angela Rounsaville, Rachel Goldberg, and Anis Bawarshi found that while students were willing to compare an entry-level writing assignment to other timed or in-class writing situations, they did not see it as inherently similar to any writing that they did in non-school contexts, even though the prompt in question was framed as a letter and offered room for creativity. While it may be significant that students did not apply non-school genres to this particular writing assignment, the genres that they did report drawing on are telling. Some students reported drawing on or recognizing religion or history essay prompts, many recognized it as a timed writing exercise (either AP or in-class), and one student saw it as diagnostic. While the implication is that students seemed to limit themselves to near transfer in this case, it seems more likely that students were drawing on previous writing tasks based on audience, rather than on genre.

The students in this study recognized the essay for what it was—a rather generic prompt that is used for a variety of purposes,

none of them particularly analytical, most of them evaluative. And because this particular type of assignment is so firmly embedded in essay exams and in-class writings, it might be asking too much to expect students to associate it with other contexts of writing. The authors do argue, however, that “findings reported here allow us to hypothesize that despite possessing a wide genre base, and despite having experience writing in multiple domains, students utilized only a fraction of these discursive resources when encountering new academic writing situations” (108). Working toward overcoming that tendency is a valid goal for writing programs and writing teachers. Building our assignment sequences specifically to expose students to the ways in which writing crosses boundaries might help them to see their future courses as more connected than they might otherwise have done. For example, assigning a series of short analyses in which students explore one topic in a variety of genres might allow them to connect their own writing abilities across different genres or subjects.

In fact, in another study of transfer and ESL students, Mark Andrew James found that while task similarity is important to transfer, it is *student perception* of similarity that matters, and that students will not necessarily have the same definition of similarity that we will. James studied students in an ESL section of FYC at a large university, asking participants to submit essays they’d written for FYC and to write a timed, out-of-class essay specifically for his study. He asked half of the study participants to write an essay on a topic similar to ones they’d addressed in their comp classes (student life), and the other half to write on a different, more “academic” topic (economics). While he anticipated that students would see differences between the two topics and have difficulty with transfer as a result, he found that this was not always the case. He found that “students who wrote about [the academic topic] were no less likely to report learning transfer; also, their scores on the writing task indicated that the difference in subject matter had no negative impact in any category . . .” (93).

While James had expected that the unfamiliar subject matter would hinder transfer, he found that students were more likely to associate particular pieces of the writing task with what they'd learned in FYC, rather than the subject matter or the type of writing. The students demonstrated transfer of writing abilities in areas such as organization and mechanics, and in interviews noted that they had used processes taught in FYC. James did note, however, that in areas where students perceived the task to be different or more difficult, they experienced negative transfer—that is, they did not use what they'd learned in their writing class in the essay assigned for the study (94).

Because student perception can influence transfer, it is important that we not assume that certain writing tasks are similar, but articulate to students how and why they can find similarities between different writing situations. James's work correlates with what Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawarshi found in their study. Because students did not perceive the out-of-school tasks as particularly related to the assigned writing, they did not report having drawn on those genres for help. The connections students did make tended to be along lines related to purpose and structure, rather than subject matter or genre. So even though one task asked students to write a letter, rather than draw on letter writing, they drew on other timed writing prompts that often use the letter as a way of setting up a fictional audience.

The problem of student perception indicates that focusing on personal experience has the potential to do more harm than good in terms of long-term learning and far transfer. The consequences of failing to address student perception can be seen in a study in which Linda S. Bergmann and Janet S. Zepernick focused on how students in engineering and the sciences view the required English course. In their study, the authors found that “students tend to think of writing in English classes as personal and expressive rather than academic or professional,” and therefore not relevant to their other classes (129). Bergmann and Zepernick conducted interviews and focus groups with students at their university and report that they “repeatedly observed a tendency among students

to actively reject the idea that what they learned about writing in high school or [FYC] courses could be applied to the writing they were asked to do in courses in other disciplines” (124). This attitude suggests that students clearly do and can transfer from their writing courses, but only if they can perceive similarities between the various writing situations. The students’ *perception* led them to dismiss out of hand any commentary on those assignments because they were fundamentally unrelated to the more objective and fact-based assignments in other classes. If we take this perception seriously, we might acknowledge that it does in fact matter what students write about, and that academic topics are required for students to see our feedback as relevant to academic writing.

