

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Foreword

Krista Ratcliffe xi

Introduction

Rachel McCabe and Jennifer Juskiewicz 3

SECTION ONE: CRITICAL INTERROGATIONS

1. Composition, Critics, and Care Work: An Undisciplined Reflection on Disciplinary Expertise

Jacob Babb and William Duffy 17

2. Trust, Truth, and the Erosion of Public Discourse: The Virtue of Reality in the First-Year Writing Classroom

Matthew S. S. Johnson 35

3. Writing with Our Bodies: Recovering Pathos through Critical Embodiment Pedagogy

Christina V. Cedillo 50

SECTION TWO: CAREFUL LEADERSHIP

4. Continuing Writing across the Curriculum Programs amid the Contraction of Higher Education: Vision, Mission, and Strategy

Christopher Basgier 69

5. Building an Affective Infrastructure to Lead Writing Programs

Nicole Khoury, Nicholas Behm, and Sherry Rankins-Robertson 90

6. On Non-scalability and Transformative Relationships in the First-Year Composition “Jumbo”

Laura A. Sparks and Kim Jaxon 107

SECTION THREE: DRAWING TOGETHER

7. Rooting Our Teaching in the Change around Us: Growing an Anti-Racist, Community-Interdependent Course Model
Zapoura Newton-Calvert 125
8. Writing with the Working Class: The Future of Public Rhetoricians
Anna Barritt and Kalyn Prince 143
9. Generative Combination: A Guiding Principle for the Future of Composition
Matthew Overstreet 161

SECTION FOUR: WRITING OUR WAY BACK

10. A Future without Thesis Statements
Hannah J. Rule 183
 11. Teaching toward a More Just Citation Practice
Elizabeth Kleinfeld 197
 12. Film in the Interdisciplinary Composition Classroom
Rachel McCabe 215
 13. Learning from Black Teachers: Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Implementing Critical Engagement Strategies in Writing Classrooms
Jessica Edwards 231
- Afterword: Timely Is Timeless
Deborah H. Holdstein 242

- Index* 249
About the Authors 255

INTRODUCTION

Rachel McCabe and Jennifer Juszkievicz

We live in a moment of national polarization. While a number of key moments in American history have been marked by ideological and political differences, the *feeling* of division has hit a high point.¹ Over the past forty years, the political landscape of the United States has shifted, with citizens becoming both calcified in their support of their chosen political party and simultaneously more afraid of their party's opposition.² In the process, the political has also become the personal as Americans increasingly consider political party membership a key piece of an individual's identity.³ The implications of this polarization for the teaching of writing have compounded: some students are increasingly concerned that their college courses are indoctrinating them into "leftist" thinking, while others fear their universities are condoning the right by allowing Republicans to engage in debate or dialogue on their campus.⁴

This polarity extends to the interpretation of major events, including the 2016 and 2020 elections, the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter Movements, the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol, and the Covid-19 pandemic. As one of our contributors notes, the elections had the effect of both freezing family discussions and electrifying media coverage.⁵ The #MeToo and Black Lives Matter Movements began in this media environment, as they seek to uncover, come to terms with, and stop violence and injustice. Retelling history is burdensome work, though, especially when facts themselves are up for debate. Unlike national traumas such as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy or the terrorist attacks of September 11, the 2021 attack on the US Capitol was not unanimously considered a tragedy; further, the Covid-19 pandemic has not been collectively considered a problem requiring federal intervention.

Many Americans see these events as a necessary step in the fight toward freedom and fair representation, making it difficult to engage with such monumental issues in the writing classroom—classrooms

where communication methods and rhetorical strategies are at the core of most curricula. That said, to ignore such moments is to do our students a great injustice. Composition courses, designed to help students find their voices and enter the academic community, often hinge on building complex arguments that acknowledge multiple perspectives and voices, trust reputable sources, and effectively communicate student ideas about the world beyond the classroom. These pedagogical choices, then, are fraught at every turn, particularly for non-tenured university faculty.

