First-year college students' perceptions of writing and writing instruction across high school to college transitions

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First-Year College Students’ Perceptions of Writing and Writing Instruction across High School to College Transitions

by

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, standards-based educational reforms in the U.S. have sought to enhance students’ college and career readiness. The most recent wave of such reforms has emphasized writing as an essential aspect of college readiness and a 21st century skill necessary for success in the workplace. A common feature of these conversations concerning college writing readiness is a prevailing sense that high school graduates are underprepared for postsecondary literacy demands and, relatedly, that standards-based instruction is the key to bridging this “gap.” Compared to the number of studies that focus on writing at either the secondary or postsecondary level, however, few studies inquire into the nature of this transition, that is, what it means move from writing in high school to writing in college. This study, therefore, takes up this question by focusing on how first-year college writers perceive and make sense of this writing transition.

The study uses a multiple case study approach of nine students enrolled in a required first-year composition (FYC) course at a four-year public university and explores how students’ conceptions of writing mediate their transition experiences, including how their perceptions of previous school-based writing instruction impact the nature of these transitions. Data sources include a series of three interviews with each student, student writing samples from both high school and college, observations of participants’ FYC classes, and classroom artifacts from FYC.

Three key findings emerged in response to my research questions. These findings included the following: (1) to varying degrees, students tended to experience this transition as a liminal space, in that they navigated destabilizing situations as writers, ambiguous identities, and reconceptualizations of writing; (2) three sets of factors (i.e., prior and current writing instruction, writerly identities, and schooling contexts) mediated students’ transitions in diverse ways and impacted the degree to which they reconceptualized writing; and (3) when it emerged as a prominent feature of their transition, these reconceptualizations of writing generally involved a shift from form-based writing to writing based on rhetorical purpose, a shift from thinking of writing as reporting to writing as inquiry, and a reconsideration of the author’s point of view in various genres.

The findings have implications for how we understand college writing readiness and writing development across high school to college transitions. In particular, this study suggests that reductive/formulaic conceptions of writing contribute to transition struggles and that mismatch between instructors’ conceptions of writing and those of their students can exacerbate these struggles. This implication contradicts conventional wisdom that would assume that struggle is the result of skills-related deficiencies in students. The implications also shed light on the various factors that influence the nature of these transitions and the kinds of instructional approaches and pedagogies that support writing development as students move from secondary to postsecondary writing contexts.
DEDICATION

To my husband, Trip – you’re my favorite
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the contributions and support of many people. First and foremost, I want to thank the nine first-year students who shared their writing experiences with me. I am so grateful for your willingness to be part of my research, and I wish you all the best in your future educational and life pursuits.

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My family and friends have also been a steady source of encouragement over these past five years. You never know what kinds of challenges you will meet in your personal life when embarking on a multi-year pursuit like a Ph.D. For me, those challenges felt overwhelming at times, from my own health-related struggles to a global pandemic, the obstacles to completing this project, at times, seemed to multiply, but I found support from friends, both near and far—including Rebecca, Amy, Leah, Katie, Nicky, Maggie, and Jen—and from family, including my mother (Julie), sister (Jennifer), and in-laws (Linda and Tad). Thanks for the phone calls and meals and surprise Amazon deliveries.

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Most of all, my husband, Trip, was a constant support to me throughout this journey. Having completed his own Ph.D., he could empathize with me and offer encouragement as one with first-hand experience. Words cannot express how thankful I am for your love and support. Life with you is a gift. I love doing all the things with you. And to our baby boy whom we can’t wait to meet—you are our miracle and longed-for one—and although you were not yet conceived at the outset of this project, it is for you too. All of it has been for you.
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Chapter 1: Problem Statement

While transitions from secondary to postsecondary school have long been an area of concern for students and educators, the call to define and make more concrete what makes for successful transition across this divide has grown louder and more urgent. With the now almost-unanimous agreement that 21st century jobs increasingly require some postsecondary training, K-12 educational policy and practice has placed an even greater emphasis on instruction that supports students’ college and career readiness (Achieve, 2015; ACT, 2016a; Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2022). More specifically, writing instruction and its role in college readiness has figured prominently in recent policy and instructional conversations surrounding how best to prepare young people for and support them during this transition (Conley, 2008; O’Neill, Adler-Kassner, Fleischer, & Hall, 2012; Duncheon & Tierney, 2014; Kelly-Riley, 2017; Henry & Stahl, 2017; Ferguson, Doll, Scarpulla, & Adamson, 2018). Policy documents such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for Writing at the K-12 level and position statements such as the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (FSPW) (2011) and the Council of Writing Program Administrators’ (WPA) Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (2014) at the postsecondary level attest to the emphasis now placed on writing at this transition.

We lack, however, a strong understanding of the nature of this transition—the challenges, opportunities, and difficulties that students face as they move from writing in high school to writing in college. While a number of studies of college writers have explored how students transition from first-year writing to writing within other courses (e.g., Chiseri-Strater, 1991; Beaufort, 2007; Johnson & Krase, 2012), few studies focus on the transition into first-year writing and other introductory courses from high school (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Harklau, 2001). Much of the research on these transitions focuses on high school teachers’ or college
instructors’ perceptions of their students’ writing abilities and college preparedness (Charbonnet, 2013; Brockman, Taylor, Crawford, & Kreth, 2010; Fanetti, Bushrow, & DeWeese, 2010), or on potential gaps or differences between writing instruction at these two levels that may contribute to students’ transition difficulties (Ruecker, 2015; Hannah & Saidy, 2014). Research has indicated that students call upon their prior genre knowledge to make sense of writing tasks in their first-year writing courses (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011) and that some students have few opportunities to compose anything but generic “school papers” at this transition (Jacobson, 2019). Other studies have found that some students’ high school writing experiences, when largely tied to on-demand essays composed for standardized testing, may not emphasize the kinds of writing tasks (e.g., those that require students to form research-based positions) valued at the postsecondary level (Ruecker, 2015).

Few studies, however, have directly considered how students’ conceptions of writing factor into their transition experiences. Much of the conversation has been concerned with how to clearly delineate what constitutes college-level writing (Brockman et al., 2010; Sullivan & Tinberg, 2006; Appleman & Greene, 1993) or with what similarities and differences teachers and students identify as contributing to transition difficulties (Cobb, 2002; Crank, 2012; Denecker, 2013; Fanetti et al., 2010). Of the studies that foreground student perspectives on the transition, some focus on contextual factors (e.g., instructional approaches; prior writing experiences; nonacademic life events/demands) that impact students’ college writing preparedness or their ability to persist in their studies (Ruecker, 2015; Stumpf, 2015), but few have considered how students’ understanding of and beliefs about writing and what it means to be a college writer impact their transition experiences. For this reason, I conducted a study that explores students’ conceptions of writing at this important educational juncture with findings that have important
implications for instruction at the secondary and postsecondary levels, provide a deeper understanding of how students develop as writers across this transition, and constructively challenge reductive notions of college writing readiness.

**Rationale for Study**

Traditionally, school-based writing studies research has investigated writing instruction and development either within the K-12 setting or within the postsecondary setting. Due to the unique concerns and priorities of scholars in English education and rhetoric and composition, not to mention the logistical challenges associated with studies that attempt to span the high school-to-college transition, the research done within these two disciplines has tended to maintain (and even reify) these boundaries, resulting in studies that largely focus on writing and writing development at the secondary (e.g., Britton et al., 1975; Applebee, 1981; Smagorinsky, Augustine, & O’Donnell-Allen, 2007; Applebee & Langer, 2011; Jeffrey & Wilcox, 2018) or postsecondary level (e.g., McCarthy, 1987; Chiseri-Strater, 1991; Haswell, 2000; Beaufort, 2007; Sommers, 2008; Lunsford, Fishman, & Liew, 2013).

Scholars, however, have argued that these disciplinary silos fragment our knowledge of writing development and limit our ability to understand how people develop as writers across their lives (Bazerman et al., 2018). I would add that these “disciplinary silos” also undermine our ability to speak to the issues at the center of the “college and career readiness” agenda—namely, the narrowing of writing to a “basic skill” or commodity that students must possess in order to be competitive in global markets and the power of this “college readiness discourse” over assessments, program design, and institutional policy. While research on the development of college writers has considered students’ writing experiences across key transitions, such as writing in first-year composition (FYC) to writing across the curriculum (WAC) (e.g., McCarthy,
1987; Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Carroll, 2002) or writing in their majors to writing in the workplace (Beaufort, 2007), secondary to postsecondary writing transitions remain an understudied area in our field that has important implications for conversations concerning college writing readiness.

Large-scale studies (e.g., Applebee & Langer, 2011; ACT, 2016b; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2008) have provided a bird’s-eye view of writing instruction in the high school and college classroom, with some studies (e.g., Addison & McGee, 2010) intentionally placing perspectives (i.e., students’ and teachers’) across this divide in conversation with each other. More common, however, are studies that focus exclusively on either the secondary or postsecondary setting. Some of these studies at the secondary level have provided a valuable picture of what approaches to writing instruction are most common nationwide (e.g., Applebee, 1981; Applebee & Langer, 2011) while others focus on smaller groups of student writers and how they experience writing and writing instruction within particular class and school contexts (e.g., Beck, 2006; Smagorinsky et al., 2007; Thompson, 2013; Jeffrey & Wilcox, 2014; Wilcox, 2015). While there is a significant body of longitudinal research on college writers (i.e., research that follows students, their writing, or both across time and space), very few comparable studies exist on adolescent writing development during the high school years (Bazerman et al., 2018). Britton and colleagues’ (1975) classic study of writing development, which analyzed over 2,000 student texts from sixty-five secondary schools and investigated how students’ abilities to write for different audiences and purposes develop over time, is one of the few such studies at the secondary level.

Among the longitudinal studies of college writers (e.g., McCarthy, 1987; Chiseri-Strater, 1991; Sternglass, 1997; Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Carroll, 2002), many have explored how
students and their writing develop over the course of multiple semesters or academic years, and some studies have focused primarily on questions of transfer (e.g., Wardle, 2007; Bergmann & Zepernick, 2007; Johnson & Krase, 2012)—that is, the extent to which students draw upon or repurpose writing-related knowledge and skills acquired in FYC in other courses. One point of agreement among these studies is that writing development is far from a linear path; it consists, rather, of “steps backward and forward, starts and stops” (Sommers, 2008, p. 154-155). In fact, we see that even students who are deemed “college ready” according to traditional measures (e.g., college entrance exams) can encounter difficulty when confronted with diverse literacy demands within both general education courses like FYC and upper-level disciplinary coursework (Carroll, 2002; Sommers, 2008). These studies in particular (e.g., Carroll, 2002; Beaufort, 2007; Sommers, 2008) insist on the fact that writing is not a “basic skill” that can be mastered once-and-for-all and easily applied across contexts.

These longitudinal studies also suggest that development is happening even when the evidence seems to be lacking: over time, student writers expand their repertoires to include new and diverse forms and genres (Carroll, 2002); they become more cognizant of the role that writing plays in their learning (Sternglass, 1997); they use writing to bring personal knowledge and concerns into conversation with those of disciplinary domains (Herrington & Curtis, 2000); and they begin to produce texts with features that more closely resemble those of competent postgraduate writers (Haswell, 2000).

One issue with these studies of college writers, however, is that they tend to view FYC as the starting point from which to chart this development and knowledge transfer and, as some scholars have noted (i.e., Harklau, 2001; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011), fail to contextualize students’ early college literacy experiences in light of their previous school-based writing instruction.
Although understandable that studies of writing development in college begin with students’ experiences in FYC and that studies conducted by members of an academic field whose raison d'être has historically centered around FYC would prioritize exploring the course’s efficacy in equipping students with transferable writing skills and knowledge, by inadvertently viewing FYC as the genesis of students’ writing development, these studies also tend to downplay, if not outright deny, the power of former beliefs, tacit theories, and prior knowledge about writing. There is a need for more studies that contextualize FYC as one step along the path in a student’s literacy journey and that specifically aim to analyze how experiences in FYC relate to previous school-based writing experiences, the focus of this study.

Despite the tendency of writing studies scholars to stick within their disciplinary bounds and focus their studies of school-based writing on either the secondary or postsecondary level, some scholars have begun to press beyond these boundaries, seeking to better understand the secondary to postsecondary transition itself. Among these studies, many have focused on pedagogical differences in writing instruction, relying heavily on educators’ perspectives at both the high school and college level (e.g., Appleman & Greene, 1993; Binns, 2004; Addison & McGee, 2010; Brockman, Taylor, Crawford, & Kreth, 2010; Fanetti et al., 2010; Crank, 2012; Charbonnet, 2013; Denecker, 2013; Hannah & Saidy, 2014). Other studies have focused on the knowledge, perspectives, and experiences of students across this transition: One study (i.e., Burke, 2018) explores students’ perspectives on their college writing readiness prior to the transition; some follow students across the transition (i.e., Harklau, 2001; Cobb, 2002; Ruecker, 2015; Filkins, 2017; Stumpf, 2018; Jacobson, 2019); and others contextualize students’ experiences within FYC based on retrospective accounts of high school instruction (i.e., Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Waner, 2013; Sullivan, 2014), the approach that I have taken.
Among the three studies in this last category, one (i.e., Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011) focuses exclusively on students’ prior genre knowledge and the extent to which students transfer this knowledge into FYC, and the other two (i.e., Waner, 2013; Sullivan, 2014) focus on how students in FYC work toward becoming members of the “college writing community,” including the skills, dispositions, and behaviors that help them along the way. None of these studies, however, foreground identity in this process (i.e., what it means to be a “college writer”), nor do they emphasize students’ conceptions about the nature of high school to college writing transitions. While similar in its context (i.e., the instructional context of FYC), my study explores the transition through the lens of writing as selfhood development, a process of exploring possibilities for self-identification and construction in relation to particular communities. Roozen (2015a) has claimed that “writing...is not so much about using a particular set of skills as it is about becoming a particular kind of person, about developing a sense of who we are” (p. 51). This study, by viewing writing as a way of exploring and enacting socially-situated identities, aims to provide rich descriptions of how students with different academic backgrounds and goals navigate FYC vis-à-vis their previous school-based writing instruction and understand what it means to be a “college writer.”

Situating the inquiry within the context of FYC represents a valid and illuminating approach to investigating this transition. FYC, as a general education requirement at most institutions, represents “a common portal through which many students first encounter postsecondary study” (Kelly-Riley, 2017). As an academic gatekeeper, FYC can grant or deny students access to further undergraduate coursework based on performance in the course (American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2018), effectively conferring on or withholding from students the position or identity of “college writer.” While the actual instruction and
expectations associated with FYC can look quite different, even within the same institution, completion of the course (or course sequence) essentially means that, from an institutional perspective, the student possesses a basic competency in academic writing that can be employed and further developed in subsequent coursework. Despite on-going debate surrounding the value of and ideal course content for FYC (see, for example, Connors, 1995; Crowley, 1991; Brannon, 1995; Downs & Wardle, 2007; Wardle, 2013; Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014), the reality is that the course currently remains a mainstay of the general education curriculum at most institutions and an entry point for students seeking membership within a professional or disciplinary discourse community. As such, it represents an important site for research into students’ development as writers across this educational transition.

Studies have shown that writing instruction in FYC can support students’ growth as writers by problematizing overly constricting models of composition that students bring with them from high school and helping them embrace more flexible composing processes (Herrington & Curtis, 2000); encouraging their movement away from rigid, rule-governed conceptions of writing toward a more rhetorical understanding of how purpose and audience shape composition (Carroll, 2002; Beaufort, 2007); and giving students a vocabulary for writing that promotes more successful transfer of knowledge to post-composition courses (Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014). On the other hand, studies have also suggested that some instructional approaches in FYC can hamper, or at least fail to promote, students’ development as writers across this transition—approaches that focus almost exclusively on technical “correctness” and surface features of written composition (Sternglass, 1997) or those that simply neglect rich concepts like discourse community and genre as powerful frameworks for a rhetorical understanding of writing (Beaufort, 2007). Yet, as previously stated, more concerned
with what students take out of FYC, these studies largely fail to explore how prior knowledge and understanding of writing interface with the practices and instruction experienced in FYC.

**Overview of Study**

Taking the approach of case study, my dissertation explores the experiences of FYC students at a four-year public university as they navigate secondary to postsecondary writing transitions. Sociocultural understandings of literacy and the anthropological concept of liminality serve as guiding frameworks as I explore the following research question and sub-questions:

1. How do these FYC students experience the transition from writing in high school to writing in college? How do these experiences compare across cases?
   a. How do students’ perceptions of previous school-based writing instruction and experience impact their transition experiences, including their conceptions of writing and what it means to be a “college writer”?
   b. How do these students conceptualize writing? How do these conceptions affect the ways in which they navigate this transition?
   c. How does FYC instruction affect how these students conceptualize what it means to be a “college writer”? How do these conceptualizations compare across cases?

**Contribution of Study**

This study contributes to writing studies research in a few key areas. Recently, research on college writers has been highly concerned with places of transition and the extent to which transfer of writing-related knowledge and skills occurs from one context to the next. These studies on transfer have looked at the extent to which students actively generalize writing strategies or processes used in FYC to writing assignments and activities in other classes (Wardle, 2007) and the extent to which FYC instruction aligns with the writing expectations
students will later encounter across the curriculum (Johnson & Krase, 2012). This study also takes up questions surrounding students’ experiences as writers at key transitions; however, unlike prior studies that have focused on the FYC to WAC transition (e.g., Wardle, 2007; Nelms & Dively, 2007; Johnson & Krase, 2012), this study focuses on the high school to college transition, and in so doing, helps to extend our understanding of how writers move across contexts, repurposing and adapting writing processes and skills to meet the demands of new situations.

Alongside questions of transfer, scholars have also been interested in exploring the so-called “threshold concepts” integral to writing studies—that is, the “concepts critical for continued learning and participation in a community of practice” (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015, p. 2). According to Meyer and Land (2006), threshold concepts are often transformative, reconfiguring a learner’s understanding of a subject; irreversible, leaving an indelible mark on the learner; integrative, enabling the learner to make connections across what were once disparate pieces of information or phenomena; and troublesome, requiring learners to wrestle with counterintuitive knowledge (as cited in Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015). In addition to naming and unpacking the threshold concepts of writing studies, some scholars have argued for making these concepts the “declarative content” (Downs & Robertson, 2015, p. 106) for curricula and programs, including FYC. This study, by “zooming in” on students’ experiences at this key academic “threshold” (i.e., FYC), sheds light on the writing concepts that beginning college students find most difficult and those that have the most potential to transform students’ conceptions of writing in powerful ways. Downs and Robertson (2015) have suggested that first-year students’ misconceptions about writing present themselves in four main areas—writing as human interaction (rhetoric); textuality; epistemology (ways of knowing and the nature of
knowledge); and writing process—and that through intentionally teaching threshold concepts of writing that speak to each of these areas, FYC instruction can be made more meaningful and transferable to future writing contexts. This study contributes to this body of work by offering insights into students’ understanding of writing and college writing, demonstrating the extent to which certain “threshold concepts” are reflected in their thinking about writing as first-year college students.

Given the study’s focus on FYC experiences vis-à-vis students’ prior school-based writing experiences and instruction, the findings also have implications for current conversations surrounding college writing readiness. The study’s methodology prioritizes “reaching back,” through interviews and document-based analysis, into students’ high school writing experiences in order to contextualize their current experiences in FYC. While some have posited that college readiness centers upon cognitive strategies such as problem solving and argumentation (Conley, 2008) and others (e.g., Greene & Forster, 2003) have invoked the need for “basic literacy skills” as a foundation for college-level reading and writing, this study problematizes these reductive conceptions of readiness. Despite the fact that research has long emphasized that literacy difficulties often have little to do with “basic skills” deficits and more to do with navigating diverse contexts (e.g., McCarthy, 1987; Walvoord & McCarthy, 1990; Moje, 2015; Learned, 2016), the college readiness agenda has tended to reduce writing to a neutral skill that one possesses and then simply applies to a range of contexts. This study, however, views writing not simply as a set of skills but rather as a way of enacting particular socially-situated identities (e.g., college writer) (Gee, 2012), providing a richer understanding of what constitutes college writing readiness than is typically found in public and educational policy discourse today.
Lastly, the study has implications for our understanding of writing development. Though not a longitudinal study, this study prioritizes some of the same types of questions (e.g., How do students develop as writers over time? To what extent do student texts register this growth? How do students draw upon or adapt prior writing knowledge in new contexts? Etc.) that other longitudinal studies have explored (e.g., Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Carroll, 2002), and it helps to fill in a noted gap (i.e., high school to college transitions) in the writing studies literature. There has been movement recently toward articulating a framework for writing development across the lifespan, and scholars have called for more research that moves across age levels (Bazerman et al., 2018). By focusing on students’ first-hand experiences with writing as beginning college students yet also contextualizing these experiences in light of their academic backgrounds and histories, this study also contributes to these efforts to articulate more holistic and expansive frameworks for writing development.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Becoming a “College Writer”

The theoretical framework for my study pulls from sociocultural understandings of literacy and the anthropological concept of liminality to explore how students experience secondary to postsecondary writing transitions. For this chapter, I will begin by discussing the main facets of this framework and then transition into a discussion of specific studies that have influenced the formation of this study.

Writing

Drawing on the work of scholars associated with the “New Literacy Studies” (e.g., Street, 1984; Heath, 1983; Gee, 2012), I understand literacy, not as discrete reading and writing skills located within individuals, but as practices situated within sociocultural contexts (Scribner & Cole, 1981). More than just decoding and encoding printed text, literacy means “applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use” (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 236). I view writing, therefore, not merely as a neutral skill applied wholesale across contexts but as a form of participation in specific communities or domains (Applebee, 2000). School-based writing, seen in this light, apprentices students into the essential “curricular conversations” (Applebee, 2000) associated with a certain discipline. While popular discourse surrounding the high school to college transition seems to assume that writing is a skill that can be employed (if truly possessed) practically indiscriminately across contexts, composition theorists and researchers have long demonstrated that effective, skillful writing in one context does not transfer neatly into another context (McCarthy, 1987; Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Beaufort, 2007). This study seeks to understand how these students conceptualize writing and “becoming a college writer” through attending closely to the instructional context of FYC and participants’ perceptions of their previous school-based writing contexts.
Also important to this study is an understanding of writing as an ideologically-charged endeavor and a form of identity construction. Social languages (i.e., different styles and forms of language valued in different contexts), genres, and language conventions are intertwined with particular worldviews, communities, and socially-situated identities (Gee, 2012; Scott, 2015). Far from ideologically neutral activities, the literacies valued within certain communities both reflect and construct these socially-situated identities (Street, 1984; Gee, 2012). A useful construct to get at this intimate link between identity and literacies is Gee’s notion of Discourse: “we can think of Discourses as ‘identity kits.’ It is almost as if we get a ‘tool kit’ full of specific devices…[through] which we can enact a specific identity and engage in specific activities associated with that identity” (Gee, 2001, p. 36). Writing instruction, therefore, entails teaching and learning not only written conventions and recognizable forms but also particular ways of being and knowing in the world. To learn and embody new ways with words, what is often asked of beginning college writers, necessitates a reorientation of the self and signals membership (or desired membership) within new discourse communities (McCarthey & Moje, 2002).

**College Writer**

Composition studies scholars (e.g., Bartholomae, 1986; Bizzell, 1992) have long theorized college writers as novice or apprentice members within the academic discourse community. We might argue, then, that “becoming a college writer” means seeking membership within this academic discourse community and obtaining some recognition as at least an apprentice member. While the construct of “academic discourse community” is debatable, as it assumes that the various disciplines and fields that comprise a college or university share certain intellectual dispositions, values, or language conventions, from an institutional standpoint the very existence of certain general education courses like FYC suggests that the construct has
currency. That is, a course such as FYC presumably functions as an institutional proxy for “college-level” writing—delineating the terms for acceptance into the academic discourse community and granting access to those who satisfy the course requirements. So while, philosophically speaking, scholars, practitioners, and students may have differing perspectives on what constitutes “college-level” writing and, by extension, “college writers” (see Sullivan & Tinberg, 2006), FYC, in effect, promotes and upholds particular definitions of these constructs through its curriculum and instruction. As such, this study uses FYC as the primary site for investigation into participants’ conceptions of college writing and writers.

Liminality

The anthropological concept of liminality also serves as a frame for my investigation of students’ experiences across secondary to postsecondary transitions. Many scholars have described the differences across this secondary/postsecondary divide in terms of a “gap” in standards or instruction (e.g., Appleman & Green, 1993; Hesse, 2009; Denecker, 2013; Mikoda, 2013; Graff & Birkenstein-Graff, 2009; Brockman et al., 2010; Hannah & Saidy, 2014). While viewing this transition as a “gap” is understandable given the disconnects that studies have revealed in how writing is sometimes taught across these contexts, perhaps, conceptualizing it as a “liminal” space is more useful, or at least it may illuminate aspects of the transition that the “bridge” or “gap” metaphors fail to capture. The frame of liminality shifts the focus away from disconnects between writing standards, expectations, or pedagogy and focuses our attention, instead, on the human experience at the center of this transition.

Studies of college writers’ development have employed a variety of theoretical lenses to document and describe the changes that happen in students and their writing over time: some focus primarily on the text itself as an index of the writer’s development (e.g., Aull, 2019;
Haswell, 2000); others focus on writing development as a sociocultural process through which writers become integrated into particular discourse communities (e.g., Beaufort, 2007); and still others view writing development as necessarily intertwined with identity and personhood development (e.g., Chiseri-Strater, 1991; Herrington & Curtis, 2000). This study, more aligned with the latter two theoretical frames (i.e., development as a sociocultural process and as intertwined with personhood), draws on the notion of liminality to illuminate how students occupy and navigate the in-between space of college writer.

Originally formulated by ethnographer Van Gennep in his *Rites of Passage* and later extended by anthropologist Victor Turner, liminality—the second of three phases (i.e., separation, margin [*limen* in Latin; *threshold* in English], and aggregation) associated with rites of passage or transitions (Turner, 1969)—involves the separation of an individual from one community and movement toward integration into another. This “in-betweenness,” while sometimes unsettling and disorienting, is also “transformative and generative” (Whalen, 2004, p. 1). According to Turner (1969), “liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (p. 95). This theoretical frame serves to problematize conceptions of writing development as simply movement through discrete stages characterized by acquisition of new skills, or the ability to produce increasingly more context-appropriate or complex text. Rather, writing development through the lens of liminality prioritizes the growth process and identity construction that takes place within the writer him/herself in this “in-between” space and considers what it means not simply to produce “college-level text” but to become a college writer. That is, the analytical frame highlights writing as a form of personhood development, a way to construct a particular kind of identity and a way to pursue membership within various kinds of communities.
To varying degrees, college students occupy a “neither here nor there” space depending on the nature of their college experience (e.g., whether they commute or live on campus; whether they are traditional or non-traditional students, in terms of age or employment status). Yet all college students experience some sense of being “betwixt and between,” as they leave (if only in a metaphorical sense) their home communities and move toward membership within an academic community. They are neophytes seeking new ways of knowing and being in the world, whether through the lens of psychology, economics, or the humanities, and acquiring these new lenses means some degree of assimilation into the disciplinary communities that value these ways of knowing. Composition scholars have even used the spatial metaphors of threshold and liminal state to describe the experience of college writers who are “asked as freshmen to leave something behind and to locate themselves in the realms of uncertainty and ambiguity” (Sommers & Saltz, 2004, p. 125).

This study considers how beginning college writers occupy and navigate this liminal space. As Sommers and Saltz (2004) have stated, “on the threshold of college, freshmen are invited into their education by writing” (p. 127), and perhaps the most concrete way in which this invitation is extended is through FYC, a course that occupies its own liminal position within higher education. Situated between the high school curriculum and disciplinary coursework, FYC meets students right in the midst of this personal and academic transition; the course itself, therefore, represents the most relevant academic context in which to situate this study on how students negotiate this important transition.

While the concept of liminality was originally employed to describe rites of passage within indigenous communities (see Turner, 1969), scholars from diverse traditions have used it to describe transformational and transitional experiences common in many other contexts.
Within educational studies, researchers have explored how various kinds of students (e.g., pre-service teachers, first-year doctoral students; first-year undergraduate students) navigate transitions that entail shifts in identity (e.g., Cook-Sather, 2006; Adorno, Cronley, & Smith, 2015; Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009; Hurlock et al., 2008), and research on the threshold concepts associated with learning in particular disciplines has also made use of the construct to capture the transformative experience of an individual acquiring new knowledge and new status within a community (e.g., Meyer & Land, 2003; Meyer & Land, 2005).

Scholars have described these threshold concepts as “‘portals’ to new and different ways of experiencing” (Hall, Romo, & Wardle, 2018), arguing that sustained interaction with these concepts moves learners through the liminal state toward more expert participation in the activities of the field. Learning in this liminal space entails both acquisition and internalization of new forms of spoken and written discourse (Land, Rattray, & Vivian, 2014) and “a shift in the learner’s subjectivity, a repositioning of the self” (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 374). Writing studies research has explored learning in this liminal space through the perspective of a graduate of a writing studies major (Hall, Romo, & Wardle, 2018) and through analysis of text features of undergraduate student writers moving from a general first-year writing course to a more discipline-specific writing course (Donahue & Foster-Johnson, 2018). This study builds on this work by using the frame of liminality to understand students’ experiences as beginning college writers, specifically considering how instruction in FYC affects students’ conceptions of being a college writer.

**Literature Review**

In this section, I will review literature relevant to this study from the fields of rhetoric and composition, adolescent literacy studies, and English education, giving particular attention to
those studies that employ aspects of my theoretical framework. These bodies of work include the literature on college readiness; research on the intersection of writing and identity; studies of students’ writing development; and studies on writing-related knowledge transfer or school-based literate transitions.

**College Readiness**

Although increasingly put forth as an essential goal of K-12 education, college writing readiness is a fuzzy and contested concept. The traditional definitions focus on demonstrating basic literacy skills (Greene & Forster, 2003) and key cognitive strategies (e.g. interpretation, problem solving) seen as applicable to writing (Conley, 2008). According to these definitions, college-level writing means simply an ability to use the writing process (i.e., drafting, revising, editing) to produce clear, coherent texts that demonstrate correct grammar and usage (Conley, 2008). Such definitions, however, depend upon conceptions of writing that writing studies research has long called into question—namely, the ability of writers to encode a stable, singular meaning within texts (Kent, 1993; Herzberg, 1991) and the notion that there are certain “basic literacy skills” that once acquired can transfer into any and every context (Russell & Foster, 2002; Carroll, 2002; Beaufort, 2007). In public and educational policy discourse, standardized test scores, rates of placement into remedial/developmental courses, and college persistence and retention rates often serve as proxies for college readiness (ACT, 2018; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2017; Complete College America, 2012). These measures alone, however, yield a superficial picture, one that focuses primarily on cognitive skills and strategies and that, when viewed in isolation, can tend to reinforce deficit discourses about students from non-dominant linguistic or cultural backgrounds (Duncheon and Tierney, 2014). Also troubling is the way in which these “readiness statistics” get circulated as evidence of a supposedly ever-
worsening national literacy crisis and a growing gap between secondary and postsecondary standards. Such discourse tends to call for higher K-12 literacy standards and more accountability for failing schools and ineffective teachers, supporting the script that has fueled the “educational reform” movements of the past few decades.

In an effort to push back against reductive thinking about college readiness, the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (FSPW) (2011), put forth by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Writing Project (NWP) purports to offer a vision of college writing readiness grounded in writing studies research and theory. The FSPW (2011) specifies a set of rhetorical skills and experiences along with eight habits of mind that research suggests will prepare students for writing at the college level. Among these experiences are developing rhetorical knowledge and developing flexible writing processes, and the habits of mind include traits or dispositions such as curiosity, persistence, and responsibility. Some have critiqued the FSPW as grounded primarily in cognitive theories of writing, neglecting to address the sociocultural contexts in which writing is situated (Duncheon & Tierney, 2014) or as placing undue emphasis on cultivating these “habits of mind” that may or may not be the result of writing-related experiences (Hansen, 2012). Despite these critiques, it is clear that the framework was intended as an alternative to other more generic notions of college writing readiness that tend to reinforce reductive understandings of writing as a basic skill.

While not specifically framed as a discussion of college readiness for writing, Sullivan and Tinberg (2006) bring together a variety of voices (e.g., high school teachers, college instructors, college students, and college administrators) to discuss what constitutes college-level writing and what distinguishes it from pre-college level writing in their edited collection. The
contributors consider the collection’s main question and title – *What is “College-Level” Writing?* – from a variety of angles. Among the issues covered are the role of basic/developmental writing programs in postsecondary education (Sullivan, 2006); the kind of pedagogy that helps to demystify for students the writing asked of them (McCormick, 2006); the role of writing standards and assessments in reinforcing socioeconomic differences and access to various kinds of writing curriculum (Lewiecki-Wilson & Wahlrab, 2006); and the attitudes, skills, and knowledge that students bring with them as resources to help them develop their writing abilities (Lunsford, 2006). This volume demonstrates how writing studies scholars and writing instructors have defined “college-level” writing, a conversation that overlaps in certain ways with the college readiness conversation at the K-12 level. This study, through exploring how high school writing instruction impacts students’ conceptions of writing as beginning college students, has implications for understandings of college writing readiness and for writing instruction at the secondary and postsecondary levels.

**Writing and Identity**

Exploring the intersection of literate activities and identity has been an important area of research in both composition and literacy studies. Research on adolescent literacy has explored how young people read and write to enact different identities and affiliate with communities and social networks that they value (Moje et al., 2008; McCarthey & Moje, 2002; Lam, 2009; Black, 2006). This body of research has also challenged unidimensional conceptions of reading ability and reading-related identity by showing how young people enact different identities (e.g., struggling reader; proficient reader) depending on the context. Some studies have explored how students take up positive identifications as readers in their extracurricular activities in contrast to school-based labels that tend to position them as “struggling readers” (Alvermann, 2001;
Alvermann, 2007), and other studies have explored how young people enact different literacy
identities across content area classes based on how different instructional approaches and
institutional arrangements position them as writers and readers (Learned, 2016; Learned, 2018a).

Studies concerned with the opportunities adolescents have to engage in disciplinary
literacy across the content areas—that is, the degree to which literacy instruction foregrounds the
knowledge-making, communicative practices of the disciplines and apprentices students into
these practices in developmentally-appropriate ways—demonstrate another way in which
adolescent literacy research has considered the intersection of identity and literacy (Moje, 2015;
Learned, 2016). Some studies have suggested that disciplinary literacy underscores for students
the inherently social nature of knowledge construction in the disciplines and opens up to students
disciplinary identities (e.g., historian, literary critic) that are far more agentive and empowering
than generic, skills-based reading and writing instruction (Learned, 2018b; Learned, 2016; Lee,
2007; Rainey et al., 2017)

Studies that explore these topics during the college years also consider how students
develop disciplinary identities as they learn and take up the discursive practices associated with
certain disciplines. Lerner and Poe’s (2014) longitudinal case study of three undergraduate
science students explores how students’ conceptions of scientific communication and
knowledge-making change over the course of three years. They found that, for these students, the
decision to leave a particular major and pursue a different one had a lot to do with their
“perceived success (or lack thereof) with communication” in that field (p. 58). That is, the ability
to “identify with the discursive practices of the discipline” (Lerner & Poe, 2014, p. 58) had a
strong influence on whether the student could see himself/herself as a member of that particular
scientific community.
Similarly, Herrington and Curtis’ (2000) longitudinal case studies of four college writers emphasize how students seek discourse and disciplinary communities that enable them to bridge personal concerns and identities with academic ones. In their analysis of Rachel’s college writing experiences, Herrington and Curtis (2000) suggest that the disciplinary lens of clinical psychology, her major, offered Rachel a way to explore important aspects of her past as she built a disciplinary identity as a writer in this field. Through her writing, Rachel “was working to compose...a coherent self with some continuity across time, transmuting her past into a new narrative where she is a positive agent in the world” (p. 269). In a similar manner, Lawrence/Steven, another case study participant, used writing to construct a sense of self. Quite literally fighting for his life, Lawrence/Steven found in his academic writing, particularly as he self-assembled a gender studies major, a forum in which to affirm his sexual identity and work through suicidal thoughts and feelings from his past. In this sense, his writing during his college years served as “a continual reauthoring of himself and revising of the dominant narrative into which he was born” (p. 135).

