throughout the study to generate, solicit, and keep in mind alternative understandings about the experiences, goals, and attitudes of Sherry and her students, and to let my research participants speak for themselves. However, my perceptions have filtered through my own beliefs as a composition specialist and an adherent of critical literacy concerned that many students seem to resist this approach and interested in finding out more about this resistance, yet at the same time eager to tap into the substantial energy, drive, and optimism that I believe students initially bring with them to the composition class. The remainder of the book details my findings and reflects upon their significance in understanding the nature of teaching and learning in a large state university's first-year composition program. The following chapter interprets students' first day of class essays describing themselves as writers and discussing their goals for the composition course.

3 The Enigma of Arrival

The title of this chapter comes from a painting by the Italian surrealist Giorgio de Chirico; it's also the title of a novel by V. S. Naipaul (1987). The painting depicts a port shrouded in darkness, the site of an ambiguous meeting between two shadowy figures. Naipaul describes the scene in his autobiographical novel:

A wharf; in the background, beyond walls and gateways (like cutouts), there is the top of the mast of an antique vessel; on an otherwise deserted street in the foreground there are two figures, both muffled, one perhaps the person who has arrived, the other perhaps a native of the port. The scene is of desolation and mystery; it speaks of the mystery of arrival. (p. 99)

We generally think of opening day in a first-year college composition class as an exciting time, students arriving with new notebooks and pens, eager to please, anxious to succeed. And yet, when I saw a reproduction of the Chirico painting, and, again, when I read about the painting in Naipaul's novel, I immediately connected it with the beginning of fall term in composition. The painting's haunting and poetic title (in fact, the title was created not by the painter but by the surrealist poet Apollinaire) and its depiction of a vaguely foreboding situation resonated with my strong feeling that the composition class is shrouded in mystery for both students and teachers.

I argue in this chapter that beginning college students often come into composition with little idea of what will be expected of them, and, more important, with views about writing and notions of what they wish to gain from the class that are surprisingly different from—and in many ways seriously at odds with—those of their teachers. This basic incompatibility has been touched upon but not well-developed in the composition literature. For example, Brooke's study (1987) of "underlife" in the classroom revealed that surface cooperation on the part of students can mask a variety of oppositional attitudes and behaviors toward the "official" pedagogy. Similarly, discussions of student resistance to curriculum and class norms by Chase (1988), Giroux (1988), and Shor (1996) suggest that students motivated by feelings of disenfranchisement and alienation often try, subtly or not so subtly, to subvert or work around
the goals of the teacher, and that such resistance can often be quite justifiable. Nelson’s examination of students’ often ingenious ways of avoiding extended critical thought in research-paper assignments demonstrates how a desire to save time and effort, and an interpretation of the assignment as one of summary rather than analysis, led students to short-circuit the “writing as learning” process envisioned by their instructor. And my own earlier investigation (1994) of beginning college students’ approaches to writing theory-based essays revealed that many students, intimidated and confused by the complex demands of the assignment, sought and found ways to avoid engaging their subject matter theoretically. These studies all hint at a basic difference of approach between teacher and student. Yet I would suggest that such incompatibility is not an isolated instance but a fundamental feature of the college composition class, raising serious challenges to the work of both students and teachers.

This chapter provides another layer of empirical evidence for my argument about the mismatch between students’ and teachers’ ways of conceptualizing composition, and the effects of this mismatch on students’ and teachers’ work in the course. In the chapter, I examine beginning college students’ writing through autobiographies completed on the first day of class, and contrast students’ understandings, attitudes, and aspirations about writing with those embodied in their composition curriculum. The purpose of the chapter is to examine the mind-set of students as they enter first-year composition, taking into consideration that the data under scrutiny are timed, first-day essays for their instructor in which students may be trying as hard to construct the right kind of persona as they are to describe their writing practices and beliefs. I investigate students’ constructions of themselves as writers and students of writing in the context of the written work and other intellectual activity that will be expected of them in the course. After briefly describing the writing curriculum’s theoretical and pedagogical foundations, I will explain the context in which students wrote their autobiographies and the assumptions underlying my reading of them. In the following section, I will discuss the overall tone or mood of the essays, then move on to analyze the specific ways students discussed both their own writing and writing in a larger sense. Next, I will examine what students said they hoped to learn in first-year composition. Finally, I will contrast students’ views with the goals of the composition curriculum.

The argument I wish to make from these opening-day essays, which I develop in later chapters through my interpretations of the student and teacher interviews, classroom observations, and student essays, is that, as teachers, curriculum designers, and theoreticians, despite our advocacy of student-centered pedagogies, we have not been sufficiently aware of students’ attitudes and prior knowledge about writing, nor of how their attitudes and knowledge affect the way they approach composition instruction. Therefore, if we indeed wish to take students’ concerns as seriously as we say we do, we would be well-advised to re-examine our own approaches.

The composition curriculum at the University of Cincinnati emphasizes what has come to be known as “critical literacy.” While there is obviously a good deal of variation in the way this term is understood and in the kinds of curricula that have been set up in its name, primary features of a critical writing pedagogy are generally agreed upon. As Sullivan and Quayle describe this approach in the introduction to their book, Pedagogy in the Age of Politics, “teachers who once invited students to master or to transcend the strictures of written discourse now call upon students to participate critically in the discourses that shape their lives. Pedagogies that once aimed at self-actualization now aim at social transformation” (1994, p. ix). A critical approach to literacy thus emphasizes certain broad dispositions of mind, including reflectiveness about self, about one’s wider society, and about one’s role in that society.

A critical literacy approach also stresses awareness and appreciation of group differences, multi-perspective consideration of ideas, and questioning of established ways of thinking. The postmodernist ideas that reality is socially constructed and truth theoretically determined are fundamental assumptions of this pedagogy. In terms of actual writing and reading strategies, a critical literacy approach emphasizes rigorous development of ideas, the opportunity for feedback from a number of different sources, extensive invention and revision, and careful reading and re-reading of one’s own texts and those of others. This pedagogy therefore combines complex and demanding aspects of academic, civic, and personal literacy with the aim, not just of improving students’ abilities to communicate in writing, but of encouraging in students a reflective, questioning intelligence and a willingness to use that intelligence as fully participating members of a critical democracy. In brief, ambitious as they may seem, these are the overall goals of the first-year composition curriculum. In the pages that follow, I will demonstrate the ways in which entering students’ assumptions about writing, and their aims for what they hope to learn in first-year college composition, appear strongly opposed to these curricular goals.

On the opening day of Sherry’s 101 class in fall quarter, students receive a copy of the course description, go over what they will be doing for the next ten weeks, and find out about my presence in the class as a researcher who also happens to be the Director of the Writing Program.
But first, according to departmental policy, she asks students to write a brief essay “not for a grade, but to let me know a little about you as writers.” She explains that if anyone’s essay reveals serious problems in writing, they could be placed into a developmental section designed to meet their particular needs. But she assures students that such a move is very rare because they should already have completed a placement essay during orientation, on the basis of which they were placed into her section. In any case, knowing her supportive attitude toward students, I strongly suspect she would be reluctant to move even a very basic writer out of her class unless that person particularly wanted to go. The essay assigned today is in two parts; it asks students, first, to describe themselves as writers and, next, to say what they hope to learn about writing in college composition. A group of students in Nan Reitz’s 101 section also write a first-day essay on this same prompt, making a total of 48 responses.

I make no claims about the representativeness or generalizability of these essays to other groups of beginning college students around the country, though the descriptions and attitudes depicted are typical of entering students in the 1990s at this large, midwestern university and seem not unlike those at similar schools as described by colleagues around the country. I will let others make their own judgments about the essays’ typicality or applicability to their own situations. Moreover, as alluded to earlier, in interpreting the essays it is important to keep in mind the complex rhetorical situation in which students find themselves here. As Postman and Weingartner (1969) among others have argued, one of the most important lessons students learn in school is how to present themselves to various types of authority figures, particularly teachers, in as safe and positive a way as possible. We therefore cannot take students’ comments about writing at face value as accurately and unambiguously reflecting their attitudes and experiences. Rather, such essays can be regarded as rhetorical constructions designed, at least in part, to make a favorable impression upon an as yet unknown teacher. Presumably, in their introductory writing, students want to appear serious, mature, and committed, confident but not cocky, knowledgeable but not know-all; to perhaps give a sense of themselves as individuals; and possibly most of all, not to be thrown back into a lower-level writing course. Quite likely, responses to the prompt would be framed differently, showing more cynicism and less deference toward the subject matter, were students seated around a table in the Student Union’s Rhine Room, eating pizza and talking with friends.

Still, despite these important caveats, I believe, as David Bartholomae (1989) suggests in “Inventing the University,” that students try to fulfill such assignments to the best of their abilities, as candidly as they can under the circumstances. I also believe that a careful analysis of the essays can reveal a good deal about these students’ knowledge and attitudes about writing, its role in their schooling and in their lives generally, and what they hope to learn in the class, shedding light on the specific understandings and expectations students bring to college composition. Though a limited data source, these essays are valuable nonetheless in providing self-reported information about forty-eight students, far more than I could have interviewed. In addition, so as not to place undue or exclusive emphasis on what students wrote about themselves as writers in a pressurized, rhetorically complex, first-day-of-class situation, in the following chapter I will compare students’ expressed attitudes and experiences to the case-study students’ initial comments about writing, about learning, and about themselves as writers, which they made privately to me during interview sessions early in the school year.

Some of what I say here could possibly be interpreted as “bashing” students by presenting certain of their ideas in an unflattering light. In particular, I suggest among other things that a degree of what could be described as anti-intellectualism is evident in many students’ comments, and that this attitude in its various manifestations conflicts fundamentally with the goals of the composition program. However, I can only say that it is not my intention here to disparage or complain about students. On the contrary, what I am trying to do is to better understand the students, to take students’ ideas and aspirations seriously, to examine them closely, critically, and as sympathetically as possible in light of the curricular demands that we, as composition specialists, have set up for them. Throughout the book, I try to look just as closely and critically at the ideas and aspirations portrayed in the composition curriculum statement, notions that are widely endorsed throughout the field as a whole, and to consider how we might better accommodate students’ more pragmatic goals in their composition classes. Thus, I discuss student writing here not as incriminating evidence of deficiencies but, in the words of Joseph Harris (1994), “as expressions of views that call for our serious consideration and response,” with the larger purpose “to revise and contest some of the assumptions and pronouncements of theory” (p. 8).