Therefore, at its core, this collection responds to the problems of our polarized world for students, faculty, and administrators in higher education. While previous collections in rhetoric and composition have contended with major historical shifts, this collection considers the political *and* educational factors of the last decade while seeing these changes not as temporary obstacles but as sites of learning that will help us navigate future challenges. Authors in this collection look to break down division in favor of models and practices that encourage compassionate exploration to help students work through ambiguity and reductive logics. The focus of many of these chapters is explicit binary thinking: the classroom versus the larger community, the traditional essay versus multimodal production, academic text versus real-world artifact, personal identities versus public ones, faculty versus administration, or fiscal responsibility versus humanism. However, others look at incendiary but less explicit themes of division, exclusion, or oversimplification. Regardless of specific focus, each of the chapters in this collection seeks to break down assumed divisions or assumptions to find common ground through best practices for all members of the educational community.

In the process, *Composition and Rhetoric in Contentious Times* poses critical questions of representation, accessibility, social justice, affect, and labor to evaluate and better understand the futures of composition and rhetoric. This collection considers how the multiple current crises of and surrounding composition and rhetoric can be met in the near future with generosity and cautious optimism. In differing ways, each chapter provides an answer to the question, “How can our courses help students become stronger writers while contending with current social, environmental, and ethical questions posed by the world around them?” Authors consider this question from numerous perspectives, recognizing the important ways power and privilege impact our varying means of addressing this question. In doing so, authors engage with social constructivist, critical, critical race, socioeconomic, and activist pedagogies. This collection includes contributors from diverse institutions and

utilizes both rhetorical theory and pedagogical case studies to propose answers to the current concerns about the longevity of the humanities.

Composition and Rhetoric in Contentious Times addresses our current national and global context; it is also a testament to how rhetoric and composition has long been preparing students to become engaged global citizens. The scholars in this collection have been building their pedagogy in a crucible of pressures that certainly predate the 2016 election—the market pressures of the Great Recession, the contraction of the humanities and higher education generally. These contributors and their work are evidence of how the field is and has been committed to pedagogy that meets students where they are, that celebrates students and faculty for their neuro-, cultural, racial, gender, economic, and linguistic diversity. We have far to go, each contributor acknowledges, but we have a great deal on which to build.

This collection offers comprehensive, innovative approaches for socially attuned learning in this complex environment, approaches that support faculty, administrator, and student development. Relying on both theory and practice, this collection centers writing courses within the wider university and society, as the field of composition and rhetoric has changed dramatically in the last decade. In addition to the curricular debates that have been occurring for decades, shifts in teaching modalities have necessitated new types of learning for both instructors and students. While these changes have occurred, dramatic fluctuations in course enrollment have put additional pressure on faculty to justify their methods of instruction. These localized questions are also mirrored by major institutional shifts. The humanities, where many writing courses are located, are increasingly underfunded. Departments and schools are merging or being eliminated in record numbers.⁶ All of these challenges raise questions about the importance and place of writing courses and writing instructors.

Composition and Rhetoric in Contentious Times considers the larger questions about equity, representation, and accessibility highlighted by the tragedies of 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic, the murders of George Floyd and many other people of color at the hands of police, more gun violence than ever before,⁷ and a record-breaking number of natural disasters across the United States highlighted the severity and immediacy of our national dysfunction and its impact on the globe. These events directly affected universities: many universities moved online, some students and faculty went on strike, and schools across the country trimmed operational costs to run on a deficit.⁸ While this collection addresses the impacts of these events on higher education, authors also look at this pivotal

moment as an opportunity for growth, a chance to implement major changes to our educational infrastructure and theory to address underlying problems. In addressing the challenges of binary thinking, our hope is that a more generous model can be championed by the field of composition and rhetoric. This collection looks forward to a vision of higher education that has learned from the mistakes of the early 2000s and 2010s and creates a more inclusive, supportive, and just educational space.

Composition and Rhetoric in Contentious Times is ordered telescopically: beginning with broad, disciplinary concerns and then moving into specific programmatic, curricular, and classroom-based strategies and approaches. In the process, this collection offers best practices to support administrators and instructors to empower students to write effectively and prepare for their role as global citizens.

SECTION ONE: CRITICAL INTERROGATIONS

This collection begins by asking wide-ranging questions about the discipline's position in and responsibility to the wider world. The chapters here look at how rhetoric and composition must continue to assert its importance in higher education and reckon with the place of public, political discourse in our classrooms. These chapters utilize a historical perspective to argue for the discipline's positioning in public discourse about literacy now and into the future.