Other research in composition studies has sought to understand how identity is implicated in the dynamic interplay between vernacular literacies and disciplinary literacies (e.g., Roozen, 2009a; Roozen, 2009b; Roozen, 2020). Roozen (2009a) considers how his case study subject’s identity as a fan-fiction writer and participation in the literate activities of fan communities supported her emerging literate identity in English studies. Drawing on texts written by Kate during her high school, college, and graduate school years, Roozen (2009a) depicts how her experience writing for various fandoms became resources that she drew upon in her English disciplinary courses and how these vernacular and disciplinary identities converged and interacted. Employing a similar methodology, Roozen (2020) documented another case study
subject’s developing skill in making meaning with inscriptions (e.g., tables) over the course of three years as an undergraduate engineering major. Through text-based interviews and textual artifact analysis reaching back to Alexandra’s early childhood, Roozen (2020) traces Alexandra’s ability to “act with tables” for engineering discourse not simply as an index of her developing identity as an engineer but rather as a literate practice with roots that cut across many areas of her life. This student’s “laminated history of acting with tables” (Roozen, 2020, p. 6) intersects with multiple identities across a diverse set of engagements (e.g., using tables to write fan novels; relying on tables for a daily planner; and solving puzzles arranged as tables).

Like these studies, my study also foregrounds identity as I explore students’ experiences across secondary to postsecondary writing transitions. Unlike studies of college writers that focus primarily on how students assume disciplinary identities through writing in their majors, my study focuses on writing in FYC, a course that has traditionally existed outside the academic disciplines despite its institutional function in granting successful students access to those disciplines. Through contextualizing students’ FYC experiences in light of their previous school-based writing experiences, this study explores how students navigate the liminal identity of college writer and how writing in FYC impacts their perceptions of their own identities as writers and learners.

**Writing Development**

Of the few studies on writing development at the secondary level, Britton and colleagues’ (1975) analysis of how students’ abilities to write for different audiences and purposes develop over time remains a seminal one. Through their analysis of over 2,000 student texts written across the curriculum of secondary school, they came to understand the development of writing proficiency as the ability to produce effectively not a particular type of text but rather diverse
texts and found that students can struggle more as they begin to consider more of the complexities of composition and as they begin to perceive disciplinary differences in writing practices. Other definitions of writing development during the adolescent years have emphasized social contexts and “effective participation in important domains” (Applebee, 2000, p. 105) or authorial agency as reflected in students’ affective and epistemic stances toward writing (Wilcox & Jeffrey, 2018). Wilcox and Jeffrey (2018), drawing from data originally collected as part of the National Study of Writing Instruction (Applebee & Langer, 2011), found that many adolescents experience few opportunities at the secondary level to understand writing as an agentive act that enables them to communicate about topics of interest and concern. They argue that such opportunities are essential to writing development during these years (Wilcox & Jeffrey, 2018).

Other recent studies on writing development during the adolescent years have focused on analysis of academic standards for writing, exploring what sorts of developmental pathways these standards envision (e.g., Jeffrey, Elf, Skar, & Wilcox, 2018). In an analysis of the writing standards for three different educational systems (i.e., Norway, Denmark, and the U.S.), Jeffrey et al. (2018) explore how writing development is conceptualized in these specifications for grade-level competencies and to what extent these conceptions have their basis in writing studies theory and research. Their findings emphasize similarities and differences across the three cases regarding issues such as the importance of context in writing, the role of audience, and the use of sources. Specifically in their analysis of the Common Core State Standards for Writing in the U.S., the authors highlight the shift from an emphasis on more personal genres (e.g., narrative) in the younger grades to an emphasis on more informational genres in the older grades. Additionally, the analysis points to a lack of emphasis in the U.S. standards on student
motivation, writerly agency, and sociocultural contexts for writing and an overall lack of connection to research on writing development (Jeffrey et al., 2018).

While studies specifically on writing development during the secondary school years are limited, there exists a significant body of work on writing development during the college years that takes a longitudinal approach to exploring these questions (e.g., McCarthy, 1987; Chiseri-Strater, 1991; Haswell, 1991; Sternglass, 1997; Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Carroll, 2002; Beaufort, 2007). For the purposes of this literature review, however, I will discuss only those studies that explore writing development in ways, theoretically and methodologically, similar to those of my study. Although I did not have the ability to collect data over the course of multiple semesters and within different courses, my study, like some of these longitudinal studies, draws heavily from student interviews, student writing, and classroom observations and prioritizes a view of writing development as intertwined with personhood development.

Herrington and Curtis’ (2000) longitudinal case study, which follows four students from the beginning to the end of their college careers, approaches “writing as a relational, self-constituting act, at once personal, social, and cultural” (p. 356). Drawing on student interviews, student writing in a variety of courses, and interviews with instructors, Herrington and Curtis (2000) explore how these students develop as writers and how their experiences of writing within different course contexts impact that development. Their study reveals the importance of students finding a “sponsoring institution” within and out of which they feel compelled to speak in order to develop as writers. The case studies reveal “a persistent personal impulse to construct coherent selves through writing, to make themselves understood through their writing to an audience capable of understanding them and for a kindred group capable of identifying with them” (p. 354). They found that teachers played an important role in serving as this
understanding audience and in helping students bring personal knowledge into meaningful dialogue with academic disciplines and discourses. In particular, their study highlights a few factors that assisted students in developing as writers: time, drafting and revising, readings, and explicit instruction and critical reflection on discourse conventions (Herrington & Curtis, 2000).

While not as invested in arguing for the connections between writing development and personal development as Herrington and Curtis, Carroll (2002) and Beaufort (2007) still emphasize writing development as a socially-situated process through which individuals become more fluent in the discourse norms and discursive moves associated with a particular discipline or field. In her four-year study of 20 undergraduate students at Pepperdine University, Carroll (2002) drew from student-assembled writing portfolios, interviews, and questionnaires to explore how students develop as writers over their college years. Carroll (2002) found that in their writing for general education courses and first-year composition, students discussed needing to “change their writing” (p. 47) in order to meet the professors’ expectations, a comment that echoes McCarthy’s (1987) Dave, “a stranger in strange lands,” who saw the writing expectations for each class as “totally different from each other and totally different from anything he had ever done before” (p. 243).

According to Carroll (2002), as first and second-year college students, students experienced varying degrees of struggle as they sought to “give professors what they want” (p. 47). By their junior and senior years, however, some students in the study began to understand these different writing expectations “not as idiosyncratic requirements but as conventions of particular academic and professional genres…[and] necessary for becoming a journalist, a scientist, or a psychologist” (p. 47). Overall, her study emphasizes that development happens “because students must take on new and difficult roles that challenge their abilities as writers”
(p. 9) and that, despite it being difficult to see at times, students do develop in their abilities to understand and compose in the genres and according to the discourse norms of their disciplines over time.

In her six-year case study of Tim, Beaufort (2007) analyzes how Tim develops as a writer through his first-year writing courses, his coursework as both a history and engineering major, and his first job post-college at a small engineering firm. Through interviews with Tim, interviews with his first-year writing instructor, writing samples, and teacher/evaluator’s written feedback on his writing, Beaufort (2007) explores how Tim’s writing expertise develops using a conceptual model comprised of five knowledge domains (i.e., writing process, subject matter, rhetorical, genre, and discourse community) to deductively analyze the data. In applying this theoretical lens to Tim’s college writing experiences, Beaufort (2007) concludes that Tim remained in the beginning stages of gaining writing expertise in the fields of history and engineering in part due to a lack of authentic contexts for writing (i.e., decontextualized “school” writing) and a lack of direct instruction in discourse community norms and discipline-specific genres. In his first-year writing course, history courses, and engineering courses, Tim was unable “to grasp the ‘real’ social context for writing in those disciplines, beyond the context of ‘doing school’” (p. 144).

In this study, I build on this research on writing development by looking at how students develop as writers across high school to college transitions. While research is just beginning in some ways to consider how adolescents develop as writers, this question is one that has enjoyed significant attention for some time now from college compositionists. This study, by considering how beginning college students experience being a college writer in the FYC setting and contextualizing these experiences based on retrospective accounts of previous school-based
Writing instruction, offers helpful insights on writing development with implications for curriculum and instruction at both the high school and college levels.

**Writing-Related Knowledge Transfer & Transitions**

In recent years, many composition scholars have focused their attention on the study of transfer, exploring how and to what extent writers draw on or generalize writing-related knowledge acquired in one setting to a different context, and for those most concerned with college or university-based writing instruction, the focus has tended to be on transfer of writing knowledge from FYC to writing in other general education or major courses (e.g., Wardle, 2007; Bergmann & Zepernick, 2007; Johnson & Krase, 2012). Reiff and Bawarshi (2011) have studied transfer of writing knowledge, however, at the high school to college transition, exploring the prior genre knowledge that students at two large public universities brought with them from high school into FYC. Through analysis of survey data, student interviews, student writing, and FYC instructors’ syllabi and assignments, they found that students generally fell into one of two categories in terms of their transfer of prior genre knowledge: “boundary crossers,” those who were more willing to adopt a novice position and revise/discard previous genre knowledge that did not serve them in new contexts, and “boundary guarders,” those who held onto previous genre knowledge more inflexibly even when that knowledge was not directly applicable to new rhetorical situations (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011). Sommers and Saltz (2004), in the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing, also found that many beginning college writers “cling to their old habits and formulas” (p. 134) despite the need for new approaches and deeper intellectual engagement while others, similar to Reiff and Bawarshi’s (2011) “boundary crossers,” “adopt an open attitude to instruction and feedback, a willingness to experiment, whether in course selection or paper topics, and a faith that, with practice and guidance, the new expectations of
college can be met” (Sommers & Saltz, 2004, p. 134). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Sommers and Saltz (2004) found that the latter group tend to fare better in terms of their writing development over the college years.

While many of the studies on “writing transitions” focus on the movement from writing in FYC to writing in other courses (e.g., Delacambre & Donahue, 2012; Donahue & Foster-Johnson, 2018), there is a growing number of studies on secondary to postsecondary writing transitions that foregrounds student voice surrounding this experience. Of these studies, some have longitudinal characteristics, following students from the end of their high school careers to the beginning of their college careers (e.g., Ruecker, 2015; Jacobson, 2019; Stumpf, 2018) or from a developmental writing course to a college composition course (e.g., Graziani, 2016). Some situate their studies in discourses surrounding college readiness (e.g., Stumpf, 2018) while others look to represent the transition experiences of traditionally marginalized students, including linguistic minority students (i.e., Ruecker, 2015; Jacobson, 2019) and underprepared, non-traditional college students (i.e., Graziani, 2016). A few of these studies emphasize how varied students’ transition experiences can be, pointing to factors that may contribute to this variation, such as participants’ high school writing experiences or their perceptions of themselves as writers (Stumpf, 2018), their institutional contexts, including the nature of the writing instruction that they experience in these contexts (Ruecker, 2015), and the distance that students must negotiate between their home/community-based literacies and the academic literacies valued in college (Graziani, 2016; Jacobson, 2019).

Ruecker (2015) followed seven linguistic minority students across their high school to college transitions and explored the differences in writing demands encountered in each institutional setting (i.e., high school, community college, and public university), the challenges
that students faced as they navigated this transition, and the resources that they drew upon to help facilitate their transition. He found that students reported reading and writing a greater volume and wider range of texts in college than they were accustomed to in high school (Ruecker, 2015). Much of their high school writing involved standardized test preparation essays and personal narratives whereas in college they were expected to compose research-based essays. While some students struggled considerably with these differences, others were able to leverage various resources (e.g., instructor feedback, college support services, familial and peer support) to help them succeed in making the transition (Ruecker, 2015).

Harklau (2001), in her year-long ethnographic case study of four immigrant linguistic-minority students, also followed students from their last semester of high school to their first semester of college, comparing their literacy practices across these two contexts. One notable finding of this study was that these students actually engaged in more extended and multi-draft composition in high school than they did in college. These findings contrast with those of large-scale studies of writing in secondary schools, which suggest that many secondary students infrequently compose text of a paragraph or more (Applebee & Langer, 2011) and rarely engage in peer review or compose multiple drafts (Scherff & Piazza, 2005). Harklau’s (2001) study, nonetheless, provides a valuable picture of the institutional literacy contexts of these four students, highlighting the different uses of instructional time and different degrees of student responsibility for learning that students encountered in college classrooms. Both Harklau (2001) and Ruecker (2015) found that students perceived a shift in their degree of responsibility and ownership over their own learning in their transitions to college: whereas teachers shouldered much of the burden for student learning at the high school level, students recognized that the onus was primarily on them as college students.
I also situate my study within this body of work on writing-related knowledge transfer and writing transitions. My study foregrounds how students’ conceptions of writing at their high to college transitions impact the ways in which they become college writers and experience writing in FYC. Through contextualizing their FYC experiences based on prior school-based writing experiences, my study also considers how “students' perceptions… [are] inextricably grounded in their high school literacy experiences” (Harklau, 2001, p. 51).
Chapter 3: Methodology

My investigation into students’ perceptions of their high school to college transition as writers uses the approach of case study. This approach is commonly used by writing studies researchers exploring students’ experiences with writing instruction in naturalistic settings (e.g., McCarthy, 1987; Chiseri-Strater, 1991; Sternglass, 1997; Herrington & Curtis, 2000) and is conducive to investigating how individuals experience particular phenomena (Yin, 2014). Case study research also analyzes cases as embedded and best understood within particular contexts (Yin, 2014), which accords with my understanding of literacy as a sociocultural practice and my interest in how instructional and institutional contexts mediate students’ writing experiences.

More specifically, this study utilizes a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2014), in which the cases consist of individual students enrolled in a first-year composition class at a four-year public university. By involving multiple participants, I was able to compare and contrast students’ academic backgrounds and writing-related experiences along with their FYC experiences and conceptions of college writing.

Context for the Study

This study took place at a four-year public university in the Northeastern United States. This university has a fairly diverse undergraduate enrollment of approximately 12,800 students. In terms of race/ethnicity, 57% are White/Caucasian, 13% African American, 12% Hispanic, 7% Asian, and 4% International. The undergraduate population is also composed of 52% male and 48% female students, and the mid-range SAT score for accepted first-year students is 1090-1240. All undergraduate students at this school must take a three-credit seminar writing course capped at 19 students (FYC), and most students elect to take it in their first year at the university. This course aims to develop students as critical thinkers and writers, equipped to use writing as a mode of inquiry within and beyond their college courses. Unlike some writing programs at other
institutions, students at this school cannot test out of this writing requirement although students in the Honors College can elect to enroll in an honors section of the course. Also, this program offers no developmental/remedial sections, resulting in diverse classes of students with a wide array of academic backgrounds and experiences.

The writing program employs about 25 full-time faculty members working under renewable yearly contracts who teach three sections of the course each semester. All faculty members hold graduate degrees, primarily in English studies, and over half have earned their Ph.D. Faculty members have a good deal of freedom in designing their courses, provided that all sections require students to compose three major essays and deliver one oral presentation; as a result, there is variability in terms of class content and instructional approach. Prior to beginning this project, I had met some of the writing faculty because I taught part-time for the program during the Fall 2016 semester, and my advisor for this research was also the director of the program at the time of my data collection.

Data collection began in January 2020 and concluded in May 2020. Midway through the Spring 2020 semester, course instruction for the entire university shifted to a remote learning model due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, my data collection methods required modification. During the first half of the semester, January to mid-March, I conducted in-person interviews with study participants and observed some of their classes, which were all held face-to-face. In the midst of my second round of interviews (March 2020), however, the university dismissed for spring break and did not come back to campus for the remainder of the academic year. I completed the rest of my second interviews and the third round of interviews via Zoom, a video conferencing platform, and I gained access to each participant’s FYC course through Blackboard, the university’s online learning platform.
While there is no doubt that the nature of students’ participation and learning in FYC necessarily changed with the shift to remote instruction, the study could proceed with these data collection modifications since the change in instructional delivery did not preclude exploration of the study’s central research questions. Undoubtedly, however, this momentous event and its unprecedented impact on higher education as a whole dramatically altered these participants’ first-year college experiences. All of the students who were able to remain in the study went from living on campus and attending classes to moving back in with their families and completing their classwork online. None of the participants had ever taken an online class before, and because of the abrupt shift to remote instruction, they suddenly had to figure out how to succeed with online learning in all of their classes at once. A number of the participants also expressed how their priorities somewhat shifted as a result of these events. Some participants, for instance, began working full or part-time jobs, which impacted their academic work to some degree. The circumstances under which these students navigated their first year of college were truly unprecedented, and this disruption in their lives and learning cannot be overstated. For these reasons, the context that is the COVID-19 pandemic is not merely incidental to this research; rather, it is central to how these students experienced the transition from writing in high school to writing in college.

**Participant Recruitment and Consent**

To participate in the study, students had to be enrolled in FYC, at least 18 years old, a native English speaker, and a first-year student. After gaining approval from the Institutional Review Board, I sent out an email in January 2020 to all of the FYC faculty, explaining my study and asking for volunteers who would be willing to let me recruit participants from their classes. I heard back from six instructors who invited me to come share about the project and pass out a
recruitment flyer in each of their course sections. From January 27-30, I visited 16 sections of FYC, four of which were honors sections, and invited eligible first-year students to email me if they were interested in participating. I utilized a convenience sampling (Yin, 2014), in that I recruited all willing participants. While convenience samples do not yield representative results, the goal of this research was not to produce findings that were generalizable to first-year college writers as a whole, at this institution or elsewhere, but to provide rich portraits of participants’ experiences that illuminate different aspects of the nature of these transitions.

In total, 14 students emailed me to express their interest. After receiving their initial emails, I sent each participant an electronic copy of the consent form and asked for their gift card preference for compensation. I also sent them directions to the office where I conducted the interviews, an available room within the writing program suite, and asked them to email me any writing from high school that they would like to share. We went over the consent form, including the participation requirements and form of compensation, and all students signed the form prior to beginning the interview. I completed this first round of interviews with all 14 students within the first five weeks of the semester (January/February 2020).

Five students voluntarily or involuntarily (i.e., never returned email correspondence) withdrew from the study after instruction moved to a solely online format. Therefore, my findings are based only on the nine students who participated for the full length of the study (see Table 1 for relevant demographic information for each participant). Although the study relied on volunteers, participants still somewhat reflect the racial/ethnic diversity present in the undergraduate population as a whole: 56% (5 out of 9) of study participants identified as White or Caucasian, and 44% (4 out of 9) identified as belonging to a racial/ethnic minority group. While the university has a slightly higher enrollment of male students, more female students
volunteered for the study. Three male students, five female students, and one gender-fluid student participated.

The make-up of the participants also does not necessarily reflect the population of FYC students at this university in terms of academic performance background. Although I visited only four honors sections of FYC and only 9% of first-year students are admitted to the Honors College, over half of the study participants were enrolled in an honors section. Honors College students generally have strong high school academic records (e.g., semester grades of a B or higher; record of taking Advanced Placement or honors classes) and high scores on standardized tests (i.e., at least 1310 on SAT or 28 composite score on ACT). Given these facts, this study’s findings may provide more insights into the transition experiences of higher performing students as opposed to average or lower performing students. It also is reasonable to assume that students who have experienced more success with academic writing or who have greater confidence in their academic writing skills would be more inclined to volunteer for a study of this nature.

Regarding academic majors, however, these participants represent a fairly diverse group. Two students (Ben and Teresa) were humanities majors, two (Teresa and Sophia) were social sciences majors, three (Sadie, Mira, and Omari) were STEM majors, two (Alex and Mike) were in an interdisciplinary field (i.e., Cybersecurity, Homeland Security, and Emergency Preparedness), and one (Juliana) was a Business major. Some participants, such as Teresa, saw writing as integral to their identities and aspirations while others, such as Sadie, were unsure of its value or role for them; or as in the case of Omari, some hoped it would be mostly irrelevant to their future goals. So, despite many of the participants having strong academic performance records, their attitudes toward writing and its place in their lives were quite diverse.

Table 1. Participant Information
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender (pronouns)</th>
<th>Honors Section</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>White/Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>Genderfluid (any)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cybersecurity, Homeland Security, and Emergency Preparedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male (he/his)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juliana</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Black/White</td>
<td>Female (she/her)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male (he/his)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Cybersecurity, Homeland Security, and Emergency Preparedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mira</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Asian-Indian</td>
<td>Female (she/her)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Biochemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omari</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Male (he/his)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Informatics, concentration in Cybersecurity and Emergency Preparedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadie</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Female (she/her)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female (she/her)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Psychology and Sociology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teresa</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female (she/her)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>History and Political Science</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* All names are pseudonyms. Participants self-identified their race/ethnicity and gender. See Appendix A for the form used to collect this information.

**Data Collection**

As is customary in case study research, I collected multiple forms of data for this study (Yin, 2014). These data sources included a series of three semi-structured interviews with each participant, student writing, classroom observations, and classroom artifacts (e.g., syllabus, essay assignments). Interviews served as the primary data source while the other sources served to provide further context for and understanding of the interview data. Triangulation of these sources (Yin, 2014) helped to strengthen the validity of the findings and make the analysis more
comprehensive. In particular, student writing, samples from both high school and FYC, served to anchor our interview conversations, offering opportunities for discourse-based questions (Odell, Goswami, & Herrington, 1983).

**Interviews**

I conducted and audio recorded three semi-structured interviews with each participant that took place at the beginning, middle, and end of the 15-week semester and focused on students’ conceptions of writing and what it means to be a college writer. The first interview, which lasted an average of 48 minutes, focused primarily on students’ high school writing experiences and their initial impressions of FYC (see Appendix B for interview protocol). Most students had emailed me some of their high school writing prior to the interview, so we also spent considerable time discussing these writing samples. The second interview, which lasted an average of 45 minutes and was either done in-person or through a Zoom call, focused more heavily on students’ experiences in their FYC course. At this point in the semester, most participants had multiple writing samples to share with me from FYC, so a significant portion of the time was spent discussing their writing (see Appendix C for interview protocol). The third interview, which lasted an average of 39 minutes, was done through a Zoom call and focused on students’ overall perspectives on their writing in FYC and how it compared to their high school writing (see Appendix D for interview protocol). As with previous interviews, I asked specific questions about the most recent writing samples that students shared with me from FYC.

**Student Writing**

With the exception of Omari, each participant shared with me writing samples from high school (see Table 2). These samples helped to ground our discussion of participants’ high school writing experiences in specific examples, offering opportunities for more pointed questions and
substantive responses. As students began writing in FYC, these high school samples also served as helpful points of comparison/contrast as I prompted students to talk about how particular texts they composed in FYC were similar to or different from particular texts composed in high school. This kind of discussion enabled me to gain a better picture of how each student conceptualized writing.

Table 2. Student High School Writing Samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of Texts</th>
<th>Titles</th>
<th>High School Classes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>● AP US Constitution &amp; Bill of Rights</td>
<td>A.P. U.S. Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Book Report</td>
<td>A.P. Literature &amp; Composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Case Brief</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● The Bill</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Why Father Figures Should Have More Appreciation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Is <em>Pachinko</em> Really Canon Worthy?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Poetry Essay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>● <em>Frankenstein</em>: The Story of Creation, Effects of Man on Science, Racism, and Invisibility</td>
<td>12th Grade English (dual-enrollment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Expansion or Bust: The Story of the US Economy</td>
<td>U.S. Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juliana</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>● AP Language &amp; Comp. Research Paper</td>
<td>A.P. Language and Composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Optimist International (essay contest)</td>
<td>English 10 Honors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Race Relations Speech</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>● Cadet Commander Essay (application essay for leadership position within youth aviation organization)</td>
<td>A.P. U.S. History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Why Flying is Important to Me (application essay for recognition within youth aviation organization)</td>
<td>12th Grade English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● College Essay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Native American Afterlife Research Paper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● <em>Night</em> Essay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Slavery DBQ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● To Fly or Not to Fly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mira</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>● The Trumpeter of Krakow</td>
<td>8th Grade English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Vikram’s Summer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A few students also shared with me texts they wrote during the previous semester, Fall 2019 (see Table 3). In these instances, the students considered these writing experiences in their first semester of college significant to their transitions. One student (Sadie) asked in our initial email correspondence if I would like to see essays from an English course she took the previous semester, so we discussed these texts in the first interview. Two other students (Sophia and Teresa), in the first interview, mentioned the impact that writing in a particular course last semester had on their understanding of college writing and writing in general. I asked if they would be willing to share any of those texts, and so we discussed these samples in the second interview.

Table 3. Student College Writing Samples from Fall 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of Texts</th>
<th>Titles</th>
<th>College Course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sadie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>● Follow Me and Listen Closely</td>
<td>Classics of Western Literature (Honors section)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Odysseus Bloom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>● Creative Writing</td>
<td>A.P. Literature and Composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Prevalence and Treatment of PTSD Victims</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Plants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Prose Essay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teresa</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>● College Application Essay</td>
<td>A.P. Literature and Composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● The Stranger Essay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sophia 1 ● A compilation of Sophia’s writing from this course  Writings on Love and Loss (a special topics writing class)

Teresa 1 ● How to Destroy the Integrity of Science  Global History (Honors section)

As students progressed through FYC, they shared with me writing they did in the course. These samples (see Table 4) were primarily discussed in the second and third interviews and allowed me to pose more specific questions about participants’ writing processes and goals. When multiple drafts of the same paper were shared, I asked students to talk about the changes they made from one draft to the next and what prompted them to make those changes. Having the actual text in front of us also helped me ask more pointed questions about the similarities and differences between one text and others written in FYC. Overall, the writing samples were valuable to the research in that they offered another way to elicit students’ perceptions and conceptions of writing.

Table 4. Student FYC Writing Samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of Texts</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Number of Drafts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Bottle Up</td>
<td>Personal Inquiry</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Causes and Effects of Emotion Regulation</td>
<td>Analysis Inquiry</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Opening the Bottle</td>
<td>Conversation Inquiry</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Writer’s Block</td>
<td>Personal Inquiry</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Essay 2</td>
<td>Mini Literature Review</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Inquiry 3</td>
<td>Documented Argument</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juliana</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Breathe</td>
<td>Personal Inquiry</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Inquiry #2</td>
<td>Mini Literature Review</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Inquiry 3</td>
<td>Documented Argument</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>ID</td>
<td>Assignments</td>
<td>Genre/Type</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Matt | 12 | - My Friend  
- Matt’s Rhetorical Analysis  
- Ostracism: Analysis of Causes and Effects | Personal Essay  
Rhetorical Analysis  
Conversation Essay | 3  
1  
1 |
| Mira | 5  | - Inefficient in the New Environment of a College Dorm  
- Efficiency in Sleep, Academics, and Entertainment  
- Efficiency in Sleep, Academics, and Entertainment | Problem Statement  
Synthesis Paper  
Problem-Solution | 1  
1  
1 |
| Omari| 4  | - Does It Matter  
- How Different Cultures Cope with Grief and Mourning | Personal Inquiry  
PowerPoint  
Presentation  
Other | 1  
1  
2 |
| Sadie| 10 | - Connected Yet Distant  
- The Good, the Bad, and the Technology  
- Socially Developing on Common Ground | Problem Statement  
Synthesis Paper  
Problem-Solution | 4  
3  
3 |
| Sophia| 7 | - Maintaining Communication  
- Maintaining Relationships; it’s more complex than it seems  
- Keeping Our Relationships Alive | Problem Statement  
Synthesis Paper  
Problem-Solution  
Other | 3  
2  
1  
1 |
| Teresa| 12| - Cancer and Fear of Death  
- Strategies to Cope with Death and Loss  
- Art Therapy as a Mechanism to Cope with Loss | Personal Inquiry  
Mini Literature Review  
Documented Argument  
Other | 5  
3  
2  
2 |

*Note.* When a title was not provided for the text, I used the document title. The column entitled assignments refers to the genre/type of text that students were asked to compose, as indicated by their instructor’s syllabus and/or assignment sheet. The category of “other” in this column refers to other pieces of writing, besides a major paper, that students composed in FYC and shared with me. Such texts included reading responses, research outlines, freewrites, and homework assignments.
Observations & Class Artifacts

In addition to interviews and collection of students’ written work, I also conducted classroom observations and collected class artifacts (see Table 5). For each observation, I took field notes, either handwritten or on my laptop (see Appendix E), depending on the technology used in that particular class. When I composed handwritten notes, I typed them up after the class or later that day. Also, within 24 hours after the observation, I composed an interpretive memo using specific questions relevant to my research goals (see Appendix F). These observations helped to contextualize the students’ interview comments about FYC and to understand how instruction in that particular FYC class conceptualizes writing and college writing. Although the focus of this project is not on the instruction itself, observing these classes enabled me to better understand students’ perceptions about these writing experiences. Some participants had the same instructor but were in different class sections (e.g., Teresa, Ben, and Juliana); in these instances, rather than observing each participant’s section, I observed just one section. I based this decision on the assumption that instruction would be quite similar across different sections taught by the same instructor, and this proved true in my interviews with students. When asked about specific lectures and activities that I observed in Ben’s FYC section, Teresa and Juliana reported that their classes did the same activities.

The classroom observations also helped me craft more specific questions for the interviews. For instance, after observing a class (2-27-20) in which Ms. Mitchell demonstrated how to use the library’s databases, I asked a specific question to participants who were in that class about their experience using the databases for research, and in another instance, after observing a few of Dr. Smith’s classes (2-24-20, 2-26-20, 2-28-20) which he opened by asking students to respond to a short writing prompt, I asked participants about these prompts, how they
felt about beginning class in this way and what they wrote for each one. My aim was to observe about one quarter of class sessions for one of each instructor’s FYC sections. However, I only observed about half of that number due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the move to distance learning after spring break, and I observed even fewer sessions of Dr. Miller’s class due to scheduling conflicts. In order to remain connected to each FYC class once the university shifted to a fully online modality, I requested access to each instructor’s Blackboard course site, which enabled me to see relevant course materials and assignments.

I collected classroom artifacts such as syllabi and paper assignment instructions primarily through emailing the instructors directly, and I collected other items such as handouts and learning activity instructions through observing classes. Although gaining access to the Blackboard course sites enabled me to gather more classroom materials, Table 5 only includes artifacts collected via email correspondence and in-person class sessions as these artifacts were the ones that primarily influenced particular interview questions.

Table 5. Classroom Observations and Artifacts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor Name</th>
<th>Number of Observations</th>
<th>Total Number of Observation Hours</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Classroom Artifacts Collected, Date Collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Clark</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>● Syllabus, 2-28-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Question-asking Strategies for Writing a Rhetorical Critique, 3-2-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Overview of the Structure for Rhetorical Analysis, 3-2-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Miller</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>Omari</td>
<td>● Syllabus, 2-27-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>● Inquiry 1 Instructions, 2-27-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Using Evidence to Build a Paper: 10 on 1 versus 1 on 10, 3-4-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Chapter 1: The Analytical Frame of Mind, from Writing Analytically</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis

Throughout data collection, I began to informally analyze the data; this process involved listening to interview audio files, reading participant writing samples, and reviewing observation field notes and classroom artifacts. As I reviewed these documents, I took notes on each student that informed subsequent interviews. After I completed the last round of interviews with each participant, I began a more focused period of data analysis. I transcribed each interview using my own word processing software. In total, I transcribed about 20 hours of audio, a little over two hours for each participant. This process gave me a deeper familiarity with the data which helped to facilitate coding and analysis. I uploaded all interview transcripts and writing samples into NVivo, a software package for qualitative data analysis.

My coding focused primarily on the interview transcripts as the research questions necessitated privileging this data source. The initial round of coding utilized a blend of deductive
and inductive approaches (Yin, 2014); that is, I both used my research questions to shape the codes and allowed the data itself to influence my coding scheme. This initial coding relied on a descriptive approach (Yin, 2014) in which I assigned topics or categories to data segments to facilitate indexing and comparison across data sources and participants. I also composed memos for each interview and one overall memo for each participant. These memos both summarized the interview content and analyzed its significance in relation to my research question and theoretical framework (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Midway through this initial pass through the interview data, I revised my coding scheme to better reflect the ideas emerging in the data and the most pertinent aspects of this transition. I deleted some codes, created new ones, merged some, and nested others under a larger category. I proceeded through this initial coding with the reorganized scheme.

On my second cycle of coding, I continued to refine the coding categories, ultimately landing on seven primary categories—1) conceptions of writing/college writing, 2) transition continuities, 3) transition discontinuities, 4) perceptions of instruction, 5) perceptions on learning, and 6) writing and identity—and 53 sub-categories nested under one of the primary ones. For instance, “transition continuities” had nine sub-codes, including codes such as “process” (referring to statements that suggest overlaps or similarities in composing processes across high school and college contexts) and “form/format” (referring to statements that suggest similar forms or formats for writing used in high school and college writing). In addition to further refinement of the coding scheme, I composed pattern-seeking memos to facilitate both within-case analysis of individual students and cross-case analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) of emergent themes across cases.
Researcher Positionality

In qualitative research, the researcher herself serves as the primary instrument through which the data is collected and interpreted (Maxwell, 1996), and given the interpretive nature of qualitative inquiry, reflexivity must be a key ingredient throughout this process (Griffiths, 1998; Maxwell, 1996). As a white, heterosexual, middle-class woman able to pursue a graduate degree, I recognize the privileged position from which I entered into this research. My interest in this topic developed as a result of my experiences as both a student and a teacher, and it is relevant, in this sense, to offer some reflections on these experiences as they undoubtedly impact the inquiry that unfolds in these pages.

In terms of my own background, I was raised in a family that valued education and encouraged me to excel in school and pursue a college education. My transition from high school to college was relatively smooth. Like some of my research participants, I found confidence in my background with Advanced Placement courses from high school and saw these experiences as helping to prepare me for college-level classes. On the other hand, like some of these students, I also had experiences as a college writer that challenged my conceptions of writing. In particular, I remember writing for my World Civilizations course and how that experience changed my understanding of the discipline of history. I had previously viewed the study of history as a set of facts and events to be memorized, but I came to see through this course how some of the same things that I loved about English studies, like close reading and analyzing sources, were relevant to the discipline of history and how writing both conveys and creates historical knowledge.

More so than my transition from high school to college, however, my transition from undergraduate to graduate school proved difficult. As an undergraduate, I was a big fish in a
small pond within the English department of my small liberal arts school. This changed dramatically when I began my English Master’s program at a large research university. Suddenly, I felt lost at sea. I thought I knew how to read, write, and talk about literature, but my experience in this program, particularly at the beginning, called that into question. Looking back, I now understand that the source of my struggle was a lack of familiarity with the discourse community and conventions of literary studies. My work as an English Master’s student much more closely approximated that of literary scholars in the field than my undergraduate experience had, and it was primarily this movement closer to the center of the discipline itself that was so disorienting at first. Writing was one of the chief ways that I had to traverse this unfamiliar terrain; as such, it was often the site of my struggle through this transition. I remember laboring over my written work for those two years and feeling as though my identity as a graduate student was at stake based on the quality of what I produced, and of course, given the necessary connection between writing and professional identity in academia, that was, to a large degree, true. Although I likely would not have said it this way at the time, I had an implicit sense that writing was a way of assuming an identity, becoming a certain kind of person. Ultimately, I decided that the identity of “literary scholar” was not for me and that I did not want to pursue a Ph.D. in English literature. So I did what many students with terminal M.A. degrees in English do: I began to teach.

My teaching career began as an English Language Arts teacher for 11th grade students, and over the course of about five years, I taught literature and writing in a variety of settings – high school, university, community college, and liberal arts college contexts. I worked primarily with young people during their late high school or early college years; as a result, helping students prepare for and navigate this important literacy transition from high school to college
became central to my work as an educator. As a high school English teacher who began her career during the advent of the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2022), I became accustomed to crafting lesson and unit plans that were “standards-based” and that helped students obtain “college and career readiness.” I also taught Advanced Placement English courses that allowed students to engage in “college-level” writing and reading within the high school classroom, and in my work for a summer program designed to give college-bound urban youth a taste of postsecondary academics, I taught a course on college research and writing skills. On the other side of the transition, as a college instructor, I taught courses such as “College Composition” to those the institution deemed “college-ready” and developmental writing courses to those whose skills needed “remediation.” Rather than making the nature of this transition and the instruction necessary to support it more transparent and obvious, my teaching experiences tended to introduce more questions and ambiguity, suggesting the complexity of the phenomenon itself. Although K-12 standards documents and college course syllabi can present as self-evident concepts like “college-ready” or “college-level,” the real experiences of people writing across this transition belie such simplistic descriptions.