The Students as Writers: Self-Critical Views

What views, then, do students express? A study by the Educational Testing Service (Lapointe, A.E., et al., 1989) of elementary and high school students’ mathematics knowledge received a good deal of attention in
the national press for a seemingly paradoxical finding (discussed in Jacoby, 1994). On the one hand, American students scored near the bottom on the exam itself. On the other hand, in a separate “attitude survey” that was part of the test, the American students reported feeling better about their math knowledge than students from any of the other countries, boldly but apparently assuming their math skills were very strong, though their performance indeed suggested the opposite. This apparent confidence was seized upon by the press as a sign that schools are emphasizing “feel-good” values over tough academics.

Students’ confidence was indeed surprising, partly in light of the difficulty of math in school and the lack of success many have with it, especially compared with other areas of study, including English. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, for example, grades in math courses are consistently lower than grades in almost all other classes at all levels of schooling, including English and writing courses. Moreover, in school districts that do competency testing, failure rates on the math section of these exams are generally twice as high as those on the writing section. At my university, failure rates for the introductory calculus course required for many freshmen are much higher than those for first-year composition. In the context of such information about the greater difficulty of math in school as opposed to writing, and the corresponding knowledge that, in spite of this difficulty a national sample of students tended to feel very positive about their math abilities, it seems reasonable to suppose that students’ views about their writing ability would also be, at the least, fairly positive. Remember, too, as was stated in the previous chapter, that we are focusing in this book on a group of successful students who, for the most part, carried a solid B-average or above in high school. However, at least for the forty-eight freshmen whose essays I read—eight of whom I talked to in greater depth as case-study students—such an assumption about their attitudes would be badly mistaken. As a group, with not many exceptions, the students appear unconfident and self-critical about their writing.

Let me elaborate on this point. A third of the students (sixteen of the forty-eight) portray their writing in an entirely negative light. Another third describe themselves in a rather negative way as mediocres or average writers; half of these students (one-sixth of the overall sample) have nothing at all positive to say about their writing, or about writing in general. The other half offer a more balanced picture, saying they are good at or enjoy some aspects or types of writing but bad or even very bad at others. Of the remaining third, about half (again, a sixth of the total group) do describe themselves as good or successful writers, or as people who like—in a couple of cases even love—to write. The others often no assessment of their writing abilities, instead discussing in a more evaluative way the types of writing they have done and/or the strategies they have used.

It is noteworthy that so many of these beginning college students sound so negative about their writing because the prompt did not actually ask them to assess their own abilities, only to describe themselves as writers. The negative tone is also surprising because one might expect students to present their writing more positively to their future evaluator. (The mechanics of doing so would, however, be rather complicated. A student believing him- or herself a weak writer might well feel unable to offer a positive self-assessment, because that assessment would have to be made in writing, thus possibly revealing the very weaknesses the student may wish to conceal.) Moreover, the institutional pressure bearing down on students as they begin college, the knowledge that they are now playing in a new and presumably tougher league, may work as an intimidation factor leading to more negative self-assessment, just as the bright lights of an interrogation may lead to a confession of guilt. That is, a student who proclaims him- or herself a confident, successful writer may be risking the teacher’s close scrutiny. It is safer perhaps to claim a lack of skill. Then the teacher can either confirm the accuracy of the assessment or else judge the student as better than he or she thinks. But in any case, these student essays are detailed and direct; taken together, the displayed lack of confidence in the essays can make for a rather depressing reading, though the self-appraisals, especially the negative ones, are in many cases also quite lively. As one representative student, Bob, writes:

To describe my writing skills, it doesn’t take many sentences. I’m messy, unconfident, and all over the place. I procrastinate till the night before, and rarely follow a straight line to tell my reader(s) what is that I want to say…

Often going along with such self-assessments is the expression of a deep dislike for or fear of writing. Another student, Rita, begins by saying she’s “always hated to write.” Then, after describing one senior year paper she “thoroughly enjoyed writing and did an excellent job on,” an argument in which she took the role of a prosecuting lawyer convincing a jury to send a man to the electric chair for murder, Rita reflects on her problems with writing:

I don’t know if I exactly “hate” to write because sometimes I come up with good ideas. It just looks so stupid when I put it on paper. I don’t know if it’s my lousy grammar, my terrible spelling, or just my ugly handwriting. But I have never liked my writing style. For instance, once I had to write a paper on my most valuable possession.
I decided to write about my family, how they are the most important people in my life. I thought it was a good idea at first, but when I got finished with the paper I hated it. It was long and drawn out with a ton of grammatical errors.

Indeed, a number of students pinpoint precisely this problem of having "a good idea" or even a great idea, on a topic of genuine interest and importance to them, but then writing a very disappointing paper that does not say what they wanted it to say. About a quarter of the students describe receiving "process" type writing instruction and show considerable familiarity with such aspects of that form of instruction—rewriting, peer response, student-teacher conferences, and revising. However, almost without exception, students describe the development of their ideas as largely if not wholly separate from the act of writing. The notion, practically ubiquitous in the field of composition, that writing might itself be a way of organizing and developing ideas, of learning, is virtually absent from the essays. This notion was presumably not a point of view students were exposed to in their previous education, or if exposed, it did not stick. Rather, ideas are depicted as coming to students quickly, almost instantaneously, to be then transferred to writing or "put down into words." Students cite the difficulty of doing so as causing much of their frustration with writing. The issue seems to involve putting ideas or a creative and exciting plan into words, in the process of which the writing bogs down; the excitement and creativity somehow get lost, leaving only the flawed and error-ridden ramblings of a vulnerable adolescent. In these accounts, the writing seems to take on a life of its own and to spin out of control. Writing is never perceived as a part of a larger thinking process. Shawnna explains:

I may begin with an incredible thought, but by the end my writing doesn’t make any sense. I’m disorganized when it comes to putting all my ideas together. In fact, sometimes I think I’m writing in a foreign language.

What students cite as the main cause of their problems with writing is rather depressingly predictable. While a wide range of problem areas are cited, including disorganization, lack of motivation, and inability to express and/or support an opinion, by far the largest number of problems mentioned have to do with sentence- and word-level issues of grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, and spelling. Curiously, even those students such as John, below, who complain about an inability to coordinate their writing from an initial "idea" stage through to completion—a classic "process" problem—generally attribute their difficulties primarily to shortcomings in word choice, grammar, or usage:

I have never been able to express myself well on paper; this is due to the fact that I understand very little about proper grammar.

In addition to labeling themselves as bad writers, a number of students question whether they could be considered writers at all. This view is not surprising, given the prevailing notion of a writer as a literary, intellectual type who makes a living by producing books. In her book on the writing of successful women academics, Gesa Kirsch (1993) points out that even those women who published regularly and to considerable acclaim often did not think of themselves as writers and in more than a few cases did not even credit themselves with the ability to write (p. 70). Students both male and female display a similar lack of confidence in their writing. Moreover, students make clear that their previous education has not encouraged them to think of themselves as writers. Only two students in the entire sample describe writing as having anything like such a central role in their lives or identify strongly as writers. However, of equal concern is that several students not only reject the possibility that they might be considered writers, they also reject the very idea that their written work for school could even be considered writing. As Bart puts it:

Describing myself as a writer is hard for me to do because I don’t really consider myself as a writer. In high school I had to write many essays and narratives, but I wouldn’t consider that writing because it was always specified as what I needed to write about. I like to write about topics that interest me, and I don’t find it to be worth the time to write about something that I really don’t care about.

The above essay is noteworthy in part because it shows an independent spirit, resisting the dominance of the teacher, throwing down the gauntlet, so to speak, in announcing a preference for self-selected topics and for pursuing one’s own interests. The writer does, however, become more accommodating as the essay goes along, as if reacting against the implicitly confrontational stance taken earlier. This essay later offers a toned-down form of the original argument, stating: "I prefer to know what I am writing about, or at least have an understanding of the topic discussed." Even in such a mild form, however, I found that overt resistance to the terms of the assignment or to the possible expectations of the teacher was very rare. In fact, even when broadly defined to include any statement of preference as to what students will be expected to do in the class, such resistance can be seen only in a few other essays. The most direct of these, written by Jack, begins without mincing words: "If I had to describe myself as a writer, unmotivated, uninterested in writing, and quick to the point are the first things that come to mind. Yet,
when forced upon to write, one can do it. The student concludes, 
'In classes I've previously taken, form and length were emphasized. Writing should be more open and carefree. You shouldn't have to worry about how long something is.' This essay is noteworthy in being one of a very few in the entire sample (along with Bart's essay just cited above) in which the writer challenges the authority of the teacher, presuming to stand on anything close to an equal footing. Yet even this writer is careful to preface the expressed views on form and length with a disclaimer, "Not to disrespect you in any way, but writing isn't my thing."

Of course, it would be misleading to focus only on pieces emphasizing the negative representations of writing and of the students as writers, even though such pieces dominate the sample. As mentioned earlier, a sixth of the students do describe their writing in positive terms, and another sixth offer a more or less balanced assessment of strengths and weaknesses, though the majority of the "balanced" views do give greater weight to the negative. However, a close look at even the positive accounts raises some troubling questions about how comfortably these students will adapt to the curricular orientation of first-year composition. Three of these positive assessments were indeed extremely enthusiastic, as in the following example by Megan which places a great value on personal uses of writing:

I love writing. I love writing about me. It's part of my being. I always need to put my thoughts down on paper, either in the form of letters or scribbles, or often writing in my journal. I write a lot about facts which help the reader understand the situation I'm talking about, but because I think facts are a bit tiring and boring, I try to express mostly my feelings and deeper thoughts.