Chapter 1, "Composition, Critics, and Care Work: An Undisciplined Reflection on Disciplinary Expertise," by Jacob Babb and William Duffy, calls for a rethinking of composition and rhetoric's ownership of student writing. The authors examine the kinds of uninformed arguments about students' writing that frequently appear in venues such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Education*. Rather than seeing these prompts as proof of a lack of education about student writing, the authors provide a look at what it might mean to respond to both students and public statements on writing with care. Their call for "care work" in the classroom and outside it stresses that disciplinarity be recognized while including the knowledge other fields have generated, and continue to generate, about how to best support student writers.

The second chapter, "Trust, Truth, and the Erosion of Public Discourse: The Virtue of Reality in the First-Year Writing Classroom," by Matthew S. S. Johnson, is written from the perspective of an educator in the midst of a crisis of truth. Johnson resists the lure of handling "fake news," "alternative facts," and "junk science" with anything less than scare quotations. He shows how the terms worked their way into his own

classroom, affecting his students' engagement and his teaching practice and theory. In the end, Johnson calls us all to action: if we are to challenge and reverse the trends toward rhetorical and political divisiveness, the treatment of facts as "facts," he contends, writing instructors must accept the political nature of the classroom and their responsibility as educators to teach students to recognize truth as such.

Such recognition—of truth, of each other, of the political nature of the classroom—carries into Christina V. Cedillo's chapter, "Writing with Our Bodies: Recovering Pathos through Critical Embodiment Pedagogy." Cedillo reweaves the history of rhetoric, showing how it has tried to capture and control the body even as it elides, hides, and shames the body. Building on critical race theory and disability theory, Cedillo explores how the body is necessary for memory. The body enables a more fulsome accounting of living, teaching, and learning in the midst of diverse social, cultural, political, and material forces that both include and exclude some scholars, some students. Without such an honest accounting, Cedillo argues, composition and rhetoric abandons the body, allowing it to continue as a whitestream nonentity. Such abandonment is an erasure of the violence against those who have been marginalized, differentiated, or punished due to their bodies.

SECTION TWO: CAREFUL LEADERSHIP

There is a risk in a collection such as this to think that the current, highly pressurized moment is a surprise. The truth is, many of our challenges and many of our strengths are sedimentary. Composition and rhetoric has long provided the educational background for writing program administrators, writing center directors, and committee/department directors because of their theoretical grounding in civic engagement and social responsibility. This section shows how this training ground needs to be approached more praxically, rather than assuming that either theory or practice can fully support the development of future administrators. The authors in this second section note that such administrative work requires the same deployment of theoretically responsive, civic-minded, ethical, and pragmatic pedagogies as does classroom teaching.

"Continuing Writing across the Curriculum Programs amid the Contraction of Higher Education: Vision, Mission, and Strategy," by Christopher Basgier, details the ongoing demographic and structural disruptions in higher education and considers the role writing across the curriculum (WAC) can play amid those changes. The ongoing contraction of higher

education has manifested as disinvestment in public colleges and college closures. Simultaneously, higher education is witnessing changes in student demographics in terms of race, ethnicity, and age. Basgier demonstrates how the WAC program at Auburn University expanded its purview beyond writing-intensive courses and writing-enriched curricula by engaging actively with high-impact practices (HIPs).

In “Building an Affective Infrastructure to Lead Writing Programs,” by Nicole Khoury, Nicholas Behm, and Sherry Rankins-Robertson, the authors address the gap in research on mental wellness for writing program administrators and instructors. This chapter responds to this situation, offering ways to help graduate students—a particularly vulnerable demographic within higher education—develop a sustainable work life by theorizing and describing a pedagogy of self-care that can be integrated in writing program administration and composition theory graduate courses. The authors build on the rhetoric of vulnerability and rhetorical empathy to offer strategies for cultivating wellness and an administrative philosophy of self-care.

Laura Sparks and Kim Jaxon negotiate administrative and pedagogical priorities in their chapter, “On Nonscalability and Transformative Relationships in the First-Year Composition ‘Jumbo.’” They describe a course at their institution called the “Jumbo,” a large-enrollment model of composition instruction that is premised on distributed learning among a community of students, mentors, and instructors. Sparks and Jaxon push back against the pressure to make such models a matter of scalability. The Jumbo is not scalable: it is a re-conception of a writing community model that creates new possibilities for students’ participation and authorization, mentors’ professional development, and instructors’ engagement. This model enables those in the course to take up, together, meaningful issues and questions about both the content of the course and the writing process itself. Sparks and Jaxon’s model offers possibilities for rethinking the field’s adherence to small class sizes as the ideal writing and learning communities, offering a way to extend the students’ action-oriented engagement beyond a class of eighteen or twenty or even thirty into a class of ninety and into a campus and local community of many more.