In her longitudinal study of transfer, Elizabeth Wardle followed students in her honors composition course, which she taught as an introduction to writing studies. Wardle interviewed her students over the course of two years as they moved from FYC into other general education courses. In her interviews with students, Wardle found that students did indeed have a greater ability to interpret other writing assignments in other classes. One student realized that she could recognize the basic rhetorical format of a lab report, and others discussed the benefits that they knew came from good revision practices. Whether they chose to implement those practices, however, was a different issue entirely. Many of Wardle’s students found that they could get by with drafts written the night before, and so did not feel compelled to enter into the revision process. Other students reported frustration or confusion with their assignments and as a result were unable or unwilling to apply skills from FYC that they knew would help them with the assignments (73). While this indicates that we still need to work with other faculty to improve writing assignments across campus, it also indicates that the curriculum designed specifically to produce meta awareness did have some impact on students’ ability to move habits from FYC forward.

Although Wardle and Downs have argued that teaching first-year composition as an introduction to writing studies can

encourage transfer, that curriculum is not always possible or realistic. Given the contingent nature of the composition workforce and the divergent interests and expertises of those instructors, creating a FYC curriculum as an introduction to writing studies is a longer-term goal for the discipline, rather than an individual solution to the issue of transfer. This is where the shorter essays come in. While it may be difficult to implement a full-scale writing studies introduction in a large department, shifting to shorter, more directed essays does not require as much change from writing teachers. If the first assignment is a four-page rhetorical or textual analysis, changing it to two shorter assignments is a relatively small change to a course.

### **Shorter Essays**

If we want students to generate a higher level of transfer from our courses, we ought to provide them first with the opportunity to create low-road transfer within our course (repeated essays of a similar type), and with essays that are arguably similar to assignments they might see in other courses. While we obviously cannot teach a history paper and a lab report and a sociology paper in first-year writing, it also appears that we may not need to do so. Instead, we can help manage students' perceptions of transferability partly by breaking down our assignments into discrete tasks, and partly by offering more frequent opportunities to practice the same or similar analytic activities. If we focus on tasks such as summary, analysis, and synthesis, and offer shorter, more frequent opportunities to practice them, we might also be able to foster a rhetorical awareness of how these tasks are repeated in many university writing assignments. Rather than using personal experience to create expertise and authority for student writers, we might, as Williams advises, prepare students for the specific difficulty that comes with new writing assignments and teach them how to find the familiar in seemingly unfamiliar tasks.

The shorter essays I'm advocating are specifically targeted to help students see the contextual nature of writing. I ask students

to write targeted analyses of specific aspects of a text. Rather than ask them to “write a rhetorical analysis,” I ask them to examine how an author creates ethos, or uses sources, or accommodates an audience. (One specific aspect of the text, rather than the overall rhetorical effect.) By focusing on how writers adapt to their writing situation, students begin to see how writing works over multiple genres. By practicing this type of analysis in two or three short essays, rather than in one longer essay, students can see different types of accommodations that writers make, but they can also have the chance to move from uncertainty to mastery over the same type of writing assignment.

The shorter essay may also allow us to manage student perception of task similarity. Many of us assume a certain amount of similarity or scaffolding between our major assignments. If students begin with an analysis of a single text, we often expect that they will use that same process to analyze the sources they choose for a research essay. However, students may not perceive the similarity between analysis for an essay and analysis for the purposes of building an argument. And as the Citation Project is demonstrating, students are not doing very much analysis of their source material at all (Howard and Jamieson). This may be because they perceive the research assignment to be similar to research assignments from high school, which very likely had a different goal, was certainly performed in a different context, and asked for a different mode of working with sources. While we can obviously be more explicit about our own perceptions of similarity, it also makes sense to heighten students’ own perceptions of similarities between the various tasks that we assign in our courses by assigning multiple tasks with the same basic process or outcome.

The course I’m arguing for asks students to write very short papers—two pages/600 words for the first half of the semester, followed by one longer essay and a significant revision component in the second half. I think that this combination can lead to some of the generalization and transfer of knowledge from our courses to future writing situations. Even though I’m advocating shorter

essays, I am not advocating that we make those short essays any less rigorous. This course would ask students to analyze and reflect, and to do so multiple times from multiple perspectives. We often hold the belief that in order to fully engage with a topic or a reading students will need to write about 1,000 words. While it is certainly true that longer essays provide analysis with greater breadth, shorter essays can, and often do, require depth. One could ask students to analyze only one component of an argument or an essay or a work of fiction. I teach using rhetorical terms, so I might ask students to analyze an author's ethos, but one could just as easily have them look at a particular literary aspect or the way an author supports her argument. The task is still difficult, and it is one that requires that they think beyond the ways they've previously been asked to look at writing, but I limit how far they can go. (Incidentally, essays of this length tend to short-circuit the 5-paragraph essay format as well.) Because they have limited space, I tell students to forgo a traditional introduction and conclusion and instead focus on the analysis section of the essay. They need a basic introduction, and they need to indicate that they stopped writing on purpose, but by taking the focus off of those two aspects of the essay I am able to move students beyond "number of paragraphs needed" and into logical organization of the body paragraphs. In some ways I think that this focus on the body of the essay helps students avoid all of the unnecessary contextualizing that Joseph Williams noted in the novice writers. I tell them they're allowed to write it, but that they'll eventually need to delete it and leave me only the analysis.