Another enthusiastic student, Carl, is one of only two who actually self-identifies as a writer (in addition to case-study student Cris, with her book-in-progress about her experiences with men). Carl cites successes at creative efforts and a desire to learn how to get future work published:

I've won three writing awards at school, an honorable mention from a national story contest, as well as placed in the Cultural Arts Writing Contest. I have discovered and developed my style of writing, which is made up of the fantasy side of nature, like talking beavers and also children's books. The key factor to my style of writing is my imagination. Nobody usually uses characters such as Hypercolor beavers and vampire squirrels, so my writings can be easily identified by people who have read others of mine before. Using this imagination is why I have won so many awards, since one of their requirements was creativity.

A third student, case-study student Rachel, cites her enjoyment at writing poetry for herself and letters to friends. Yet none of these students, despite expressing very positive attitudes about writing, mentions any particular affinity for the academic, analytic writing that makes up the great majority of the composition curriculum. Rachel specifically contrasts the enjoyment she gets from writing poems and personal letters with the pain and difficulty she experiences in school writing. Several other students who portray their writing in positive or balanced terms cite a particular teacher or class that helped them to develop and overcome earlier problems in writing. Two such essays describe "workshops" in which students were allowed, even encouraged, to read and write whatever they wanted, and cite these courses as leading to their improvement in and greater enjoyment of writing.

What all these students appear to have in common are strong, positive feelings about personal and imaginative uses of writing. However, such writing is not emphasized in first-year composition. Rather, the main focus in the program is on helping students to construct analyses, primarily arguments and interpretations, in other words, on academic, analytic forms of writing. True, there is a strong personal component built into almost all assignments, guided by the assumption that interpretation starts with a writer's own understanding and is grounded in that person's individual and cultural contexts. And, of course, imagination, or creativity, is also important; how often, after all, do we tell students that "all writing is creative"? However, the program attempts primarily to develop students' critical and reflective abilities in writing. Thus, as a teacher, I would be excited to work with these positive-sounding students in a first-year writing class—they seem bright, lively, enthusiastic, personable, hard-working, even interested in writing. But I also recognize that these students have expressed no particular interest in doing the sort of written work I will be laying out for them. The kinds of imaginative and personal writing that they express interest in, the kinds that they describe doing successfully, though not unrelated to what they will be doing in first-year composition, are rather significantly different. And, on the whole, the students suggest that these academic forms of writing are also significantly more difficult.

Similarly, other essays, even ones in which the writers express views about writing and about themselves as writers, suggest students that one would be delighted and honored to work with, as much as one can tell from a decontextualized essay written in thirty minutes under stressful circumstances. Thus, the news is by no means all bad. Many students express some satisfaction with their past writing instruction, including
in one case a tribute to a class taught by a published poet in which every student had a poem published somewhere and the writer describes gaining a new appreciation for poetry. Several students voice pride in their overall growth as writers and in particularly successful or memorable pieces they have written, such as a comprehensive research paper effort. The vast majority of students depict themselves as conscientious, ambitious, hopeful, and hard-working, eager to do well; they seem like a pleasant and engaging group. Perhaps by way of putting the best foot forward, only a few students portray themselves as lazy or lacking in effort, and even these students should perhaps be praised for their candor.

Yet all in all, the balanced and even the positive essays offer a reading of the student that, as a teacher looking carefully over this first-day writing, I might indeed regard with some concern. Most of these pieces (and for that matter, most of the pieces in which students portray themselves as bad, even terrible writers) do not strike me as badly written in the conventional sense of the term, for students just coming out of high school, despite the timed, one-shot nature of the assignment. They address the prompt’s questions; provide specific, often intriguing details; convey emotion; reveal the presence of “thinking” individuals with opinions and personalities behind the page; and use grammar, punctuation, and mechanics that are generally correct, and even when incorrect do not impede understanding. However, in some pieces the words themselves belie the student’s attempt to portray him or herself as a proficient writer, reflecting the ability of the written word to “betray” the student and act as a kind of shield, separating the students who belong from those who don’t. Paradoxically, these are pieces in which the writers say they write well, but the words themselves say they don’t. A few essays, like Larry’s below, show the pugnacious or defensive quality seen in Jack, the resistant student’s essay above, combined with an oral, conversational style that does not work as well written prose:

In describing myself as a writer, I feel that I know just as much as all the students in this class will know. Possibly a little less or a little more knowledge. Some of my writing experiences in high school consisted of creativity, personal, hobbies, and research reports, also reading stories from various authors. Doing this in high school helped me become a better writer as the years progress. If not only prepared me for college but also reality.

Other such pieces reveal a somewhat naive notion of writing that might lead a teacher to anticipate some potential difficulty. Amy writes:

As a writer I am very creative. During high school we were given writing time and I used to close my eyes and just imagine. Anything at all. As far as stories or real personal experiences. I enjoy free-writing because you can be yourself and write about whatever is on your mind.

Finally, the small number of students who do report success at and/or enjoyment of critical or research writing generally emphasize aspects of such writing that are very much at odds with the program’s approach to composition. These students either pledge allegiance to one or the other of the rigidly structured five-paragraph theme formats (several are mentioned in the essays) or assert a dubious ability to write “factually.” Yet another way some students mention to avoid the oppressive demands of rigorous and careful thought is the time-honored, romantic tradition of spontaneity. Damon, a self-confident student who appears to have known success in the past, defends this approach with evident sincerity, and is also savvy enough to demonstrate knowledge of the “correct” way to write, but simply prefers not to:

Upon examining my previous writing experiences, I would be characterized as an excellent composer of research papers and literary criticisms. Although I believe I work better under the pressure of a deadline. I almost always wait until the last minute to write a paper, and I have always abhorred writing rough drafts. Admittedly, my papers would be improved if I were to take the proper steps to writing a paper (brainstorming, forming an outline, composing a rough draft, etc.). I suppose, however, that the absence of these steps is what defines my style of writing. It gives my papers a sort of spontaneity and freshness. True, I could improve by preparing more extensively, but I have also found that under the confines of things like rough drafts, my style becomes muddled.

These few essays, which present the student’s own preferences and challenge the “official” pedagogy, may stem from a lack of tact or savvy on the part of the student. Yet such essays are refreshingly bold, suggesting an independent-minded student who, from a teacher’s point of view, might well prove unconventional, nonconformist, or otherwise interesting and enjoyable to work with in the class. Paradoxically, the essays that portrayed the writer, and writing in general, in a more negative light were often among the liveliest and most interesting to read. Those pieces that offered a positive slant were more often general, insipid, lacking in conflict, distinctiveness, drama, or intensity. Perhaps, just as Dante’s Inferno makes for much livelier, if more harrowing, reading than the blander Paradiso, so the more negative accounts with their depictions of pain, failure, and disappointment are more engaging than the rather complacent and conventional positive accounts. Certainly those positive accounts are more affecting that place the student’s success in writing in the context of a long and difficult struggle to overcome problems and deficiencies.
While as a group students seem highly critical of themselves as writers, they aren’t particularly critical of their past English classes, perhaps to an extent not wanting to offend the English teacher who would be reading and evaluating their work. In fact, many students express satisfaction with at least some aspects of their high school writing instruction—a particular teacher, a certain approach, a specific essay or story. And as I will discuss more in the following section, students generally report seeing writing as an ability that will be important in their lives. Yet the essays as a group, while offering both positive and negative appraisals of students’ writing abilities and attitudes toward writing, lean decidedly toward the negative. Vulnerability, lack of confidence, and feelings of nonmastery of a written code that can quickly betray one’s shortcomings dominate the sample. Moreover, as we have seen, even the more positive descriptions depict approaches to writing that are largely inconsistent with the critical form of literacy emphasized in first-year classes. It is difficult if not impossible to know just how honest and open students were being in these essays. However, there would seem to be little benefit to students in presenting a greater aversion to writing than they genuinely felt, or a more negative assessment of themselves as writers than was really the case. The following section of the chapter presents a similar interpretive dilemma. Here we move away from the study of student attitudes to examine how students described to the teacher their own goals for the class.

What Students Hope to Learn about Writing: A Counter-CCCC

The second part of this first-day essay assignment asked students to discuss what they hoped to learn about writing from the composition course. And just as in the previous section, a basic conflict is evident between what the students say and what the curriculum emphasizes. There are some points of overlap, but these are largely overshadowed by the areas of divergence. I want to begin by giving the overall flavor of students’ responses to this part of the prompt. As I have said, I was quite struck earlier by the extent of students’ negative cast of mind about their writing. Not surprisingly, many of their concerns and worries carried over to their responses to the second part of the prompt as well. Specifically, in examining students’ comments, I was impressed by both the importance they attach to writing and the corresponding pressure they report not only to do well in the course, but also to improve the quality of their written work. Students want to improve their writing for a variety of reasons, most of them very pragmatic. Clearly, the stakes are high for students in first-year composition. There is some, but very little, casual talk from the most confident-sounding students about brushing up on previously learned skills and branching out adventurously into new areas. More common, though, are remarks like the following, from Melissa, one of the many students coming into college, and entering composition, uncertain and more than a little frightened:

In this class I hope to learn how to be more creative. I need to know how to get things flowing so that I don’t just stare at a piece of blank paper. I see people around me just writing and writing and I sit here thinking and thinking; what am I going to write? I shouldn’t be nervous I should be confident and ready to write, and I should know what to write about.

By the word creative, this writer seems to mean able to get words down on the page, productive, rather than imaginative or inventive. Half a dozen other students show similar symptoms of writer’s block, or fear of writing, and the desire to overcome it. But even students, such as Penny, who do not express an inability to get words on the page admit deep worries about their prospects in composition class, and in college generally:

All I want to learn about writing is the proper way to write. I want to express myself in a way that the reader will find enjoyable; moreover, I don’t want to write a paper that has a lot of neat stuff being boring because of bad grammar.

I also want to become a better writer to help me through college. I have been told by a number of people that I would be doomed in college because of my writing skills; I want to change my skills so I won’t be doomed.