SECTION THREE: DRAWING TOGETHER

Composition and rhetoric’s curriculum has long been an interdisciplinary conversation: writing courses are often designed by scholars with differing pedagogical and theoretical investments. Our students come

from across the university and, potentially, the community. The scholars in this section demand that writing courses come to terms with the existing links between our students and our community. They also consider composition and rhetoric as a site that can bridge disjunctions within K–12 education.

“Rooting Our Teaching in the Change around Us: Growing an Anti-Racist, Community-Interdependent Course Model” by Zapoura Newton-Calvert examines the “intentional adaptation” process occurring in the community-based Social Justice in K–12 Education Capstone course at Portland State University in response to a convergence of simultaneous and interwoven pandemics (Covid-19 and racism/white supremacy). Informed by adrienne maree brown’s emergent strategy models and Ibram X. Kendi’s work on anti-racism, this writing describes emerging practices; the way remote learning encouraged a positive breakdown of traditional roles; the impact of a focus on racial and literacy justice on the writing, editing, and learning processes in the course; and the relationship building required to allow deep inquiry and accountability to ourselves and each other.

Anna Barritt and Kalyn Prince argue that composition and rhetoric scholars need to speak *with* rather than speak *to* or *about* those in the working class. In their chapter, “Writing with the Working Class: The Future of Public Rhetoricians,” Prince and Barritt suggest two settings where the field can engage with these publics: the classroom and public, local arenas of concern. They rely on their own experience as scholars from working-class backgrounds to explore the first, and they use the example of Oklahomans’ debates about fracking to explore the second. They prompt their students to reconnect with and contribute to their home publics, they encourage public-facing scholarship, and they advocate for revising graduate student pedagogical training to embrace a future as public humanitarians. They hail rhetoric and composition, as the discipline that trains scholars to analyze and communicate, to take up the standard of serving as activists within our own communities and training our students to do the same.

In “Generative Combination: A Guiding Principle for the Future of Composition,” Matthew Overstreet argues that the future of composition entails generative combination. To meet modern literacy challenges, he claims that writers need familiarity with a variety of genres and modes. Integrally, they also need to be able to deploy such tools in combination to create wholes larger than the sum of their parts. A similar logic applies to writing instruction. Writing teachers shouldn’t see themselves as teaching either academic writing or non-academic

multimodal forms. Instead, we should teach both and do so in ways that allow for synergy between genres and modes. Toward this end, he suggests that transmediation—the translation of meaning between sign systems—might be of particular use. The act of translating meaning from textual, academic forms to popular multimodal forms, for instance, can make real the varied affordances of mode and genre. It can also reveal points of synergy between disparate forms, thus helping move composition beyond a simplistic text/multimodal binary.

SECTION FOUR: WRITING OUR WAY BACK

In the final section of this collection, authors are thinking critically about the writing that happens in writing courses. They consider how to keep that writing authentically reflective of students' complex and evolving thoughts. They are also concerned with the voices and narratives we invite into our classrooms. The aim of all four chapters here is to revise the way students engage with texts through writing, which is the heart of the discipline of rhetoric and composition.

While many of the chapters in this collection embrace the discipline, Hannah J. Rule uses her chapter, "A Future without Thesis Statements," to suggest that we move on from that history. Specifically, she argues that we should move on from the reductive, limiting practice of teaching students to write thesis statements. She acknowledges the difficulty of questioning what is perhaps one of the most universalized features of composition writing instruction; however, as thesis statement logic is at the heart of reductive, formulaic, conformist writing, she argues that such abandonment is necessary. Not only does requiring thesis statements teach students to contain their writing within arbitrarily proscribed limits, it also demonizes other forms of effective communication and potential approaches to writing instruction. Moving beyond thesis statements opens writing to possibilities, exploration, and uncertainty. It allows students to work within the complex and, yes, uncertain world in which they actually live.