This research, therefore, was informed by my own desire to better understand the nature of these transitions, not as an attempt to uncover the singular essence of the phenomenon, as though any human experience could be boiled down to a single narrative, but rather as a way to uncover the “essences” of these transitions through the eyes of particular students in particular times and places. Even as I have sought to employ a rigorous, iterative process in order to arrive at credible findings, I recognize that this study, nonetheless, was influenced by my own identity and experiences as a student, instructor, researcher, and person in the world.
Validation Strategies

Important to case study research is validation of findings through triangulation of data sources (Yin, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). While interview data served as the centerpiece of this study, I used observational data, classroom artifacts, and student writing to provide other means of exploring the same phenomenon (i.e., students’ experiences of becoming college writers), and these additional data sources had value in so far as they offered additional tools for accessing and understanding students’ descriptions and perceptions of their writing experiences primarily elicited through the series of interviews. Additionally, I used member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018) throughout the data collection process to confirm my understanding and interpretation of students’ experiences. This validation strategy happened mostly during interviews two and three and often took the form of referencing a takeaway I had from that student’s previous interview and offering him/her an opportunity to respond. This strategy helped to confirm my understanding of students’ writing experiences and the conceptions of writing that informed those experiences. Figure 1 provides an example of this member-checking process from Alex’s first and second interviews. The credibility of this study’s findings depends upon understanding the perspectives of the participants—”the meanings they attach to their words and actions” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 90)—therefore, I have taken care to ensure that my own preconceived notions do not impose a framework onto the phenomenon that does not emerge from the participants themselves.

Figure 1. Example of Member-Checking
Note: The left-hand boxes are data exemplars from Alex’s first interview, and the right-hand box demonstrates a moment of member-checking from Alex’s second interview.

Limitations

While I have aimed to provide rich and thick descriptions of how these case study participants experienced becoming a college writer, the findings are necessarily limited due to the study design. They are not generalizable to first-year students at this institution nor to first-year students in general, and given the fact that I am the sole person collecting and interpreting the data, another limitation of the study is my own bias and subjectivity as the researcher. Despite my efforts to craft data collection instruments that elicit participant experience and interpretation, students’ responses and behaviors were likely still somewhat impacted by my presence as the researcher. Lastly, this case study does not lend itself to replicability as a means
of validating findings. A similarly designed case study may yield significantly different findings depending upon the participants, the institution, and the instructional contexts.

In the following chapter (Chapter 4), I will provide an overview of each participant, including some of the most prominent features of their transitions. This chapter will discuss each student’s high school writing experiences and college writing experiences, both within FYC and other courses, and will consider how each one navigated the transition from writing in high school to writing in college. After providing a miniature portrait of each student, I will discuss the most salient themes that emerged when looking across cases. This chapter serves as a prelude to and context for the findings chapter, Chapter 5.
Chapter 4: Student Profiles

For these nine first-year students, asking how they experienced the high school to college transition positions the inquiry on faulty ground from the beginning. This formulation suggests uniformity, a singular transition experience with a predetermined beginning and end that students must navigate. There is no “the” transition for these students; rather, there is only “their” transition, and even this transition for each one does not neatly begin when they step foot on the college campus and end when they complete their first year and presumably persist into their second. Reductive notions of how students navigate the transition fall in line with quantitative measures of college readiness (e.g., test scores and grades, college persistence and completion rates) while obscuring the complex and varied paths that particular students traverse. If anything, attending closely to students’ own ways of narrating and describing their transitions as writers reveals that such standardized conceptions of the transition lead to distortion and caricature rather than life-like portraits and depictions.

For this reason, I avoid relying on external measures (e.g., ACT scores, course grades), in and of themselves, in my descriptions of students’ transitions and focus, instead, on how the participants understand and make sense of the various writing-related supports (e.g., instruction, assignment, feedback) and symbols (e.g., grades) they encounter along the way. Before exploring the study’s overall findings, the focus of the subsequent chapter, I provide a brief overview of each student in this chapter, including their high school backgrounds and identities as writers, experiences in FYC, and any significant experiences in other writing-intensive college courses. This overview functions to introduce each student and highlight some of the unique features of their transition. In my descriptions, I aim to allow students’ voices to take center stage and rely on their ways of conceptualizing, describing, and classifying their writing-related experiences. This means, for instance, that I maintain the genre labels or categories (e.g.,
research paper, creative writing) that students assign to particular texts and their ways of describing writing processes (e.g., outlining, editing) or features of written products (e.g., formats, styles). Since the focus of the inquiry is on how students’ conceptions of writing and college writing inform their transitions, it has been essential to privilege their interpretations of and classificatory schemes for their writing rather than my own. The sections that follow include short profiles of each participant, and the chapter concludes by discussing the most salient themes that emerge when looking across cases.

Omari: “It was...hard for me to actually conceive how to write outside that format.”

In our first interview, when I asked Omari how he would describe himself as a writer, he said, “I’m a reluctant writer...It’s just, I always struggle with it.” As a STEM major, specifically Informatics, Omari did not see writing as something integral to his identity as a learner or his future goals. In fact, concerning his high school instruction, he said “that’s why I like STEM classes more [than history and English]. I didn’t have to do essays, just like a worksheet on how to do like a math problem or something.” Omari said that in high school he had to do one “research paper” every year in English class in addition to papers that followed assigned reading material:

So like say like in English we just read How to Kill a Mockingbird, we read like the first five chapters, he would want like a summary of the first five chapters. Or maybe write like a paper on symbolism that was showing up throughout those five chapters, or like a common theme or something like that.

The other type of writing that stood out in Omari’s memory was “thesis papers” in history class. According to Omari, these papers entailed forming a thesis and then “mak[ing] an outline.” With these papers, it was important to “relate it to something in the modern day” and then “expand on
that concept.” When I asked him what he thought the purpose of that writing was, he said his teacher emphasized that “[he would] need this skill in college.” Omari conveyed mixed feelings, however, about whether or how these “thesis papers” have helped to prepare him for college writing. He said at the time it felt like “busy work,” but now he thinks, “it definitely did [help], but I still don’t feel like I’m applying it as well as I should, or at least on the level that I should be because I still feel like I write at like a barely high school level.”

When I asked Omari about the focus of his high school writing instruction, he said, “I would say definitely know like the standard format for like a paper, like introduction, maybe a body, a few body paragraphs, and a conclusion.” He added that forming a “concise sentence” and using “vocabulary of like an academic level” were also important. This “standard format” came up frequently in our interviews as Omari wrestled with this formulaic conception of writing emphasized at his high school and what Omari described as his FYC instructor’s desire for them to “break away” from that format: “I find it really difficult cause I don’t know any other form of writing beside that, so it was like really hard for me to actually conceive how to write outside that format.” Noteworthy about this comment is Omari saying that he could not “conceive” how to write without that format: his conception of writing was so intertwined with the five-paragraph format that writing in FYC entailed reconceptualizing writing itself.

Despite the challenge, in his first essay in FYC, a personal essay, Omari took steps to embrace the conception of writing that the instructor encouraged. To Omari that conception centered around the relationship between thinking and writing. He even said that doing the personal essay was “like dissecting your own thought process into it and explaining that,” and in a written reflection on this essay, he said he learned about the focus needed “to write down your thoughts on paper.” This personal essay explored his own emotional response to his
grandmother’s death, and from Omari’s description of his writing process, he did allow his own questions and reflections to guide his composition rather than any predetermined format.

For Omari, his high school preparation’s emphasis on this “standard format” was largely discontinuous with the writing encouraged in FYC. However, there were aspects of his paper writing, such as the length and the need for correct grammar and “proper sentences,” that felt more continuous to him. Once instruction moved online with the pandemic, Omari said he struggled in FYC: “I was falling so far behind in that course, I did not know what was going on.” This was due, in part, to a shift in his priorities: “I had to make sure that my family was safe and stuff before all the academic stuff.” Omari did not complete the second and third major papers in his FYC course, but his instructor gave him an alternate assignment given the circumstances, and he finished the course successfully.

In his last interview, Omari described a more social, knowledge-building conception of writing than he had articulated previously. In the first two interviews, he spoke of college writing as being at a “higher level” than high school writing, but in the last interview, he said that a defining feature for him between high school and college writing is that “[in high school] your paper isn’t going to be like an official research paper that others will use in the future to conduct their own research. But like in college I feel like every time you write a paper, it should be held up to that standard.” In saying this, Omari characterized college writing not in terms of a set of new writing “formats” but rather a new purpose and context, that of a research community. It is likely that his FYC course helped to encourage this conception, as the last major assignment in the course was a “conversation inquiry” in which students were encouraged to “join the academic conversation.” Omari’s case demonstrates how students’ conceptions of writing, while
informed by their high school experiences, remain malleable as first-year writers, able to be revised and reshaped based on their exposure to new writing-related knowledge and experience.

**Ben: “You gotta give them what they want.”**

At the time of our first interview, Ben had recently declared an English major. Early on in the interview, he said that he really likes “creative writing” and decided on the English major because of a positive experience in a creative writing class the previous semester. Ben drew a sharp line, however, between “creative writing” and what he called “basic essay” writing, the kind typically required of him in school. Concerning typical paper assignments, Ben expressed “not [being] a big fan of writing” because this kind of writing felt “generic” and basically required rehashing what was read and covered in the class: “it’s just the same menial grind.”

Brad expressed these sentiments particularly in relation to his high school English and history classes. When I asked him what he considered to be the focus of his writing instruction in high school, he described a procedure for composing texts that involved identifying three themes, placing them in your thesis, having a body paragraph on each one, and then ending with a conclusion. During a separate interview, Ben referred to this kind of writing as “thesis writing,” a “style” that he learned in his Honors and A.P. classes in high school, a method for “how to formulate [his] essay.”

Ben shared a literary analysis on *Frankenstein* from his twelfth grade English class that illustrated this “style.” His thesis states, “The story deals with several aspects of our society today as they did also back then such as Creationist theory, Racism, and the effects of man on science.” Consistent with Ben’s explanation of how to do “thesis writing,” this paper has three lengthy paragraphs on each of these “themes” in relation to the novel. Although the form of the paper follows the structure Ben described as typical of his high school writing, when I asked if
he enjoyed writing this paper, he said, “Yeah, because I had freedom to write about it what I wanted. When teachers are just like OK write the theme and write about it, it’s like not as good or not as fun for me to write, but this I was like, wow, I can do this.” What made the difference for Ben with this assignment was the fact he got to pick the book and the specific themes he explored. This “freedom” translated into more engagement and motivation.

Similar to Omari’s formulaic conception of writing from high school, Ben, too, described writing in a way that suggested this conception. This understanding and the procedure for producing text that accompanied it contributed to both continuity and discontinuity across his transition: it worked in some contexts but not in others. When I asked if he could see himself turning in a paper like his *Frankenstein* paper for a college class, he said, “Definitely. I already did. So I had a poem by Elizabeth Bishop, ‘Brazil January, 1502,’ and I did almost the same process.” One notable exception, however, was Ben’s experience writing in an upper-level English class: “I know in English, I tried writing for my professor. I tried to write how I was taught in high school, and he didn’t really take it very well. He was like OK not the best writing style...he said it was too high school-esque.” Ben contrasted his position as a first-year student with that of the juniors and seniors in the class who “had been around the block with the English major.” To Ben’s mind, their experience made their writing more mature or less “high school-esque.” However, when I then suggested that they may have learned more of what writing in the English discipline requires, he somewhat resisted that idea, offering an alternative explanation: “Or how to write for the teacher in general, but towards the end, I started learning how he would like it, and yeah, it’s very different.”

More so than reliance on a particular form, Ben’s transition was really guided by a sense that school-based writing is about figuring out what the teacher wants. Reminiscent of
McCarthy’s (1987) Dave, Ben described how “every teacher has their own style, so just cause you did it in high school with one way, another teacher is going to be like, not good enough, or wow that’s really good.” To Ben’s mind, this fact limits the ability of the student to draw on or transfer any writing experience or skills from one context to another. He described how one professor may want it differently than another, so you have to “curveball” your writing to meet those expectations: “You gotta give them what they want.” It seems that for Ben “creative writing” provided a respite from the ever-changing demands of the “teacher-as-examiner” audience (Applebee, 1981). He contrasted the time and effort he spends with creative writing versus “basic essay” writing. When engaging in the “menial grind” of typical school-based writing, Ben said he would spend the minimal amount of time necessary. In his own words, “get the job done, get your grade, and get out.” But when writing fiction, he described a greater degree of investment: “When you get to choose something you actually want to write about, you’re like, I’m not done. It took me three days to write a story that I actually want to write compared to an essay where I’m like, eh close enough.”

Ben said the transition to online learning was “relatively easy.” He felt like his work load actually decreased because he opted to not consult the recorded lectures and other materials that instructors posted. He just focused on turning in his required work. Like Omari, he indicated that his priorities shifted with this major disruption: “academics kind of got pushed back.” Unlike Omari, however, there was less evidence that Brad had begun to reconceptualize writing or college writing through his experience in FYC or other courses. His experiences seemed to further cement his notion that “creative writing” is for the writer himself and “basic essay” writing is about learning the “formats” and “styles” a particular instructor requires.
Alex: “I feel like I’m at the start of it.”

Alex was a Cybersecurity, Homeland Security, and Emergency Preparedness major, and they chose this university, in part, because it offered this particular major. Early on in our first interview, they shared that when they were younger they wanted to pursue a career as a writer because they enjoyed “imaginative writing.” Alex attended a summer writing workshop for two summers during high school that they described as a “really nice experience”: “I really got to flourish...we got to share our own ideas, and we got to work with editors and...published authors.” While Alex enjoyed this opportunity, they said that ultimately the workshops showed them that they did not want to make a career out of being a published author.

Alex conveyed a sense of confidence in themselves as a writer, particularly in the first interview, and in the preparation for college writing they received in high school. Alex described “analysis” as a mode of writing that was “really big” in high school. Some of this analytical writing was somewhat “rigid” when they had to respond to a particular literary work: “like some of my analysis papers were on a book that we had to read, you know, like The Scarlet Letter and Jane Eyre, and I’m like I don’t really like those books, so it was more difficult and boring.” Alex found this writing less enjoyable because they had little to no autonomy over the writing—the books were chosen by the teacher, and the prompts tended to ask them to “analyze this scene, or like the symbolism of this.” Of the writing that Alex shared with me from high school, they most enjoyed writing a paper on a novel called Pachinko. This assignment asked students “to pick a book [they] wanted to read and write a paper about it whether it was canon worthy.” Alex described why they liked writing this paper: “it was more freeing. It was a very open topic that we could talk about because it wasn’t rigid like what happened in this scene and what did it
symbolize...It was like what does this mean to you, and how can you relate it to the book that you read.”

Alex composed this paper in their senior A.P. Literature and Composition class, and it was their A.P. English classes that they credited with preparing them for college writing: “I was in the A.P.’s, so they, you know, were also focused on how to write a paper that could be seen as written by a college student.” Alex said that their A.P. English teachers emphasized analysis rather than just summary: “they were like trying to steer us away from like just writing what happens instead of understanding why it happened and explaining why it happened rather than just that it did happen.” Although Alex described this shift as somewhat challenging, they felt like this instruction made them “a better writer” and said that “it works with college writing now.” In fact, in the first interview, when I asked Alex whether they see themselves as a college writer, they said, “I would like to think so. I would like to think that I can impress my professors and like be able to get good grades on my writings.” They echoed this idea in the second interview, saying that they “can write academically and at a college-level.”

During the last interview, however, it became clear that an experience in FYC had caused Alex to reconsider their position as a college writer and the ways in which their high school instruction prepared them. Alex shared that they earned a C+ on their analysis inquiry, their FYC instructor’s second paper assignment, and this experience caused some “whiplash” for Alex as they were used to earning higher grades on their writing. Alex shared that their instructor found their paper “too distant and cold” and that they failed to incorporate their own “voice,” but they confessed to not knowing how to bring “[their] own voice” into the paper: “I didn’t really understand that I needed to like still be personal about it. I was more just like OK here’s the information that you need to know. I didn’t really understand that concept.” While Alex had had
a lot of experience with analytical writing in high school, they encountered difficulty with this assignment because their own conception of analysis differed in certain ways from their instructor’s.

Toward the end of this last interview, I asked Alex how they were thinking about college writing these days. Alex replied, "Oh god, college writing is hard.” Alex said that now they view college writing as “more...about putting yourself into a conversation about something scholarly...it’s less of just writing about something that you’re looking up.” They even recontextualized the role of their high school instruction in their transition, revising their understanding of how that work prepared them for college:

I feel like my A.P. English classes prepared me more for like sounding like a scholarly writer rather than this is how you should be writing it. Like it was more like make sure that you have this specific structure. Make sure you have good grammar, vocabulary, trying to make it sound good and making it very cohesive and understandable...But now it’s more like, I have those things, but now I need to learn how to incorporate myself into it and to broaden my understanding of things and being able to analyze it even more closely.

In stark contrast to our previous interviews, when I asked if they think of themselves as a college writer, Alex said, "nope." Then they qualified that by saying "I feel like I'm at the start of it.” They hoped that by the end of college they would consider themselves a "full fledged" college writer, which to their mind involves "tak[ing] these conversations and you know, developing them even more and researching about them." Although, in a sense, Alex’s confidence as a college writer somewhat deteriorated over the course of their semester in FYC, the posture of the novice that they assumed toward the end of the course may be a more productive one for further
writing development (Sommers & Saltz, 2004) as it leaves room for continued growth and
learning.

**Juliana:** “I could put a twist on it.”

Juliana said that last semester was a “rough transition” for her, “not just in writing, but
living, classes, doing everything on [her] own.” At the time of our first interview, however, she
said that she had now settled into college life more and that she loves the “university feel” at this
school. When I asked how she would describe herself as a writer, she replied, “I’m kind of on the
weaker side. I never really liked writing, especially for classes. I always kept a journal and like I
wrote poems a lot when I was younger, so just, I was more of a creative writer than here’s this
task or here’s this essay format, you have to do this.” Like Ben, Juliana did not find school-based
writing compelling; she identified herself as a “creative writer,” something she saw as at odds
with writing done “for classes” that require specific “tasks” and “formats.” Despite this general
lack of enthusiasm for academic writing, Juliana seemed genuinely proud of the two high school
papers she shared with me, one was a speech she wrote and delivered in tenth grade and the other
was an argumentative research paper written in eleventh grade.

Juliana pointed to her A.P. classes as giving her some continuity in her high school to
college writing transition. Comparing FYC to her A.P. English classes, she said, "I feel like
they’re the same like flow of things." Juliana noted that some of the rhetorical concepts (e.g.,
audience, purpose, genre) her FYC instructor touched on were familiar to her from high school:
“we learned rhetoric in A.P. Language and Comp. So it was kind of a review.” Despite these
overlaps, Juliana also saw differences. For example, when describing her second major paper in
FYC, a mini-literature review, she contrasted this paper and its use of source material to the
research paper she shared with me from her A.P. Language and Composition class: for the FYC
paper Juliana said, “we need to explain our articles that we’re finding,” but the A.P. research paper was “just like you’re summarizing” the sources. In our last interview, Juliana described how her writing in FYC encouraged her to “leave people thinking about what you said and questioning things. Get them to want to do more research on it.” She contrasted this with her high school papers in which she would “conclud[e] everything in the end like the same way it was in the beginning.” These descriptions demonstrate how Juliana characterized the purpose of writing in FYC differently from writing in high school. While the former encouraged writing as a form of inquiry that extends beyond the text itself, impacting readers and keeping the conversation going, the latter did not reference an audience or purpose for the writing. It merely specified a technique for producing a conclusion: “conclud[e] everything...the same way it was in the beginning.” It is understandable why Juliana described this writing in our last interview as “basic” and “kinda boring.”

For Juliana, writing and identity were interconnected; in fact, when I asked Juliana how she decided which texts to share with me from high school, she said, “these were ones I thought described me and my writing pretty well.” Some of the writing she shared with me from high school explored her participation in sports, an important part of her high school experience, and her identity as a biracial young woman; these themes carried over into her writing in FYC but not by way of sheer repetition. For instance, when I asked her how she decided on her topic for her first inquiry paper in FYC, which was on anxiety and sports performance, she said, “I felt like it was something new, and I, well, it was something also familiar, but I could put a twist on it, where it wasn’t something I was just repeating old things.” Although she had written on her athletic experiences in the past, she had never delved into the anxiety that often accompanied those activities and the potential roots of that anxiety. In this way, Juliana was actively creating a
rhetorical context in which the “familiar” helped to fuel formation of the “new.” Juliana’s writing epitomized this notion of continuity and discontinuity embedded in a single act of writing, and in this instance, the embeddedness was intentional on her part—she wanted to “put a twist” on what she had written in the past.

Racial identity was also a theme that cut across her high school and college writing. For instance, in a speech she wrote and delivered in her 10th grade Honors English class, she wrote, “Being biracial, I will tell you that living under both black and white stereotypes isn’t easy. I often question where I fit in in this divide.” Juliana said the purpose of this speech was “to say that people do still discriminate in a way. It’s not as bad, but it still happens. Some people just don’t see that.” Although she said she was “nervous” to deliver the speech, she said this kind of writing “comes natural to [her]” and is her “go-to in writing.” She continued to explore this theme in her writing for FYC. After reading an essay on racial discrimination entitled “Just Walk on By: Black Men and Public Space,” she wrote a response in which she “explained the text” and “compared it to a real world problem.” In this response, she echoes ideas from her 10th grade speech as she again grapples with her biracial identity: “Everything seems to be race related; politics, education, the work place. I swear I can’t go a day without hearing ‘black people this’ and ‘if only white people didn’t do that.’ imagine being both. It’s tough out here.”

Across this transition, Juliana used writing to wrestle with and question “where [she] fits” in this black/white “divide.” And perhaps the writing itself offered her an opportunity to articulate a “being both” reality, to author a continuous self that resists the false dichotomy of black/white. In her body and in the act of writing, these seemingly contrary identities were reconciled in her insistence on “being both.” Juliana found both continuity and discontinuity in the writing she experienced across this transition. Not only that, but she also actively created
rhetorical situations that would allow continuity and discontinuity to coincide in generative ways to make “something new.”

**Matt: “I’m definitely a novice at it.”**

In our first interview, Matt said he considered himself “a little bit above average” as a writer but confessed that he “never paid attention much to writing when [he] was in high school.” He said writing was just “an assignment” he had to do “to get credit for the class.”

When I asked what kind of writing he did frequently in high school, Matt mentioned “research papers.” According to Matt, the research process that worked in high school was very straightforward: “you look a bunch of stuff up on the internet, and then you kind of present the information in the paper, like that’s it.” Writing that followed his reading of literary works was similar in that the focus was just on “reiterating what the book says.” One of the essays Matt shared with me from high school was on the memoir *Night* by Elie Wiesel. Matt referred to it as a “summary paper” and said, "I can probably give you ten others just like it." By that, Matt seemed to mean that he had composed numerous papers for English classes that involved simply rehashing what he read: “You’re just kind of taking what you saw in the story...There’s no deeper interpreting of meaning that you get to do.” Overall, Matt found much of the writing he did in high school mundane and unmotivating.

When discussing another piece of writing he shared that was composed for an extracurricular activity, Matt conveyed much more enthusiasm and investment. This piece, “Cadet Commander Essay,” accompanied his application for a leadership position within a youth aviation training program: "I probably have never been more passionate about writing in my entire life except for this one." He spent much more time on this essay, revising and editing portions, than he typically did for school-based writing assignments: “I read this over like five or
ten times just to make sure that I got each individual vocabulary correct.” When I asked directly how this writing compared to the others he shared with me from high school, he said,

When I’m writing I think it should be about making a difference. I think we should be able to influence somebody, motivate somebody, argue a certain point...so when the teacher gives you the assignment, and there’s no point behind it besides getting a letter grade, I don’t get very passionate about it, and I don’t do a very good job on it.

As a writer, Matt wanted his writing to communicate with and influence an audience, to move someone to action. The decontextualized school essays he often composed that were “monotonous” and merely “followed a formula” did not engage him beyond the desire to earn a good grade.

Across his high school to college transition, Matt pointed to DBQ (document-based question) writing for history classes as useful in preparing him for college writing. For Matt, these essays had value in that they asked the writer to “use contextual evidence” to “explicate a point,” and although they could have required a bit more “analysis,” in Matt’s opinion, they provided a “good foundation”: “I have to say that was probably one of the best pieces for college level writing, especially [for] the rhetorical analysis paper.” Apart from these essays, however, Matt did not feel that much of his high school writing, with its emphasis on form, prepared him for the writing he was doing in FYC. He even said that his FYC instructor “has been really unique in the aspect of trying to bring a lot of interpretation and brainstorming instead of just writing out a formula...I really do enjoy that actually.” Matt seemed to view FYC as an introduction to college writing that will help him “write like a researcher” and use “interpretation and analysis” in his writing. He also contrasted it to his high school writing, saying that with college writing, “I get to put myself into my writing...even when I’m doing a research paper.” He
said this was quite different from high school when he was simply “sourcing material” in his research papers and “copy and pasting.” Matt articulated how his FYC class encouraged “inquiry” in writing, and this concept was new to him but one that he was eager to explore. When I asked him to share what he meant by inquiry, Matt described the relationship between writing and learning: “I never thought that you could use writing to actually learn something. I thought it was just kind of nailing stuff down on a board.” Matt understood that FYC was inviting him to reconceptualize writing, not as mere textual assembly—“nailing stuff down on a board”—but as a more thoughtful and intellectually engaging process. In his last interview, Matt emphasized his “biggest takeaway” from FYC: “when you write an essay, a paper, or gather information on something, you have to think and write, actually write. Think while you’re writing, and write while you’re thinking, kind of:"

The pandemic along with the shift to online learning had more of an impact on Matt’s experience in FYC than it did for some other participants. He said that he struggled in the course to the point that he chose to earn an S/U (satisfactory/unsatisfactory) rather than a traditional letter grade. He shared that his priorities somewhat shifted during this time: while he was on campus, his focus was solely on academics, but when he returned home for the remainder of the semester, “making money and going to work” became a higher priority. This shift combined with the lack of in-person communication with his instructor and classmates proved challenging: “it’s really kinda taken a toll on me.” He struggled in particular with his last major paper in the course, what his instructor referred to as a “conversation essay.” According to Matt, the purpose of this last paper was “to inform and give your own little commentary on it.” He added, “like kinda have the sources talk to each other to discover the meaning behind it, I guess.” He still struggled, however, to write it and described this paper as “really difficult.” We concluded the
last interview with Matt expressing his thoughts on college writing and what it means to be a college writer. Overall, he felt like he understood that it should entail “inquiry-based” thinking and “analysis,” but he said he needed more experience: "I'm definitely a novice at it."

**Mira: “It’s more about your own progression.”**

Mira was the only out-of-state student in the study and the only participant who attended a private high school. She decided on this university because she was accepted into a highly selective guaranteed entrance program for a local medical school. From our first interview, it was clear that Mira’s secondary schooling had afforded her some significant experience writing in the sciences, and these experiences combined with her goals as a pre-med student impacted her writerly identity: “I always veered more towards sciences and like STEM fields, so writing was never my forte, but obviously everyone has to know how to write at least a little bit.”

Mira tended to see “writing” as incidental to her STEM-related studies rather than as a primary way in which she enacts and embodies that identity. While she acknowledged that “everyone has to know how to write at least a little bit,” throughout our interviews, she tended to think of “writing” primarily in terms of the discipline of English, and although her FYC course was not housed in the English department, she referred to it as an “English course.” For instance, in our last interview, she offered her thoughts on whether FYC should be a requirement:

I think that it still should be required because I did see benefit from it, and since I know there are a lot of people who are STEM majors and don’t do English at all and like high school would be the last time they touched it, even though I have to take an English elective. That’s going to be the last English class I take, so I think that it was good to continue that a little bit in college.
Mira understood “writing” as something prioritized in English rather than STEM classes. In fact, she said that she did mostly “tests” in her science classes last semester whereas she imagined that “people more in the humanities would do more like papers.” When I asked whether she had to do any science-related writing such as lab reports, she said yes: “the lab would have questions, so you’d have to write like tiny paragraphs under each of the questions.” Her response emphasized that the amount of writing was minimal—the reports only required “tiny paragraphs,” and she went on to share that the lab reports often follow the “same format,” so as a writer, “you just insert whatever you’re working on.” This description suggests that STEM-related writing serves as a container or receptacle for the real work of the discipline—the scientific research or activities themselves—and arguably, Mira’s conception of writing as a STEM major does reflect a common epistemological stance of these disciplines, the notion that writing involves merely reporting on or conveying knowledge generated by scientific experiments or tests rather than being a means of knowledge construction in and of itself.

The roots of Mira’s understanding of writing and STEM-related writing reach back into her secondary school writing experiences. When we discussed her high school writing, she recounted a couple lengthy papers (i.e., 20-25 pages), one of which took the form of a scientific journal article describing her original research on quail embryos. She said that this project taught her “how to write scientifically” and that in this “research seminar” she learned “how to write abstracts and papers and stuff like that.” Mira had an understanding of writing as differing based on the disciplinary context. For instance, she shared that she didn’t enjoy writing in history classes, attributing this to her dislike of “history as a subject,” and when discussing writing in her A.P. Biology class, she noted that since the discipline of biology is "like a story," writing within this discipline involves "proving that...you understand the steps of that story." Whereas most
participants tended to think of “research papers” as a monolithic category, Mira could describe different types of research papers based on her high school writing experiences. In addition to the scientific paper she did on her quail embryo research, she also wrote a lengthy research paper for her economics class on illegal trading of animals. When I asked how she would compare and contrast the scientific research paper with the one for her economics class, she said,

The lengths were similar, but also you have to research, even...for the scientific one, even though it’s based off of your own work, your own work is based off of other people’s work, so you still have to bring them up and talk about what they did a little bit. But not as much. For the economics, it was a lot, like I wasn’t doing my own research, I was looking at what other people have done and just like compiling them.

Mira understood both papers as relying on and referencing other sources; the scientific research paper, however, involved “[her] own research” whereas the economics paper involved “compiling” the work of others.

Unlike other participants, Mira never recounted any high school writing requirements or instruction that was highly formulaic in nature, a noteworthy difference when comparing her case to others. When I asked Mira about the focus of her writing instruction in high school, she said, “how to like concisely make your argument, but also accurately, being accurate and concise.” Other participants, like Omari and Matt, when asked the same question, immediately discussed a procedure they learned for producing a five-paragraph essay, or others, like Juliana and Alex, made mention of such a procedure throughout the course of our interviews, and generally speaking, participants found this procedure discontinuous with the conceptions of writing they encountered in FYC. In this regard, Mira experienced a greater degree of continuity in her transition which she affirmed when discussing her ideas about college writing:
I feel like being a college writer is not very different from a high school writer…I feel like every year you get feedback from more people, and you get feedback from different people, so it does change your writing based off of your professors and teachers and such, but I don’t think there’s a significant difference between high school and college writing. I think it just means you’ve had more years.

For Mira, there was no obvious qualitative difference in her high school writing and her writing in FYC. She added that she did not think there was a “certain standard” synonymous with “college writing”: “I think it’s more about your own progression and how your writing has changed through time.” While Mira conceptualized her transition as more of a “progression,” there were still some moments of discontinuity.

The main difference she discussed with writing in FYC was the fact that the process itself was more protracted: there was more drafting and more feedback, from both instructor and peers than she received in high school. Mira attributed having more time to work on each paper to her gaining a better understanding of how to use sources to support her argument:

I feel like in high school...our teachers might have talked about how it was important to like be making your own point and be using research to back that up, but it takes time to figure out how to do that, and… in high school, we probably didn’t spend as much time on one essay.

On the surface, source usage was a continuous aspect of her transition in that both her high school and FYC writing required it, but upon further inspection, Mira identified some discontinuous elements that, in this case, prompted her to attend more closely to the relationship between her argument and those of her sources.
Sophia: “College writing is more adaptation rather than repetition.”

In our first interview, Sophia described herself as more of a “creative writer” which she contrasted with “the writing that is kind of emphasized in schooling.” School-based writing, in Sophia’s experience, is often “analytical” such as “rhetorical analysis,” and this writing, while it is the type she more often engages in, is not as enjoyable to her and is somewhat divorced from her own identity and voice as a writer: “with that kind of writing [i.e., referencing an essay she shared with me that analyzes a poem] you have to be very objective...You can’t have a point of view. We were always told, don’t use I...that’s a big rule, never use I in your writing.” For Sophia, “creative writing” does not require an “objective” point of view; rather, it invites more personal engagement: “I’m able to kind of put myself into it.”

Sophia described her A.P. English classes as helping to prepare her for college writing and college in general. These classes were “structured...as a college class” with a “syllabus” and “readings...[they] were expected to do.” It was also in her A.P. English classes that Sophia said she was given more liberty from her teachers to “deviate” from the standard paper structure that had characterized much of her secondary education. According to Sophia, this structure, which she described as “intro, body, body, body, conclusion,” was emphasized in most of her classes, and while it provided “some stability in writing,” it also “kind of inhibit[ed]” her as a writer: “when I got to A.P. Literature, she was like that is kind of elementary so to speak...you’re supposed to progress as a writer...you can deviate from the structure.” Sophia indicated that this standard structure was tied to “time constraints with testing,” and while her A.P. Language teacher “focused more on preparing you for tests,” her A.P. Literature teacher was more concerned that students “comprehend everything.” According to Sophia, her A.P. Literature class
was the more valuable of the two A.P. English classes and helped to better prepare her for college writing since it was not as focused on formulaic writing within set “time constraints.”

Prior to FYC, Sophia’s most significant college writing experience came in the previous semester in a special topics writing course for honors college students. The theme of the course was “Writings on Love and Loss,” and Sophia enthusiastically described the positive effects of this course on her writing: “my writing skill progressed so much.” She said the writing for the class was “non-fictional” and “personal” and that she learned about “proper writing,” giving as an example a grammatical error, “dangling modifiers,” she was not previously familiar with. She said her instructor even contrasted the writing done in the course with what he imagined students had experienced in high school: “he said there’s so many things in writing that a lot of teachers kind of forego because they’re preparing you for tests...and the tests, they kind of focus more on content, like what you’re writing about rather than how you’re writing.” This course, according to Sophia, focused more on the craft of writing, which left her wishing that high school had instilled in her “more knowledge about some of the rules of writing.”

Although Sophia experienced mostly discontinuity between this writing course and her high school writing, she experienced more continuity between high school and FYC. This continuity, however, felt more like sheer repetition to Sophia to the point that in the second interview she described it as “redundant.” She added, "[it’s] annoying because it’s like you’re doing the same thing." When I asked for more details about how FYC writing compares with her writing in high school, Sophia qualified that it is "slightly different" because in high school it was more "English style writing where it’s like you have a book and then you have to like describe the book and you have to say like why the author does this and stuff like that." In contrast, writing in WCI “is like from yourself and the research that you find.” Although Sophia
had only done one research paper in high school, which she shared with me, she did not feel like this put her at a disadvantage in FYC or that she needed direct instruction on the process: "a lot of the stuff we’re learning, I feel like I could look up on my own, and I would be able to do it."

By the time we had our last interview, however, Sophia’s thoughts on FYC and its role in her development as a college writer had become more nuanced. She did not describe the course as totally “redundant;” rather, she sensed that there was a different “context” that informed writing in FYC. When I asked what advice she would give to future students in the course, she said, “I would say still really focus even if you’re going over the same thing. You might realize that...while a lot of it’s the same, there is a different kind of context almost and that you can kind of find a different part of the format.” Throughout Sophia’s interviews, she conveyed mixed feelings about formulaic writing and “rules for writing”: she saw particular “formats” as inhibiting and constraining, yet she seemed to have trouble, like Omari, conceiving how to write outside of these static forms. Although her A.P. Literature teacher encouraged her to “deviate” or “diverge” from formulaic writing, absent another framework or guiding conception she did not know how to do that: “[A.P. teachers] kind of hinted at like oh you can deviate...They were like oh you can make this better by kind of changing things up, but you’re like how am I supposed to change it.”

When I asked Sophia in this last interview what she thinks it means to be a college writer, she talked about how purpose and context should inform writing:

[A]s a college writer you have to adapt more, and you have to adapt to kind of the specific subject you’re talking about rather than following just one format cause a lot of times in college you know, the format changes because you’re writing about different
things and the purpose of your essay is different, so I feel like a lot of college writing is more adaptation rather than repetition.