Another student, who earlier reflects on whether she actually “hates” to write or perhaps is merely ambivalent, concludes: “I want to learn how to have fun with writing and not dread doing it or coming to class.”

Doom and dread. These students’ comments are only the most extreme representations of an attitude expressed by many of the essays. These essays seem to depict writing instruction as an unpleasant and even dangerous activity most noteworthy for its ability to get a person in trouble at school. Yet students also depict writing as a necessary activity, like taking a harsh medicine needed to cure an illness, but medicine of a curious type. For the medicine is not so much worthwhile in itself. Rather, it is the courage and character required to steady oneself and take it, the very act of taking it, that makes the medicine worthwhile. A steely stoicism permeates these essays, reflecting not just the common notion that nothing worthwhile is easy, but also the idea that writing and writing instruction are worthwhile precisely because of their difficulty. Some students justify writing instruction the way Latin instruction used
to be justified: as an important form of mental discipline, boot camp for the mind. Reading these essays gave me the strong feeling that students were trying hard to convince the teacher that they could do a good job in the course, but also to convince themselves that the composition class, however unpleasant, would be good for them. Such a sentiment comes through clearly in the following essay by Mike:

This is going to be a very important course for me. I have never been interested in or even liked English classes in the past. It is necessary for me to take this class not only to develop my writing style, but also to see if I can learn to like and do well in a class that otherwise I wouldn’t have taken.

This class should help me become more rounded as a student and as a person. I’m going to put my mind to it and try hard so I can prove to myself that I can do things that are difficult and things I don’t enjoy as well. This should be an indicator to show if I have what it takes to succeed in college and in life. I’m going to have to face it; life isn’t always going to be fun. If I keep a good attitude and work hard I think I can do well.

This stoical “I know it must be good for me” stance and the emphasis on keeping “a good attitude” permeates the essays: composition class as a character-builder; writing instruction as hard, dirty, uninteresting work, the doing of which will make me a better person. On the one hand, such attitudes should not be altogether discouraging to us as teachers. We want students to have a strong work ethic and to believe that composition class will be useful for them. On the other hand, such attitudes should concern us greatly. When students express so little interest in, indeed so much distaste for our subject matter, we of all college teachers need to sit up and take notice. For as composition specialists, we have been among the major advocates of student-centered learning in the university, priding ourselves on giving students as much autonomy and authority in the classroom as possible. Therefore, we must look beyond students’ general willingness to do what we ask of them, in order to examine how their approach to composition may be affected by their own goals and aspirations, their own relationship to our curriculum.

“Spriug from students’” metanotions about composition are a number of more focused goals for what they hope to learn in the course. One finds very little variation in the overall goals students express. Their aspirations are overwhelmingly pragmatic and utilitarian, far more focused on attaining practical skills and achieving career goals than on critiquing current society or developing reflective capabilities. This pragmatism reflects a strong tendency in American culture that has been noted and discussed since the early nineteenth century. Starting with de Tocqueville (1835), the discussion has continued with Dewey (1916), Rorty (1979), and other thinkers, and shows no signs of abating in the present day. Punctuated by brief periods such as the late 1960s in which idealism was widespread and practicality unfashionable, especially among the young, a pragmatic, largely materialistic spirit has dominated American culture and served as a key component of schooling. Hence, the domination in many universities, including the one in which this study is set, of pre-professional, career-oriented education. With few exceptions, the goals students express reflect a powerful desire on their part to develop writing skills that will help them do well. They want to learn skills that will help them, first and foremost, in the composition sequence itself, a distant second, in their other coursework, particularly their majors, and a remote third, in their careers and later lives generally. The humanistically oriented goals of a traditional liberal education as they relate to writing—to convey one’s ideas persuasively and eloquently, to develop a greater appreciation for and understanding of the best that has been thought and said, to live the examined life—are not mentioned as part of most students’ desired repertoires. Nor are the more explicitly political goals of critical literacy—to use writing and reading in order to better reflect on and understand oneself, the larger society, and one’s relations to that society; to prepare for participation in a democracy; to foster a desire to work for social justice. Such concerns, important as they may be in shaping the composition curriculum, seem far from the minds of students as they begin college composition, at least as indicated by these opening-day essays. Perhaps students were not exposed to these ideas in their previous education, and their goals mirror the kinds of teaching they have experienced, the classrooms they have inhabited.

Indeed, the first—and for many students—only stated consideration centers on their anticipated performance in the course. Such grade consciousness and performance anxiety have been cited by Ehrenreich (1989), Horowitz (1987), and others examining the culture of contemporary college students as springing from a perceived fear of failing, of not doing well enough academically to attain the good job which is the primary reason for attending college in the first place. According to such an interpretation, this anxiety combines with, and to a large extent causes, a lack of deep interest in broader social, political, and philosophical issues, often leading to a pragmatic, bottom-line mentality. The essay prompt was not intended to elicit definitive information about students’ world-views (such views will be examined more closely in the following chapters, in the context of how students approached their coursework). Still, the pervasive, even exclusive concerns expressed about grades and classroom performance certainly suggest a strongly pragmatic, though also perhaps short-sighted, attitude toward writing instruction and to-
ward college generally. Such a mind-set, reflected in most students’

says, is often expressed frankly and without equivocation, as in the fol-

lowing example from Randy, who bemoaned his unfortunate tendency

in writing to “turn a good idea into a bad grade”:

To be totally honest, I would like to learn how to get an A on a pa-

per. I want to find that special something that was missing in my B

and C high school papers. I suppose there are ways I can do this. I

just don’t know how.

Many similar comments, while not always going so far as to mention

aiming for a specific grade, emphasize the desire to learn how to write

a paper that meets with the teacher’s approval. At times, though, this de-

sire is embedded in a broader rhetorical goal. A small group of students

assert that they want to strengthen their writing generally for their

audience, make it more interesting and memorable, not only for teachers

but for whatever readers they may have. The notion of addressing and

impressing an audience, of learning more effective ways to engage a

reader’s interest, is mentioned in almost every fifth of students’ essays. This

notion is often accompanied by an admission that readers, especially

teachers but in some cases the students themselves, have in the past

found their written efforts boring, confusing, or otherwise less than sat-

isfactory.

A small number of students also assert the hope that, because they

expect to write papers for other classes throughout college, the instruc-

tion they receive in first-year composition should help them more gen-

erally in their academic work. Such hopes are indeed an important part

of the justification for a required composition sequence. Though a grow-

ing body of empirical research by psychologists such as Sternberg and

Dettman (1993) suggests the extreme difficulty—some even say the

near impossibility—of transferring knowledge from one domain to an-

other, students anticipate using the knowledge gained from compo-

sition instruction in successfully carrying out writing assignments for other

courses. One student who does so, Carl, earlier expressed positive atti-

dudes about writing, describing previous successes and also indicating

an interest in writing for personal reflection “when I’m upset, happy, or

frustrated.” This writer links the desire to write well for other classes

with a sense of the importance, and shifting demands, of audience:

By taking freshman English I hope to gain a lot of writing skills.

This is so very important in college because I will have to write

papers for other classes this year and years to come. I hope to gain a

better way of persuading my reader(s).

I want for however long my reader is reading my paper, I want

that person to feel like they’re in my shoes for that time. I want

them to feel what I’m feeling and maybe affect them in some way. I

do not want them to forget my paper.

An even smaller number of students cite the importance of writing

beyond its role in college. Most such discussions center on the role of

writing in the workplace, but a few mention the general importance in

life of “good communication abilities,” however variously phrased. The

students whose essays look beyond college to career and later life are in

almost every instance those who express generally positive attitudes

about their own writing and present themselves as successful and en-

thusiastic writers. These students appear to have stepped back somewhat

from their immediate situations in an attempt to look more broadly at a

long-range trajectory of development. This inclination to discuss the “big

picture” may be due in part to these students’ apparently greater confi-

dence and lower stress level. Those students feeling more anxious and

intimidated might have found it very difficult, especially under the pres-

sures of the timed writing, to look beyond the situation immediately at

hand. A sense of perspective, or at least an attempt at perspective, comes

through in these future-oriented essays; they seem aimed at conveying

an attitude of mature reflection and calm deliberation, more so than the

pieces which focus exclusively on performance in the class. Megan, who

earlier said that she “loved” writing, particularly writing about herself

(though she also said she enjoyed writing for school), takes such a

broad view, and also links writing with speaking as key forms of com-

munication:

I need to be absolutely proficient in the language in order to be a

good speaker and writer. Because, no matter what: do in the future,

if I don’t have the necessary skills to communicate, everything will

be tougher for me.

Several other students, such as case-study student Josh, focus more on

the demands of their particular major and future career:

I am planning to major in civil engineering here at the University of

Cincinnati. Due to the fact that my job will require me to commu-

nicate with a lot of different people, I need to learn how to effectively

convey my ideas in writing.

Several of these career-minded students seem quite concerned about the

image they will project. Like Marlon, below, they are eager to look good

and avoid embarrassment:

I hope to be able to write a paper and to look like I know what I’m
talking about. I would like to look educated when I have to write a

paper as an engineer instead of fitting in with the stereotype that

engineers are not good at English or spelling.
However, a few students who express a “large” view make the kinds of sweeping, generalized, slightly pompous-sounding pronouncements that read like “English” introductions to five-paragraph themes, existing in dubious authority. These essays seem to reflect how some students think academic writing should sound, the type of student prose paradigm by Coles (1974), Macorrie (1970), and others, but still found in high school and college writing. Anne’s is a prime example:

As we all know, writing is a very important tool in the world we live in, because in order to be understood and effective, you must make your statements clear and clean cut to everybody. I believe that this class will help refine my skills as a writer so that I will be capable of giving my views in a strong and effective manner.