Elizabeth Kleinfeld joins Rule in holding the field to a higher, more just standard. Traditional citation practices have remained abelist, racist, and patriarchal despite recent, limited efforts to incorporate more diverse authors in our field through other avenues (expanding the canon, for example). Kleinfeld's chapter, "Teaching toward a More Just Citation Practice," relies on multiple authors to uncover the layered biases that continue in current citation practices. She advocates for incorporating more diverse voices in our bibliographies. Her argument

asks for more than a simple shift in appearances, though. She pushes us to take this work to heart, coming to terms with it and integrating it substantively into our arguments and considerations of who we are and what we can do. If citations are a genealogy of thought, Kleinfeld demonstrates that our current work is stunted by a disciplinary resistance to acknowledging our scholarly relations.

In “Film in the Interdisciplinary Composition Classroom,” Rachel McCabe explores the opportunities afforded composition and rhetoric as a field with a fluctuating location within higher education. This interdisciplinary location and the diverse people who teach writing courses have led to the use of interdisciplinary texts. This chapter explores one such medium—film—and its beneficial relationship to student writing within the interdisciplinary structure of the modern and future composition course. McCabe considers the ways theories of identification can illustrate the power and potential of writing about film. To do so, she looks at the pedagogical maneuvers necessary to successfully bring both superficially simple films and more complex works into the writing classroom.

Jessica Edwards’s chapter, “Learning from Black Teachers: Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Implementing Critical Engagement Strategies in Writing Classrooms,” looks at the ways the personal and the professional are inextricably linked for Black instructors. By studying the pedagogical practices as well as the communication techniques of Ida B. Wells, Edwards posits that contemporary scholars can see both a model for Black pedagogies and a look at the work of an early technical communicator. Using critical race theory’s understanding of counterstory, Edwards demonstrates how rhetorical understandings of story in Wells’s work provide both an important text for teaching and an empowering model for educators.

CONCLUSION

The work collected here has grown over time, beginning from conversations at the Futures of Rhet/Comp Conference in the spring of 2019. At that conference, hosted by John Schilb and Christine Farris, scholars—a few of whom also contributed to this collection—sought to build a new vision for the future. Deborah Holdstein noted in her presentation surveying *College Composition and Communication* that many of the concerns first published in the journal are concerns we still share: questions about diversity and access, instructor and student control, racism, and sexism. She called on those present and

the discipline more widely to be as attentive to our histories as to our futures, as each of the contributors in this collection does as well. Each author here refuses to concede the field, even when the obstacles are so many and so high. At the same conference, Krista Ratcliffe asked a pivotal question, one this collection continues to seriously consider as we look ahead. It is a question about the audacity of foresight: how can we think we can prepare students for a future we can't predict? Many conversations in the field have hinged on determining what skills, what knowledge our students will need once they leave our classes, our institutions. How can we prepare them for their majors? For their careers? For a world on fire? In the end, we cannot. We cannot know their futures. As Ratcliffe implies, that is not the point. Our task is to know the kind of world we want to build from the materials we see around us and to teach students to build as well. Reading the writing on the wall isn't the question at hand; the question at hand is how to write for ourselves and with our students.

Our goal is to leave readers of *Composition and Rhetoric in Contentious Times* with a sense of this cautious optimism, with a commitment to finding out *how* to move forward. We and our contributing authors recognize the obstacles, which include (but aren't limited to) increasingly limited enrollment numbers, pressure from administrators, and students who struggle to see the value of a college education in a world plagued by continued racism, sexism, ableism, and economic disparity. We simultaneously see opportunities for growth and evolution in our field. In acknowledging the deep polarization of our current sociopolitical moment, we hope this collection provides strategies to reveal complexity and embrace compassion in every aspect of our work.

NOTES

1. Najle and Jones, "American Democracy in Crisis."
2. Bishop, "If We Can't Polka Together, We Can't Govern Together"; Pew Research Center, "Amid Campaign Turmoil, Biden Holds Wide Leads on Coronavirus."
3. Fredrick, "Welcome to the Fractured States of America."
4. Flaherty, "Students, Professors, and Politics"; Wermiel and Blackman, "Thwarting Speech on College Campuses," 20–21.
5. Johnson, chapter 2, this volume.
6. Lederman, "The Number of Colleges Continues to Shrink."
7. Chiwaya, "Gun Violence Is Up"; Della Cava and Stucka, "Mass Shootings Hit a Record High in 2020"; Thebault and Rindler, "Shootings Never Stopped during the Pandemic."
8. Snyder, "Haverford College Students Launched a Strike Last Fall after a Racial Reckoning"; Schifrin and Tucker, "College Financial Grades 2021."

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