In these comments, Sophia emphasizes adaptability and flexibility as essential to college writing; she also evidences the beginnings of a rhetorical conception of writing—that is, an understanding of how “subject” and “purpose” guide composition rather than decontextualized forms. In subsequent comments, Sophia suggested that writing a research paper for her introductory anthropology course alongside her writing in FYC helped to elucidate this understanding for her: “how I wrote in [FYC] is different than I wrote in my anthropology course, cause the sources are different, what they include is different, and you kind of have to adjust your writing based on that.” Although discussion of writing “formats” was still prevalent in this interview—e.g., Sophia described her last paper in FYC as “combin[ing] kind of English and history formats”—this new rhetorical conception was beginning to take shape as well. Her A.P. Literature teacher “hinted” at the idea that writing is not about following pre-set formulas, and her experiences as a first-year college writer provided hands-on experience of how rhetorical considerations should guide decisions about form.

Sadie: “It really does depend on the teacher.”

Sadie was a math major and, like Mira and Omari, her interest in STEM disciplines informed her identity as a student. Although she was also accepted to a more STEM-focused school, she decided on this university to keep her options open in case “[she] had any doubts about going into science.” She described her transition so far as “not that hard” and shared that “time management,” a skill she saw as important in adjusting to the greater degree of autonomy and flexibility of a college schedule, has been one of her strengths.
When I asked about her high school writing, Sadie said that it was mostly her English classes and, to a lesser degree, history classes that required writing. Much of this writing centered around analyzing “plays and classic books” in her ninth and tenth grade years when she was in Advanced English and practicing the kind of writing required for state exams in both English and history. She opted for regular English her eleventh and twelfth grade years because she did not want to take A.P. and did not consider English one of her strengths: “I’m not that good at English.” Her most positive writing experiences came in her twelfth grade English class. According to Sadie, this was because the writing preparation for state exams was behind them, as the state test in English was administered in eleventh grade, so the focus in twelfth grade was more on “preparing you for college writing.” Sadie said that, with the state test completed, twelfth grade could “actually focus on how you want to write papers well.”

All of the high school writing that Sadie shared with me came from her twelfth grade English class. One of these pieces was a persuasive speech she wrote and delivered to her class on the negative impacts of excessive social media use. Sadie described this speech as “heavily research-based” and said the goal was to identify a “relevant problem” and then “persuade people with the facts and not, you know, your own opinion.” Sadie enjoyed the more conversational tone of this piece and found it easier to write than typical research papers:

…[W]ith research papers that have to be just written and not spoken, sometimes I get yelled at a little bit, just cause it’s less formal, and it sounds more like I’m just talking to somebody about it. So I found that those speeches were a lot easier for me to make points because I felt like I could pretend I was talking to somebody and working it out that way.
Sadie added that sometimes her more informal approach yields positive feedback while other times the feedback is less enthusiastic: “I still haven’t really figured out the pattern...I wonder if it just depends on the teacher.”

This confusion, and at times frustration, surrounding the kind of feedback she received on her writing followed Sadie into her first semester at the university. Sadie shared with me two essays from an English course, Classics of Western Literature, she took the previous semester to satisfy a general education requirement. She shared how the instructor allowed students to submit paper drafts ahead of time to get feedback before the final submission. She took advantage of this opportunity because she did not feel particularly skilled in the area of literary analysis: “I always struggled with analysis just cause I guess I’m not an English person...a lot of people say because I’m math and science based, I tend to think more logically and I don’t end up seeing the deeper meaning in something. So I know I struggle with English.”

Although she submitted drafts and received corrections from the instructor for her papers on *The Odyssey* and *Ulysses*, she was confused when she still earned Bs for both: “This one I think I got a B+ on, and this one was a B-, which was really frustrating because I spent a lot of time on it, and both of these I did, I think I started writing at least a week or two before they were even due.” Her experience in this course reinforced her idea that there is not a “pattern” as such guiding different teachers’, particularly English teachers’, criteria for good writing; students, therefore, cannot expect that previous writing-related knowledge and experience will transfer into new class contexts: “It really does depend on the teacher, I’ve found, because some English teachers like different formats, so for that you really just have to relearn with the teacher. You can’t really prepare for it.” In contrast to what Sadie felt was the capricious nature of English teachers and their differing standards, she found writing in the sciences to be more predictable
and direct. She described lab reports as a classic example of the kind of prose required for STEM-based disciplines: “It’s pretty straightforward, which is what I like because sometimes I feel like it’s kind of silly to beat around the bush instead of just getting to the point.”

Sadie’s perspective on FYC was that it had a lot of “repeats” from high school. She felt that her high school had prepared her well for research-based writing, emphasizing skills like finding credible sources and using them to support her ideas, and she drew on these writing experiences in FYC, both practically and conceptually. Practically speaking, Sadie chose the same topic for her writing in FYC that she did for her twelfth grade persuasive speech on cell phones and social media use. The rhetorical context of the FYC assignment was similar to that of her high school assignment in that students had to identify a problem and then do research to further outline the problem and propose possible solutions. While the writing in FYC extended this process and developed it over the course of the semester and three separate papers, her speech in high school represented a more abbreviated or concentrated version of, what Sadie saw as, the same basic idea.

Sadie also drew on her prior experience with research-based writing conceptually to make sense of the writing asked of her in FYC. In our first interview, when we discussed a paper from twelfth grade English, Sadie said the task was to do a “review” of something, “to pretend...you’re a critic” writing a review of a movie, restaurant, etc. Sadie chose the children’s movie Coraline based on a novella of the same name. Sadie enjoyed writing this paper because it challenged her to “come out of her shell” and be “more blunt” in how she felt about something: “this was another research one where you had to find other credible sources to kind of back you up. So you can’t just say, oh I think this cause that’s how I feel about it. You really had to make some factual points as well as opinions.” Although Sadie described this paper as a “review” in
the first interview, in our second interview she compared it to a paper she was doing in FYC, what her instructor referred to as a “synthesis paper”:

[T]he *Coraline* essay was another synthesis thing where I had to put my opinions but with facts backing it up...and that was in the style of a review. So a little different than what we’re doing now, but it definitely is a synthesis-type paper.

These comments show how Sadie assimilated her prior writing experience into an expanding taxonomy of paper types. While “synthesis” was not a category she used to characterize her high school writing initially, this category became meaningful to her in FYC, but not by way of simple addition as something totally new. Rather, she integrated it into her understanding of the research-based writing she had done previously, offering her a slightly different vantage point from which to view the past experience—“[it] was another synthesis thing.”

Sadie’s transition, like other participants, was quite smooth. The pandemic, although obviously disruptive to her learning, did not result in significant setbacks or require her to alter her academic plans. Unlike Alex or, to a lesser degree, Sophia, Sadie remained consistent in her assertion that there were no differences between high school and college writing in terms of the writing itself. The differences that she identified were more contextual: writing in college is “heavier weighted just cause it’s no longer public school that [she doesn’t] have to pay for.” Otherwise, she attested to no other discontinuities.

**Teresa:  “There’s definitely a lot to learn and improve on.”**

Teresa’s transition to college writing was more blended than most participants. She came into the university with 50 credit hours, making her technically a junior in her first year. These credit hours came from a combination of A.P. and ACE (Accelerated College Education) courses through a local community college. She was a history and political science double-major with
plans to apply to law school and chose this university because of the potential for internships in the surrounding area. Given the fact that Teresa had accumulated so many college credits during high school, her transition as a first-year writer reflected this accelerated pace. Her first semester at the university had required some extensive writing for her majors. FYC, a course that students cannot fulfill through other avenues, was the exception within her class schedule that was otherwise populated with upper-level classes in her discipline.

When I asked Teresa how she would describe herself as a writer, she said she felt “confident” in the preparation she received in high school: “I feel like it’s something I’ve definitely really worked on in the last couple of years, and I feel like it’s a skill that I’m proud of.” She saw her A.P. and ACE courses as helping to smooth this transition for her, and she credited her twelfth grade English teacher, in particular, with preparing her for college writing. The two pieces of writing she shared with me from high school were both from twelfth grade English and included her college application essay and a literary analysis. The former she described as “very individualistic and creative” while the latter was more specific and “narrow” in its criteria. The literary analysis was an oft-assigned genre for Teresa, and like the particular one she shared with me, she said these kinds of essays involved “looking at a book,” and “pretty much were cookie cutter essays.”

In fact, Teresa described much of her writing in high school as “cookie cutter” and somewhat “robotic.” Like other participants, she referenced a formulaic conception of writing—"intro, three body paragraph, conclusion”—that worked and was encouraged across her classes. Although she knew she could do this kind of writing well and earn high grades, she described it as disconnected from her own thoughts or voice as a writer:
I feel like if you stick to that very standard format that they try to get everyone to write, one it’s not going to be special when you write. It’s going to be very standard, and it’s going to sound very close to what other people have to say, and two, I don’t think it gives you any room to really use your own creativity or ideas. I feel like it kind of limits you to one thesis, a very direct and easy to understand one, and then just evidence.

Like other participants (e.g., Sophia), Teresa described her twelfth grade English class as making some space for writing that did not rehearse the same formulaic structures. She shared specifically about a research paper her teacher assigned that was not supposed to follow the five-paragraph format. For this paper, she did a historical analysis of a play they had read and said, “It was very thorough...I feel like it was more holistic than anything I’d done before.”

This experience provided some support for Teresa in her first semester at the university as she found that history professors generally did not like formulaic writing and encouraged her to critically analyze texts and ideas. She said that in her writing last semester she felt that she got to "infuse...[her] own thoughts into it to add to it something that’s not just repeating what’s already out there." She described a specific experience writing in an upper-level history class and how it challenged her to “try something new” in her writing rather than repeating the “standard” format instilled in her from high school. According to Teresa, her history instructor said he “hate[s] that style of writing” and asked them, “please don’t do that style.” Teresa described how she had to “take a risk” when writing for this class because following that format had become so “instinctive” to her and was “so drilled in high school.”

Beyond the format of the text, however, Teresa’s experience with writing in this class challenged her conception of the discipline of history. Teresa described how the writing invited more “in-depth analysis” as opposed to “summary” of primary sources and factual recall, what
her high school history classes emphasized: "a year ago I would have argued that [history] was much more fact-based and like there’s really nothing to argue about it, but I’ve definitely had that view of history changed since I’ve been here, like there’s definitely a lot more room for interpretation in writing." These disciplinary writing experiences, in addition to her experience in FYC, prompted Teresa to redefine how she thought about college writing: originally she viewed it as being about proper grammar, knowledge of literary terms, and vocabulary, but after these experiences she was inclined to think that it is more about "different types of thinking when you're writing." She said, “instructors here like encourage you to be creative and take a risk and think outside the box and definitely analyze more.” Like Omari and Matt, Teresa’s ideas about college writing centered around the relationship between thinking and writing.

Similar to her history classes, Teresa found that FYC encouraged her to be "more reflective on [her] writing" and "more critical" of it as opposed to following any pre-set formulas. Her strong sense of how writing reflects disciplinary differences, likely facilitated by encountering upper-level disciplinary courses so early in her college career, manifested in her discussion of the literature review she was writing in FYC. She understood a literature review to be about surveying the existing information: "gathering a whole bunch of texts and being like well this is the information that’s already out there." She considered literature reviews to be “fact-based” and commented that this genre will likely be relevant to the writing she will do in her majors, particularly political science. She distinguished, however, between what literature reviews would look like in history versus political science: “I feel like history would have more of an interpretive type of focus where it’s not necessarily with as many statistics or facts or science-based statements.” In general, Teresa viewed FYC, and her other writing-intensive courses, as helping her to grow as a writer, an identity that was integral to her plans to study law:
“I feel like writing is going to be a huge deal for me, and that’s why I take all the papers so seriously and all the feedback so seriously cause I feel like I’m going to be able to get a lot out of it, and I know it’s going to be important for me.” Teresa said that the “documented argument” paper in FYC would be the most relevant to her future goals as she envisioned herself “crafting arguments for [her] job.”

Overall, Teresa had very focused academic and career goals, and these goals informed her writerly identity and the way she navigated her high school to college transition. She tended to conceptualize her transition as a steady progression: with each writing assignment, even when it was a task she had done before, she saw a chance to grow. For instance, when discussing the annotated bibliography required in FYC, she said, “I have done [an annotated bibliography] before, but there’s definitely a lot to learn and improve on.” Through her A.P. and ACE courses she felt like she got a taste of college: “even though it was while I was in high school, I feel like I dipped my toes in the water.” The result was that for Teresa she experienced some of her high school to college transition while still technically in high school: “I felt like I went from high school, and then junior year I hit college-and-high school, and then I hit college.”

**Looking Across Cases**

Despite obvious differences, patterns do emerge in participants’ retrospective accounts of their high school writing instruction and experience. One commonality among most participants was the strong association they expressed between writing and English classes. Most of the writing that participants shared with me from high school was composed in their English classes, and when describing their significant high school writing experiences, most discussed English as the site of these experiences. This finding accords with large-scale studies of writing in secondary schools that show that students write more and compose lengthier texts in English
classes than other content areas (Applebee & Langer, 2011). Mira was a notable exception to this trend as some of her most significant and substantive writing was done within the sciences. This tendency to equate writing with English studies carried over into how students conceptualized their work in FYC although most participants somewhat revised that understanding as they encountered the actual work of the course.

Participants also tended to describe formulaic writing as a prominent feature of their high school writing. They described this kind of writing as rigid (Teresa) and generic (Ben), and negative affective states, such as boredom (Juliana) and feelings of monotony (Matt), were associated with it. Sophia directly linked this kind of writing to testing, and Sadie suggested that connection by explaining how, after she took the state test in English in eleventh grade, they stopped using what she referred to as that “style” of writing. Matt described trying to rid himself of that “formula mindset” with writing, and Teresa echoed this idea when she discussed how the emphasis on “cookie cutter” writing did not serve her as a college writer and was a structure some professors encouraged her to shed. In this sense, participants’ experiences reflect the findings of large-scale studies of writing that show how classroom writing can be “dominated by tasks in which the teacher does all the composing, and students are left only to fill in missing information,” and these tasks are often connected to high-stakes assessments (Applebee & Langer, 2011, p. 26).

Another commonality among participants’ retrospective accounts of high school writing was their discussion of A.P., Honors, and dual-enrollment English courses as helping to facilitate a smoother transition. Juliana said that her A.P. Language class and FYC had the “same flow,” and Alex said their A.P. classes focused on “how to write a paper that could be seen as written by a college student.” Participants generally saw these classes as good preparation for college
writing even though some of their perspectives on how these classes prepared them shifted over the course of our interviews. Most notably, Alex revised how they understood the nature of their preparation in A.P. in the last interview: these courses helped them “sound like a scholarly writer” in more of a superficial (e.g., grammar, vocabulary) rather than a substantive sense.

Regardless of academic track, however, participants tended to report that their twelfth grade English classes offered more opportunities for less formulaic and more engaging writing. Sadie, for instance, who was in a mainstream, as opposed to advanced, English class her twelfth grade year said that with the state test behind them, senior English could “actually focus on how you want to write papers well” which she reported helped to prepare her for college writing. Ben also described some of the writing he did in twelfth grade English, most notably his Frankenstein analysis, as less of the typical “grind” that he was accustomed to in earlier grades, and Teresa described a research project in her twelfth grade A.P. English class as more “holistic” and “thorough” than the formulaic writing often asked of her. In general, participants saw these writing opportunities as more useful and better preparation for their work now as college writers.

In students’ descriptions of their writing in FYC and other writing-intensive courses, another prominent theme was the malleability of their conceptions of writing and college writing. As they encountered new perspectives on the role of writing in their academic lives and learning, to the degree that they were able to articulate these new conceptions, they also embraced and embodied them. There were no instances in which participants described encountering new philosophies on writing yet chose to reject them in favor of a prior understanding. For instance, Omari and Matt seemed to immediately sense that their FYC instructors conceptualized writing and research differently than they were accustomed to. For both these students, the dialectic relationship between writing and thinking, specifically writing as inquiry, was new for them. In
Matt’s own words, “Think while you’re writing, and write while you’re thinking.” In their writing for the course, they sought to allow this conception to guide them, particularly in writing their personal essays.

Similarly, Teresa described how her history instructor wanted more analytical writing on the assigned readings as opposed to summary:

[H]e wanted us to look into those readings and...not just read them and be like, oh this is what I read, but think about like bias and why this particular thing was written and like what might have caused the author to take that tone…and then we’d do writing based off...of what we thought the piece was about more than just what it was saying.

Teresa described this kind of analytical writing as “reading between the lines,” a practice she now saw as essential to college writing. Important to note with each of these examples was that when students embraced new conceptions of college writing they were able to describe them to some degree, including how they differed from their previous perspectives. For example, before FYC, Matt said he had thought of writing more as “nailing stuff down on a board,” a metaphor suggesting mindless assembly or blunt application of force, whereas he described how in FYC the process was conceptualized as more thoughtful and thought-provoking. For Alex, a mismatch between their understanding of analytical writing and their FYC instructor’s led to a less-than desirable grade on their second paper, a situation that Alex said caused “whiplash” for them. This “whiplash,” however, revealed to Alex that there was a discrepancy between their and their instructor’s conceptions, something they had not perceived until this point in the semester.

The opposite was also true: participants who perceived no significant differences between their instructors’ conceptions of college writing and their own tended to experience that writing as an extension of what they had done in the past. They described mostly overlaps and
continuity. For example, Sadie found FYC to have mostly “repeats” from high school and did not describe the course in ways that would suggest it encouraged her to reconceptualize writing. Similarly, Ben reported that he wrote for FYC in the same way that he did for his high school English classes, and Mira saw little distinction between high school and college writing: she said, “I think it just means you’ve had more years.” Juliana and Sophia experienced a great degree of continuity in their FYC writing, but they also expressed some differences they perceived, particularly in the last interview. These discrepancies were articulated in more vague ways, however, than participants who perceived sharp contrasts. Sophia said, “there is a different kind of context almost” for writing in FYC, and Juliana described needing to dig deeper into her sources when writing in FYC.

Another theme that emerges when looking across cases is the prevalence of the teacher-as-examiner audience (Applebee, 1981; Applebee & Langer, 2011). Participants described how attention to this audience was a feature of both their high school and college writing. Ben insisted that students “gotta give [teachers] what they want,” and Sadie’s experience in a college English course reinforced her idea that students must “relearn” in each class, especially English classes, how that particular teacher wants them to write. Although some participants (e.g., Juliana, Teresa) shared that peer feedback was a more integral aspect of FYC than they had experienced in previous school-based writing contexts, the teacher audience, in both FYC and other writing-intensive courses, still loomed large in students’ minds and guided their decisions about what and how to write. Teresa said that her history instructor sharing his distaste for the five-paragraph “style of writing” prompted her to “take a risk” and “try something new” with her writing in that course, and Omari shared that his FYC instructor’s feedback on his personal essay prompted him to discuss the experience of his grandmother’s passing from a different angle than
he had previously considered. In these instances, and others, participants described how teachers
figured prominently in their minds as they determined what and how to write as first-year college
students.

These brief profiles of each participant along with the salient themes that emerged when
looking across cases serve as a backdrop for the study’s findings, the focus of the next chapter.
By offering these portraits of each participant’s transition experience, including some reflections
on the cohort as a whole, the discussion contained in this chapter serves to contextualize the
three key findings that I will explore next. These findings illuminate how these students
experienced the transition from writing in high school to writing in college and how their
conceptions of writing and college writing impacted the nature of these transitions.
Chapter Five: Findings

Through detailed data analysis, including both individual and cross-case analysis, and an iterative writing process, three key findings, outlined below, emerged in response to my research questions concerning how students experienced the transition from writing in high school to writing in college and how students’ writing-related experiences and the contexts for those experiences mediated their conceptions of writing. These findings highlight how students’ conceptions of writing, rooted in their academic backgrounds and histories, figured into their transition experiences; the theoretical framing of liminality emphasizes the “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1969) nature of the transition as a space uniquely suited to conceptual disruptions and adjustments (i.e., learning).

Key Findings:

1) To varying degrees, these students experienced their high school to college transition as a liminal space (see Figure 2) that involved navigating moments of disruption and destabilization as they encountered new writing contexts, assuming an ambiguous identity (i.e., college writer), and reconceptualizing writing in both subtle and substantial ways.

2) Three specific sets of factors affected the nature of students’ transitions in diverse ways and influenced the extent to which students reconceptualized writing within this liminal space: (1) prior and current experiences with writing instruction, (2) their sense of identity as writers, and (3) schooling contexts within which they were writing.

3) When it emerged as a prominent feature of their transitions, this reconceptualization of writing presented itself in three dimensions:

a) A shift from form-based writing to writing based on rhetorical purpose

b) A shift from thinking of writing as reporting to writing as inquiry
c) A reconsideration of the author’s point of view in various genres (i.e., a new understanding of all genres as having an authorial perspective, even seemingly “objective” forms of academic writing)

Figure 2. High School to College Transition as Movement through Liminal Space
Finding #1

To varying degrees, participants experienced this transition as liminal, an “in-between” experience in which prior knowledge, understanding, and even selfhood were deconstructed and reformed. The liminal nature of this transition manifested in a few key ways for these students: it involved navigating disruptive, destabilizing moments as they encountered new writing contexts, assuming the ambiguous identity of college writer, and reconceptualizing writing in both subtle and substantial ways. In the following sections, I will discuss each of these aspects of their transitions, providing data exemplars to illustrate this finding.

Moments of Disruption and Destabilization

All participants had experiences as first-year writers that disrupted their prior knowledge about and understanding of the purpose and practice of writing. These moments called into question routinized behaviors and practices surrounding writing and, on a more fundamental level, their actual conceptions of what writing is and is used for. For some students, FYC was the site of this disruption while, for others, it happened in other writing-intensive courses during their first year. Omari, for instance, described his early experiences in FYC, particularly writing his personal inquiry, as destabilizing—an experience that “threw [him] for a loop.” Omari contrasted the process his FYC instructor encouraged with what he had learned in high school. In high school, he had become accustomed to writing with what he referred to as “a pre-planned out plan.” He said, “It was all just planned out, just introduction, body paragraph, conclusion, all of high school.” In FYC, however, his instructor encouraged writing as a form of inquiry, a way to explore questions and gain deeper insights. Omari touches on this difference in the following interview excerpt as he discusses writing his personal inquiry:
Me: Overall, how would you say the writing instruction, like what Professor [Miller] emphasizes in class, the kinds of writing that you’re doing, how would you say that compares to your high school writing?

Omari: It’s definitely more in-depth. I feel like in high school you could just give your answer in your writing class just be like, and the teacher would be fine if you just gave it on like a surface-level answer, but more she wants to actually get into why you’re thinking this, how you’re thinking it, how it could relate to another topic or something like that. So it’s like really different.

Me: Sure. And I remember you mentioning some of that last time, that y’all were analyzing a specific paper, and she was asking you to really think pretty deeply about the choices that the author made in writing it and stuff like that. Has that continued to be the case in your class time?

Omari: Yeah, I remember she assigned us this paper, and she basically just told us that, like for you to arrive to a question, that you shouldn’t be able to answer the question easily, and that just threw me for a loop. So I didn’t even know how to write about it at all. I was spending like two hours just thinking about what to write…

Me: Gotcha. Yeah, was that with the personal inquiry?

Omari: Yeah, I believe so, yes.

Me: Gotcha. So was that different than what your high school teachers emphasized with your writing, like coming up with a question that’s hard for you, as the writer, to answer?

Omari: Yeah, like in high school it was just like, they would ask you some question about what you think about this and just be like the standard intro paragraph, two body paragraphs, and a conclusion. It’d be really easy.

The conception of writing Omari describes from his high school instruction is formulaic and more a matter of following a procedure rather than actually composing. According to this conception, writing becomes synonymous with assembling certain predetermined, generic parts: “the standard intro paragraph, two body paragraphs, and a conclusion.” In FYC, however, the
instructor emphasized writing as inquiry, a process of finding and pursuing complex questions without straightforward answers. This process contrasted with Omari’s description of high school writing as merely providing “surface-level answer[s]” to questions already formulated by the teacher. It is no surprise, then, that this new conception of writing “threw [him] for a loop,” leaving him feeling confused and disoriented: “I didn’t even know how to write about it at all.”

Whereas in the past writing prompts had elicited a highly routinized method of producing text (i.e., the “pre-planned out plan”), within the liminal space of this transition, Omari’s personal inquiry writing assignment, with its emphasis on developing and exploring questions through the writing process, invited him into a very different, and initially quite perplexing, rhetorical context. Although this new context was disorienting at first, he, as the writer, had a greater sense of agency and autonomy in the sense that he needed to determine what questions to pursue and how to pursue them. Omari said that his instructor offered guidance throughout this process: “She...recommended just starting without a topic, just like writing, and then trying to find your way to the topic, and then once you find your way to the topic, just base it off that…I never learned that before.” His instructor encouraged Omari to use the writing process itself as a way to discover what it is he wants to say. More than just a new writing strategy or approach, however, Omari’s description of this advice suggests a new conception of writing, writing as inquiry.

Omari ultimately took up his instructor’s recommendation and embraced this new conception of writing in his personal inquiry. In this paper, Omari explored some memories surrounding his grandmother’s death, specifically considering how he experienced and processed his grief during that time. Rather than following a strict outline, as he was accustomed to doing in the past, he said that with this paper he allowed the writing to take him wherever it would: “...I
didn’t have a plan this time, so I just felt like whatever popped into my head, I just wrote down. And it couldn’t be wrong because there was no plan.” Allowing this process to move him through the writing, his inquiry ended up in a different place than it began. Rather than exclusively reflecting on his grandmother’s passing, he ultimately concluded the paper with reflections on his own life, including questions about the significance of his life and how he will be remembered after death. In the following interview excerpt, I ask Omari about these aspects of the paper:

Me: …I found the end of your personal inquiry really powerful when you start to talk about how your grandmother’s passing made you come to terms with your own mortality, and you know, just questions about what significance does my life have and will it have to those that I leave behind. Was that something you were thinking about from the very beginning when you decided to write about your grandmother’s passing, or was that something that emerged in the process?

Omari: Yeah, it just emerged in the process. Like I was, while writing it, I guess I was making self-realizations while I was writing it, and by the time I got to that part of the paper, it just made me realize why I’m actually writing this.

According to Omari, through engaging in writing as inquiry, he came to new “self-realizations,” gaining awareness of what actually prompted him to explore this memory and his feelings surrounding it in the first place. In a reflection that he submitted after writing the paper, he reiterated the significance of this new insight: he wrote that through doing the personal inquiry he discovered that he had “unresolved feelings about past memories that in result have shaped [his] view on matters like mortality and self-importance.”

Although the new writing context that Omari encountered in FYC disrupted his prior conceptions of writing and provoked feelings of confusion and uncertainty, he remained open to these new ideas about writing, ultimately embracing writing as inquiry in how he conceptualized
his task with the personal inquiry. This was no small thing, considering how prominently Omari’s high school instruction had featured formulaic writing. It was Omari’s perception that his FYC instructor wanted students to reconceptualize writing through their work in the class:

I guess she wants us to break away from how we learned how to write like going through high school or like, I guess, school before that. Me, personally, I find it really difficult cause I don’t know any other form of writing beside that, so it was like really hard for me to actually conceive how to write outside that format.

A necessary aspect of the liminal space involves “break[ing] away” from that which came before and locating oneself in the “realms of uncertainty and ambiguity” (Sommers & Saltz, 2004, p. 125), a disorienting experience that Omari rightly describes as “really difficult.” To move through this space, however, one must remain open to the process and be content with the “not knowing” at least for a time. In this case, although Omari could hardly “conceive how to write outside that format,” he, nonetheless, with his instructor’s support, made significant strides to conceptualize the assignment in dramatically different ways than he would have previously. As a result, Omari, in his written reflection after completing the assignment, said, “The whole process of writing the Personal Inquiry was a completely new experience,” one that may affect how he understands and approaches future tasks as a college writer.

Like Omari, Alex also had a destabilizing, disruptive experience in FYC that led them to question their prior conceptions of writing. This experience involved writing and receiving feedback on their analytical paper. Alex had entered FYC confident in their writing skills: “I feel really prepared for [FYC], like overprepared kind of.” And they felt particularly adept at analytical writing as their high school instruction had emphasized this type of writing: “That was like their favorite thing to do…analysis was really big.” Indeed, of the papers that Alex shared...
from their A.P. Literature class, all three were literary analyses: one was on *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison; another was on an excerpt from *The Odyssey* and a poem entitled “Siren’s Song”; and the third was on a novel, *Pachinko*, that Alex got to self-select. Given this background with analysis, in our second interview, as Alex anticipated doing the analytical piece in FYC, they felt confident in their abilities and their understanding of the task at hand: “…analysis I feel like I’m good at just because it’s a lot of research and then like translating the research into coherent sentences, and then being able to look into it and like use it.”

Alex ended up earning a C+, however, on this paper, an experience that, in their own words, felt like “whiplash.” Alex was accustomed to earning much higher grades for their writing, as a result this experience was disorienting and led to some confusion. When I asked them to summarize how they understood the writing task with this paper, they said that they took a topic that emerged in their personal inquiry, emotional regulation, and then consulted scholarly sources to help them “explain [the] topic” and “form a thesis.” They added,

…so the analysis inquiry was very academic writing, research-based, so for me, I feel, obviously I had to do analysis, but I felt I couldn’t do analysis, just because what I’m doing is I’m taking data and research claims from people, and I don’t understand, I personally struggle with analyzing those kind of things, so that might be why I got a really low grade because I didn’t do a lot of analysis.

From these comments, it is clear that Alex’s conception of analysis was disrupted through the process of writing and receiving feedback on this paper. Although Alex had previously expressed confidence in analytical writing, their understanding of what that entailed did not align with the nature of the task at hand, as they understood it—“obviously I had to do analysis, but I felt I couldn’t do analysis.” The “analysis” that Alex had done previously had primarily been in the
context of English classes, specifically response to literature, whereas this “analysis” involved “taking data and research claims from people.” While their paper on the novel *Pachinko* did use sources in addition to the literary text itself, these sources included book reviews and websites designed for a general audience (e.g., history.com) as opposed to scholarly journal articles geared toward disciplinary experts. Not only did the task involve different kinds of texts, but based on Alex’s comments, it also relied on a different conception of analysis. In response to a follow-up question I posed, Alex expanded on this difference further, clarifying the source of their difficulty with the FYC paper:

**Me:** Gotcha. Just touching on something you touched on previously, you said it was difficult analyzing these ten articles and to kind of interpret some of that data. Is that what you said?

**Alex:** I don’t really find it hard to understand what I’m reading or the data that I’m looking at. It’s more of I can’t, I find it hard to analyze how it relates to my paper and everything else because when I think of analysis, I think of like taking what you’ve written already and then spinning something out of it. You know, making it more, like relating the world in a sense, and I find that really hard, especially when you’re looking at hard data cause that’s kind of different from ideas. Interpreting ideas, that’s fun and kinda easy. Data is where I’m just like OK this is the data. I don’t understand how I’m supposed to analyze it.

Alex could comprehend the articles and understand “the data” contained in them. In other words, their struggle had nothing to do with deficits in basic literacy skills; in fact, being able to read and understand articles published in journals such as *Developmental Psychology* and *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, some of the publications listed on their reference list, perhaps goes beyond basic literacy skills and into the realm of more advanced literacies. Rather, it was how they conceptualized analysis—“when I think of analysis…”—and the disconnect between
that understanding and the nature of the writing task in FYC that was the underlying source of
Alex’s struggle.

What they found to be “really hard” was analyzing the significance and contributions of
their selected articles within the context of an academic conversation, one into which they were
entering—“to analyze how it relates to my paper and everything else.” With this assignment in
FYC, Alex was asked to analyze a disciplinary conversation, to look at the extant research on
their topic and analyze what is known and understood about it, and then to offer their
contribution to that conversation (i.e., their “thesis”). Their instructor’s assignment sheet for this
paper reiterated this task: it stated that the “analysis inquiry” should “survey...the academic
conversation about your topic/question and analyze[ze]...key parts of that conversation.” This
experience disrupted Alex’s conception of analytical writing and ultimately destabilized their
identity as a writer. In the first two interviews, when I asked Alex if they felt like a college
writer, they basically said yes; however, in the last interview, after sharing about this experience
with the analysis inquiry in FYC, they responded to the same question with a straightforward
“nope.” Alex added, however, that although they no longer have the same degree of confidence
in their status as a college writer, they think that they are moving in that direction: “I feel like
I’m at the start of it.” As Alex moved through this transition, they found both their knowledge
about writing and their identity as a writer destabilized, yet this disruptive experience also made
space for new conceptions and identifications to emerge. Alex’s case suggests that these kinds of
conceptual disruptions are a necessary prerequisite for moving through this liminal space, a
process that is, in a way, synonymous with learning itself.

Although Sadie and Ben had less obvious moments of disruption and destabilization than
Omari and Alex, their experiences still evidence this liminal state of first-year college writers.
Sadie and Ben had experiences in college English classes during their first semesters at the university that called into question their prior conceptions of writing. Ben said that an English instructor last semester implied his writing was “too high school-esque,” and Sadie had trouble discerning how to write for her Classics of Western Literature class. Sadie shared, “some of these essays I didn’t do well on because she said...I wasn’t going in the direction I should have been going. She was saying that I didn’t show that I knew what I was doing, which was a little frustrating.” Sadie’s description here suggests that how she understood the assignment did not fully coincide with the task as conceptualized by her instructor (i.e., “I wasn’t going in the direction I should have been going”), but unlike Omari, who eventually came to see the “direction” to take with his writing in FYC, Sadie did not have any comparable “a-ha” moments in this English class. While the experience was destabilizing, Sadie seemingly remained in a state of confusion and frustration, knowing that her English instructor wanted something different but not yet understanding what that was nor how to produce it.

Although Ben also struggled to understand what was being asked of him in his upper-level English class, he reported that as the class progressed he “started learning how [the instructor] would like it,” adding that his instructor’s preferences were “very different” from how he had written in the past. Both Sadie and Ben, however, did not see the source of their struggle in these classes as conceptual. Rather, they attributed their difficulty to a lack of familiarity with or misunderstanding of the preferences of that particular teacher. For instance, Ben commented that, unlike himself, the juniors and seniors in that English class knew “how to write for the teacher,” and Sadie’s experience led her to conclude that “[i]t really does depend on the teacher with English.” Although these experiences suggested a mismatch between their conceptions of writing, specifically within English studies, and those of their instructors, Sadie and Ben tended
to cling to their understanding of writing as a matter of giving a specific teacher what he/she wants. Unlike Alex, whose disruptive experience in FYC led them to question their understanding of analytical writing, Sadie’s and Ben’s experiences in these classes did not prompt them to reconceptualize what it means to write a response to literature or to write in general for that matter. Instead, they persisted in their understanding that the teacher-as-examiner subsumes any other rhetorical context, and to succeed as college writers, students must understand and satisfy these ever-changing demands and criteria. In Ben’s words, “you gotta give them what they want.”

Every participant in the study experienced some sort of destabilizing moment as a first-year college writer. Omari and Alex had disruptive experiences in FYC that were ultimately productive in that they prompted them to reconceptualize writing. For Ben and Sadie, however, the aforementioned moments did not seem to cause them to reconceptualize their writing tasks; rather, they reinforced their understanding that school-based writing, and perhaps particularly within the discipline of English, is a matter of figuring out a specific teacher’s requirements and predilections.

An Ambiguous Identity/Status

In addition to moments of disruption, as liminal entities, participants also occupied an ambiguous identity or status. All participants either initially expressed uncertainty surrounding what constitutes college writing and who qualifies as a college writer or described experiences in FYC and other courses in which their preconceptions about college writing were deconstructed and reshaped. In the first interview, when I asked participants what it means to be a college writer, Omari, Sadie, Ben, Sophia, and Mira all replied with some version of “I don’t know” while Juliana, in the second interview, replied to the same question with “I’m not really sure.”
Although Alex, Teresa, and Matt never replied to that question with “I don’t know,” throughout our interviews, they described how their initial understanding of college writing had changed or was in the process of changing due to experiences in FYC and other classes.