Again, it is important to keep in mind that students are writing at least in part for their teacher here, and have strong reasons to promote the importance of written communication in ways their teacher would presumably approve of and appreciate. Not surprisingly, the picture that emerges thus far of what students hope to learn about writing shows a group of students eager—and often quite anxious—to do well in the course. They have in the majority of cases not been satisfied by their past performance in writing, and want to make up for what they see as their deficiencies now. While a fair number of students express at least some confidence about themselves as writers, and a few even rather boldly offer their own views on what sort of material they think the teacher should emphasize in the course, none express the belief that they are already good enough writers and therefore should not be required to take composition at all. All seem to accept the writing requirement in this sense, at least overtly. However, the rhetorical situation (writing for a teacher’s evaluation on the first day of class and wanting to make a good impression) may have something to do with the lack of such assertions. In my experience, this attitude that one should not have to take college composition is certainly prevalent, and does come out occasionally once the term has gotten under way and students have relaxed their defenses somewhat. Only a small proportion of the students express an awareness of the importance of writing as a communicative tool that will be useful, even necessary to them in their academic and professional lives. No students mention the kinds of intellectual and political goals that underlie the curriculum, goals with which they are unlikely to be familiar if they have come out of a traditional high school English curriculum. Most students appear to have focused their attentions on meeting the demands of the course at hand and developing the necessary skills. With this overall larger picture of their goals in mind, we will examine

the more specific aspects of writing that students expressed a desire to learn about in the composition sequence.

In the previous section, we saw that many students attribute their difficulties with writing primarily to weaknesses in grammar, punctuation, and word choice. They feel this way even though the essays as a group do not seem especially problematic at the word- and sentence-levels, particularly for a timed writing at the start of the year. And they feel this way even though many of the difficulties students cite in their past writing appear to stem from issues of motivation, organization and development of ideas, or coordination of the process than from problems of mechanics. In fact, some of the most error-ridden essays are those quoted earlier in which the writers express a guarded confidence about their writing. Still, for whatever reasons, this area is where students generally appear to feel most vulnerable. Thus, while it may seem rather incongruous, fully half of the essays express principally a desire for so-called “grammar therapy,” “mechanics overhaul,” or whatever one might call the quest for greater correctness in writing. This desire for greater correctness is by far the largest focus of concern mentioned. Some students target particular errors which have given them trouble in the past—and which apparently continue to trouble them. The following student, Nick, for example, earlier states that his previous teachers always praised his papers for their creativity and liveliness—they were never “dull, dry, and boring”—but that his mechanics were another matter entirely:

In this class, I’d like to become more experienced with my punctuation. Sometimes I just write and don’t stop, which leads to poor punctuation. I don’t really think about putting commas in sentences when I write, or even periods sometimes. Since I do this I end up proof reading my papers at least twenty times. Putting in and taking out commas and shortening up my sentences.

Sometimes when I write I do a lot of run-ons. I would like to know when to stop a sentence, when I have a good idea I like to keep writing so I don’t lose my train of thought, so sometimes I think of putting punctuation in as I write a disturbance.

Thus, in describing his punctuation problems, this student also illustrates them clearly, though the illustration is presumably not intentional. This anxiety about issues of correctness appears traceable to past experiences with negative evaluations, as a number of students describe frequent run-ins with the “red pen” and the long-term consequences of such negative feedback. Here is a typical example from Ned’s essay:

What I really hope to learn about writing in this class is how to get my point across more clearly. Also, where to put all the commas
and semi-colons. I think my ideas start off great, but once I start getting it down on paper it all gets messed up. It seems every time I get a paper back that I think I did well on, it's always cluttered with rules from the Writer's Inc, or the teacher tells me that the main focus got lost. This is very frustrating, and I'd like to solve the problem.

Like other students, this writer conflates what a composition specialist would probably see as two distinct though not entirely unrelated problem areas, making sentence-level mistakes and losing the main focus of the paper. In fact, the essays as a group show a strong inclination to depict nearly all problems in writing as stemming from weaknesses in word and sentence-level skills. Yet the composition curriculum, while requiring students to edit and proofread carefully, does not give much emphasis to such pursuits. Issues of mechanics are only infrequently and briefly covered in class, with far greater priority placed upon the development of ideas and other rhetorical concerns. We cannot conclude from such comments that students' high school teachers focused exclusively on sentence- and word-level issues in responding to writing. It could be that teachers point out such errors more often than they focus on larger rhetorical or conceptual aspects of students' texts. However, it could also be that marking of errors is somehow more conspicuous and painful to students—that the red ink makes a particularly strong impression—and they therefore pay more attention and give greater weight to such comments than to comments about global aspects of discourse. Such overall comments may appear most often in a brief, disregarded note at the end of the paper rather than in a series of more visible marginal notes or corrections included in the text itself. Perhaps students simply pay more attention to the "marking up" of their texts. In any case, it appears that many students come into the composition sequence expecting, apparently even hoping or wishing to convey the hope, that the class will focus on issues of mechanics, an area of writing that they see as problematic in their own prose.

Besides improving their grammar and punctuation, a number of students also want to increase their vocabularies, reflecting the prevalent idea that use of "fancy" words is an important sign of intelligent writing, is indeed a necessary condition for good writing, at least good school writing. One student who wants to do so, Paula, relates past problems in writing to a limited vocabulary, expressing the belief that knowing and using more words is key to becoming a good writer:

I feel that as a writer I am sometimes limited in my vocabulary. This limit is set by the fact that my spelling skills are not the greatest. The reason my skills are lacking is I did not put forth a great effort through the first year or two of high school. This lack of effort caused me to be limited in my later writing classes. As a writer I feel that if I practice enough and get the help I need, I will be able to survive.

This student's worries about "survival" in the class, and the concern not to "slide," echo other students' fears about college writing, the "dread" and "dread" expressed earlier. Some of that anxiety also comes through in another goal many students emphasize: to write with greater clarity in order to get their points across. Aside from wanting to improve their sentence-level and vocabulary skills, students most frequently mention a desire to learn how to write "more clearly," so that their readers can better understand what they are trying to say. Almost a third of the students list achieving clarity as a key aim. The desire for clarity is closely related to the feeling many students express that their good ideas often fall apart in the transition from head to paper. The anxious writer who earlier mentions not liking to "just stare at a piece of blank paper" goes on to say:

I would also like to learn how to be more organized. I would like to learn how to take all of the thoughts floating in my head and put them into sequential order, so they make sense to everybody instead of just me.

I would like to learn how to write intelligently, clear, concise, and to the point. But at the same time make my writing interesting.

Correctness, clarity, and conciseness thus emerge as something of a holy trinity in the essays, those features of writing to which students most aspire. They are certainly the three most frequently cited aspects of "good writing" mentioned in the essays. These characteristics are of course admirable features of much good writing. They have a long history of importance in composition teaching and are closely associated with what has by now long been called the current-traditional paradigm of writing instruction. Moreover, these aspects of writing may well have been stressed in much of students' previous instruction. Yet, as far as the college writing course is concerned, the idea of basing a course around notions of correctness, clarity, and conciseness has been strongly criticized by composition specialists for some years. Critiques of current-traditional approaches date back to the late 1960s with the advent of process- and writer-oriented instruction and have long been items of faith in the profession. To be sure, a look at the curriculum reveals a very dif-
different set of primary goals for the composition sequence, which are in important ways not consistent with the Strunkian emphasis on correctness, clarity, and conciseness. Reflectiveness, questioning, elaboration, revision, and other such features of critical literacy are not just different goals, but in important ways even run counter to students' desires to make their points clearly, concisely, and in sequential order. While not intended to produce students whose writing is unclear, rambling, or disorganized, the critical approach emphasized in the curriculum attempts to complicate initial plans for writing and to encourage students to re-see and move beyond their early ideas. The approach seeks to extend students' writing processes, in order to allow for more careful reflection, questioning, and elaboration on the topic. Surface correctness, clarity, and conciseness, if the content of the paper is superficial and has not been questioned, reflected upon, and examined from several different perspectives, are not in themselves greatly desired goals. Indeed, teachers may work hard to move students away from such an approach. The neat and tidy essay which does not show evidence of serious thought is only a pedagogical starting point, something to improve upon, in the critical literacy classroom.

In students' essays, this desire for correctness, clarity, and conciseness frequently goes along with a desire to learn "proper" form, often expressed as the right way to organize a paper, as if there were just one way. Many students here allude to structures such as the five-paragraph theme, which they describe as a "correct" format. Some express the belief that there must be other such rigid structures for use in college and professional writing. The official curriculum, however, stresses that there are a multitude of possible ways to organize an essay, depending on the logic of the particular points the writer wishes to make and on the rhetorical and cultural situation. The composition class therefore attempts to teach students not to rely on, indeed to move beyond, such formulaic ways of structuring their writing.

Some students do say they would like to learn how to write longer, more detailed papers, a desire more consistent with composition theory, which places considerable value on the ability to elaborate about one's subject and to develop one's ideas deeply and fully. But even here the focus is not a heuristic one but a largely pragmatic one. It is not that students state a desire to learn how to explore their ideas in greater depth and complexity. Rather, they hope to learn how to achieve a desired length. These students say they have had trouble in the past meeting a length requirement and therefore need to learn how to expand their prose, in order to fill in the blank space on the page. They want to get sufficient numbers of words down on paper as an end in itself, not as would be more consistent with the curriculum, to explore their ideas as fully as possible. Getting words down on paper is implicitly at least, a process issue. And nowhere are students' goals more greatly opposed to those of the curriculum than where writing processes are concerned. The program seeks to extend, enrich, and broaden students' writing processes, to build in greater opportunities for reflection, interpretation, and development. However, students appear to want the opposite: shorter, more streamlined, and more efficient writing processes. Rather than spending more time on their writing assignments and doing more and better planning, drafting, revising, students want to do less. Very few students even allude to process concerns, focusing instead primarily on the structure and content of their texts. However, the few students who do mention going over a previously written draft, talk about wanting to develop their editing and tightening skills, rather than learning how better to extend and develop their drafts.

One can understand this desire for greater efficiency: students are busy people. Even at the start of college, they already appear concerned about the demands of other academic requirements, particularly those in the major area of study. Students are also perhaps not inclined to devote as much time, effort, and thought to their studies as instructors wish they would. Well over half of the beginning students at this university have jobs, often working close to forty hours a week or even more, and with other demands on students' time, academics often do not hold as central a place in students' lives as faculty might wish or expect. But for whatever reasons, greater speed and the development of a more compact and readily applicable set of writing strategies emerge as key features students wish to learn, though certainly in conflict with the goals of the curriculum.