In this course set-up, the distance between the first essay and the end of the semester means that students can return to their first two essays with a real sense of distance. It allows students to apply what they've been learning about meaningful analysis, sentence structure, and organization to these essays and see the real difference that meaningful revision can make. The shorter length of the original essays also allows students to return to more than one essay, and to revise them not for a different audience or a different purpose, but to be more effective at reaching the initial

audience or serving the initial purpose. It also compels students to contemplate the relationships between the essays and assignments, rather than leave them as individual units. Emphasizing similarities as well as contextual differences can help us create more bridging, and avoid what Bergmann and Zepernick heard from students in their study: “every time you get a new professor it starts over” (135).

The revision component of this course meshes nicely with the portfolio pedagogy that already exists in composition studies. Multiple studies have demonstrated the benefits of portfolio writing, especially the reflective component that requires students to think about their writing holistically, rather than focus on the discrete tasks of each essay. Portfolios and their reflective components encourage the same meta-awareness that promotes knowledge transfer, and can provide some bridging from the assignments of a first-year writing course to writing done throughout the university. Shorter, more frequently assigned essays give students and instructors more to work with in a portfolio, and provide greater fodder for reflection.

## **Conclusion**

As teachers, we always want students to take what they learn in our classes and use that knowledge to further their educations. This is especially true with FYC, which by its very nature relies on the assumption of transfer. However, the transfer we most need to instill is far transfer, which is more difficult, both to integrate and to study. As DePalma and Ringer argue, thinking in terms of adaptive, dynamic transfer allows writing teachers to “move beyond viewing the transition from one writing context to another solely in terms of use and reuse” (145) and to reach more clearly for the far transfer that is more effective in the long term. One way to foster this is to begin in our own classes, by asking that students first perform near transfer (one short essay to another of the same kind) before asking them to move from one type of writing to another. By naming transfer as a goal of the course, and by managing their perceptions to encourage it, we can



help our students understand how to move between the many writing contexts they will encounter in their college courses.

Shorter essays allow instructors greater intervention in the writing process, and give us more opportunities to manage student perceptions through repetition and meta-awareness. Shorter assignments also allow us to focus on one or two tasks at a time, rather than on the myriad tasks that have to be considered when we assign fewer, longer essays. If, instead of a four-page analysis, an instructor assigns two two-page analyses, it is possible to focus on paragraph development in one and organization in the next. In this way, instructors and students can narrow their focus in each individual essay, but can also view them as connected parts of a larger project of analysis. If the topic of the essays is also designed to foster meta-awareness, then the opportunities for transfer become even greater.

Shorter essays are a neat concept, but can they really enhance transfer? I think that the answer is yes, but we need to continue developing both our definitions of transfer and our understanding of how students process what they learn in our writing classes. Often our curricula are driven by what university communities want students to be able to do, rather than by what students can do when they arrive at our doorsteps. Shorter essays are a way to be more practiced at meeting students where they are. Because the university needs students to develop information literacy and write research papers in other classes, first-year writing has traditionally involved a researched argument or persuasive paper. Yet the Citation Project is rapidly indicating that students are not engaging with their sources in the ways that we had hoped. Alice Horning's recent article on plagiarism and reading in *the Journal of Teaching Writing* notes the myriad literacies a student needs just to select a source for an essay. Given the difficulties that students, instructors, and library professionals have with the "traditional" research assignment, it would appear that some of the longer essays we see as the norm for first-year writing are not serving students the way we want them to. Shorter essays are one way for composition instructors to explore transfer and to help their

students move successfully from first-year writing to writing in the university.

### Note

<sup>1</sup>The WPA Outcomes Statement provides a list of outcomes that can be expected at the end of first-year writing, but emphasizes that students continue to develop their writing skills beyond FYC. An assumption that the Outcomes Statement creates is that there are, in fact, tangible outcomes of FYC that are presumed useful in other aspects of university and professional writing tasks.

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