Given students’ uncertainty and shifting perceptions surrounding college writing, it is not surprising that most were reluctant to identify themselves as college writers, particularly at the beginning of the semester. In response to this question (i.e., do you consider yourself a college writer?) in the first interview, Juliana said, “not really”; Omari said, “No, not at all”; and Ben said, “No, I still see myself as a high school writer training for college.” In response to the same question, Mira replied, “I don’t think so because I am just like a freshman, and so I feel like whatever I write right now, whatever I produce, is still like high school writing.” Both Ben’s and Mira’s responses reflect the “in-betweenness” associated with this liminal position. Ben is still “training for college,” and because of Mira’s status as a “freshman,” her work more reflects high school writing than college. Despite being college students, these participants still felt distanced from the identity of “college writer.” In Sophia’s response to this question, she echoes this idea of lacking the necessary experience and knowledge to identify as a college writer: “I feel like you’ll probably be a college writer toward the end of your college career cause then you’ll know what college writing consists of.” Sadie also tended to think of being a college writer in relation to a point further along in one’s college career. She said, “People always talk about the thesis you have to write at the end of your college experience…but I don’t really know what it is.” Sadie connected being a college writer to writing a thesis “at the end of [her] college experience,” but given her current status as a first-year student and her uncertainty about what writing a thesis entails—“I don’t really know what it is”—the identity of college writer felt like something she was observing from a distance, not currently inhabiting. Students’ hesitancy to
identify as college writers and their tendency to associate that identity with an indeterminate point in the future suggests the ambiguity that characterizes their experience and status across this transition.

This ambiguous identity also manifested in the advice they would give to future students making this transition. Juliana discussed the importance of using professors as resources to navigate the uncertainty: “I would tell them...to stay close with your professor because you’re gonna wanna be able to ask some questions and stuff like that,” and Teresa echoed that sentiment: “You can learn so much from going to your professors and trying to get feedback and learning and understanding what you can do better. So I definitely wouldn’t take that for granted.” Mira talked about the need for openness and responsiveness to feedback: “be open to like changing your thought process or being open to feedback so that you can change your writing a little bit, instead of being just stuck in what you’re actually doing because that would make it a lot easier for improvement,” and Sophia felt that a posture of flexibility and a willingness to make adjustments is key: “as a college writer you have to adapt more, and you have to adapt to kind of the specific subject you’re talking about.” As is evident in these comments, students sought to manage the uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding this transition by tapping into supportive resources (e.g., “stay close with your professor”) and adopting flexible, responsive stances (e.g., “being open to feedback”). These strategies helped them navigate new, and sometimes disorienting, writing tasks and contexts.

Rather than viewing “being a college writer” as an identity that they possessed or inhabited, some participants conceptualized it as a direction toward which they were moving or a path they had just begun to walk. In the final interview, when I asked participants if they consider themselves college writers, Omari said, “I think I’m getting there. I don’t know if I’m
there yet”; Alex said, “I feel like I’m at the start of it”; and Matt identified as “a novice,” adding, “I feel like I’m barely touching the iceberg of it.” These comments suggest that a process has been initiated (e.g., “I’m at the start of it”) and movement has happened (e.g., “I’m getting there”), but the destination has not been reached (e.g., “I don’t know if I’m there yet”). Teresa’s self-assessment conveyed more confidence, demonstrating the more accelerated pace of her college experience, but still overlapped with others in the sense that she also located herself on a learning trajectory: “I feel like I’m a college writer, but I also see that there’s room for improvement with every paper I turn in.” Given her status as a junior and her immediate enrollment into disciplinary, writing-intensive courses upon arriving at the university, Teresa had already navigated her initial threshold experience with college writing in her history classes the previous semester and was now anticipating, as we discussed in the last interview, her honors thesis, which she would write in her next (and final) academic year. Despite her relative confidence in her identity as a college writer, she still gestured to the fact that that identity is not static but rather dynamic, with each new experience she continues to grow and develop.

According to Turner (1969), liminal subjects are like “passengers” (p. 94), aboard a train that has left the station, but not yet arrived at its destination. These “entities in transition” (Turner, 1969, p. 103) have left behind a former way of being and knowing, but not yet fully stepped into the new way. These students, as persons in transition, reflected this liminal status as they navigated ambiguity, uncertainty, and sometimes confusion surrounding their knowledge and identities as writers, and they negotiated this uncertain experience through seeking support from experienced others (e.g., instructors) and adopting flexible, receptive attitudes toward instruction and feedback.
To varying degrees, each participant reconceptualized writing during the course of this transition. For some students (e.g., Ben, Sadie) these conceptual adjustments were subtle, even easy to overlook, but for others (e.g., Teresa, Alex), they were more obvious and striking. Ben, for instance, through exposure to a new genre in FYC, broadened his conceptual categories for writing and reinterpreted prior writing tasks in light of this new genre knowledge. Ben’s FYC instructor referred to the second paper that he wrote as a mini-literature review. In our second interview, Ben did not recall having written such a paper in the past—“I think that’s a new thing. I never heard that”—but by the time we had our third interview, Ben had come to see literature reviews as quite similar to research papers he had written in the past: “Same exact mindset going into it... the Frankenstein¹ was a lit review, so it’s literally the same exact thing.” When I asked him to describe how he went about writing the literature review, he said, “You have to be very boring for this one.” He went on to say that the challenge with this paper was keeping it objective: “Cause this one you can’t have any personal bias or anything, like personal statements in it or anything really. It was just give me the facts and let me read it.”

While Ben’s understanding of the purpose and process of composing a literature review may not have overlapped with that of his instructor, Ben shared that he earned a satisfactory grade on the paper (17 out of 20 points), and this experience, combined with his sense of this new genre, led him to believe that he had written similar papers in the past. His high school teachers just had not categorized them as such. The point of interest with these comments was not whether or not Ben had, in fact, written a “literature review” in the past but rather that his

¹ Research-based paper that Ben wrote in his 12th grade English class
conceptual categories for writing were changing. Whereas in the past “research paper” served as a catch-all category for any writing that used sources, because of his experience in FYC, he was exposed to, what might be considered, a subgenre or particular type of research-based writing. While Ben had not yet worked out the relationship between the “old” conceptual category of “research paper” and this new thing called a “literature review” and tended, instead, to simply conflate the two (e.g., “it’s literally the same exact thing”), his conceptual categories for writing were, nonetheless, expanding and becoming more complex. This transition, as a liminal experience and space, manifested in Ben’s shifting conceptual categories and his reassessment of prior writing experiences.

Like Ben, Sadie’s experience writing her second paper in FYC, what her instructor referred to as a synthesis, prompted her to reassess her prior writing experience and expand her conceptual categories. She came to view the paper she wrote on the movie Coraline in her twelfth grade English class, a text she originally labeled as a review, as similar to the synthesis paper she wrote in FYC. In the following interview excerpt, Sadie discusses how some of her high school writing helped to prepare her for writing in FYC, particularly referencing the Coraline paper:

Me: You mentioned that the writing you did in 12th grade, because you were done with the [state test] at that point, that you had some opportunities that were meant to prepare you for college writing a little bit. Or that was a phrase I think you used…. Sadie: Yeah, that was my teacher’s intent.

Me: OK, yeah, so I’m just wondering which parts of your 12th grade English class, like assignments or exercises that you did in class, anything like that, do you feel like helped to prepare you?
Sadie: I’d say it did just because the persuasion speech, this one was a lot of research where I had to put together a bunch of different quotes and articles that I thought would put my thoughts ahead because that was about technology and how it affects like the dinner table and like your conversations with family and your development overall, so I thought that was really a good experience cause it was basically what I’m doing now, except that was a speech so that was a little different style format. But I still thought that was really helpful, and then the *Coraline* essay was another synthesis thing where I had to put my opinions but with facts backing it up, so that way it’s a little bit more, it sounds like I did know what I was talking about, and that was in the style of a review. So a little different than what we’re doing now, but it definitely is a synthesis-type paper.

In our first interview, when discussing her review of the movie *Coraline*, Sadie never described it as a synthesis; however, here in the second interview, she describes it as “another synthesis thing” and a “synthesis-type paper.” Sadie saw the purpose of her high school paper on *Coraline* and this new genre of synthesis she was exposed to in FYC as quite similar: in both, “[she] had to put [her] opinions but with facts backing it up.” Whether or not her high school English teacher and her FYC instructor would agree with this comparison is somewhat beside the point. This instance demonstrates how Sadie’s experiences in FYC were offering her new conceptual lenses for understanding and interpreting past writing experiences. This past experience was recast in the light of her new experience in FYC, offering her a different vantage point from which to conceptualize both current and previous writing tasks.

Although both Sadie and Ben throughout the interviews insisted that their writing in FYC did not differ significantly from their high school writing, which on the surface might suggest they did not experience this transition as movement through a liminal space, these encounters with new genres or types of writing and the “revised” understanding of past writing experiences
they prompted still evidence, however subtly, the conceptual adjustments that characterize this transition. In order to make meaningful new concepts and knowledge, these students actively formed connections between current and past experiences, and as a result their conceptual categories, however incrementally, evolved. This transformation, albeit slight and somewhat subconscious, bespeaks the liminal nature of the transitional experience itself.

Juliana’s reconceptualization of writing in FYC, on the other hand, was a bit more striking. Throughout our interviews, Juliana tended to see FYC as requiring similar types of writing compared to her A.P. Language and Composition class, but from her perspective, FYC encouraged deeper engagement: she described it as “more in-depth work” and “more rigorous” than what she had done in high school. She discussed needing to explain rather than just summarize her sources and to craft a longer and more complex thesis statement for FYC than she had done in the past. Most significantly, however, in our last interview, Juliana discussed differences in her writing across this transition that suggest a shift away from the rigid, rule-governed conception of writing that had characterized much of her high school instruction. When I asked her if there is anything she wished her high school writing instruction had emphasized less, she said,

**Juliana:** I feel like all my papers in high school had a similar structure that was very basic that like anybody could use, but it was really emphasized then. And now it’s more like how I want to write it is how it’s gonna be…[in high school], the intro paragraph was just like introducing your topic, having a thesis, which was one sentence and now our thesis is like one sentence but with like three clauses, and it was really long. So I had never done anything like that, and then the middle part for any paper was just topic one, describe it; topic two, describe it; and maybe three or four paragraphs and then concluding everything in the end like the same way it was in the beginning, so it was pretty, kinda boring.
Me: Yeah, so what made the writing in [FYC] different from that structure? Or how’d you know you needed to not just replicate that?

Juliana: I feel like [in FYC], he, we talked about fairy tale writing and you tell a story and then it has a happy ending, and that’s boring. Like everybody’s writing looks like that, so what you want to do with the conclusion of your paper is like leave people thinking about what you said and questioning things. Get them to want to do more research on it.

Juliana distinguished writing in FYC from writing in high school primarily in terms of the conception of writing each context encouraged. Her high school emphasized a structure and a procedure for producing that structure (i.e., “topic one, describe it; topic two, describe it…”) while FYC emphasized a more rhetorical conception of writing. Writing in FYC involved participating in a research community in which the purpose of writing was to generate more questions and thoughts: “leave people thinking about what you said and questioning things. Get them to want to do more research on it.” Juliana experienced this procedural conception of writing in high school as “boring” and decontextualized: not only was there no audience nor compelling purpose for writing, but there also was, in a sense, no writer either. The structure was sufficiently nameless and faceless such that ”anybody could use it.” It is no wonder then that a noted contrast for Juliana with writing in FYC was her experience of having a writerly self with agency: “now it’s more like how I want to write it is how it’s gonna be.”

Like Juliana, Sophia also had begun to reconceptualize writing through her experiences in FYC. Although Sophia had shared that she felt FYC was “redundant” in our second interview, her feelings had evolved by the time we had our third interview at the end of the semester. She described the content of FYC as similar to high school but the “context” as different: “while a lot of it’s the same, there is a different kind of context almost and that you can kind of find a different part of the format.” This “format” from high school, the “intro, body, body, body,
conclusion” format as she put it, haunted Sophia to some degree as a college writer. Although she described such formats as “inhibiting” and wanted to embrace her A.P. Literature teacher’s invitation to “diverge” from the format, this conception of writing was like a “whack-a-mole” for Sophia, not easily subdued and inclined to pop up again when she encountered new writing tasks or contexts. In this last interview, however, there was evidence that this formulaic understanding of writing may have received a fatal blow and a new understanding was emerging. When I asked Sophia what advice she would give to high school seniors about how to successfully make the transition from writing in high school to writing in college, she replied,

I would say don’t focus too much on kind of the specific formats in high school because you are going to be exposed to new formats, or you’re gonna realize that that format might not fit a specific paper, and I think you should try to be more open and try to think not from format to finished product, but what do you need to do in the finished product and then make a format based on that.

In these comments, Sophia describes how considerations of form and format should not precede rhetorical considerations (i.e., “what...you need to do in the finished product”). This is no small realization given the conflicting thoughts and feelings Sophia had expressed surrounding writing forms and formats throughout our interviews. More than simply advising high school seniors to be open to “new formats,” Sophia encourages them to reconceptualize writing: “try to think not from format to finished product, but what do you need to do in the finished product and then make a format based on that.” Sophia describes how “what...you need to do” as a writer should take priority over the “format,” signaling a conceptual shift that has begun.

Each student’s transition experience, in different ways and to different degrees, involved navigating an “in-between” space and identity. This liminal experience manifested in the
destabilizing moments students encountered, the ambiguous identity they navigated, and the conceptual adjustments that shaped their evolving sense of what writing is and is for. An underlying implication of this finding is that students’ experiences with writing (e.g., genre exposure, writing instruction) mediated their conceptions of writing. Therefore, when they encountered new, and sometimes disorienting, writing-related contexts and instruction, those conceptions of writing necessarily had to adapt and evolve to meet the new tasks. As I discuss the next major finding, I will explore how students’ previous writing experiences and instruction, combined with other factors, contributed to the extent to which they reconceptualized writing across this transition.

**Finding #2**

In diverse ways, specific factors affected the nature of students’ transitions and the extent to which students reconceptualized writing within this liminal space. It is important to underscore that these factors (e.g., prior experiences with writing instruction; writerly identities), when looking across cases, did not impact students’ transitions in predictable or uniform ways. That is, there was nothing to suggest that a particular combination of factors consistently promoted a certain kind of transition experience or, more specifically, that a certain kind of instruction reliably yielded the same outcome (e.g., conceptual shifts and adjustments) in all students. This finding does suggest, however, that students’ former and current writing-related experiences, combined with their various attitudes and dispositions as writers, related to how they navigated this transition and understood the role that writing played in it. In the following sections, I will discuss some of the factors that most prominently emerged across cases and demonstrate the different ways in which these factors mediated students’ conceptions of writing and their transition experiences. Then I will offer a more in-depth analysis of two specific cases,
Mira’s and Ben’s transitions, to demonstrate how these different factors interacted in complex ways to affect students’ transitions.

High School Writing Instruction

Across this transition, students’ experiences with writing instruction in high school was an important factor mediating their conceptions of writing and the extent to which they reconceptualized writing as first-year college students. To varying degrees, most students brought with them a formulaic conception of writing based on high school experiences in which composition was reduced to rote, almost mindless, procedure. These experiences exerted an undeniable influence on students as first-year writers; however, that influence manifested in diverse ways. For Ben, for instance, this formulaic conception of writing was something he continued to rely on as a college writer and, generally speaking, did not see as being at odds with writing as it was conceptualized in his college classes. Ben talked about using, what he referred to as, the same “style” of writing (i.e., five-paragraph structure) now as a college writer that he learned in his high school Honors and A.P. English classes, and with the exception of an upper-level English class he took the previous semester, he did not describe receiving significant pushback from college instructors. As a result, from Ben’s perspective, there was little prompting him to reconceptualize his writing tasks.

For others (e.g., Sophia, Omari, Teresa), however, this formulaic way of conceptualizing writing was something against which they struggled. They recognized its problematic nature and often found it constraining (e.g., Sophia said, “I feel like that kind of inhibits us when we’re like forced to do a certain structure”), but also found it difficult to discard. Due to the emphasis on

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2 Mira was the exception. She had attended a private high school and did not describe formulaic writing as a prominent feature of her high school instruction.
formatting and procedural conceptions of writing in Omari’s high school instruction, he reported that it was “hard for [him] to conceive how to write outside that format,” and similarly, although Sophia’s senior A.P. English teacher had subtly suggested they did not have to follow, what Sophia referred to as, the “standard format,” absent another framework for writing, she found it challenging to let go of that rigid conception, as both a twelfth grader and a first-year college student. She described what this struggle felt like in her A.P. English class: “[T]hey kind of hinted at like, oh you can deviate [from the standard structure], but sometimes they didn’t even like outright say it. They were like oh you can make this better by kind of changing things up, but you’re like how am I supposed to change it.” Without another conception of writing to guide her, Sophia likely could only imagine “changing things up” to mean simply using a different format.

Students’ prior experiences with formulaic writing instruction was just one way in which high school instruction emerged as an important factor impacting this transition. More generally speaking, it was clear that previous instruction mediated students’ conceptions of writing and served as a tacit guide when navigating their new writing contexts as college writers. For instance, both Alex and Matt conceptualized analytical papers assigned in FYC through the lens of their prior experiences. Alex’s experience with analytical writing, particularly literary analysis, was initially a source of confidence for them as a writer in FYC. However, they found their conception of analysis challenged and broadened (see discussion of finding #1) through composing a research-based analysis of a scholarly conversation in FYC. Alex’s conception of analytical writing, which at times in our interviews almost seemed to be synonymous for them with academic writing, was rooted in their high school instructional experiences, and its disruption and reconstitution in FYC emerged as a salient feature of their transition.
Although Matt generally found FYC to involve more “interpretation and analysis” than his high school writing, describing it as more “thinking-based,” his high school experience composing DBQs\(^3\) felt somewhat continuous with his college writing and, as such, helped to inform his conceptions of writing in FYC. Matt described the purpose of DBQs as he understood it and reflected on how this writing prepared him for doing a rhetorical analysis in FYC:

So they emphasized the point of you look at the article, you look at the piece of literature, you look at the image, the illustration, and you’re really trying to find out what’s the theme of this, what does this mean, how does this help out the author, what they’re trying to say, and I think that was a good point that high school pieces tried to make upon what analysis you’re doing. So I think that set a good foundation for the analysis aspect of it now that I did an analysis paper in college.

Matt felt that writing DBQs served as a “good foundation” for writing in college. He conceptualized analysis, in the context of the DBQ, as a matter of deciphering a text’s argument and unpacking how the author advances that argument—“what does this mean, how does this help out the author, what they’re trying to say”—, and to his mind, this kind of analysis overlapped with his rhetorical analysis in FYC and helped him navigate that assignment.

As high school writers, the dominant context for participants’ writing was English Language Arts. In fact, of the school-based writing that students shared with me from high school\(^4\), over 80% was done for English classes. A few participants shared texts composed for social studies classes; however, no participants shared any texts composed for science or math

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\(^3\) Document-based questions: a type of essay, common on A.P. history exams, in which students are given multiple documents (often primary sources) and must analyze them in relation to a particular historical event or issue

\(^4\) Some of the texts that students shared with me were written for extracurricular activities, and I did not count those when calculating the percentage of school-based writing that was done within English Language Arts classes.
classes. Teresa, for instance, described how most of her writing in high school happened in English, but that has not been the case for her now as a college writer:

Really, other than English, I don’t feel like I did that much writing, like a little bit in the college biology class I took. We had like pretty extensive lab reports, but really I see it the most in English classes, and I feel like that is not the experience I’ve had at college. Teresa went on to share how she has done a significant amount of writing for her college history and political science classes, and given her lack of writing experience in disciplines besides English, this came as a surprise to her. Within their high school English classes, the genres that students recalled composing most frequently included literary analysis and research papers. Omari, for instance, when asked what kinds of writing assignments were common for him in high school, provided an example of a typical assignment. He described reading a novel like *To Kill a Mockingbird* and then being asked to do “a summary of the first five chapters or maybe write like a paper on symbolism…or like a common theme.” Literary analysis was also a common genre in Ben’s English classes. When asked the same question, he described how his English teachers often structured the learning around reading and responding to a literary work:

You have two weeks, three weeks to read this book, uh I’m going to give you, we’re going to talk about it in class, do a couple of assignments, and then you’re going to do a paper on what the main themes are…

To a lesser degree, students also described research papers as a common genre in their English classes. Sometimes their research-based writing related to literary works they had read, such as in the case of Alex’s paper on the novel *Pachinko* or a paper Teresa wrote that involved historical research about a play, while other times this writing involved topics or issues not directly related to a literary work they had read. Omari, for example, described writing a
research-based paper on the legalization of marijuana, and Sophia shared a paper written in her twelfth grade English class on post-traumatic stress disorder.

Regarding the research papers often assigned in high school, Omari shared that he did one per year in his English classes and that, although he did them on different topics each year, the requirements were basically the same across grade levels. Omari even said that some students would write these research papers over breaks so that they had them done ahead of time: “I knew of kids who made research papers like prior because it was just the same guidelines each year. So they like just made two research papers on like their summer break or spring break or something.” For Sophia, the paper she shared with me on PTSD was the only research paper she recalled writing in high school, and for this paper, Sophia said there was little instruction surrounding the assignment:

There wasn’t a lot [of instruction], and I think it’s because this was kind of, at least for my class, it wasn’t the main thing. It was kind of, we’re going to do all this prep for A.P., but you also have to do this paper at the end of the year. So she gave it to us early, and we had the whole year to do it…. She gave us the rubric of like what we needed to write, and she was like this is how I’m going to grade it, so just make sure you have everything in it. From Sophia’s perspective, the kind of writing required for this paper was not “the main thing” emphasized in her A.P. Literature class. Preparation for the A.P. exam, including the kind of literary analysis required on the exam was more the focus. As a result, Sophia mainly just followed the rubric provided and made sure her paper “ha[d] everything in it.” In general, students tended to experience “research papers” as a monolithic school genre\(^5\) typically required

\(^5\) Mira was the exception. She described writing research-based papers for both science and social studies and articulated some of the ways in which that research is different depending on the disciplinary context.
in English classes despite the fact that the content of this writing often crossed over into other
disciplines, such as in the examples offered by Omari and Sophia. For Omari and Sophia,
composing a research paper in their English classes felt like an obligatory aspect of the
curriculum to which neither teachers nor students devoted significant attention. These
background experiences with “research papers” informed how students navigated and understood
research-based writing as first-year students. Also, the dearth of writing opportunities outside of
high school English classes and, more specifically, outside of the genre of literary analysis,
impacted students’ transitions in that they generally lacked a larger framework through which to
understand writing as means of inquiry across the disciplines.

Although students’ descriptions of their high school writing instruction emphasized the
prevalence of formulaic, decontextualized writing, when they experienced more motivating and
authentic contexts for writing, such experiences often stood out in their memories as more
meaningful and enjoyable than the typical assignments. For a few students, writing and
delivering speeches to their classmates was an avenue for this kind of writing. Juliana described
writing, what she referred to as, “argument speeches” in her tenth grade Honors English class,
one of which she shared with me. Regarding these assignments, she said, “that was probably one
of my favorite writings.” Alex also fondly recalled composing a speech for their eleventh grade
A.P. Language and Composition class on toxic masculinity: “looking back on it, being able to
write about that topic was really fun and enjoyable and informative for me.” Sadie, when
describing speeches she wrote and delivered in twelfth grade English, touched on a reason why
she found these writing assignments more enjoyable and compelling:

So usually with research papers that have to be just written and not spoken, sometimes I
get yelled at a little bit, just cause it’s less formal and it sounds more like I’m just talking
to somebody about it. So I found that those speeches were a lot easier for me to make
points because I felt like I could pretend I was talking to somebody and working it out
that way.

For these assignments, students had an actual audience they envisioned informing or persuading
(e.g., “I could pretend I was talking to somebody…”). In contrast to more decontextualized
writing in which they wrote solely for the teacher and for a grade, these writing contexts were
intrinsically more motivating and agentive. In addition to two speeches, Sadie also shared with
me a paper she wrote in the same English class that invited her to compose in a more authentic,
“real-world” genre. In our first interview, Sadie shared about the nature of the assignment:

…You were supposed to write your own review kind of thing, so you’re pretending
you’re a critic, and you’re writing about, you could choose a restaurant or a movie or
different types of things that most people tend to criticize, whether it’s good or bad.

Sadie reviewed the children’s movie *Coraline*, and although the assignment stretched her in
certain ways, she seemed to find value in it: “I tend to be a nicer person, so I don’t always get
blunt with how I feel about things…So it was kind of nice to explore the more critical, like being
a little more harsh, not harsh, but just a little bit more outward about how I feel about things.”

Through this assignment, Sadie not only wrote in a different genre but also assumed a new kind
of identity as a writer. Through stepping into the role of the “critic,” she was able to explore what
it feels like to be more “blunt” and “outward” about her opinions.

In general, these writing contexts that afforded students more authentic purposes and
audiences for their writing supported students across this transition in that they offered
opportunities to experience and practice writing as a rhetorical act situated in a particular
context. As I will detail during discussion of the third finding, a reconceptualization of writing
that some students experienced as first-year writers was a shift from form-based writing to writing based on rhetorical purpose. These high school writing experiences that provided more meaningful and compelling rhetorical contexts, in a sense, offered a foretaste of the kinds of writing opportunities that promoted these conceptual shifts as college writers. As students negotiated this liminal space, their high school writing instruction emerged as a key factor mediating their transition experiences. These experiences gave rise to particular conceptions of writing that students carried with them, often subconsciously, into their college writing contexts and used to make sense of their tasks and roles as writers in FYC and other courses.

College Writing Instruction

The writing instruction that students were exposed to as first-year college students also impacted the nature of their transitions and the extent to which they reconceptualized writing across this transition. Although individual instructors had considerable latitude in their design and delivery of FYC, the first-year writing program at this university emphasized writing as a form of inquiry, and the assignments and instruction were designed to introduce students to critical inquiry in a variety of contexts through the practice of writing. On Professor Clark’s syllabus, for instance, it states,

[FYC] will teach you how to participate in this inquiry-driven environment [the university], through intensive instruction about writing as a subject of study and as a practice…You will learn to use writing to explore what matters to you, to find ideas, to deepen your thinking, and to address puzzles and problems that matter to you. You will use writing as a tool for deeper and more complex thought, which is what will be expected of you in all your college classes.
Matt’s FYC instructor was Professor Clark, and in our first interview, when I asked Matt what he wanted to learn in the course, his response reflected the learning goals laid out in his instructor’s syllabus: “I never ever ever thought of writing as a way to learn something…so it would be really nice to think of it from that perspective.” Professor Clark’s syllabus describes “writing as a tool for deeper and more complex thought,” and Matt wanted to reconceptualize writing in the way in which his instructor was encouraging—in his own words, “to think of it from that perspective.”

There was variability across participants’ sections of FYC; however, based on my class observations and collection of class artifacts, the course instruction seemed to emphasize writing as inquiry to some degree and to be anchored in composition theory and pedagogy. This instructional context cannot be overstated when discussing this transition as encouraging reconceptualizations of writing. Had these students attended another university in which FYC instruction had a different focus or was not as informed by writing studies theory and research, their transitions may have looked quite different. Their instruction within the course may have more closely approximated that of their high school classes and, therefore, not challenged them to reconceptualize writing in the ways that many participants did.

In fact, in some instances, instruction within FYC more overtly encouraged participants to reconsider or even leave behind aspects of their high school training. During a class session that I observed, Professor Clark was encouraging students to begin work on, what she referred to as, their “Conversation Essay” by first consulting online sources such as social media and blogs to get a sense of the public discourse surrounding their topic. After giving these instructions, she referenced students’ prior instruction, assuming that students had likely been told to avoid such sources in the past: “set aside that high school teacher who says that’s not a good or credible
source” (Observation Notes, February 24, 2020). It bears mentioning that within the context of
the class as a whole students did ultimately need to submit a paper that used scholarly sources,
and this instruction to consult non-scholarly sources was an initial step in what was an extended
research and writing process. Nonetheless, a statement like this signals to students that writing
and research in this course will differ in certain ways from their instruction in high school, and
students, in response, need to be willing to “set aside” prior conceptions derived from their high
school instruction.

Professor Miller’s sections of FYC also encouraged students to distance themselves from
certain aspects of their prior instruction. For example, in students’ first paper assignment, she
offers an explanation for why she refers to the assignment as a “personal inquiry” and implies
that students’ experiences with writing in high school may be laden with misconceptions that
FYC will challenge—“I frequently use the term ‘inquiry’ instead of ‘essay,’ because ‘essay’
often carries with it misconceptions about what writing does.” While Professor Miller does not
directly state what those misconceptions might be, further down in the assignment directions, she
conceptualizes this writing task as a departure from formulaic writing: “You’re stepping out of
formulaic writing to pursue curiosity and discovery,” and she later adds, “5-paragraph-form is
not used in college because it arbitrarily curtails deep thinking.” Professor Miller’s directions to
students clearly encourage them to leave behind formulaic conceptions of writing and, instead, to
conceptualize writing as inquiry, a process guided by “curiosity and discovery.”

Omari, one of Professor Miller’s students, picked up on the fact that his instructor wanted
them to reconceptualize writing through the course: “I guess she wants us to break away from
how we learned how to write like going through high school or like, I guess, school before that.”
Omari did seek to “break away” in how he conceptualized and wrote his personal inquiry (see
discussion of finding #1). The experience, in his own words, was “completely new.” Alex was also in one of Professor Miller’s sections of FYC, and like Omari, Alex got the sense that their instructor wanted them to think about and practice writing differently than they had in the past. While writing their personal inquiry, Alex got feedback from their instructor that they needed to be more willing to “let go” of “having a rigid structure and organization”; however, Alex confessed that it was “really hard to let go.” Later in the interview, they explained the source of that difficulty: “I’m always so used to having specific structure, you know, your thesis and the body paragraphs with the analysis in them, and then, you know, a conclusion.” Alex was comfortable with the five-paragraph format that was emphasized in their high school instruction and found discarding that “specific structure” a bit unsettling. It is understandable that Alex struggled, at times, with writing their personal inquiry, for their instructor was not simply asking them to use a different structure but rather to “let go” of a specific conception of writing, one that had worked for Alex in the past.

Students also experienced instruction in other classes during their first year that impacted the nature of their transitions and their conceptions of writing. In Teresa’s first semester at the university, since she arrived with a considerable number of credits from pre-college courses, she immediately began taking upper-level history courses for her major, an experience that had a profound effect on her transition. Teresa’s instruction in her college history classes encouraged movement away from, what she referred to as, more “robotic” and “cookie-cutter” writing, the kind that was common in high school, and toward, what she described as, more “analytical writing.”

Teresa specifically mentioned how her history professor last semester encouraged her to be more analytical and critical of the texts they were reading. This kind of writing contrasted
with her high school instruction’s emphasis on summary. She added that, while they did look at
primary sources in high school history classes, they generally did not examine them critically:

[My history professor] wanted us to look into those readings and kind of think about not
just read them and be like oh this is what I read, but think about like bias and why this
particular thing was written and like what might have caused the author to take that
tone… and then we’d do writing based off of kind of what we thought the piece was
about more than just what it was saying.

Her work with primary sources in high school did not require Teresa to go beyond “what [the
text] was saying,” but now as a college writer, she had to consider things like rhetorical context
and authorial bias. This kind of writing instruction invited her to step into the identity of
historian: it positioned her as a scholar within this discipline as opposed to a student simply
learning about history. Teresa expressed how this instruction not only changed how she thought
about writing but also the study of history:

[L]ike a year ago I would have argued that it [history] was much more fact-based and like
there’s really nothing to argue about it, but I’ve definitely had that view of history
changed since I’ve been here. There’s definitely a lot more room for interpretation in
writing.

While in the past she saw history as “fact-based,” her experiences as a college writer prompted
her to reconceptualize the discipline as more interpretive and analytical, and this shift was
facilitated, in part, through the disciplinary identity she had been invited to assume in her
writing. Across this transition, students sometimes experienced college instruction conflicting
with and, therefore, requiring divergence from high school instruction (e.g., Teresa’s writing for
her history major) while, at other times, they felt that the experiences dovetailed in supportive
ways (e.g., Matt’s rhetorical analysis in FYC). In both types of scenarios, however, the nature of their college instruction and how that instruction interfaced with prior instruction emerged as a key element of students’ transitions.

The instruction students were exposed to as first-year college students affected the nature of their transitions in diverse ways, often prompting them to reconceptualize writing to some degree. Because Teresa had already made some significant conceptual adjustments as a writer in her first semester at the university, she entered into FYC differently than those who had done virtually no writing the previous semester. Teresa’s case suggests that an aspect of students’ transitions worth noting is not only the kinds of college writing instruction they experience, but also when and to what degree they experience it. For Teresa, her exposure to instruction that encouraged reconceptualizations began early in her transition and happened across various courses within her history major. Although Ben had the same FYC instructor as Teresa, he did not reconceptualize writing to the same degree that she did across this transition. This fact suggests that writing instruction, as a factor impacting students’ transitions, is complex and multidimensional. In and of itself, mere exposure to a particular pedagogy for or philosophy on writing does not necessarily yield a particular learning outcome.

Writerly Identity

Another factor that emerged as significant in how students negotiated the liminal space of this transition was writerly identity. How students saw themselves as writers, how they felt about writing (and specifically their writing), and how they understood the role of writing in their lives all mediated their experiences across this transition in various ways. To discuss this factor, I will focus on three students—Teresa, Juliana, and Matt—and discuss the writing-related attitudes and dispositions that impacted their transition experiences.
**Teresa.** Although Teresa described some destabilizing experiences in her college history classes the previous semester, she expressed confidence in herself as a writer and generally felt well prepared for college writing: “I feel confident in my writing abilities…it’s a skill that I’m proud of…I know there’s still progress to be made because you can always make progress, but I feel like it’s one that is good.” Teresa’s sense of pride in her writing motivated her to take seriously feedback she received and to strive for continual growth:

I’m getting feedback from a lot of people this semester on how to make my papers better, so I feel like I comb through them with a more careful eye, and I’m trying to make the paper the best it can be every single time.

Teresa’s confidence and self-efficacy as a writer contributed to her conscientious responsiveness toward feedback. She had a strong sense that she could, in her own words, continue to “make progress” and develop as a writer; as a result, she made adjustments to how she conceptualized writing when she perceived a discrepancy between her conceptions and those of her instructors.

Not only were these characteristics true of Teresa as a college writer, but they also emerged in how she described her high school writing. Teresa shared that much of her high school writing followed a very specific format, a structure she described as “cookie cutter.” In her senior English class, however, the teacher encouraged students not to simply replicate that standard format for a research paper assignment. As a result, Teresa ended up not following the five-paragraph format for the paper and attributed this decision to her overall attitude toward writing:

I mean, some people still stuck with it [the standard format], but I feel like the people who enjoyed writing more were more willing to branch out. Like I definitely enjoy writing, so I’m more open to suggestions and to try new things.
This “willing[ness] to branch out,” to Teresa’s mind, was connected with her enjoyment of writing. Oftentimes, the “cookie cutter” format was what her high school teachers expected, but in this instance in her senior English class and certainly in her writing for college history classes, something different was encouraged, and her disposition as a writer made her more inclined to be “more open to suggestions and to try new things.”

Teresa was also highly motivated to grow as a writer because she saw writing as central to her identity and future goals. I asked Teresa what kind of role she thought writing would play in her educational and career goals as an aspiring law student. She said,

I feel like writing is going to be a huge deal for me, and that’s why I take all the papers so seriously and all the feedback so seriously cause I feel like I’m going to be able to get a lot out of it, and I know it’s going to be important for me. I think in the instance of transferring to my career, the documented argument one [a paper in FYC] is probably going to be pretty helpful because I’ll be crafting arguments for my job, and even if I’m not writing them, I’ll be speaking them, but I still feel like the general format and skills will transfer, so I feel like that will be very helpful to a future career.

Unlike other students who saw writing as incidental to their future plans or those who were not sure what role it might play, Teresa thought it would be crucial for her. She even anticipated which genres would be most relevant, specifically mentioning the documented argument she composed in FYC as having a similar purpose and some similar characteristics to texts she might craft as an attorney. Given these perceptions, Teresa took “so seriously” her writing as a college student, feeling as though these writing experiences were opportunities to grow— “I feel like I’m going to be able to get a lot out of it.”
Teresa specifically saw her writing in her history classes as relevant to her future goals. In one of her history classes, her professor encouraged her to not simply reiterate what the text says in her writing but to question it and potentially take issue with certain aspects. Teresa described how this way of responding to texts was somewhat unfamiliar to her, but she saw value in it:

I feel like in high school I was definitely more encouraged to summarize and maybe consider like bias in terms of lack of credentials or not explaining the point well or having not enough sources, but now, I was like, why does he [history professor] just want us to constantly pick out the faults in things and argue against it. It took me awhile, but I definitely feel like it’s helped me become more of a critical thinker, and like I’m reading between the lines of the text and not just taking what it says at face value, which I think is a really important skill, especially for how it’s going to translate to law school.