If correctness, clarity, and conciseness (both in terms of having a concise product and employing a concise process) make up students' holy trinity of writing virtues, the fourth C would be creativity. One-sixth of the students say they want to learn how to be more creative in their writing, making creativity the fourth most frequently expressed goal. Students differ considerably, however, in what they appear to mean by the term creative. Some, like a writer quoted above, relate creativity to knowing "how to get things flowing so that I don't just stare at a blank piece of paper." They also connect it with being interesting, exciting, and unconventional in their writing, as a way of attracting and holding a reader's attention, a concern that the above student expressed. Others relate creativity to being uninhibited, expressive, and free in one's writing, not bound by repressive rules and requirements such as length and form. Some assert a desire to study those types of writing traditionally
known as “creative.” Several students hope that the composition course will be more of a creative writing course, providing opportunities to produce fiction and/or poetry. As Jay, a confident writer who describes himself as “good at writing thorough, informative research papers,” puts it:

One of my weak points in writing is poetry. I have never fully understood difficult poetry and I have not done very well at writing it. I would like to improve my poetry writing skills, because it is a necessary part of any English class.

My basic problem with poetry is understanding it. I have always had trouble analyzing difficult poetry to find hidden messages and symbols. I have to understand poetry before I can write it well. I would like to become a more proficient poet this year. I think I should learn to put meaning and symbols in my poetry instead of just rhyming words.

Jay never actually says he likes to write poetry or is even particularly interested in writing it, but rather describes poetry writing as “a necessary part of any English class” which for that reason must be mastered. This description suggests no deep affinity for poetry, only the thought that students might well be required to compose and/or interpret some of it in the first-year writing class, and he had therefore better learn how to do it well. Thus, as with correctness, clarity, and conciseness, creativity as defined by students is generally not an important goal for the composition curriculum (except in the first two senses described: the ability to generate words and the ability to be interesting to one’s audience).

Conclusion

On the whole, as the preceding discussion illustrates, the approaches to writing and even the types of writing that students hope to learn about in the composition sequence differ substantially from those that will soon confront them. We can see students as implicitly forming their own organization, a counter-CCCC emphasizing correctness, clarity, conciseness, and creativity. This CCCC stands very much in opposition to our own professional organization in terms of the students’ philosophy of writing, their discussion of the uses and value of writing, and their expressed curricular goals, however inchoate, unselfconscious, and below the surface these goals might be. Students report little interest in engaging in critical analysis, in extending their writing processes, or in entering the sort of intellectual community that the composition class entails.

The curriculum emphasizes writing as reflection, while students emphasize writing as practical action. The curriculum focuses on writing at a global level, emphasizing larger rhetorical aspects of argument and interpretation, while students focus more on the sentence and word levels. The curriculum seeks to extend and complicate the composing process, while students seek to streamline and simplify it. The curriculum regards text as situated, contingent, and open to a variety of interpretations, while students see it as fixed and straightforward. The curriculum pushes for questioning of the status quo, with hopes of encouraging social transformation, while students wish to find a comfortable place for themselves within the existing status quo. There is thus a serious discontinuity between what we expect students to learn in college composition and what they hope to learn, just as there is a discontinuity between the idea of writing as embodied in the curriculum and as understood by students. Compounding these discontinuities are the negative representations most students present of themselves as writers and the disaffection and outright fear many express for the course requirement that confronts them. Indeed, for many of the students the act of writing is itself an enigma. Not only do students find mysterious the process by which an idea or set of ideas becomes a finished text. They seem to think there exists a secret, preferably painless technique for achieving “that special something” that will finally allow their writing to find favor with their teachers, other readers, and even themselves.

Given this large gulf of understanding, expectation, and attitude, both students and teachers face difficult challenges in the composition sequence. On the one hand, teachers must hope that students can somehow be persuaded to adopt the values and attitudes, the habits of mind, that underlie the curriculum, and they must work hard to convince students of the advantages of critical literacy. It may be, after all, that students have simply never been exposed to such ideas before and once made aware will find this view of writing quite congenial. Failing such persuasion, teachers know that students want to do well, are generally cooperative and respectful, and in any case will more or less do what they need to do to succeed in the class. Of course, teachers have the power to require students to complete the assigned work, however disposed students may be, and perhaps through exposure and practice the intellectual dispositions of critical literacy may have a chance to take root. On the other hand, students face the challenge of having to take on a difficult course of study that appears to require a certain orientation that they themselves do not possess and that runs counter to their understandings and inclinations. To adopt critical literacy would involve for students a major shift in world view, attitude, and approach to schooling. Moreover, such a shift would be quite complicated and probably time-consuming as well, something more likely to happen gradually.
over the span of an entire college education, than during the first quarter or two of college.

With all these problems, the situation would not appear to leave much room for optimism. And yet, as Tom Newkirk illustrates in his recent book on personal writing in first-year composition (1997), optimism is perhaps the one quality students and teachers have in common. A glimmer of optimism can often be seen beneath all the fears and doubts that students express, underlying what their teachers might see as a narrow concern with getting a good grade and preparing for a future career, a concern that threatens to shut out larger matters of social, political, and intellectual importance but does not always succeed. Despite their worries, students want to do well in college and feel they can do well, though it might take great effort on their part. At times in these essays, an energy and determination comes through that should inspire hope in the most despairing of teachers. The following student, Shawna, earlier critiques her own disorganization in writing, suggesting it sometimes feels as if she is writing in a foreign language. But she concludes her essay this way:

Throughout my schooling writing has never been my strongest point. Being a musician I never really worried about it. That is until now. Now I'm in a whole new ballgame. In college they (Professors) don't care why you're there, just as long as you learn what they're teaching. So that's my attitude! When I walk into this classroom every Tuesday and Thursday I'm not going to even think about the fact that I'm a voice major. The minute I set foot in the classroom I'm going to imagine myself as a journalist or a novelist, that way I can really put my "all" into writing and learn the most I can.

I hope to learn the basic skills I need to know for writing a good, no, a great essay or paper. I hope that when I'm finished with English 101 I will be more than prepared to move on to a higher level of learning. Either that or become a "Bestseller" novelist.

Students also suggest that, despite their sometimes single-minded careerism, they are by no means completely closed off to new possibilities. If one looks hard at the essays, one can find fliers of openness, a willingness, even a desire to experiment with new ways of thinking and writing. Another student Ted, who also began his essay with a slew of negative comments about his own writing, even criticizing his letters to his girlfriend, ends with this analysis of what he would like to learn:

I hate researching! I hope to learn ways of motivation to research topics further than my present knowledge. Research is so time-consuming and seems to drag on forever to the point where I forget what I'm doing at the library in the first place. Is there some kind of technique that allows me to integrate with the information rather than just writing fact after fact after fact? If there is someone who knows, where were they when I needed them in high school? The ironic part is, they probably were there; I just wasn't paying attention. I guess I need to work on that too. What was I writing about again?
Fall Quarter. It is 9:00 a.m. on the first day of class in English 101. The early morning hour suggests that this is the first college class for many of the students. They file into the room a few at a time, not saying much to one another, and seat themselves in the prearranged circle. Dressed casually, the young men wear mainly tee-shirts with the names of colleges, sports teams, or bars, and blue jeans or shorts—it’s late September but still warm in the Midwest (not that it has to be warm for college students to wear shorts). Some students look a little preppier, with Izod-style shirts and khakis. A number of the men and a few of the women as well wear baseball caps, generally pulled down low over the forehead, making it difficult to get a good look at their faces, especially those who stare down at their desktops. The young women also wear jeans and tee-shirts, some emblazoned with designer brand names or southern-vacation memories. A few of the students sport a more alternative look, with longish hair, ripped jeans, tie-dyed tee-shirts, and colorful bracelets. With the exception of one Asian woman, the students are all white. A woman with short red hair and large, expressive eyes looks to be a returning student in her thirties; the others all appear about eighteen years old and fresh out of high school. In an arrangement reminiscent of a junior high dance, the women sit mainly on one side of the room, the men on the other. The teacher, a graduate student with long, wavy blonde hair, not that many years older than her students and wearing a gold pantsuit, stands at the front of the room greeting students. I sit in my chair looking around, right on the dividing line between the men and the women as it turns out, an older observer, not the teacher but apparently not a peer either. The faces of the students are a little flushed with excitement, apprehension, and, it seems to me, some fear. College has begun.

The students’ excitement is understandable: they are beginning a dramatic new phase in their lives, entering an institution highly valued by our culture. For this same reason, their worries are also understandable: today, they enter a new and unfamiliar setting, a large urban university with a reputation for impersonality. Many students have undoubtedly received warnings from family, friends, and teachers about the difficulties that lie ahead, not just the Byzantine registration system and inadequate parking facilities, but the increased demands of college assignments, the “weeding-out” process reputed to take place the first year, the need to be self-motivated and not fall behind, the necessity to change long-held habits and attitudes. How many beginning-first-year students declare that, though they took it easy in high school, they are really going to get serious about schoolwork now they are in college? Most of them, it seems.

As Michael Moffatt argues in his ethnographic study of Rutgers undergraduates, *Coming of Age in New Jersey* (1989), going to college in our society is an important part of the ritual move from childhood to adulthood, and this transition, glorious though it may be in many ways, is also fraught with worries for students. Most of these worries, as Moffatt shows, concern social aspects of being at college, such as making friends, having relationships, and finding interesting leisure activities. But at least some of these concerns focus on academics and course work, if only as possible impediments to students’ obtaining the freedom, independence from parents, and interconnectedness with new peers that are important goals in attending college. Given the pragmatic instrumentalism, the focus on developing skills and qualifications that the previous chapter suggests is a primary impetus in these students’ approaches to schooling, the stakes are high in attending college and may seem particularly so as students begin their first class.

Part of students’ anxiety comes out of their need to learn to negotiate this complex new environment, not just the physical and social settings of the large campus and, for many, new city (around 40 percent are living in dormitories and about that number will be pledging fraternities or sororities), but the academic terrain as well. It is this making sense of the academic terrain, specifically in the first-year writing class, that the present chapter will examine. Students must grasp the wide array of new demands that make up their coursework as a whole. About three-quarters of the students have already chosen a major in a pre-professional area and are beginning classes in that area as well as many others. Hence, students may well feel the need to organize their studies on a hierarchy of importance. Students must decide whether or not to devote particular attention to courses in their major, and if so, to decide which of their other courses should be seen as closely related to their major, therefore deserving of significant attention, and which as more peripheral, hence perhaps less important. Of course, students are also determining not just how valuable, but how interesting and how difficult their courses are, and such decisions, as I will show in this chapter, affect how much time and effort students devote to any particular class. The first-year writing course sits in an interesting position here: not part of the major, but probably
close enough in an instrumental sense for many students to consider important. But underlying students' questions and concerns is the need to become oriented in this new situation, to assess how different, and in what ways, their college courses will be from their previous instruction. Students must figure out the underlying ground rules operating in their classes. This idea of ground rules, with the term used in a specific, technical sense, takes on considerable importance in this chapter, as well as the following two chapters, and I will therefore discuss it in some detail below. Following that discussion, I will look in-depth at several important student-teacher conflicts in the first course of the composition sequence, using the notion of ground rules as a cultural frame for examining classroom interaction and student-teacher conflict. I will focus on the classrooms of Sherry and, to a lesser extent, Nan, looking in particular at the experiences of students in each class as they attempted to figure out and master the often implicit expectations in their respective courses.

The Idea of Ground Rules

I define ground rules here not as rules or requirements in the traditional, prescriptive sense of the term—due dates, length limits, homework assignments—but rather as teachers' tacit or underlying expectations of what students need to know and do in order to successfully carry out an academic task. Such expectations may carry considerable weight in influencing how teachers interpret and evaluate students' attitudes, comments, and coursework. The notion of ground rules comes originally from speech-act theory and pragmatics, the study of language use in particular contexts, as developed by philosophers such as J. L. Austin, in his book, How To Do Things With Words (1962) and Paul Grice, in his essay, "Logic and Conversation" (1975). Discussing the exchanges of middle-class Britons, Grice suggests that participants in conversations rely heavily on implicit, shared expectations and mutually understood cultural knowledge that are needed for speakers to make sense of one another's comments. For example, typical conversations are governed by what Grice calls a jointly held "cooperative principle," which participants expect each other to follow. The principle states: "Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." (p. 45). This principle breaks down into four subareas, which Grice calls "maxims," concerning the truth, informativeness, relevance, and intelligibility of the contribution. Essentially, these maxims state that we expect a speaker's contribution to be accurate, of an appropriate length, germane to the subject under discussion, and in a form that we understand. The maxims take into consideration differences imposed by specific contexts and purposes, such as status rules allowing one person to hold the floor longer than another or change the subject, or situations such as sales transactions in which a speaker might be expected to withhold or even provide inaccurate information.

Of course, this description of principles underlying conversation may work well in the abstract, but actual conversations frequently violate aspects of the cooperative principle. Speakers are often inaccurate, rambling, off-topic, or obscure. People are often not so cooperative or may have conflicting purposes in a conversation. Yet by examining these very situations in which maxims seem to have been violated, the principle can actually be observed most clearly. For one's first response in a conversation when a maxim appears to have been breached is not to reject it as meaningless, but to attempt to understand the utterance as if it did indeed "make sense" and fit with our tacit knowledge of how conversation works. So, when I ask a student if he turned in his essay, and the student replies, "I was sick all weekend," the comment at first appears not to respond to my question. However, because I assume the cooperative principle to be in effect, I look for and easily find the missing propositions to make sense of the reply, and therefore can then ask when the paper will be ready. Because the principles underlying conversation may vary across cultures with limited amounts of shared knowledge and assumptions, cross-cultural misunderstandings are to be expected and frequently take place, but to a large extent can be explained using Grice's framework. Discourse analyst Stephen Levinson (1983) argues that Grice's maxims are not simply linguistic ground rules but govern forms of social interaction—including conversation—in a more general sense.

While some scholars attempt to adduce overarching principles governing conversation and social interaction generally, others focus more on contextual variations, the ways of using language and making sense of it that characterize particular groups or settings. Legal, medical, and business communication have been studied extensively, as has educational discourse. In Britain, the importance of tacit understandings, or ground rules, in communication has been applied to the study of classroom discourse and teacher ideology in elementary science classes by educational theorists Neil Mercer and Derek Edwards (1987), to whom the above discussion of Grice's work is indebted.

This notion of ground rules has also been applied to research on secondary school writing in English, science, and humanities by Yanina Sheenan and Douglas Barnes (1991), who studied working-class and middle-class children at several British schools. As this work is particularly important for the present study, I will discuss it in some detail. According to Sheenan and Barnes, some ground rules are general to
schooling as a whole, such as the importance of punctuality, class participation, and an "interested" attitude. Some are particular to a subject or discipline, such as the conventions of a specific genre, for example a lab report in chemistry, which teachers may make explicit to varying degrees. And some are specific to a teacher or even a particular occasion, such as an individual instructor’s preference for a literary as opposed to an expository style in composition. The existence of unstated ground rules, these authors suggest, is not in itself a terrible or unusual thing. As I suggested in the above discussion of Grice’s analysis of conversation, people generally organize their behavior in familiar cultural situations through such unstated expectations. But schooling is so riddled with evaluations, both formal and informal, that teachers’ tacit expectations often take on heightened importance; hence, the constant search by students for “what the teacher is really looking for.” As teachers who want students to be more intrinsically motivated and genuinely interested in their education, we often find such concerns petty and irritating, but I would suggest that students’ anxiety can indeed be well-founded.

In fact, both sets of scholars examining ground rules in schooling, Edwards and Mercer as well as Sheeran and Barnes, found strong evidence that what teachers left unsaid regarding their expectations of students was often just as significant as what they overtly communicated. Sheeran and Barnes argue that many of the ground rules governing school writing tasks are unspoken, simply assumed by teachers to be understood, while students may have quite a different understanding of what they are expected to do. The authors suggest that teachers are often not fully aware of many of the ground rules operating in their classes, though such expectations may reflect the underlying purposes of an activity. For example, school assignments often have as their underlying purpose to encourage and initiate students into particular ways of thinking, such as abstract reasoning or the understanding and application of theories or category systems, though these approaches may never be clearly described. And according to Sheeran and Barnes, students are far more likely to resist carrying out a school task, not only if they do not agree with its justification, but also if they do not understand why they are being asked to do it.

Sheeran and Barnes found a number of different types of ground rules concerning writing to be operating in British secondary school classrooms. While the educational contexts are obviously very different, I would argue that some of the ground rules the authors discuss are directly relevant to the present study of American college students. For example, Sheeran and Barnes talk about the importance for students of taking on forms of hypothetical thinking in assignments and activities across the school curriculum. Teachers frequently require students to suspend their usual ways of understanding the world and to try out alternative conceptual frameworks, an activity I would argue also takes place frequently in the first-year college writing class. A writing assignment they observed in a science class asked students to apply seven tests for determining whether something was a living organism. The teacher chose as a readily available model a set of keys, to which students had to subject the seven tests. While the majority of the class followed the teacher’s directions and applied the tests, a small but vocal group of working-class students resisted the assignment, arguing that they knew the keys were not alive and that therefore the tests were unnecessary. These students were, of course, correct, that the category system was not needed in this instance. However, the point here is that entering a “what if” realm in which one does things one would not do in ordinary life is an essential part of schooling. Yet, according to Sheeran and Barnes, some students, particularly those from less privileged backgrounds, often seem to be less willing to engage in such activities, to enter the “what if” realm, indeed often resist the activities, either because they do not understand the importance of such hypothetical thinking or because they expect a school activity to be more closely related to everyday life and to have more immediate application. Related sorts of conflict and resistance can be found in first-year writing in American colleges and universities.

Similarly, an area in which implicit ground rules were found by the authors to be operating and causing problems with regard to writing assignments in secondary English classes concerned the type of critical stance the teacher wanted students to adopt in writing essays about literature. Teachers frequently required students to adopt “new critical” analytic systems investigating such textual features as character, symbolism, theme, and setting in a particular work of literature. Yet many students resisted these demands, arguing that the category system detracted from their enjoyment in reading and also that it did not seem particularly revealing or relevant, a conclusion that has also been reached by many literary theorists today. Another example of an area of apparent ground-rule problems concerned the extent to which students were permitted to draw upon their own prior knowledge and experience in carrying out an assignment, as opposed to confining themselves strictly to course content. Teachers frequently did not specify this information, and students often assumed that an important ground rule in critical and argumentative writing was that they should only draw upon the actual subject matter as provided in the class, and that other knowledge they happened to possess was strictly off-limits for the assignment.
Ground Rules and Social Class

One key problem that makes the study of implicit expectations so important is that, for most of these areas in which tacit ground rules seemed to be operating, the authors found noticeable differences in understanding and performance between students from different socio-economic class backgrounds. In particular, Sheeran and Barnes (1991) argue that privileged, middle-class students, because of their backgrounds and preparation, typically have a better grasp of the ground rules than working-class and/or minority students, and that, therefore, the differential mastery of ground rules helps to perpetuate existing power relations through the schools and into society as a whole. In this sense, the concept of ground rules is closely related to what Pierre Bourdieu, in discussing French university students, refers to as “cultural capital,” knowledge of the kinds of knowledge, attitudes, and behavior required to be successful in schooling (1974). Bourdieu argues that middle-class students have far greater access than working-class and poor students to the sanctioned ways of interacting and interpreting teachers’ words and actions in school, and that these differences contribute significantly to academic performance.