Teresa felt that the “critical think[ing]” required in her history class not only was an “important skill” in and of itself but also one that would support her in the future as a law student. Teresa’s motivation to continue developing as a writer was rooted in her understanding of the central role that writing would play in her life, and her attitude toward her writing and herself as a writer supported pursuit of that growth. She saw herself as a capable and competent writer who enjoyed writing. These aspects of her identity as a writer may have positioned her to be more willing and eager to reconceptualize writing across her transition as she encountered writing contexts and tasks that were unfamiliar and, at times, even disorienting.

Juliana. Juliana had the same FYC instructor as Teresa; therefore, she likely was exposed to similar writing instruction. Her transition, however, differed from Teresa’s,
particularly in terms of how writerly identity mediated her experiences. In our first interview, Juliana indicated that she did not think of herself as a strong or engaged writer:

I’m kind of on the weaker side. I never really liked writing, especially for classes. I always kept a journal, and like I wrote poems a lot when I was younger, so just, I was more of a creative writer than here’s this task or here’s this essay format, you have to do this.

Juliana found “creative” writing more compelling than school-based writing and suggested that it is the compulsory nature of the latter that makes it less appealing (e.g., “you have to do this”). Unlike Teresa, Juliana did not identify as someone who “liked writing,” and during our second interview, when I asked whether she sees herself as a college writer, she replied, “Yeah, I still don’t. I don’t like writing. I’m very unmotivated right now. I’m not going to lie. Like I just, writing’s not something I’m interested in per se.” To Juliana’s mind, her reluctance to identify as a college writer was connected to her lack of interest in writing and lack of motivation to write. When I asked Juliana what it means to be a college writer, she said, “I feel like college writers go out of their way to do writing and to perfect their writing. I mean I’m a perfectionist myself, but writing I just, I’d rather just get it done and get the grade.” For Juliana, being a college writer had more to do with one’s disposition and attitude toward writing—those who ”go out of their way to do writing” or who write for the intrinsic value of the act or for some purpose beyond “just get[ting] it done and get[ting] the grade” are college writers. Based on these criteria, Juliana felt as though she did not qualify.

By the time we had our third interview, however, Juliana’s attitude toward writing and herself as a writer had shifted somewhat. She said that her last paper for FYC, which was an 8-page research-based argument on the benefits of sports participation for children and youth, was
the longest paper she had ever written, and the process of completing it made her feel “accomplished.” This writing experience seemed to have instilled a greater degree of confidence and self-efficacy in Juliana as a writer. We returned to a series of questions I had asked in previous interviews, and Juliana’s responses demonstrated the evolution of her writerly identity throughout the semester.

**Me:** Now at the end of [FYC], what do you think it means to be a college writer? Or how would you define that?

**Juliana:** Um, to be a college writer to me means you’re pretty much developing your work, especially with this last one, so that other people can understand it, and it’s more so putting your thoughts and research into ways people can understand it, and a lot of persuasion too with that so people agree with what you’re saying, and that definitely goes into the business world and everything in life.

**Me:** So do you think of yourself as a college writer these days?

**Juliana:** I guess so with this class under my belt.

**Me:** Yeah. So it does give you some confidence that you may not have had at the beginning?

**Juliana:** Yeah. I feel like…reading other people’s work and getting feedback built my confidence as a writer because I really, like going into this class, I dreaded it, and I didn’t want to do writing at all cause like I’m a business major. I’m not going to write all the time, so yeah, this class definitely helped with all that.

Juliana’s understanding of what it means to be a college writer evolved over the course of the semester and seemed to be greatly impacted by her work in FYC. At the end of FYC, she tended to conceptualize being a college writer as a growth process or trajectory: “to me [it] means you’re pretty much developing your work.” She credited the class with helping her to build more confidence and to feel more like a college writer. Although at the beginning she “dreaded” the class and did not think it was pertinent to her goals as a business major, she eventually came to
see it as relevant, particularly the persuasive writing she did with her research-based argument paper.

Juliana’s reconceptualization of college writing took shape alongside this shift in her writerly identity. Previously, Juliana had understood “college writing” as a more individual endeavor centered around improving one’s skills—“college writers go out of their way to do writing and to perfect their writing.” In this last interview, however, she described it through a more social and rhetorical lens: college writing is about “putting your thoughts and research into ways people can understand it.” This conception of college writing also emerged at another moment in our last interview when Juliana contrasted the procedural nature of her high school writing with the more social and knowledge-building nature of writing in FYC. She said that the goal with writing in FYC was to “leave people thinking about what you said and questioning things. Get them to want to do more research on it.” This reconceptualization was linked to her growing confidence as a writer and her developing sense of how writing would be relevant to her as a business major and beyond: “that definitely goes into the business world and everything in life.” Juliana’s identity as a writer was a factor that mediated her transition in complex ways. Far from static, however, her writerly identity evolved over the course of FYC and was connected to other key factors, such as the college writing instruction to which she was exposed.

Matt. Matt’s identity as a writer also changed in certain ways across this transition. As a high school writer, he described himself as disengaged, largely due to the decontextualized school-based writing tasks that dominated his instruction; however, as a first-year college student, he found that his attitude toward writing was changing as he began to encounter more meaningful rhetorical contexts that felt pertinent to his developing writerly identity. In our first interview, when I asked Matt how he would describe himself as a writer, he responded,
Well, I never paid attention much to writing when I was in high school. It was more just this is an assignment I have to do, just to get credit for the class. It never really piqued my interest, but within the last couple months, I’ve started reading more, and I’m actually in the middle of *Moby Dick* right now. It’s a great book, and I try to take the writing assignments in the writing class fairly seriously, and I think I did an alright job on the personal essay…

In high school, Matt gave writing little thought, and given the mechanical nature of some of his high school writing instruction, it is not surprising that he saw writing tasks as little more than hoops to jump through in order to earn grades. He shared that much of his high school instruction focused on “format”: “They give you a sheet and just give you a formula on how to do it, and everyone pretty much follows the same exact thing.” Understandably, Matt did not find this kind of writing very inspiring.

As a college writer, however, Matt found writing more motivating, in part, because he saw its relevance to his educational and career goals. He planned to go to graduate school and saw writing as an important part of those academic aspirations:

I’m looking forward to actually learning how to college write. You know, write like a college student, and I really hope that I get to learn how to write like a researcher. I do really want to investigate more undergraduate research, and you know, how to research when in graduate school. I think that will be interesting.

Matt took FYC “fairly seriously” because he felt it would help him learn what college research and writing entails. He even shared that he volunteered for this study because he wanted more exposure to the research community of the university. Matt also saw writing as relevant to his academic major:
… [E]specially in Homeland Security [his major], even if I’m working for the federal
government, or if I’m working for a business or corporation, I have to know how to write
to somebody. I have to know how to motivate in my writing. I have to know how to
inspire in my writing. I have to know how to just kind of talk to somebody through my
writing.

Matt envisioned multiple rhetorical contexts in which writing would serve him, and in contrast to
what he described as his “monotonous” school-based writing in the past, these contexts involved
actual audiences (i.e., “somebody”) and purposes (i.e, inspiring people, communicating with
people).

Overall, Matt seemed very ready to leave behind the conceptions of writing that
dominated his high school instruction and to break new ground as a writer; this disposition likely
contributed to his eagerness to embrace “writing as inquiry,” the conceptual framework he
encountered in FYC. In our last interview, when I asked him if he thought of himself as a college
writer. He said he now has a better grasp of what that entails but still considers himself a
“novice.” Understanding his position as one of a beginner and learner also may have positioned
Matt to reconceptualize writing in more obvious ways than others did across this transition.

Students’ feelings about writing and themselves as writers shaped their writerly identities,
and in turn, these identities were factors in how students negotiated this transition. As was
evident in these short profiles of three students, these identities, however, are dynamic and
constituted through students’ exposure to and experience with diverse writing contexts. Students’
dispositions as writers, particularly their openness to new ideas about the purpose and practice of
writing, was a particular aspect of writerly identity that seemed related to the degree to which
they reconceptualized writing across this transition. Also, those who saw writing as a vital part of
their lives and aspirations seemed more inclined to reconceptualize writing when exposed to different writing contexts.

Schooling Contexts

Another factor that emerged as significant across this transition was the various schooling contexts within which students experienced writing instruction and formed writing-related identities. Most of these contexts were specific to either the high school or college setting. For instance, contexts such as high-stakes assessments and tracking placements (e.g., Honors, A.P.) pertained to high school settings while the Honors College at this university was a context specific to the college setting. Disciplinary contexts, however, pertained to both high school and college settings, impacting students’ experiences with and conceptions of writing across the transition. In the sections that follow, I will discuss each of these schooling contexts, using specific students’ experiences as exemplar cases of how a given context impacted the nature of their transitions.

High-stakes Testing. High-stakes testing was a context within the high school setting that shaped students’ writing-related instruction and identities. Sophia, for instance, when describing the formulaic writing instruction she experienced in high school connected this kind of instruction to testing contexts:

I think like when you do it [formulaic writing] for so long it becomes like habit, and especially if we’re in time constraints. With like testing, you know, it’s very easy to fall back into kind of that rhythm…you can write something really good outside of class that you spent a little bit more time on, without the pressure of kind of like the time constraint, but when you’re in a kind of habitat where it’s like you have 45 minutes to write this, and it always stressed me out because my teacher was like oh you can write this in like 20
According to Sophia, this kind of writing was constraining and inhibiting for her as a writer. She knew she could craft something more effective if given more time, but the testing context, to Sophia’s mind, made her revert to an earlier version of her writerly self (e.g., “middle school…quality writing”). The cumulative effect of that high-stakes writing assessment “habitat,” to use Sophia’s word, was that formulaic writing became a “habit,” one that Sophia found it difficult to break as a college writer. Sophia carried this constraining conception of writing with her across this transition, and although she recognized it as problematic, she lacked another way in which to conceptualize writing. Toward the end of FYC, however, she began to describe her writing in ways that suggested a new understanding of writing as rhetorical rather than form-based.

Like Sophia, Sadie also experienced high-stakes writing assessments as a context that informed her transition. Toward the beginning of our first interview, when I asked Sadie to share how much writing she did as a high school student, she gave a rough outline of what writing looked like for her across different grade levels. Writing done in preparation for the standardized state test in English was a prominent feature:

So 10th grade was a lot of writing because it was Advanced [her track placement], but I think it was more, like, the analysis stuff, and it was more in preparation for [the state test]. So it wasn’t like, it was mostly [state test]-based, so you had to follow the way the [state test] wants you to write it, and then 11th grade was major test prep for [the state test] just cause that was the year we took it. And then in 12th grade, I was still in regular
English then, and that was a lot of writing, but that was just cause that class was meant to prepare you for college writing. So even though it was just like English 12, it was more of now that we’re done with [the state test], we can actually focus on how you want to write papers well.

Sadie’s high school writing revolved around the state test. Her descriptions suggest that its presence loomed large as a mediating, perhaps even controlling, context for her education: “you had to follow the way the [state test] wants you to write it.” Although she did not directly call this context “inhibiting” as Sophia did, that feeling is implied in her description of the writing that she did in twelfth grade after taking the test the previous year: “it [English 12] was more of now that we’re done with [the state test], we can actually focus on how you want to write papers well.” In this statement, Sadie suggests that “writ[ing] papers well” and writing, as it is required on the state test, are two separate things. Later in the same interview, Sadie described this kind of writing as “frustrating” and “not that fun” because the prompts were generally quite rigid and did not allow for much originality. In twelfth grade, once this context was no longer relevant to her learning, she enjoyed writing much more: “[I]n English 12, it was more of like, hey what’s your opinion on it and how’re you going to back it up. Here are your databases, and then you just choose however you need to do it.”

For these participants and others (e.g., Matt, Teresa), high-stakes testing was a schooling context that informed their transitions. As high school writers, these testing contexts had a constraining effect, limiting what and how students could write. These contexts trained students to value certain things (e.g., form/structure, correctness) in their writing while ignoring other things, such as rhetorical situation or critical thought, and given the connection that students identified between formulaic writing and testing, these contexts tended to reinforce problematic
conceptions of writing, conceptions that students often found incompatible with college writing as it was conceptualized in FYC and other courses in their first year.

**Tracking.** Tracking, specifically Honors/Advanced Placement English tracks, was another context that informed students’ navigation of this transition. Students partially defined themselves as high school writers in relation to whether or not they took Honors or A.P. English (and sometimes history) classes, and for those who were on the advanced track, they often found some degree of confidence in navigating this transition based on those experiences. Alex, for instance, took Honors and A.P. English, and they specifically pointed to their A.P. classes as helping them now as a college writer. When I asked Alex what was emphasized in their high school writing instruction, they replied,

> In senior year, a lot of the writing was about creativity and expressing yourself and your ideas…along with preparing us for college, at least for me because I was in the A.P.s, so they, you know, were also focused on how to write a paper that could be seen as written by a college student.

Alex considered their writing instruction in A.P. classes to be relevant now to their work as a college writer and felt that, “because [they were] in the A.P.s,” they were better prepared than those who were in the mainstream track. Sophia felt similarly. She initially found her writing in FYC to be very similar to her writing in A.P. classes and even considered the overlap somewhat redundant:

> I know at least for my school, they did try to prepare you for college writing, especially like A.P. classes, so if you take A.P. classes, which at least my classes were all Honors and most of us took A.P. classes, so it’s really a lot of the same stuff.
Both Alex and Sophia, in our first two interviews, expressed some frustration about what they felt was the repetition between FYC and their high school A.P. classes; however, their perspectives had changed by the time we had our last interview. Alex had struggled with their analytical inquiry in FYC which led to a reconceptualization of writing, and Sophia had come to see FYC as having “a different kind of context almost” than her writing in high school. In these instances, participants’ backgrounds as A.P. and Honors students instilled in them both confidence in their writing and an implicit assumption that FYC was essentially the same as previous A.P. English classes. For a period of time, this assumption somewhat blinded them to the ways in which their writing now as first-year college students, at times, encouraged different conceptions of writing. It was through their process of reconceptualizing writing that Sophia and Alex began to perceive differences between FYC and A.P English and to make conceptual adjustments in order to engage in writing through a more rhetorical lens.

Juliana also felt that her A.P. English class provided her some valuable preparation for FYC, stating that both classes had the “same flow,” and Teresa shared that, although now she has a “broadened” understanding of what college writing is, she entered college with confidence, largely due to the instruction she received in her A.P. and dual-enrollment English classes: “I feel like I definitely saw myself as a college writer in terms of like basic skills and the use of the English language going into college.” Sadie, on the other hand, shared that she decided not to do A.P. English in high school because she did not consider English to be one of her academic strengths: “So I did advanced in 9th and 10th, but then in 11th, the only advanced available was A.P., but I didn’t want to do A.P. because I’m not that good at English.” Sadie was in a mainstream English class her eleventh and twelfth grade year, and she considered these classes better suited to her as someone “not that good at English.” This appraisal of her English skills,
reflected in her thoughts concerning A.P. courses, also emerged in how she understood the source of her struggles in her college English course, Classics of Western Literature:

I always struggled with analysis just cause I guess I’m not an English person…a lot of people say because I’m math and science based, I tend to think more logically and I don’t end up seeing the deeper meaning in something. So I know I struggle with English.

Sadie’s assessment of her struggles in this English course relied on the same logic that she applied to her decision not to continue on the advanced English track in high school: “I guess I’m not an English person.” She tended to view competency in English classes as a matter of an innate disposition that one either possesses or does not, and as someone who is “math and science based,” she did not consider herself to possess the “English person” disposition. This perspective may have impacted the degree to which Sadie reconceptualized writing across her transition. For instance, rather than viewing her struggle in Classics of Western Literature as rooted in a limited understanding of how to craft responses to literature (i.e., how arguments and interpretations are made in literary studies), something that can be learned, she attributed it to the lack of some intrinsic quality possessed by those who are, so called, English people. Sadie’s experiences in tracked English classes, including how such experiences impacted her writerly identity, was a context that mediated her college transition in complex ways. Overall, these examples illustrate how students’ tracking placements in high school had implications for how they saw themselves as writers and how they navigated this transition.

Public vs. Private Schools. Another schooling context that emerged as significant was whether students attended a public or private high school. Mira was the only participant who had attended a private school. All of the other students had attended a public school within the state in which the university is located. This context is important to note because Mira was an outlier
among this group in that she did not describe formulaic writing instruction as a prominent feature at her high school. In fact, in contrast to every other participant, when describing her high school writing, she never made mention of any writing procedures comparable to the five-paragraph essay structures that other participants described as routinely drilled in their schools. This difference is likely due to her private school context. Participants who were in a public school context were subject to the regime of high-stakes testing required by the state, which included writing components in English Language Arts (ELA) and other content areas. Within this state, a major ELA standardized test occurs during students’ eleventh grade year, and Sadie, for instance, described how this particular test somewhat dictated the nature of her writing instruction in high school. These assessments were high-stakes for students in that earning a passing grade was required for graduation, and they also had high stakes for teachers and schools as poor performance and pass rates would elicit a greater degree of state oversight and accountability. These punitive measures, in turn, would have negative implications for school and teacher reputation.

This particular context was a factor impacting students’ transitions. Those who had attended public schools did tend to describe formulaic writing as a common feature of their high school instruction while Mira, who had attended a private school, did not describe her high school writing in ways that would suggest a dominant formulaic conception of writing. This context clearly overlaps with the contexts of high-stakes testing and tracking. High-stakes testing, specifically that which was imposed by the state, was a feature of students’ high school instruction by virtue of the fact that they attended a public school, and tracking practices, particularly in public school settings, are often organized around the nature and degree of test preparation deemed necessary for a particular cohort of students. For instance, students in lower
or mainstream tracks may have more instruction specifically geared toward preparation for state testing while those in advanced tracks may have more instruction geared toward preparation for Advanced Placement exams. In either case, within the public school context, high-stakes testing and tracking go hand-in-hand, and these contexts mediated the nature of students’ transitions.

**Honors College.** Matt, Mira, Sadie, Sophia, and Teresa were all enrolled in Honors sections of FYC. Honors College students at this university can elect to enroll in sections reserved specifically for them; as such, the Honors program at this university was a mediating context for over half of the participants. Mira, Sadie, Sophia, and Teresa were enrolled in the Honors College from the beginning of their fall semester while Matt had just applied and been accepted at the beginning of the spring semester. In our first interview, Matt described his reasoning behind enrolling: “I just thought it would be something nice to put on the resume and also to get to meet researchers like you.” It was also his perception that electing to enroll in an Honors section of FYC would mean that the work would be more rigorous and meaningful. When I asked him how he felt about taking the course, he replied,

> I thought it was going to be a joke. I thought it was just going to be like, oh I have to write about food or something. I’m actually happy that I took the honors version of it because I can tell she [instructor] cares a little bit more because I heard that like last year for some [FYC] classes, it was definitely like write about your favorite food five times over.

Whether or not Matt’s instructor actually did invest more into the class because it was an Honors section is beside the point. From his perspective, being an Honors student in an Honors section positioned him as someone who wants to be challenged and to learn. “Writ[ing] about [his] favorite food five times over” was not how he wanted to spend the semester. Rather, he wanted
to do work that would help him better integrate into and participate in the research community of the university—“to get to meet researchers like [me]”—and for Matt, the Honors College and its offerings served as a vehicle for those kinds of authentic academic experiences.

The Honors program served as a context mediating other students’ transitions as well. In our first interviews, both Sophia and Sadie brought up an Honors research seminar that all first-year students in the Honors College took during the fall semester. Sophia said that this class introduced her to APA format, and since that was not the format used at her high school, she felt underprepared for college-level research-based writing:

[L]ast semester in the Honors class I had to take, we had to do the outline in APA format. I have never done that before, so it was definitely kind of concerning because I had to kind of relearn a whole format, and I’m so used to MLA cause that was the only format we ever did in middle school and high school. That was the format we did. That was the format we stuck with, so I feel like, I think I’m certainly unprepared to do research papers cause I don’t exactly know what the process to do one is.

Sophia’s experience in this Honors seminar informed her understanding of what research and writing looks like as a college student, and for her, this understanding seemed to center around APA style as a marker of college writing. Although this was her first experience using this particular style, she ended up using it for her papers in FYC, and she anticipated, as a psychology major, that she would be using it frequently in other classes. While this experience in the research seminar, in a sense, made Sophia feel less confident of her writing preparedness, it had the opposite effect on Sadie. When I asked Sadie whether she felt like her high school writing prepared her for college, she said,
I would say so because last semester when we did, there’s an Honors Seminar, where all the freshman Honors kids have to take it and it kinda just, it was a little unfocused, the class in general. But a lot of these assignments [from high school], especially the last thing we did was a research paper, so I kind of felt like I was prepared for that because I already knew how to write a topic sentence and then how to back it up with information and how to kind of organize the format of the essay, and we also had to use an outline for that too. And I already knew the format for the outline because my English 12 teacher was able to give us the format for that and how to use it and how to make it an official outline and not just a weird organization of information.

Sadie felt that her experience doing a research paper and outline in twelfth grade English had prepared her well because they did a similar assignment in her Honors research seminar. She was familiar with the formatting and the process because of her prior high school instruction: “I already knew how to write a topic sentence and how to back it up with information.” In both Sadie’s and Sophia’s cases, the Honors program was a context within which Honors College students experienced this transition, and this context informed their understanding of their own college preparedness. In the case of Sophia, it exposed some gaps in her instructional experiences while, for Sadie, it underscored her feeling of college readiness.

**Disciplines.** Disciplinary context was a factor that impacted students’ writing transitions beginning in their high school settings. In general, when I asked students about their writing opportunities and experiences in high school, most of them described composition within the context of English Language Arts and, to a lesser degree, social studies classes, and the writing samples that they shared with me reflected this fact. Teresa addressed this in our first interview:
Really, other than English, I don’t feel like I did that much writing [in high school], like a little bit in the college biology class I took. We had like pretty extensive lab reports, but really I see it the most in English classes, and I feel like that is not the experience I’ve had at college.

Other students echoed this same experience—that is, they described few high school writing opportunities outside of English. Teresa went on to say that she has done extensive writing for her history classes in college, and these experiences have challenged her understanding of writing as belonging exclusively to the discipline of English. Although Mira had done some significant writing in the sciences during high school, she still tended to see writing as something primarily done in English classes: “I always veered more towards sciences and like STEM fields, so writing was never my forte, but obviously everyone has to know how to write at least a little bit.” It was Mira’s perception that writing more pertained to the discipline of English, and while she reasoned that “everyone has to know how to write at least a little bit,” it was more peripheral to her work and identity as a STEM major.

In our last interview, when I asked Mira if she felt like a college writer these days, she said she would “be more likely to say yes” now having completed FYC. She added,

I feel like at this point...I feel like my writing will change a little bit, but I don’t see it changing dramatically, especially since I won’t be taking a lot of English courses. I will be taking one next semester for creative writing, but I feel like my college writing itself will not progress a lot.

Mira tended to view being a college writer as an identity more associated with English as opposed to the sciences, and because she would mostly be taking STEM classes moving forward, she did not anticipate her writing “progress[ing] a lot.” Her reasoning seemed to be that, since
“everyone needs to know how to write a little bit,” even STEM majors, her writing “will change a little bit” as a college student but not “dramatically.”

Other students described initially expecting FYC to be similar to past English classes and then being surprised by the course not meeting those expectations. For example, in our first interview, Teresa shared what she had expected of FYC:

I just assumed it was this quasi-English class that we had to take, and I didn’t really know what to expect from it other than they were going to force us to write papers, and I figured it was going to be more of the *The Stranger* essay that I wrote. I thought it was going to be more of that type of a class. It is definitely not. I was way off base on that.

Teresa had expected that FYC was going to require literary analyses, similar to what she had shared with me from her twelfth grade English class (i.e., *The Stranger* essay), but as other students described, she quickly learned that the course was different than she had expected. In these instances, students’ conceptions of writing, as an activity associated with the discipline of English, mediated aspects of their transitions and informed how they navigated their writing as first-year students.

The discipline in which a student was matriculating also had an impact on their transition experience and their conceptions of writing; however, it did not do so in straightforward, predictable ways. Ben and Teresa, for instance, were pursuing majors in the humanities, English and history, respectively, and both, particularly Teresa, had written more for their classes than other students who were majoring in different disciplines. They both described having done some significant writing during the fall semester: Ben took an English course, and Teresa took some history courses. A number of other participants (e.g., Juliana, Mira) reported doing virtually no writing during their fall semester, making FYC their first college course that
required writing. For example, Mira, a biochemistry major, said, “last semester was a lot of
STEM classes and they did not have writing really, even for biology, it was all scantron,” and
Sadie shared that as a math major she had done a little writing in her physics lab, but she did not
think of it as actual writing: “I have to do write-ups [for physics lab], but that’s really just
repeating what my data is, and why it is the way it is…So it’s still writing but it’s not really the
same, and it’s meant to be short and concise.” Those who were within humanities disciplinary
contexts were writing more frequently across this transition than those majoring in other
disciplines, and these writing opportunities, their presence or absence, affected the nature of
students’ transitions.

While those in the humanities were generally writing more than students in other majors,
Ben’s and Teresa’s experiences within their respective majors were quite distinct. Teresa
described reconceptualizing writing in her history classes as an interpretive, meaning-making
practice, and the fact that she was doing extensive writing within her major immediately in her
first year seemed to precipitate this reconceptualization process. Ben, on the other hand, although
he had taken an English course last semester and was currently enrolled in another one, described
writing in English as more a matter of figuring out a particular instructor’s “style” and then
delivering that, an approach that had worked for him in high school as well. Since this
conception of writing was continuing to work for Ben as a college writer it was the one that he,
then, applied to his writing in FYC. For Teresa, her history classes had impressed upon her the
intimate connection between writing and thinking, and this conception of writing seemed to help
her navigate FYC. These cases illustrate that simply matriculating in a discipline that requires a
fair amount of writing early on in one’s college career does not guarantee that a student will
necessarily come to conceptualize writing in ways that more closely approximate the work of
disciplinary experts any faster than those who do not encounter extensive writing until further
down the road in their majors. While Teresa seemed to make significant movement in this
direction, Ben did not. Nonetheless, their experiences within their respective disciplines
informed how they conceptualized writing tasks in other contexts, such as FYC.

The extent to which students were writing in their major courses prior to or alongside
FYC also did not necessarily relate to the degree to which they reconceptualized writing within
FYC. Ben, for example, did not come to conceptualize his writing in FYC through a more
rhetorical or inquiry-based lens while other students, such as Juliana and Alex, who had
experienced fewer college writing opportunities prior to FYC, did reconceptualize writing in
some of the ways the course aimed to promote. As an Informatics major, Omari had not done
much writing as a first-year student prior to FYC, and he was not sure that it would be a big part
of his major: “I don’t see a role for it [writing] right now…as of right now, I’m just learning how
to write code and stuff like that.” Nonetheless, this disciplinary context did not preclude his
reconceptualizing writing in FYC. Although he did not see writing as particularly important to
him as a STEM major, he remained open to conceptualizing writing as inquiry as he navigated
FYC, and this conception was strikingly different from the formulaic conception that had guided
his high school writing. These disciplinary contexts impacted students’ perceptions of
themselves as writers, their conceptions of writing, and the role that they felt writing would play
in their education. These contexts also shaped the nature of students’ transitions in that they
impacted how much and what types of writing they did in their first year. This factor, like the
others, however, cannot be analyzed independently and made to predict any particular type of
transition experience.
In summary, the second major finding of this study is that three specific sets of factors impacted students’ transitions and the extent to which they reconceptualized writing across their transition: (1) prior and current experiences with writing instruction, (2) their sense of identity as writers, and (3) schooling contexts within which they were writing. To conclude the discussion of this second finding, I will analyze two specific cases in more depth, Mira’s and Ben’s transitions. These profiles will illustrate the interplay of these factors across each student’s transition and highlight how these different factors worked together to mediate their transitions.

**Factors affecting Mira’s Transition.** Across Mira’s transition, the schooling contexts within which she wrote as a high school student, the writing instruction she experienced in those contexts, and the writerly identity those opportunities afforded her all impacted the nature of her transition and the way in which she reconceptualized writing in FYC. Unlike other participants, Mira had attended a private high school, and this schooling context seemed related to the fact that Mira did not describe formulaic writing instruction as a prominent feature of her high school writing. Her high school writing also had provided her with some significant writing opportunities in the sciences, and these experiences helped her develop a more disciplinary writing identity as a student interested in STEM-related fields. For instance, Mira had the opportunity to conduct her own scientific research and then document that research process through writing. She described composing a lengthy paper on her research involving quail embryos that reflected conventional aspects (e.g., abstract, findings) of scholarly articles in the sciences. This research project began during her junior year of high school and extended through her senior year, culminating in a paper presenting her findings. Mira’s secondary school opportunities as a writer were unusually sophisticated compared to other study participants: few students described such lengthy (i.e., 20-25 pages) papers, and few had the opportunity to
assume disciplinary identities as writers (e.g., scientific researcher). Much of the high school writing that other participants described was within the context of English Language Arts; if students described writing in the sciences, they typically described composing lab reports or short answer responses on tests, not more authentic disciplinary texts based on original research.

In contrast to participants whose primary experiences with writing in high school were based on formulaic procedures (e.g., Omari, Mike), often within high stakes testing or tracked contexts (e.g., Teresa, Sophia), Mira’s experience with research-based writing in the sciences was more closely related to the literacy practices of disciplinary experts. Through her research, she was invited to participate in science as a social and knowledge-constructing enterprise, rather than a decontextualized school exercise done solely for the teacher and to earn a grade. When describing her scientific research paper, Mira touched on this social dimension: “for the scientific one, even though it’s based off of your own work, your own work is based off of other people’s work, so you...have to bring them up and talk about what they did...” Research, for Mira, is not something done in a vacuum; she had a sense that her “work” was building on that of others. By “bring[ing] them up and talk[ing] about what they did,” her writing represented this research conversation and her particular contribution within it. While her background as a high school writer did help her develop particular literacy skills such as finding credible sources and integrating them into her writing, in a more profound sense, it mediated her actual understanding of writing and academic writing, and these conceptions accompanied her across this transition, informing her understanding of the writing she did in FYC. When asked how she went about determining the topic for her series of papers in FYC, Mira said, "I wanted something that I could research on, but was also not something that had a clear, known solution because then I just feel like... It’d be very boring, and you wouldn’t be like accomplishing anything." Mira’s
understanding of research as purpose-driven, aimed at “accomplishing” something through
posing complex questions without “clear, known solutions,” also speaks to her prior experience
with meaningful writing activities situated in more authentic rhetorical contexts.

This understanding overlapped in certain ways with her writing in FYC and the
conception of writing guiding the course instruction. After observing a few of Mira’s FYC
classes and seeing her instructor’s paper assignments, I asked Mira to share her perceptions
regarding her instructor’s emphasis on research as conversation:

Mira: Yeah. When I first started researching and was like introduced to research, I definitely did
not think of it as a conversation. I was like this is what people are saying. I need to figure out
relevant information so I can put together what I need to say, but now I do feel like it’s more of a
conversation, especially participating in like science research. It feels like you might get like
certain results, and what you get is like hard, this is what I saw kind of, but then also you can
interpret that differently, and that depends on your previous knowledge. It depends on what other
research you find, what other scientists think of it as well, and so with [FYC], I feel like they also
think of research as this conversation because you are trying to find out. It’s not just you finding
other people’s research and being like this is what they said, but it’s like you are interpreting what
you have differently because of what they do, and if you put out papers or you put out your own
articles, then they will also, other people, will see that, and they’ll compare it to what they have
and what other people have, and interpretation is really big. It changes what conclusions you’ll
get.

Me: Yeah. Is that an understanding, like what you just said, is that an understanding you feel like
you had as a high school writer, or is that something that you’ve developed more in college?

Mira: I think that I’ve understood that more in college. I knew that a little bit in high school, like
it was in the back of my mind, but it wasn’t really emphasized by any teachers. It was just like
you need to do research, so you can find accurate information, and I feel like in [FYC], Professor
[Mitchell] does emphasize that it is a conversation. There is back and forth. It’s not just a one way stream.

In this response, Mira drew on her high school experiences with scientific research to help her contextualize and interpret what her instructor meant by “research as conversation.” Although her sense of this concept may have been mostly tacit in high school—”it was in the back of [her] mind,” this conceptual lens, explicitly put forth in her FYC class, prompted her to make connections between previous research experiences and current ones in FYC. Regarding her scientific research, she affirmed its conversational nature: one interprets “results” based on “previous knowledge” and “what other scientists think.” She then compared this practice to her research in FYC: “with [FYC], I feel like they also think of research as this conversation because...you are interpreting what you have differently because of what [others] do.”

Although Mira had not consciously thought about research as a social process, given this new framework in FYC, she was able to reconceptualize the nature of her scientific writing in high school in light of this new lens. Rather than research simply being about “find[ing] accurate information,” her prior conception, she articulated how research exists within a communal context: “There is back and forth. It’s not just a one way stream.” This new perspective, put forth in FYC, offered her the vocabulary to describe both prior and current writing experiences. Mira’s case illustrates how schooling contexts, writing-related identities, and prior and current writing instruction are overlapping factors that mediate students’ transitions, affecting how and the extent to which students reconceptualize writing as they navigate their first year of college. Mira reconceptualized research as conversation in FYC; however, her high school writing experiences, including the disciplinary identity she had begun to develop, also played a role in this process. Her schooling context was also at play in the sense that the absence of certain contextual forces (e.g., state testing mandated in public schools) impacted the nature of her
writing instruction in high school, likely allowing for a broader range of writing experiences such as those she experienced within the sciences.

**Factors affecting Ben’s transition.** Some of the key factors that impacted Ben’s transition included his writing contexts in high school (specifically A.P./Honors English tracks), the formulaic writing required in those contexts, and his writerly identity as a student more invested in fiction/creative writing than traditional academic writing. These factors affected the nature of his experience as a first-year writer and seemed to limit the scope of his reconceptualization of writing across this transition. Although Ben’s transition did evidence small conceptual adjustments in FYC, specifically pertaining to his conceptual categories for various types of research-based writing, he did not reconceptualize writing in the more sweeping ways that other participants did. As an English major, Ben had taken both a creative writing class and a literature class in his first semester at the university, and he was in another literature class in addition to FYC during his second semester. Despite having taken more writing-intensive classes than most participants in his first year, his formulaic conception of writing, rooted in his high school experiences, persisted. Like other participants, Ben felt that his writing opportunities in Honors and A.P. English classes had prepared him well for college, but unlike some others, his perceptions of the nature of that preparation—both what it included and what it left out—did not seem to change as a result of his exposure to new writing tasks and contexts in college. In our last interview, I asked him to make some overall comparisons between his high school writing and FYC:

**Me:** Now that you are at the end of [FYC], how was the writing that you did in the course similar to what you did in high school?

**Ben:** Very similar. It was everything I learned in high school helped with [FYC]. It was the styles I learned in eleventh grade, twelfth grade, just how to formulate my essay. I never really got it,
but those, the teachers that I had in the Honors and A.P. classes, they were teaching us, cause I always thought it was like more work. I was like oh, why couldn’t I just write the essay how other kids in the school were writing them, and then I learned that the teachers were setting us up for college and how to write, [FYC] especially or my Informatics class, I had to write a small thing like that, and the style they taught me was more college than it was high school.

Me: And you, are you saying you really didn’t recognize that or appreciate that until becoming a college student?

Ben: Mm hmm. And then learning that I had to write exactly how I was writing in high school because it was always so extra, and then the teachers are like oh if you don’t write how I want you to write, you’ll get like an 80, but if you write how I told you to write and follow my style, you get like a 90, 100, 95.

The style that Ben was referring to is a basic five-paragraph structure. This “style” of writing, from his perspective, is practically synonymous with college writing. He continued to “formulate” his writing using this structure across the transition, and when he felt some pushback from an English instructor the previous semester who considered that style, in Ben’s words, “too high school-esque,” he simply focused his attention on figuring out that instructor’s style and delivering it. Ben describes this experience and his general philosophy on school-based writing in the following interview excerpt:

Me: I know the last time we talked, I asked you if your high school writing prepared you for the writing in [FYC], and it sounds like you’re saying, yes, it did. But I remember you also saying, in a way no it didn’t, because every teacher’s different, and you have to learn what they want you to do, which I see why you’d say both of those things, but how do you see both of those things fitting together?

Ben: Well, for my example with the professor I have now, Professor [Smith] [FYC instructor], how he wants us to write is how the high school teachers taught me to write, but for maybe
another professor, it would’ve been a completely different story, like I know in English, I tried writing for my professor...how I was taught in high school, and he didn’t really take it very well. He was like OK, not the best writing style.

Me: What did he not like about it? Or do you remember?

Ben: Uh, he said it was too high school-esque. Or not very English major cause I was in a class with 21-year-olds, 22-year-olds. I was in...a 300-level, so that’s a junior [level], and I’m 18-years-old, freshman, writing with juniors...So they’ve been around the block with English major, you know.

Me: Right. They’ve learned what that discipline seems to value in their writing.

Ben: Or how to write for the teacher in general, but towards the end, I started learning how he would like it, and yeah, it’s very different.

Me: Do you think, then, that in learning how he wanted it, that that would translate well to some of your other English classes, or do you think you’ll have to learn all over again what another English professor wants?

Ben: Yeah, actually, now that you say it, who knows? I think it’ll be better with his style, but still not what they fully want. Or it could be complete overkill for their style, you know. You just gotta write my first essay and see how they take it, and if they take it well, then I know his style or the high school style worked, and it’s just a learning game.

From Ben’s perspective, FYC did not require him to reconceptualize writing. He continued to write for Professor Smith in the same way that he wrote for his high school English classes, and although his English professor last semester did not “take it very well” when he used this “style,” this experience did not prompt any major conceptual adjustments on Ben’s part. He reasoned that the juniors and seniors in the course had more experience as English majors; it was understandable, therefore, that he struggled more. However, when I suggested that these students, by virtue of their experience, had a better grasp of how to write within the discipline of
English, he offered an alternative explanation, the one guiding his writing as a first-year student: “Or how to write for the teacher in general.” To his mind, their experience as English majors primarily had to do with their familiarity with the preferences of specific teachers, not disciplinary conventions that would apply across English classes.

Ben had the same FYC instructor as Juliana and Teresa, but these participants did reconceptualize writing in more pervasive ways through their experiences in the course. Juliana and Teresa found that the formulaic conception of writing encouraged in their high schools came into conflict with the rhetorical, inquiry-based conception put forth in FYC. These three participants shared some of the same factors impacting their transitions, most notably similar types of high school and college writing instruction and some similar schooling contexts (e.g., public schools, Honors/A.P. tracks). Their attitudes and dispositions toward writing (i.e., their writerly identities), however, were distinct, and this factor may account for some of the differences in their transition experiences. Unlike Teresa who saw writing as integral to her educational and career goals, Ben did not envision writing as having such a prominent place in his future. At the beginning of our third interview, I asked Ben a series of questions about how the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted his learning and future plans. I specifically asked if he was still pursuing an English major. He replied,

Um, I guess. I have nothing else to really fall back on. It’s not like my career is even going to use English, like my major really because I plan to go into criminal, into law enforcement. So that really has nothing to do with being an English major, but yeah.

Ben saw his English major, and presumably the writing associated with that major, as irrelevant to his career goals. This disconnect may have contributed to some of the differences, noted above, between his transition and that of Teresa or Juliana.
Ben’s identity as a writer seemed much more connected to his fiction writing than his traditional academic writing. He described typical school-based writing as a “grind.” Of his high school writing, he said that oftentimes they would have to write an essay based on what they had read or learned, and that kind of writing was “just the same menial grind.” He went on to say,

You knock it out in a day, and then you’re like okay, that’s 85 maybe 90, I’m done with it. When you get to choose something you actually want to write about, you’re like, I’m not done. It took me three days to write a story that I actually want to write compared to an essay where I’m like, eh close enough.

Ben found fiction writing much more engaging and motivating than traditional academic writing, and these aspects of his identity as a writer persisted into his first year of college. He described genuinely enjoying his work for a creative writing class the previous semester: “I really liked creative writing, and I took a class with Professor [Hamilton], and her class was just really fun, and I learned to write, and then I wrote a 50 page novel.”

In terms of traditional academic essays, on the other hand, Ben’s attitude of “eh close enough” continued to shape his experiences with writing in other classes, including FYC. In our last interview, when we were discussing his mini-literature review in FYC, I asked Ben how he did on the paper and whether his instructor gave any specific feedback. He replied,

I mean, I didn’t read the feedback. [laughs]...I think there’s feedback on the grade, but I was like OK cool, I got 17 out of 20. Texted the boys in the group chat. They all got like 16s, 18s, so then I was like ay good job guys, and then we’re like next one.

Ben had a very different posture toward his writing than, for instance, Teresa had. While Teresa described wanting to glean as much as possible from every assignment and bit of feedback, Ben had the attitude of simply getting it done. In his own words, “get the job done, get your grade,
and get out.” Had Ben invested the same degree of thought and attention to his writing in FYC that he gave to fiction writing, then he may have reconceptualized academic writing in more extensive ways. In Ben’s case, writerly identity offers one way of explaining why his transition looked different from other students who had the same FYC instructor. From Ben’s perspective, he had no compelling reason to invest more into academic writing. He was satisfied with the grades he was earning, and he did not feel that his future career goals would depend on the kind of academic writing that currently dominated his education.

These brief case studies of Mira and Ben demonstrate how these different factors—that is, (1) prior and current experiences with writing instruction, (2) schooling contexts within which students were writing, and (3) writerly identities—impacted students in complex ways across this transition. Individual factors, such as FYC instruction or high-stakes testing contexts, cannot be extracted from the whole and made to predict or explain any particular type of transition. As an organic whole, however, the combination of these different factors do provide insight into the nature of a particular student’s transition. Identifying these factors and describing their various contributions to a given student’s experience helps to illustrate how and why one student’s transition was both similar to and different from another’s.

**Finding #3**

When students reconceptualized writing in more obvious ways, this reconceptualization often presented itself in three dimensions: 1) a shift from form-based writing to writing based on rhetorical purpose, 2) a shift from thinking of writing as reporting to writing as inquiry, and 3) a reconsideration of the author’s point of view in various genres (i.e., a new understanding of all genres as having an authorial perspective, even seemingly “objective” forms of academic writing). Many students brought with them to college a conception of writing as form-based, a
matter of following a set of procedures with little regard for rhetorical situation. This formulaic conception of writing was challenged and, in many cases, partially or fully deconstructed as students encountered new writing contexts that asked them to write for different purposes and audiences. This conceptual shift manifested as movement away from decontextualized, form-based writing to writing based on rhetorical purpose. For some participants like Juliana, this shift looked like a greater sense of authorial agency over her writing—“all my papers in high school had a similar structure that was very basic that like anybody could use…now it’s more like how I want to write it is how it’s gonna be”—, and for others like Sophia, it looked like a growing awareness of how different purposes shape texts—“a lot of times in college, you know, the format changes because you’re writing about different things and the purpose of your essay is different.”

Students also moved away from a conception of writing as merely reporting information and toward a conception of writing as inquiry. Mira, for instance, described how a lengthy, research-based economics paper she had composed in high school involved mostly “summarizing”: “I did feel like that was just gathering information and putting it into my paper.” In FYC, on the other hand, she described the purpose as “be[ing] able to make your own argument out of other people’s research.” While on the surface these comments might sound like merely a new set of techniques for analyzing source material and incorporating it into her writing, Mira’s comments about using sources to prove an argument in FYC point to a different conception of research-based writing. They suggest a conceptual shift away from writing as merely reporting knowledge articulated by others toward writing as a form of inquiry and knowledge construction—“mak[ing] your own argument out of other people’s research.” Matt experienced a similar conceptual shift in FYC. He described this reconceptualization of writing
in our first interview: “I never ever ever thought of writing as a way to learn something…I thought it was just kind of nailing stuff down on a board, so it would be really nice to think of it from that perspective.” Matt hoped that FYC would help him to “think” about writing from a different perspective—“writing as a way to learn,” a form of inquiry.

Lastly, this reconceptualization also manifested as a shift away from viewing writing, particularly traditional academic genres, as objective and detached from the writer and toward an understanding of all writing as having authorial presence and perspective. Both Sophia and Teresa, for instance, experienced this shift. Prior to college, they had tended to view academic writing as the opposite of writing that allows for authorial voice, perspective, and creativity, but their experiences in writing-intensive courses during their first year challenged this assumption by inviting them to bring their own thoughts and perspectives into, what they had considered to be, “objective” academic writing. In the following brief case studies, I will discuss these types of reconceptualizations further by focusing on Sophia’s, Teresa’s, and Alex’s transitions.

Sophia’s Transition

Sophia’s transition was characterized by reconceptualizations of writing in two of these three dimensions: through her writing experiences in an anthropology course and FYC, Sophia came to reconceptualize academic writing as having an authorial perspective and as guided by rhetorical purpose rather than decontextualized forms. Sophia’s reconceptualization of academic writing as having an authorial perspective was prompted primarily by a paper assignment in her anthropology course; this writing experience challenged Sophia’s understanding of how she, as the writer, figures into her writing, even when composing in more traditional academic genres. One feature of Sophia’s previous writing instruction was its barring of first-person pronouns when composing typical academic papers. As a result, she tended to generally see school-based
writing and, what she referred to as, “creative writing,” which did allow for first person, as mutually exclusive categories. One of the papers she shared with me from high school was a story about an experience with a friend of hers, which, according to Sophia, represented one of the few times that she got to write creatively in high school. Because these kinds of assignments were more rare and, for Sophia, more enjoyable and meaningful, she wanted to invest more into them: “I think when I have the opportunity to, I spend a lot more effort because I think it means more, I think, to me personally because with this, I feel like I can put myself into creative writing.” In contrast to creative writing where she could "put [herself] into it," Sophia felt that typical school-based writing did not allow for her own voice: "You can’t have a point of view. We were always told, don’t use ‘I,’ like you can’t use ‘I,’ like that’s a big rule, never use ‘I’ in your writing."

Indeed, the other texts that Sophia shared with me from high school were, to use Sophia’s description, “analytical” in their tone and did not use first person. One of these papers was written toward the beginning of her twelfth grade A.P. Literature class and was an analysis of a poem. The beginning of the essay reads,

Olive Senior’s piece “Plants”, extensively portrays the plant species as a whole as complex and having multiple varies [sic] aspects to their behavior and nature. This complexity is also interconnected with other factors that illustrate the tangled relationship between said living organisms, the narrator and the intended audience.

Sophia’s “objective” tone rings out throughout this essay as she analyzes different features of the poem, and according to Sophia, this kind of writing was typical of her high school writing experience. These experiences instilled in Sophia a sense that creative writing and academic writing are discrete categories primarily in terms of the role assigned to the writer: creative
writing foregrounds the writer’s own subjectivity while academic writing requires the writer to be virtually invisible.

This conception of academic writing as objective and detached from herself as the writer was called into question in her introductory anthropology course. She took this course during the spring semester of her first year, along with FYC, and the main writing assignment in the course was a research paper on a monster of their choosing associated with a particular culture. Regarding the assignment, Sophia said, “I think the whole purpose of it is to kind of learn and kind of see how anthropology research is done.” Although Sophia tended to view academic writing as objective, she said that her instructor told them that they need to use “I” in their research paper. These directions somewhat baffled Sophia: "I find it so kind of jarring because I don’t know how to write in this kind of objective fashion with the terms ‘I.’ So I feel like I’ve never really been taught how to do that." The idea of inserting her authorial self into the text in the form of first-person pronouns was incompatible with Sophia’s conception of research as “objective.” As a result, this paper somewhat conflated and altered Sophia’s conceptual categories of academic and personal writing. If, for Sophia, one of the chief features of research-based writing was its objectivity and detachment from the selfhood of the writer (i.e., its prohibition of the first person), then it makes sense that directions to intentionally weave her own self into the writing (i.e., use “I”) would indeed be “jarring.” For this instruction did not merely amount to the switching of pronouns, but rather it signaled the need for a different conception of research, one that challenged her prior understanding of research as objective and divorced from her own thoughts and voice as the writer.

Through this assignment, Sophia’s following of the directions to use “I” resulted not merely in a paper that superficially conformed to this criterion, but also in an altered conception
of research-based writing: that is, this experience encouraged her to revise her previously-held belief that research is an impartial process and that the researcher, by implication, is a disinterested voice speaking, as it were, from outside of the text. When confronted with a writing task and context that did not conform to her prior conception, Sophia made adjustments, both technically (i.e., using “I”) and conceptually.

Another way in which Sophia reconceptualized writing across this transition was in her shift away from form-based writing to writing based on rhetorical purpose. Sophia had described how the five-paragraph essay structure was a key aspect of her high school writing instruction, and this formulaic conception of writing had followed Sophia into college despite her awareness of how it, to use her word, “inhibits” her as a writer. In our last interview, however, Sophia articulated a new rhetorical conception of writing that was beginning to come into focus for her:

I think in high school you had to go, OK just get the format right, but I feel like in college it’s more like OK constantly trying to kind of update your writing… I think it’s also as a college writer you have to adapt more, and you have to adapt to kind of the specific subject you’re talking about rather than following just one format cause a lot of times in college, you know, the format changes because you’re writing about different things and the purpose of your essay is different, so I feel like a lot of college writing is more adaptation rather than repetition and doing the same thing over and over.

Through her writing in FYC and anthropology, Sophia was beginning to recognize how “purpose” and “the specific subject you’re talking about” should guide composition, not a decontextualized “format.” Sophia saw this shift as movement away from “repetition” and toward a posture of “adaptation.” As Sophia adapted her writing to new rhetorical contexts and purposes, her conception of writing, in turn, was also changed.
Teresa’s Transition

Teresa’s transition evidenced conceptual shifts in all three dimensions. She reconceptualized writing as guided by rhetorical purpose rather than specific forms/formats and came to see, particularly in her history classes, writing as inquiry rather than mere reporting of information. In addition to these conceptual shifts, writing opportunities across her transition also encouraged Teresa to reconsider how her point of view, as the author, relates to her work. Teresa had described how much of her high school instruction was formulaic, and a history professor last semester had encouraged her to be more analytical with her writing and less shackled to a specific essay structure. Her experiences in FYC continued to challenge this formulaic conception of writing. For example, she contrasted how she composed thesis statements for her twelfth grade English class with how she composed them in FYC: “his [twelfth grade English teacher] was very formula-based, where this one [in FYC] was much more open.” In our first interview, when I asked whether she sees herself as a college writer, she referenced a conceptual shift that she had already experienced the previous semester:

I feel like I definitely saw myself as a college writer in terms of like basic skills and the use of the English language going into college, and now that I’m here I feel like I had a very narrow scope of what that actually meant, and now I feel like it’s broadened, and I feel like I’ve worked on it for a couple months, so I feel like I’m more of a college writer now than I was when I started, but I also feel like there’s more to understanding what a college writer is than I originally thought.

Teresa said that she began college with, what she now understands to be, a “narrow scope” on what it means to be a college writer, and after “work[ing] on it for a couple months,” her conception has been “broadened.” In a subsequent comment, she stated that her original
conception of college writing centered around solid grammar and good vocabulary, essentially a grasp of basic literacy skills that allows a writer to report information clearly and accurately. However, her revised conception had less to do with technical features and more to do with rhetorical purpose and cognitive processes associated with writing, such as critical thinking and analysis. Regarding this more expansive understanding of college writing, Teresa said,

I feel like now it includes more of using different types of thinking when you’re writing, like before I was just very these are the facts I will use them, but now I’m like instructors here like encourage you to be creative and take a risk and think outside the box and definitely analyze more.

In these comments, Teresa contrasts writing as merely a matter of conveying “facts” with writing as inquiry—“using different types of thinking when you’re writing.” The quality and nature of the thinking reflected in and developed through her writing had become more central to Teresa’s conception of college writing.

Another significant detail from this statement is how Teresa describes this kind of analytical writing as “creative” and “outside the box.” This description suggests a conceptual shift away from writing as a detached, “objective” exercise toward writing as an engaged and “creative” act that involves the thoughts and perspectives of the writer as a person in the world. In our first interview, when describing her high school writing, she discussed two primary categories of writing: what she referred to as more “creative” or “unique” writing (less common) and more “standard” or “cookie cutter” writing. In fact, the two texts she shared with me from high school reflected these two categories. The first piece, written in her twelfth grade English class, was her college application essay on her battle with chronic pain and how this difficulty has shaped her as a person. She shared what her English teacher emphasized with this essay:
“This is one where he wanted us to be very individualistic and very creative, and...he wanted it to all stand out unique. He did not want them to be standard.” She added that this essay was supposed to be “representative of you.”

In contrast to this “individualistic” essay, she also shared with me a literary analysis on the novel *The Stranger* by Albert Camus written in the same class: “When we did essays like the one on *The Stranger*, where it was looking at a book, those I feel like were just so narrow in what they wanted, like they all pretty much were cookie cutter essays.” She went on to say how the five paragraph format was emphasized with these essays, in part, because “the prompts are so limited in what they wanted you to discuss that there’s really no way to not use that very standard format.” These standard essays, in Teresa’s estimation, tended to limit individuality and creativity: she described how when writing this literary analysis all the students in her class were “led to the same conclusions.” These somewhat discrete categories of creative versus more standardized writing informed Teresa’s conceptions of writing as a beginning college writer, and her reconceptualization of writing, a process well-underway by the time she arrived in FYC, involved a redefining of these categories.

Given this context, Teresa’s statement that college writing invites more creativity, analysis, and outside-the-box thinking emerges as significant. The majority of Teresa’s writing in her first semester, the writing experiences which form the basis of these comments about college writing, were not personal narratives, fictional prose, or other genres often labeled “creative,” but rather were analytical pieces on primary historical texts and other readings in her history classes. She described how this writing challenged her understanding of what it means to write about history. Initially, her writing tended to summarize the readings, but after getting feedback from her instructor, she came to see that a more critical and analytical stance was encouraged. This
conceptual shift not only pertained to her writing but also to her understanding of the discipline of history itself. She described how her experiences last semester challenged and broadened her sense of American history: “I feel like in high schools they teach you one narrative of American history, and in college they’re like look at all these other things that you never considered before. And I’m like woah [laughs] that’s different.”

Like Sophia’s reconceptualization of the categories of creative and academic writing, Teresa’s transition evidenced similar conceptual adjustments. In her discussion of the writing samples she shared from high school, it was clear that creative and standard writing were separate categories, and their distinction centered around the degree to which the writer could assert an individual voice and perspective. One of Teresa’s comments about her college application essay illustrated this point: “what we wrote was really what we wanted to say.”

Although she had not written any pieces similar to her college application essay in her first semester at the university, she had, nonetheless, come to see college writing as having more in common with that essay than her literary analysis on *The Stranger*. In her own words, with writing in college, "there's so much more of a push to be an individual."

She experienced this “push” primarily in her college instructors’ resistance to the formulaic writing that had characterized much of her high school writing, epitomized in essays like *The Stranger* analysis, and their encouragement of more analytical writing that, according to Teresa, required “reading between the lines.” While the “standard” essays from her high school days encouraged uniformity and she had anticipated more of the same in college, she found that college writing is about being able to "infuse...your own thoughts into it to add to it something that’s not just repeating what’s already out there." Teresa was beginning to see college writing in ways that reconfigured her understanding of how her own subjectivity and perspective factor into
her writing, and these new conceptions mediated her perceptions of both past and present writing experiences.

Alex’s Transition

Across their transition, Alex also experienced these three reconceptualizations of writing. FYC was the site of these conceptual adjustments, and it was specifically their experience writing an analytical paper that prompted these shifts. Alex had entered FYC with a good deal of confidence in themselves as a writer and in their understanding of what college writing requires. Alex had felt that their A.P. English classes, in particular, had prepared them well for college writing. In our first interview, they said, “I feel really prepared for [FYC], like overprepared kind of…I’m just lucky enough to be able to go to a school where they really prepare you for writing and language.” During our first two interviews, Alex expressed their feeling that FYC was “redundant” for them: they had already gained these skills in high school, and now they were having to rehash it all again in college. Alex shared how they had done peer review in the class, and they said this experience showed them why FYC was a requirement: “I noticed like a lot of people need to be in a writing class.” They went on to describe why they think students may need the class, and their response illustrates Alex’s initial conception of what constitutes college writing:

There was some really bad writing, and I feel bad for saying that, but just if you look at it, it looks like it’s written by a 10-year-old because it’s one long paragraph, so many spelling mistakes, grammar mistakes, punctuation mistakes. It doesn’t sound, it doesn’t look coherent…I applaud them for the effort and like what they were writing about…It’s just that I understand that they need to go back to the basics of writing, and that’s why [FYC] is in place.
Alex conceptualized college writing as writing that demonstrates an understanding of “the basics,” which, to their mind, meant writing that looks and sounds “coherent” and that avoids “mistakes.” Given this guiding conception, it is understandable why Alex felt that FYC was superfluous and why they initially responded with a practically automatic “yes” when asked if they feel like a college writer. Alex already had the “basics,” and if the intent of FYC, as Alex seemed to assume, is to remediate the skills of those who do not yet meet this basic college writing benchmark, then it is no wonder that they saw the course as meaningless to them.

By our third interview, however, Alex’s thoughts about college writing had drastically changed. This change was brought on by their struggle with the analytical paper required in FYC. This experience prompted them to reconsider their initial understanding of college writing. When I asked them what it means to be a college writer, they replied,

Oh god, college writing is hard. I feel like more now it’s about putting yourself into a conversation about something scholarly. It’s less of, I feel like now it’s less of just writing about something that you’re looking up. It’s more like incorporating what you know into that conversation and maybe developing it even more and forming your own opinions about it. It’s less cut and dry now. It’s more gray and like how you’re interpreting it now.

Through this analytical writing assignment, Alex had come to see how college writing is more about inquiry (i.e., “putting yourself into a conversation about something scholarly…and maybe developing it even more and forming your own opinions about it”) and less about simply reporting information (i.e., “just writing about something that you’re looking up”). Their response also suggests a more social, rhetorical conception of writing, the idea that writing
participates in a “conversation.” That is, one is writing for an audience (i.e., others involved in the “conversation”) and a purpose (i.e., “developing [the conversation] even more”).

In addition to these conceptual shifts, this assignment also challenged Alex’s understanding of how their voice as the writer figures into academic writing. Alex shared that their FYC instructor found their paper “too distant and cold” and said it did not feature their voice enough. Alex expressed confusion about this feedback, however, as they were not accustomed to bringing themselves into their writing, so to speak, unless it was an “opinion-based” piece. They put it this way: “[In high school] it was mainly just like here’s something for you to read, analyze it, relate it to something else maybe, but you shouldn’t use ‘I.’ You shouldn’t use your own opinions.” For Alex, this conception of writing from high school came into conflict with their FYC instructor’s conception. Alex reflected on this mismatch: “I didn’t really understand that I needed to like still be personal about it. I was more just like OK here’s the information that you need to know. I didn’t really understand that concept.” In this statement, Alex identified the source of their struggle to be conceptual—that is, they “didn’t understand” their instructor’s “concept” of academic writing. Like Sophia, Alex was accustomed to first-person pronouns being prohibited in their writing; therefore, their instructor’s feedback about their voice being “too distant and cold” in their analytical paper was confusing. Since academic writing, to Alex, was objective and divorced from their own perspective as the writer, this experience helped to initiate another conceptual shift.

Previously, Alex said they thought that college writing consisted of strong grammar and vocabulary and a clear structure, and based on these criteria, Alex felt that they were a college writer. However, after this experience in FYC, they began to see how authorial perspective figures into college writing, even with those genres that seem most detached and unbiased. They
said, “I feel like more now [college writing is] about putting yourself into a conversation about something scholarly.” This idea of incorporating oneself as the writer into the conversation was a new concept for Alex, and while this perspective presented new challenges, Alex also considered it more valuable:

… [I]t’s definitely harder now for me just because knowing that I should be relating myself to this research and then incorporating my own ideas and my own knowledge into them. It’s more difficult, but I think it’s more useful than what I, like just copying and pasting.

Alex described how previously they saw academic writing as a matter of simply reporting on what others say—“just writing about something that you’re looking up” or “just copying and pasting.” Through this experience in FYC, however, Alex had come to see research-based writing as an invitation to join a conversation and consider their contributions to it. While in previous interviews Alex had underscored how their A.P. English classes had thoroughly prepared them for college writing, in the last interview, their understanding had changed, and they said that those classes more prepared them for “sounding like a scholarly writer,” suggesting attention to more surface-level features of composition (e.g., grammar, vocabulary). Alex was developing a conception of college writing as rhetorical and inquiry-based, and this understanding was accompanied by a newfound appreciation for how challenging college writing can be (e.g., Oh god, college writing is hard”) and how their own authorial perspective factors into their writing.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the findings of this study point to the ways in which students experienced this transition as a liminal space. They experienced moments of confusion and disorientation,
navigated an ambiguous status/identity, and reconceptualized writing in sometimes subtle and other times more substantial ways. There were a variety of factors that emerged as significant across students’ transitions: their experiences with writing instruction in high school, their experiences with writing instruction in college, their writing-related identities, and their schooling contexts. These factors interacted and overlapped with each other in complex ways to affect the nature of students’ transitions and the extent to which they reconceptualized writing. When students reconceptualized writing in more striking and obvious ways, these reconceptualizations often presented themselves in three different, yet often interdependent, dimensions: a shift from form-based writing to writing based on rhetorical purpose, a shift from thinking of writing as reporting to writing as inquiry, and a reconsideration of the role of authorial perspective in writing, particularly in those seemingly “objective” forms of academic writing.

These findings suggest that students’ conceptions of writing mediate their experiences with writing and writing instruction; however, these conceptions are not set in stone but rather subject to change as students encounter new experiences and contexts. As writers traverse these transitional, liminal spaces (i.e., high school to college transition), they often find their conceptions of writing deconstructed and reformed in various ways. Their shifting perceptions of their writing experiences evidence how these conceptions are fluid and constantly being revised in response to new rhetorical situations, and these conceptual adjustments reflect how this transition involves movement through a liminal space. In the same way that writers revise their work over time, applying fresh eyes to previously written text, they also, and perhaps particularly when in transition, engage in a continual (re)vision of their understanding of past writing experiences while moving through time, acquiring new and different conceptual lenses through
which to interpret their writing lives and identities. While this process may be characteristic of all writers regardless of age or life stage, it is particularly vivid for those in a place of transition. These participants, as first-year college students, were transitioning from high school to college and, in a more general sense, from late adolescence to young adulthood. Their sense of “in-betweenness” was palpable as they described their past and present experiences, interpreting and reinterpreting the significance of what they had done with writing in the past and what they were doing in the present.

These findings have implications for our understanding of how students navigate high school to college transitions, and they also productively challenge the notion of college readiness as often conceptualized in current educational standards and standards-informed discourse. In terms of pedagogical implications, the findings offer insights relevant to both secondary and postsecondary writing instruction and specifically speak into the standards-based literacy model that is prevalent in secondary schools today. I will take up these topics, and others, in the next and final chapter.
Chapter Six: Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore how students enrolled in FYC at this university experienced the transition from writing in high school to writing in college. The aim was to investigate how students’ perceptions of previous school-based writing impacted their transitions and shaped their conceptions of writing and what it means to be a “college writer” and how these conceptions of writing informed the ways in which they navigated this transition. This study also considered the extent to which writing instruction in FYC, and other courses in which students were enrolled, affected students’ conceptions of writing and college writing.

Three key findings emerged in response to my research questions. These findings included the following: (1) to varying degrees, students tended to experience this transition as a liminal space, in that they navigated destabilizing situations as writers, ambiguous identities, and reconceptualizations of writing; (2) three sets of factors (i.e., prior and current writing instruction, writerly identities, and schooling contexts) mediated students’ transitions in diverse ways and impacted the degree to which they reconceptualized writing; and (3) when it emerged as a prominent feature of their transition, these reconceptualizations of writing generally involved a shift from form-based writing to writing based on rhetorical purpose, a shift from thinking of writing as reporting to writing as inquiry, and a reconsideration of the author’s point of view in various genres.

This study’s findings have implications for how we understand college writing readiness and writing development across high school to college transitions. They also shed light on the various factors that influence the nature of these transitions and the kinds of instructional approaches and pedagogies that support writing development. I will begin by discussing some of these implications, considering the contributions of this study within the context of the research literature. This portion of the chapter will be organized based on the various sub-topics that relate
to the study’s findings. Then I will conclude by discussing pedagogical implications for writing instruction at both the secondary and postsecondary level along with future directions for research.

**College Readiness and Skills-Based Discourses on Writing**

An important context for understanding these students’ transitions is the college and career readiness agenda that has dominated public schooling in recent years and the skills-based discourse on writing (Ivanič, 2004) that these contexts have tended to foster. College readiness discourse is predicated on the notion that acquiring certain basic literacy skills will ensure college preparedness (Conley, 2007), an underlying premise that this study disrupts. A key driver of this discourse and the most recent wave of educational reforms has been the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the various CCSS-aligned assessments designed to measure mastery of those standards. Unlike previous reform movements, such as No Child Left Behind with its far greater emphasis on reading, the CCSS, spurred on by incentives put forth by the Obama administration (i.e., The Race to the Top Initiative), have elevated the status of writing, making it as an essential aspect of college readiness both within English Language Arts and across the content areas (Kelly-Riley, 2017; Shanahan, 2015; Sundeen, 2015; Applebee, 2013). Since their advent, however, these standards have been the subject of debate, and scholars from diverse fields, have raised concerns about standardization in literacy teaching and learning, particularly when it comes to the constraining effects of standards-based assessments on instruction (Kelly-Riley, 2017; Adler-Kassner, 2014; Botzakis, Burns, & Hall, 2014; Applebee, 2013). Botzakis, Burns, and Hall (2014), for instance, have argued that the CCSS present literacy as a set of basic skills that remains essentially the same regardless of context. They liken this conception of literacy to the autonomous model articulated by Brian Street (1984), a model that neglects
sociocultural conceptions of literacy in favor of “a one-size-fits-all” view of literacy
development (Botzakis et al., 2014, p. 223). Such a model detaches literacy-related skills and
behaviors from the contexts that give them meaning.

More specifically, others have raised concerns about how the CCSS conceptualize
writing and writing development and how these conceptualizations may impact writing
for instance, has argued that the standards lack a rich framework for writing development and lay
out, instead, arbitrary and trivial progressions across grade levels. He adds that by emphasizing
particular “features of language use, organization, and development” in student writing, the
CCSS may promote “the formulaic and perfunctory rather than supporting the development of a
flexible array of strategies for addressing a wide variety of specific audiences and purposes”
(Applebee, 2013, p. 29). To be fair, the CCSS do make reference to concepts such as audience
and purpose; however, specific text types (e.g., argumentative, informative) and their constituent
features dominate the standards (CCSS, 2010), and given our understanding of how testing can
constrain literacy teaching and learning (Hillocks, 2002; Ravitch, 2010; Learned et al., 2020),
without intentional inclusion of more authentic audiences and purposes, CCSS-based writing
instruction may place inordinate emphasis on the production of these narrowly-defined text types
commonly required on high-stakes writing assessments. Such instruction would mean that
students mainly write for an “audience” of teacher-examiners (Applebee, 1981; Applebee &
Langer, 2011) and for the “purpose” of earning a grade, a decontextualized school exercise that
has little to do with readiness for diverse writing contexts beyond K-12 education.

Many students in this study brought a formulaic conception of writing with them from
their high school instruction, and the context of high-stakes literacy testing seemed inextricably
linked to this decontextualized, form-based view of writing. As 2019 high school graduates, the participants in this study were heirs of almost a decade of CCSS-based literacy learning, attending middle and high school during the height of these reforms in a state that tightly tethered curriculum, instruction, and assessment to these standards. As such, standards-based education with its college readiness agenda was a powerful context within which they experienced their secondary literacy education and one that, for these students, tended to promote formulaic and reductive conceptions of writing. It was this conception, more so than the absence of any particular skill set, that contributed to transition struggles and difficulty.

If possessing basic literacy skills, measured through grades and test scores, is the primary factor needed to ensure a smooth college writing transition, then there is no way to account for the struggles and obstacles that these students, at times, navigated across their transitions. For, according to the conventional definitions, these students were “more-than” college ready: over half were enrolled in the selective Honors College at this university; most described academic performance histories that involved A.P., Honors, and dual-enrollment courses; and the writing that they shared as part of the study, on the whole, reflected students who have a strong grasp of the basics of written composition. Additionally, all nine participants successfully completed FYC despite the unprecedented disruption to their learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The traditional definition of college readiness involves simply avoiding remedial placement and succeeding in credit-bearing introductory college courses (ACT, 2019; Complete College America, 2012; Conley, 2007). Based on this definition and given the uniquely challenging circumstances surrounding these students’ first year of college, they handily met the benchmark.
College Readiness and Sociocultural Conceptions of Literacy

There was much more at play in these students’ transitions, however, than their mastery of basic literacy skills, and these conventional measures of college readiness do little to explain the nature and complexity of their transitions. There is a rich tradition of research from diverse scholarly fields that has long-resisted reductive notions of literacy as a matter of mastering discrete skills, insisting, instead, on the sociocultural dimensions of literacy and literacy development. Such research argues that literacy, far from unitary and stable, manifests differently depending on context, and literacy, as a social practice, is situated within and constituted through social interactions and use of cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Hull & Moje, 2012). In contrast to the basic skills discourse on writing development, sociocultural conceptions of writing emphasize the situated and contingent nature of discourse norms (Heath, 1983; Roozen, 2015b) and problematize notions of college readiness as a set of basic skills that one demonstrates regardless of context. Research on secondary and postsecondary students’ experiences with school-based reading and writing reveals that literacy difficulties and obstacles often have little to do with “basic skills” deficits and much more to do with navigating diverse literacy contexts (McCarthy, 1987; Walvoord & McCarthy, 1990; Moje, 2015). Adolescent literacy scholars, for instance, have documented the fact that secondary students can struggle as they move through grade levels due to encountering, not only more complex texts, but also a wider range of texts across their content area classes (Lee & Spratley, 2010; Carnegie Council Report, 2010). The inoculation approach—that is, the idea that rigorous literacy instruction in the early grades will immune young people to struggle during the adolescent years—simply fails to recognize the source of such difficulty (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).
Similarly, at the postsecondary level, students, who by conventional measures are deemed “college-ready,” still can encounter difficulty when confronted with diverse literacy demands both within general education and upper-level disciplinary coursework (Carroll, 2002; Sommers, 2008), demonstrating that writing is not a skill that can be mastered once-and-for-all and neatly applied across contexts. This reality also confounds any attempt to use FYC to “remediate” basic literacy skills and immune students to later struggle as they move into courses for their majors (Bergmann & Zepernick, 2007). In fact, some scholars have noted that it is through these struggles, as students take on new and more complex roles than they may feel ready to assume as writers, that their skills actually develop (Carroll, 2002). The findings of this study affirm the contextual nature of writing and resist the notion that amassing certain basic skills will ensure a smooth writing transition. They also suggest that students can possess the literacy skills necessary to perform well on high-stakes testing or to earn high grades, yet when undergirded by a reductive view of writing, these skills, in and of themselves, do not help students navigate writing tasks and contexts structured around fundamentally different conceptions about writing. In fact, this study suggests that students’ underlying, and often subconscious, beliefs about writing, rooted in their prior experiences and various writing contexts, have a greater influence over the nature of their writing transitions than the degree to which they possess a particular literacy-related skill set purportedly linked to college success.

**Alternative Frameworks for College Writing Readiness**

Over the past decade, writing studies experts have sought to reclaim the narrative concerning the types of writing experiences and knowledge that prepare students for college (Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing [FSPW], 2011; Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015; Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2014). In an effort to better define what
constitutes college writing readiness, the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Writing Project (NWP) put forth a framework describing eight habits of mind in addition to several types of writing-related skills and experiences “that are critical for college success” (FSPW, 2011, p. 1). These writing skills include things such as rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, and knowledge of conventions, and the habits of mind include certain postures toward learning—curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition (FSPW, 2011). The findings of this study, however, somewhat complicate these notions of college writing readiness, particularly concerning the habits of mind associated with success. Students in this study did tend to exhibit more growth as writers when they demonstrated these specified qualities; however, the findings suggest that these traits were contextual and subject to change depending on other factors. Students sometimes demonstrated a given quality (e.g., openness, engagement) as writers in one context yet not in another. Ben, for instance, was a highly engaged creative writer, spending copious amounts of time on his work in a college fiction writing class, but when it came to traditional academic writing, such as the writing he did in FYC, he was not as motivated and seemed more inclined to simply “get the job done.” Other participants did not initially demonstrate a particular “habit of mind,” but after an incident in which their prior knowledge or sense of themselves as writers was disrupted and destabilized, they did come to embody that trait. For example, Alex did not initially seem receptive to the new conceptions of writing they were encountering in FYC, but after their experience with an analytical writing assignment, they adopted a much more open and flexible stance.

In addition to contextual factors, writerly identity also played an important role in the degree to which students demonstrated these “habits of mind.” To the extent that students saw
writing, and specifically the types of writing most common in their schooling, as relevant to their
lives, interests, and future goals, they also were more prone to embody these “habits of mind”
within that particular writing context. For example, Matt was not a particularly engaged writer
when in high school; in college, however, he invested much more into his writing, in part,
because he thought that academic, research-based writing would help him achieve his goals (e.g.,
going to graduate school). Students’ identities as writers and the contexts that give those
identities meaning and purpose cannot be left out of the conversation about college writing
readiness and proficiency. The “habits of mind,” as they are presented in the FSPW, suggest that
these traits or postures toward learning manifest to the same degree regardless of context. Others
have critiqued the FSPW for this lack of regard for sociocultural context (Duncheon & Tierney,
2014), and this study also suggests that the framework may leave out as much as it includes
concerning what makes for success as a college writer.

Another effort on the part of writing studies experts to resist reductive thinking about
college writing readiness has emerged in the work known as “threshold concepts” of writing
studies, concepts considered essential to the teaching and practice of writing (Adler-Kassner &
Wardle, 2015; Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2020). As these scholars state, the exigence for this
work, in part, stems from the “push to standardize ideas about what ‘good writing’ means,
extending from what we think of as the college and career readiness agenda” (Adler-Kassner &
Wardle, 2015, p. 5). These threshold concepts represent an alternative way of conceptualizing
success in postsecondary writing, insisting on the often messy, nonlinear nature of learning and
resisting the tendency of outcomes-oriented statements to locate learning at the end of important
experiences as opposed to at all points along a winding path (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015).
Some have argued that these concepts, concepts such as “writing is a social and rhetorical
activity,” could serve as the “declarative content” for FYC (Downs & Robertson, 2015, p. 106), and this pedagogical approach, what has also been referred to as “writing about writing” (Wardle, 2013; Downs & Wardle, 2007), may encourage students to reconceptualize writing in productive ways and offer them a framework for thinking about writing that facilitates transfer of that understanding into other writing contexts.

This study’s findings concerning the liminal nature of this writing transition relate to the work surrounding threshold concepts. Of course the very metaphor of a “threshold” suggests an in-between, liminal space that is neither here nor there, neither this nor that, and the concepts themselves echo the conceptual shifts that many students experienced first-hand in this study. None of the students in this study, however, experienced a “writing about writing” approach to FYC; rather, the subject matter that they took up in their FYC writing was wide-ranging and generally a function of their interests and issues relevant to their lives. While using writing to explore the act of writing itself was not the explicit focus of the course, many students, to varying degrees, did reconceptualize writing in some of the ways that these threshold concepts depict and that “writing about writing” pedagogies seek to elicit more overtly. Students in this study also experienced the kinds of destabilizing events that scholars associated with this movement say often lead to these conceptual shifts. As Downs and Robertson (2015) state,

Only with a critical mass of dissonance-inducing learning and experience will there come the ‘aha!’ moment that constitutes crossing the threshold into the new concept. A critical incident is often the impetus for learning, especially when students perceive failure at something as an opportunity for learning… (p. 116).

This study’s findings detailed such “dissonance-inducing” experiences in FYC and other courses; in some instances, these experiences led to paradigm shifts while in other instances they
did not. This study found, however, that other factors beyond the instructional context of FYC had a strong bearing on the degree to which students reconsidered prior knowledge about writing and began to develop new frameworks through which to think about and practice writing across this transition. For some, these other factors, such as writing-related identities and schooling contexts, seemed to have a greater influence over their conceptions of writing than the writing instruction itself.

High School to College Transitions and Writing Development

The study also has implications for how writing development across high school to college transitions is understood. Writing studies research has suggested that a flexible posture, one that is willing to make adjustments and even deconstruct past knowledge to be more responsive to new contexts, may better support students’ development as beginning college writers (Sommers & Saltz, 2004; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011), and longitudinal studies of college writers in particular have shown that writing development is far from a linear path (Haswell, 1991; Sternglass, 1997; Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Beaufort, 2007). Students in this study often found prior knowledge about writing disrupted across this transition and their identities as writers destabilized as they traversed this liminal space. Their willingness to enter into this space of deconstruction, the realm of not-knowing, paradoxically positioned them, however, to grow and develop as writers. This openness often took the form of adopting a “novice” status (Sommers & Saltz, 2004), a posture oriented toward learning and growth that resisted the false binary of ready/not ready. Such growth, however, did not conform to the old adage—one step forward, two steps back—as this notion, despite its acknowledgment of setbacks and incremental progress, still implies linearity, a singular path or trajectory with a predetermined destination. These students’ experiences did not proceed across a straight line; rather, they were curving and
divergent. That is, there was no universal developmental narrative able to explain these students’ transitions; their experiences were diverse and varied, incongruent with the notion of a linear trajectory for writing development. Even the narratives that students themselves constructed surrounding their transitions (e.g., A.P. English prepared me for FYC), narratives that helped them understand and navigate their development as writers, were anything but fixed and stable. Rather, they were constantly shifting and evolving as students encountered new writing experiences and contexts.

The writing experiences and contexts that tended to promote writing development for these students were those that allowed for more agency, originality, and critical thought. In their high school contexts, students often looked back favorably at such writing assignments and considered them more significant than those that required more formulaic, monotonous, or uniform writing. This kind of writing was often labeled as more “creative” by students, and sometimes took the form of fiction or poetry writing or, in some cases, speech writing in which students had a good deal of freedom in terms of topics and issues they could explore. Even more traditional academic genres such as literary analysis and various kinds of research-based writing were occasionally viewed in this light by students. English Language Arts was the primary context for this more agentive and “creative” writing, and while, for most students, such writing opportunities were more the exception than the rule, they stood out in students’ memories as more meaningful for their development. As first-year college writers, students also seemed to value and demonstrate more growth through writing opportunities in which they had this kind of personal investment and were able to bring their own voices and thoughts to the table in original ways, and many experienced FYC as this kind of writing context.
Studies on writers’ development at the secondary and postsecondary levels have shown that students are more engaged and inclined to grow when their writing contexts and tasks invite this kind of individual expression and investment (Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Jeffrey & Wilcox, 2014; Jeffrey & Wilcox, 2018), yet such opportunities need not be relegated to the occasional “creative” writing assignment sprinkled into the curriculum. Research has shown that students can experience disciplinary literacy and learning contexts as engaging and relevant to their lives when afforded the opportunity to construct knowledge and step into disciplinary identities (e.g., historian, biologist) (Moje, 2015; Learned, 2018a; Learned, 2018b). Herrington and Curtis (2000) found that their case study participants developed as writers in college, in part, through finding “sponsoring discourse communities” that enabled “the linking of private with academic interests” (p. 355). Their development involved finding disciplines and disciplinary conversations that allowed for “reconciling personal with academic writing” (Herrington & Curtis, 2000, p. 356). Across this transition, these students also saw value in these kinds of writing opportunities, and the findings of this study suggest that such opportunities prompted development in terms of conceptual shifts that afforded students new ways of understanding writing and how their own subjectivities figure into their writing. Although these conceptual shifts often made students’ transitions bumpier in comparison with those who sailed through without as much turbulence, researchers have noted that a “smooth transition” may not be synonymous with development and growth (Swofford, 2019; Sommers, 2008). As the field of writing studies continues to engage with the question of how writers develop over time (Bazerman et al., 2018; Gere, 2019), the multi-dimensional nature of writing development and the various contexts that promote such growth must remain at the center of the conversation.
Writing Instruction across High School to College Transitions

As students navigated this transition, rather than simply transferring basic skills acquired in high school to college, they made conceptual adjustments to their understanding of the purpose and practice of writing, and multiple factors, not just cognitive-based ones measured through grades and testing, contributed to the nature of these transitions and reconceptualizations. An important factor that emerged was the writing instruction to which students were exposed. Writing studies research has looked at different features of the instructional contexts that inform these transitions. Hannah and Saidy (2014), for instance, have considered how the language of writing instruction can support or hinder students’ transitions, specifically pointing to the ways in which college writing instruction, when relying heavily on unfamiliar language, may erect boundaries that make it more difficult for students to make connections between their prior knowledge and current experiences. Crank (2012) has made a similar assertion, contending that beginning college students’ understanding of certain writing-related terms—specifically, genre, voice, and argument—may not coincide with how their college instructors use and conceptualize those same terms, and such differences can lead to transition difficulties.

This study also found that students’ conceptions of writing mediated their transitions, and when there was a mismatch between their conceptions and those of their instructors, students tended to experience struggle. This struggle was often navigated in one of two ways: students either attributed their struggle to the unique demands of that particular teacher and carried on to the best of their ability, an approach reminiscent of McCarthy’s (1987) Dave, or they reconceptualized their writing tasks by making adjustments in light of new rhetorical or disciplinary contexts. Studies of college writers have suggested that students can initially see
differences in writing expectations as solely a function of different instructors’ preferences; as they develop over the college years, however, they can come to see these “idiosyncrasies” as actually reflective of the conventions and discursive moves associated with distinct fields and disciplines (Carroll, 2002). While this study did not follow students for long enough to document this process, Teresa, a history major who was on an accelerated college timeline, was gaining a sense of how historians analyze documents and use writing to build knowledge in their field. It is highly likely that other students would also demonstrate this kind of growth had the study followed their experiences for multiple semesters.

More generally speaking, other scholars have suggested that secondary and postsecondary writing instruction are characterized by different sets of constraints, demands, and expectations that contribute to places of disconnect for students across this transition (Denecker, 2013; Crank, 2012; Foster & Russell, 2002), and students in this study certainly experienced some of these differences. The schooling and instructional contexts within which students were writing changed in some dramatic ways as students moved from writing in high school to writing in college. For example, few students described substantive writing opportunities outside of English classes in high school, and much of the writing in English was within the context of response to literature. While some study participants described writing in history classes, these experiences tended to primarily involve summary of material or, in some cases, DBQ-style essays. Virtually no students (except Mira) made mention of writing in science and math classes. As first-year college students, however, these students experienced writing in FYC, a course more connected to the field of rhetoric and composition than that of literary studies, and writing in other disciplines, such as history for Teresa and anthropology for Sophia. Research has long shown that secondary school students do not write frequently or substantively across the
curriculum (Applebee, 1981; Kiuhara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009; Applebee & Langer, 2011; Jeffrey & Wilcox, 2014), and although far from a new phenomenon, this persistent dearth of extended composition beyond English Language Arts is important to note within the context of the CCSS. Many scholars, with the advent of the CCSS, had expressed hope that writing would become a more common practice given the standards’ emphasis on literacy across the content areas (Applebee, 2013; Shanahan, 2015; Crank, 2012). For these students, at least, English Language Arts remained the main context for their writing, and some (e.g., Teresa) were surprised by the amount of writing they did in other disciplines as college students. Addison and McGee (2010) have discussed this emphasis on literary analysis at the secondary level and advocated for a broadening of English Language Arts curriculum that might better prepare students for college writing and beyond: “Here we imagine an interdisciplinary curriculum in high school and college English departments that does not displace literary studies but rather re-establishes the importance of English studies broadly conceived at all levels and within all disciplines” (p. 170). Although Addison and McGee (2010) conducted their research prior to widespread implementation of the CCSS with its emphasis on reading and responding to informational text across the content areas, if these students’ accounts of their high school instruction reflect broader trends, literary analysis may still be a dominant genre in which high school students compose and writing opportunities within other genres or disciplinary contexts may be quite limited.

**Pedagogical Implications**

Although I alluded to the pedagogical implications of this study in the preceding sections, this section will explore these implications in greater detail. The findings of this study suggest that, when student writing at the secondary level primarily occurs within the context of English
Language Arts, students may not be gaining the kinds of experiences with disciplinary writing that will support them as college writers. Many of the students in this study had limited experience with writing in other disciplines and, in some cases, struggled to envision how writing would figure into their educational and life pursuits. Disciplinary literacy, as a pedagogical framework, emphasizes the literacy practices distinct to each discipline and invites secondary students into these disciplinary ways of reading, writing, and thinking in developmentally-appropriate ways (Moje, 2015; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). The findings of this study represent the need for disciplinary literacy across the content areas of secondary school. Such instruction would better prepare students for college writing in the sense that it would cultivate an understanding of writing as a means of knowledge construction in every discipline, not just within English studies. It would also enable young people to take up disciplinary identities in their writing, and research has shown that literacy instruction that positions students as doers of the work of a discipline, rather than passive receivers, supports deeper engagement and learning (Learned, 2018a; Learned, 2018b). Although the CCSS have elevated writing to a higher status as a way to support learning across the curriculum, if these students’ experiences are any indication, this vision may not have trickled down into actual content area instruction. The instructional approaches associated with disciplinary literacy offer a powerful way to realize this vision and to apprentice young people into the ways of thinking and building knowledge represented within the disciplines (Rainey et al., 2017; Rainey & Moje, 2012).

The need for writing instruction at the high school level that invites students into more agentive and motivating rhetorical contexts is another implication of this study. Research suggests that rhetorical contexts that offer students a greater degree of autonomy and agency are
boons to writing development (Jeffrey & Wilcox, 2014; Jeffrey & Wilcox, 2018), and writing within the secondary school has traditionally relied heavily on tasks done solely for the “teacher-as-examiner,” an inherently inauthentic writing context (Applebee, 1981; Applebee & Langer, 2011). For the students in this study, the decontextualized writing assignments done solely for the teacher-examiner audience were all too common in their high school writing experiences. When given a more authentic audience and context for writing, however, students found more value and purpose in their writing. Some examples of such contexts, for these students, included speeches written for and delivered to an audience of classmates and assignments that mimicked “real-world” genres, such as Sadie’s twelfth grade English assignment to “pretend you’re a critic” and write a review of something, such as a movie, TV series, or restaurant. These kinds of authentic writing contexts, when coupled with writing instruction designed to foster an understanding of writing as a rhetorical and situated activity, can support writing development. Given a compelling purpose and audience for their texts, students can explore different genres, including the text types (i.e., argumentative, informative, narrative) specified in the CCSS, yet they can do so not as a decontextualized school exercise (e.g., write an argumentative essay) but as an activity situated in a more engaging and motivating rhetorical context.

The findings of this study also serve as a call to secondary educators to critically consider the effects of writing instruction primarily geared toward preparation for high-stakes testing on students. Such testing is practically a non-negotiable in schools today, and test scores exert real, felt consequences for students, teachers, and schools. To pretend otherwise is naive and perhaps even offensive to educators who work hard to prepare students for the high-stakes assessments that will impact their educational trajectories in powerful ways. Within the context of the current system, neglecting to prepare students for such testing does them a disservice. We must also ask,
however, how educators can balance these demands with a broader commitment to literacy instruction that fosters students’ growth as writers and human beings. The narrowing, constraining effects of high-stakes testing on literacy teaching and learning have been well-documented (Hillocks, 2002; Ravitch, 2010; Learned et al., 2020), and there is nothing to suggest that testing will diminish any time soon. The findings of this study, however, should spark conversations about the extent to which such testing and the dominance of test-preparation instruction is hindering students’ growth as writers. Although the CCSS and the testing designed to assess mastery of the standards purportedly measure college and career readiness, given this study’s findings about the dominance of formulaic writing among this cohort of students, an inordinate emphasis on writing instruction tethered to such testing may actually undermine students’ college writing preparedness rather than supporting it.

In terms of pedagogical implications for FYC, this study invites FYC instructors and writing program administrators to consider not only what they want students to glean from their instruction but also what sorts of writing contexts have informed students’ conceptions of writing and their sense of themselves as writers long before stepping foot on the college campus. Students bring with them into first-year composition tacit theories and beliefs about writing and diverse writerly identities that mediate their experiences with writing instruction in FYC. Instructors can aim to elicit reflection from students on their own writing-related beliefs and identities; such metacognitive work may help to make these tacit beliefs more visible and accessible to both students and instructors in ways that could support their writing and learning. Providing these avenues for reflection may also help instructors better bridge between students’ prior knowledge and their current work in FYC and may help students tap into the writing-related resources they bring with them into FYC. While it is understandable when FYC
instructors want to encourage students to discard written forms, such as the five-paragraph essay, that are often associated with problematic conceptions of writing, it may be beneficial, even in these instances, to invite students to see how such formulaic essay structures have utility, however limited, within particular rhetorical situations (e.g., high-stakes testing). When students are simply encouraged to abandon a particular form or format, they will likely, then, simply look for a new format to supplant it. If, instead, they are offered a new conceptual lens for viewing past and present writing experiences, a lens that many students in this study began to develop in FYC, they will make strides toward reconceptualizing writing, not as mindless replication of mechanical forms and rules, but as a means of responding to rhetorical situations with purpose and agency.

The findings of this study also have pedagogical implications in relation to the recent work in composition studies surrounding threshold concepts. For these students, FYC instruction encouraged conceptual shifts reflected in these so-called “threshold concepts,” and to a certain degree, these conceptions of writing did serve as the “declarative content” (Downs & Robertson, 2015, p. 106) of participants’ instruction in FYC: they were reflected in many of the class artifacts I collected, in some of the classes I observed, and in students’ interview comments. Students were not, however, “writing about writing” in the way that some scholars have called for in FYC (Wardle, 2007). Instead, they wrote on various topics, ranging from strategies to cope with grief to the role of team sports in the social development of children and youth. Their writing, in many cases, took up problems or issues that impacted their lives, and their investment in these topics may have affected the degree to which they reconceptualized writing while in the course. The findings of this study suggest that, when students have some freedom to write in ways that feel important to their lives and identities, they often develop more as writers and
reconceptualize writing in productive ways. Based on this study, therefore, students need not be confined to writing about writing (e.g., developing their own theories of writing; doing original research projects related to writing studies) in order to come to see writing through a more rhetorical and inquiry-based lens. Students can grapple with these “threshold concepts” of writing studies and experience the kinds of “dissonance-inducing” moments (Downs and Robertson, 2015, p. 116) that prompt conceptual adjustments while writing about many different things. In some cases, it could even be counter-productive to limit students to writing and research projects related to the field of writing studies as some students may not find these topics compelling and, as a result, somewhat disengage. Overall, this study suggests that the instructional conditions that support interaction with threshold concepts include course learning goals, and activities aligned with those goals, that are linked to writing studies theory and research; open-ended writing prompts/assignments that offer considerable latitude to students in designing their research and writing projects; and an environment that offers timely resources and supports (e.g., teacher feedback, peer review) to help students navigate moments of struggle and disorientation.

In terms of pedagogical implications related to writing instruction in other courses, this study underscores the need for faculty across the curriculum to make the discourse conventions of their respective fields more transparent for students, to help students understand that certain writing requirements are not simply a function of instructor preference, nor are they a static set of “rules” for that discipline as a whole. Rather, these conventions reflect the epistemological beliefs and stances of a given discipline, and such ways of knowing and knowledge-building are represented in the texts that disciplinarians use to communicate with each other and to get work done in their fields. Positioning students as apprentices, those who are “trying on,” as it were,
disciplinary identities (e.g., anthropologist, literary critic) and disciplinary lenses, the perspectives through which expert members of a discourse community understand and interpret reality, makes for writing instruction that is inherently more inquiry-oriented. Such instruction also helps to demystify for students writing standards that, to them, can feel arbitrary and capricious, based more on the whims of a given instructor. While my data collection instruments did not allow for anything like a thorough examination of the instructional contexts for writing that students were experiencing beyond FYC, students’ descriptions of these experiences, such as Sadie’s confusion surrounding how to write in her Classics of Western Literature class or Sophia’s confusion when asked to use first person in a research paper for anthropology, suggest that they would have benefited from more direct instruction or conversation surrounding discourse norms, authorial perspective or stance, and knowledge-building practices within the various disciplines they encountered during their first year. Writing studies research has long called for this kind of explicit writing instruction within the disciplines (McCarthy, 1987; Chiseri-Strater, 1991; Beaufort, 2007; Lerner & Poe, 2014), and this study echoes that call.

**Directions for Future Research**

The findings of this study provide various avenues for future research on how students experience this transition and how they develop as writers in secondary and postsecondary contexts. Further investigation into the nature of students’ transitions from writing in high school to writing in college might consider the extent to which students in different instructional and institutional contexts experience this transition as a liminal space characterized by conceptual disruptions and adjustments. The postsecondary institution at which this study was conducted was a public research university, and the first-year writing program was greatly informed by writing studies theory and research. Students in other institutional settings (e.g., two-year
college; public regional college; private liberal arts college) with differently configured writing requirements, such as WAC/WID programs instead of first-year composition, or with different guiding pedagogies for writing instruction would likely have somewhat different transition experiences. Future studies might consider how students from varied postsecondary contexts experience this transition and what factors inform the nature of their transitions. Another direction for research related to the postsecondary level would be to follow students into subsequent semesters of their college education after FYC, exploring the extent to which these reconceptualizations of writing carry over into future writing contexts, a question that overlaps with those posed by researchers who explore transfer (Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014). It may also be that students who demonstrated only marginal conceptual adjustments in FYC would have occasion to reconceptualize writing more substantively in subsequent semesters after having more “dissonance-inducing” (Downs & Robertson, 2015) experiences and perhaps ones within their disciplines. Pursuit of any such questions would contribute to our understanding how this liminal experience unfolds for students and what it means for their writing lives and identities.

Further research might also consider the extent to which disciplinary literacy instruction at the secondary level better prepares students for this transition and to what extent such instruction impacts the nature of their transitions and their conceptions of writing. Such research might explore the instructional contexts of students’ high school writing experiences more intentionally as opposed to relying on retrospective accounts like this study does. Other avenues for research at the secondary level might include further investigation into particular schooling contexts identified in this study as significant factors in mediating students’ transitions (e.g., high-stakes testing or tracking). Gaining a better understanding of how students experience these
contexts as writers and the ways in which they factor into their transitions is important given their ubiquity in schools and their ways of positioning students and impacting their writing-related identities.

Lastly, these findings suggest the need to attend more closely to the conceptions of writing that are being fostered in our schools and classrooms at all levels. Yagelski (2011) has suggested that mainstream writing instruction tends to focus primarily on textual form, with little attention to rhetorical context or content: “writing is primarily a rule-governed activity in which ‘content’ is presented in a sanctioned form according to specific conventions” (p. 23). When writing is reduced to a matter of producing clear and correct prose that conforms to certain formal features, students are deprived of writing opportunities that would support their growth as writers and they come to see writing as little more than a basic skill rather than an ever-evolving lifelong practice. This study suggests the need for more research into how students experience writing instruction, particularly at the secondary level. Research that provides an avenue for depicting students’ perspectives and their conceptions of writing, especially in schooling contexts strongly affected by standards-based literacy instruction, could greatly inform educational policy and practice. This kind of work would offer something that mainstream assessment data is not providing. These assessments may tell us whether students meet a particular literacy learning benchmark, but they do not depict the conceptions of writing instilled in students as they experience various types of instruction, particularly that which is geared toward test preparation. This study suggests that these conceptions, more so than the meeting of particular benchmarks, have a profound effect on the way in which students navigate future writing contexts, such as their high school to college writing transitions; as such, there is a need
for research that explores students’ conceptions of writing within the instructional and schooling contexts in which they are formed.

**Final Thoughts**

Mainstream educational policy and practice, including discourses surrounding college readiness, tend to conceptualize the high school to college transition as a gap that needs to be closed or bridged (Achieve, 2014), and according to conventional wisdom, standards-based curriculum and instruction is the key to bridging that gap (CCSS, 2010). While traditional notions of college writing readiness would suggest these students had smooth transitions, presumably encountering no major gaps, the diverse experiences related in this study clearly call such superficial assessments into question. On the contrary, these students found themselves in a liminal space across this transition in which they deconstructed and reformed what they knew about writing in response to new contexts. While we could say that their high school writing instruction prepared them in certain ways for this transition and did not in other ways, given the complexity of their transition experiences, such a conclusion feels obvious and, more importantly, beside the point. Students’ assessments of their past and present writing experiences changed over the course of the semester; sometimes they saw a particular experience as preparing them for college writing, but later, they adjusted that interpretation as their conceptions of writing evolved. This fluidity in interpretation suggests that students’ very categories for and ways of understanding their writing experiences were changing. Such an experience is not one that a person can prepare for in the traditional sense of the word. If by “preparedness” we mean drawing on prior writing-related knowledge and experience in a straightforward, uncomplicated manner, then these students were not “prepared” for college writing, nor would we want them to be. They wrestled with certain aspects of their new tasks and contexts as college writers and
sometimes their footing slipped as they traversed new terrain. This study suggests that the binary of prepared/underprepared does very little to describe the phenomenon that is “becoming a college writer” and that our conceptual categories need adjusting to better account for the multidimensional nature of these writing transitions and the human experiences at the center of them. This study offers an invitation to educators and policymakers to engage in a continual (re)vision of our practices and policies in order to better support students as they navigate these transitions and seek to grow as writers within college and beyond.
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Appendix A: Research Study – First-Year College Students’ Perceptions of Writing and Writing Instruction Across High School to College Transitions

Participant Information Form

Name: ________________________________

Age: ____________

Race/Ethnicity: _______________________________

Gender Identification: __________________________
   Pronouns (e.g., she/her; he/his): ____________________________

FYC instructor: _________________________

FYC section schedule (e.g., T/TH 10:15): ____________________________

Appendix B: First Semi-Structured Interview (within first five weeks of course)

Thank you for taking time to participate in this study with me. I am going to ask a series of questions about your transition from writing in high school to writing in college and about your experiences in FYC. I am very interested in hearing about your perspectives and first-hand experience on this transition. I just want to emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions I’ll ask. I’m also interested in hearing about both positive and negative aspects of your experiences. This interview should take about 40 minutes to an hour of your time.

Before we begin, I want to go over a few things about how the interview will be conducted. First, I would like to audio record our discussion to make sure that I have accurately captured the information you are providing, but if you prefer that we not record that’s okay too. Is it okay with you to audio record? If at any time, you would like me to stop the recorder, please let me know, or if you are ever reluctant to continue to participate in the interview, let me know that too. We will stop at any time you wish. Finally, in order to participate in this study, I need to make sure that I have you sign a consent form. [Go over consent form with participant.]

I wanted to start with some general questions and then we’ll move to some more specific questions later.

1. So is this your second semester at this university? How has your time here been so far?
2. How did you decide on this university?
3. Do you know what you will major in? Or do you have any specific academic interests?
4. Did you have any expectations about what it would be like to be a student here? Have those expectations been accurate so far?
5. Overall what has the transition from high school to college been like for you so far?

Let’s talk a little bit about your high school writing experiences.

1. How often did your high school classes require writing?
2. Which of your high school classes emphasized writing?
3. What sorts of writing assignments did you often do in high school? Which of those assignments did you enjoy the most and the least? Why?
4. What was the focus of writing instruction in high school? What did your teachers want to make sure that you knew how to do?
5. How did you or your teachers use writing in your high school classes? What purpose(s) did it serve?
6. Did your high school teachers emphasize certain writing skills that they said were important to prepare you for college? If so, what were they?
a. Do you agree that those writing skills are important as a college writer?
7. What high school writing experiences or instruction do you think best prepared you to be a college writer?
8. Is there anything that you learned about writing in high school that you’ve relied heavily on or that you’ve used a lot to complete writing assignments now in college?
9. Is there anything that you learned about writing in high school that has been more of an obstacle or a stumbling block for you as a writer in your college classes?
10. Is there anything you wish that you had learned about writing in high school?
11. Is there anything else you’d like to share about your high school writing instruction that we haven’t discussed?

Thank you for sending me a couple of your high school essays. I wanted to ask you a few questions about them.
[questions will be repeated for each piece of writing]
1. For what class did you write this essay?
2. Was this kind of writing assignment common or exceptional?
3. What, if anything, was enjoyable about writing this essay? What, if anything, was challenging?
4. What sort of instruction, if any, helped you complete this writing assignment?
5. What was the feedback from your teacher on it?
6. Would you feel comfortable turning in a paper like this for one of your college classes? Why or why not?
7. Is there anything else you’d like to share about this piece of writing?

I wanted to ask a few questions about your experiences at this university and in the writing course so far.

1. How would you describe yourself as a writer?
2. Do you see yourself as a college writer?
3. What would you say that it means to be a college writer?
4. How do you feel about your academic writing skills?
5. What sorts of writing did you do in your classes last semester?
6. How do you feel about taking this writing course?
7. What do you think the course will be like? What do you anticipate learning in the course?
8. So far, have your expectations related to the course been met? Or has it been different than you thought it’d be?
9. How does the writing instruction in this course compare to what you experienced in high school?
   a. How does the way that your writing instructor talks about writing compare with how your high school teachers talked about writing?
10. Is there anything you hope to learn or gain by taking this writing course?
11. Is there anything else you’d like to share about your experiences so far in the writing course?
12. Lastly, I’m just interested in what you think this writing course will be able to offer you. Is there anything that you think you’ll be able to take with you into other classes or into your future?
Appendix C: Second Semi-Structured Interview (approximately 9-10 weeks into course)

Good to see you again. I wanted to talk with you a bit more about your experiences in your writing course, picking up where we left off last time. Again, I am going to ask a series of questions and listen to your answers. Some of the questions will be the same or similar to the ones I asked last time. Don’t worry about repeating yourself or answering the questions differently. This interview should take about 40 minutes to an hour of your time.

Before we begin, I want to review a few things with you. First, is it okay if I audio record this session, as I did last time? If at any time, you would like me to stop the recorder, please let me know. If you are ever reluctant to continue to participate in the interview, let me know that too. We will stop at any time you wish.

1. How has your semester been going?
2. How has your writing class been going?
3. How does the writing instruction in this course compare to what you experienced in high school?
   a. How does the way that [writing instructor] talks about writing compare with how your high school teachers talked about writing?
4. Are there any other similarities or differences that you have noticed when comparing writing in this course with writing in high school?
5. What does [writing instructor] emphasize about writing?
6. During our last interview, I asked you a few questions about how you see yourself as a writer and your ideas about college writing. I wanted to ask some of the same questions this time. Don’t worry if your answers stay the same or change.
   a. What do you think it means to be a college writer?
   b. Do you see yourself as a college writer?
7. What have you learned in the class so far?
   a. What, if anything, will you take with you into future classes or other areas of your life?
8. What aspects of your high school writing instruction prepared you for the writing you’re doing in this class? Is there anything you wish that your high school teachers had spent more time on?

Discourse-based questions:
9. Tell me about the writing assignments you have completed so far in the class.
10. Thank you for sharing this/these essay(s) with me (assuming student emails some essays):
   a. How did you go about writing this essay? Describe your process.
   b. What was your purpose or goal in writing this essay?
c. How did your approach to this essay compare with how you approached writing assignments in high school?
   i. Can you imagine having turned in an essay like this for one of your high school classes? Why or why not?

d. What came naturally for you? What was more challenging?

e. What kind of feedback (from your instructor or peers) have you gotten on this essay? How did you feel about that feedback?

f. Any other specific questions related to the content of the essay.

g. Is there anything else you’d like to share about this piece of writing?
Appendix D: Third Semi-Structured Interview (approximately 14-15 weeks into course)

Good to see you again. Thank you for taking this time to talk with me over Zoom. So much has changed in the world and in your life, I’m sure, since we last talked. If it’s OK with you, I wanted to start off our interview by asking a few questions about how this major disruption in the semester, the pandemic, and the movement to distance learning has impacted you personally. Would that be OK?

Before we begin, I want to ask if it’s OK if I record our Zoom session so that I have a record of the conversation.

I want to just emphasize again that your participation in my research is anonymous and confidential. So I won’t be sharing any of your answers with your instructor, and you’ll be given a pseudonym in my research reports so that your identity will be protected. Do you have any questions before we get started?

For this first series of questions, I’d like to hear how this experience over the past two months, the pandemic and transition to distance learning, has impacted you:

1. What has the transition to distance/online learning been like for you?
2. What has been most disruptive for your learning?
3. How has this shift to distance learning impacted your experience transitioning from high school to college?
4. Has the pandemic and the disruption in learning changed your academic plans in any way? (e.g., enrollment for upcoming semesters; academic major; etc.)
5. Did your priorities, academic or otherwise, have to change at all because of these recent events?
6. How have your experiences in FYC changed?
7. In FYC, what is the biggest adjustment you’ve had to make as a student?

Next, I thought we could look at the FYC writing you shared with me.

Questions posed for each student text:

a. Can you tell me a little about the writing assignment for this essay? What was the purpose/goal for this essay?
b. How did you go about writing this essay? Describe your process.
c. What came naturally for you? What was more challenging?
d. What helped you write this essay?
   i. Was there any guidance from your instructor or the class that really helped you write the paper?
e. How did this FYC essay compare with essays you wrote in high school?
f. How did you do on the essay? What kind of feedback (from your instructor or peers) have you gotten on this essay? How did you feel about that feedback?
g. Any other specific questions related to essays themselves.

I wanted to finish up with some overall questions about FYC and college writing. Some of these will be the same questions that I’ve asked you before.

1. What do you think it means to be a college writer?
2. Do you think of yourself as a college writer?
3. What are the most important things about writing that you have learned in FYC?
   a. What do you think you will take with you after the semester ends?
   b. Do you think that what you have learned in this course will help you with writing in your major? Why or why not?
4. Now that you are at the end of FYC, how was the writing that you did in the course similar to what you did in high school?
5. How was it different?
6. If you were to give a high school senior advice about how to successfully make the transition from writing in high school to writing in college, what would you say?
7. What advice would you give to future FYC students?
8. Now at the end of FYC, what, if anything, do you wish you had known at the beginning of the class?
   a. Is there anything that you think your high school writing instruction should have emphasized more?
   b. Is there anything that you think your high school writing instruction should have emphasized less?
9. Is there anything else you’d like to share about your experiences in FYC or your high school to college transition?
Appendix E: Observation Protocol

Date:

Instructor:

Section/# of students:

Guiding questions:

1. What is the main topic or focus of the class session?
2. How is writing discussed in the class session?
3. What writing, if any, takes place during the class session?
4. What aspects of writing does the instruction emphasize?
5. What references, if any, are made by teacher or students to previous writing instruction?
6. What references, if any, are made to how this knowledge about writing will be useful to students in the future?
Appendix F: Interpretive Memo Protocol for Observation

1. What do the observed class sessions reveal about the conceptualizations about writing and what it means to be a college writer encouraged in this course? [based on instructional materials and instructor comments]
   a. What established theories of writing, if any, align with these conceptions?
   b. In what ways are these conceptualizations similar or different across observations of the same class?

2. What do the observed class sessions reveal about the students’ conceptualizations about writing and what it means to be a college writer? [based on students’ comments]
   a. What established theories of writing, if any, align with these conceptions?
   b. In what ways are these conceptualizations similar or different across observations of the same class?

3. What do any references made to previous writing instruction reveal about students’ understanding of writing and their understanding of how that previous instruction relates to their current writing in this course?
Research Study involving First-year Writing Students

Are you...
- 18 years of age or older
- A first-year student
- Native English speaker
- Enrolled in a first-year college writing course

If so, then I would love your input in my study! I want to hear about your experiences with writing in this writing course and how those experiences compare with the writing you did in high school.

Your participation would be confidential and wouldn’t in any way negatively impact your grade/performance in the class. In fact, this opportunity to reflect on your writing may be beneficial. Your instructor will not know which students in the class are participating unless you choose to tell him/her.

Participation would involve three 40-60 minute interviews at a time convenient for you. The interviews would be on-campus and audio-recorded. I will also ask participants to share with me copies of their major essays for the course along with any feedback provided by the instructor.

You will be compensated with a $10 Starbucks or Amazon gift card upon completing the third interview.

If you’re interested, please contact me, Laura Dacus, at ldacus@albany.edu for more information. I look forward to hearing from you!