Sheeran and Barnes’ findings support Bourdieu’s analysis, with the more privileged students generally more in tune with teachers’ implicit expectations, more comfortable engaging in alternative ways of thinking and writing, as well as more compliant about trying out concepts and category systems that differ from their previous experience. The authors argue, along with Bourdieu, that less privileged students are not intellectually inferior to those from more middle-class backgrounds, but that poor and working-class students often lack the savvy, the understanding of how to operate most effectively in a school context, and the willingness to cooperate with and trust teachers, that their more privileged peers possess and benefit from. Composition classes at the University of Cincinnati, as I suspect, at many other large state universities include students from a fairly wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, from upper-middle-class to poor, though the majority of students are in the mid-range of the middle class. Thus, one important purpose of Chapters 4 through 6 is to identify and look closely at ground rules operating in the composition class in order to examine their impact on students from different backgrounds. Such inquiry may ultimately serve to raise teachers’ awareness of their taken-for-granted expectations and to help teachers find ways of clarifying ground rules and sensitizing students to their existence and importance.

I therefore have several reasons for making the concept of ground rules central to my analysis of the first quarter of college writing instruction. First, a close look at this issue of ground rules and how they affect students’ understanding and classroom performance in first-year college writing helps to explain some of the important but generally obscured cultural and political forces behind key conflicts teachers and students experience in the class. Second, working-class and some minority students, that is, less privileged students, appear to be disproportionately affected by the problem of a lack of awareness of the implicit ground rules and therefore may have much to gain from an improved understanding of this issue on the part of educators. Third, I would argue that the first-year writing course, in that it serves as an introduction to discourse and thought at the university, is itself in large part a class about ground rules, that is, about making clear to students the ways of thinking and communicating that will be expected of them, and likely not made so explicit, throughout college and even beyond. Yet at the same time, the writing class has its own set of not fully stated ground rules for students to figure out, and which they comprehend with varying degrees of success. Therefore, the concept of ground rules takes on particular importance with regard to the first-year writing class and can serve as a powerful frame for examining the ways in which beginning college students and their teachers approach the course material in first-year college writing.

The complexities of classroom interaction, and of student and teacher interpretation of curriculum, raise a number of important questions about teaching and learning in the composition class. What takes place when we attempt to enact a highly sophisticated and ambitious curriculum with beginning college students whose understandings and expectations are so different from our own? How do students tend to make sense of the course? How do they go about their work? How do the teachers themselves understand and view the curriculum, and the theory which underlies it, and how do they enact it with the students? What sorts of conflicts emerge when students and teacher’s orientations differ? What are the effects of these conflicts? How are they dealt with by students and teachers alike? Such questions have not been explored sufficiently in composition, a field replete with ambitious approaches to teaching but short of inquiry into classroom enactment and possible transformation of curriculum.

Chapters 4 through 6 address the above questions within the context of a particular first-year college writing program, as students attempt to figure out and master the implicit ground rules for the class. But rather
than provide a comprehensive, chronological discussion of twenty weeks of instruction, the chapters will instead highlight key areas in which conflicts and misunderstandings frequently take place. In the present chapter, I discuss student responses to one of the primary underlying expectations governing the course. I refer specifically to the expectation that, in terms of their general behaviors and attitudes, students will begin the process of socialization into the academic community. Teachers gauge the level of socialization in part, I suggest, by examining the extent to which students seem to be taking their work seriously, doing it promptly, and spending a sufficient amount of out-of-class time on class assignments, as first-year writing is the closest course the university has to a general introduction to university study. I also refer to the unrelented expectation that students will learn to extend and complicate their writing processes, which is an important goal of the writing sequence and is particularly stressed during the first quarter.

**Teachers' Approaches and the Received Curriculum**

A key aim of the first-year writing curriculum is to help students establish a high level of engagement with their course work, that is, to make a successful transition from high school to college not just in their writing and reading, but in their overall work habits, attitudes, and general approaches to academics. As is prominently stated near the beginning of the First-Year Writing Program mission statement, the sequence is about textuality, how texts are produced and consumed; the sequence, therefore, is necessarily about critical thinking, critical reading, and critical writing. It seeks to give students access to the discourse of the university community, and it also seeks to preserve the student’s critical relation to that discourse. We need to help students develop the oppositional, questioning ability that makes of them not just passive consumers, but thinkers who can hold new materials up to genuinely informed scrutiny.

Underlying this goal is the assumption that high school students typically have a more perfunctory attitude toward their coursework than is needed in college, are accustomed to spending too little time studying and completing assignments, and often lack the level of intellectual and critical engagement necessary for serious college academics. What's more, most students in first-year writing have been fairly successful in high school, maintaining at least a B average overall, whatever their past performance in English classes, and thus may desire if at all possible not to change their approaches while in college, despite whatever warnings they may have received about the greater difficulty of college. Of course, no first-year writing class could prepare students for the wide variety of prose formats and ways of writing that exist in college and that students might be required to undertake; from the various disciplines in the sciences and technical fields, to business, to social sciences, and to the arts and humanities, the range is enormous. However, the course can and does attempt to provide a kind of intellectual orientation to university academics and a set of strategies, or dispositions of mind, that will help prepare students for not just the writing but also the kinds of intensive, rigorous thinking, reading, speaking, and problem solving that make up a university education. I would argue that this goal of the course is particularly important for less advantaged students whose families and previous educational experience may not have fully prepared them for the nature of college work.

This idea that the first-year writing sequence functions in part as an introduction, not just to the ways of writing students will be expected to master in college, but also to the ways of thinking and learning, while highlighted in the Program’s mission statement, is not necessarily shared, or shared to the same extent, by teachers in the Program as they enact curriculum in their own classes. Moreover, the focus of instruction is not necessarily the same for each of the courses in the writing sequence. The second course in the sequence, English 102, which involves critical reading and writing about cultural and political issues, as well as a research-writing component, may be seen by many instructors as the primary site for teaching careful engagement and critical reflection about one’s subject matter. The first course in the sequence, 101, appears to be viewed by instructors as focusing more exclusively on preparing students to be effective college writers. In this course specifically, individual teachers seem much more likely to focus directly on issues of writing, rather than on questions of overall intellectual development, though clearly thought and intellect are key concerns of teachers in helping students improve their writing.

Both teachers, Sherry and Nan, when discussing their goals for 101, make this point clearly. As Nan describes her purpose in 101:

I want [students] to move away from expressive or narrative writing to expository and analytical writing. I want to wean them away from bad high school or teenage writing habits (gushing, ranting) and encourage them to be more controlled and sophisticated writers. I think we help them be more effective by presenting them with a range of writing assignments and giving them the specialized tools in invention, organization, and self-editing. By the end of 101, they should have practiced these tools and be ready for any kind of college writing.
Collision Course

For Sherry, the goals of the course are wider but also more nuanced. Among other points, she states:

It is important that 10: invite first-year students rather than bully them with a "You're in the academy now" kind of ethos; at the same time, the curriculum should lead them to take risks with their writing in an academic setting—and to become more aware of themselves as rhetors in rhetorical situations, making choices which would affect an audience's reading/response/action. I also want them to develop some awareness of the antecedent notions of genre influencing their relationship with assignments and to begin considering alternative definitions for writing in the academy.

In 101, I want students to explore relationships with literacy, with their own reading and writing processes. While helping them develop a precursive habit, I strongly emphasize invention. I have become increasingly convinced that this is a critical stage of literacy that most students have not been taught to value and explore. I also attempt to help students become aware of their own subjectivity, competing authorities, and some of the complexities involved in taking a "creative" approach in an assignment.

In addition, both teachers cite sentence-level skills as an important part of students' self-presentation in writing, but both also argue that superficial correctness is less of a priority than are larger concerns of process, rhetorical awareness, and discourse structure. As Sherry puts it:

I want my students to leave 101 understanding correct (standard English) grammar as a tool which lends them authority with many audiences, especially academic audiences. But, because I do not want students to fixate on surface "correctness" as the end-all of writing, I direct most of my emphases in grading and in class discussions, on content. Students in 101 are still experimenting with the amount of energy it takes to write an effective piece; if that energy is being distributed by writers in a limited-resource fashion, I want them to direct most of it toward critical thought and development of ideas.

While emphasizing that 101 should bring students comfortably and nonthreateningly into the academy by focusing on personal knowledge and experience, Sherry and Yen each assert that the course should be rigorous and demanding as well. There is, thus, a tension built into the 101 course which teachers themselves seem to wrestle with. On the one hand, drawing upon a philosophy that owes much to student-centered writing pedagogy, the teachers want to "meet students where they are" (Yen), and "to invite first-year students rather than bully them" (Sherry). On the other hand, they also have the goal of challenging students to be more reflective, engaged, and hard-working. Complicating this tension even more is the disparity in degree of preparation among students in first-year writing, with certain students who are writing at a fairly high level to begin with and others who have serious trouble even meeting minimal standards of development, organization, complexity of ideas, perceptiveness, and surface competence. If the teacher is at all concerned with maintaining consistent standards of evaluation, as the Program officially requires them to do, then this variation in levels of preparedness can make for a difficult moving back and forth between the nurturing and the challenging stance.

For example, teachers must walk a fine line in making the course doable for those students who come in with low-level writing skills and weak preparation, while at the same time making the course appropriately challenging for the students who enter the course already writing at a higher level of competence. The following section examines how the teachers themselves dealt with this potential conflict and how case-study students who entered the course at these different levels interpreted and responded to the teachers' conflicting desires, on the one hand, to create a comfortable setting in which students would be engaged with their writing and, on the other hand, to create a rigorous atmosphere in which students would be appropriately challenged.

Ground Rules in College Composition

Comfort Zone, Conflict Zone: Degrees of Difficulty in Composition

One idea behind the "greater engagement" approach is that students will push themselves harder if they are engaged in their writing, that is, if they enjoy their work and feel stimulated by it. Yet in examining how students went about their work in 101, we can see just how complicated and multifaceted this notion is, and how great the tension can be between the emphasis on comfort and the emphasis on rigor.

Indeed, as one way of stressing rigor, college teachers often advise students that, for every hour of class time, they are expected to spend two hours working on their own. Thus, students would be expected to spend about six hours working outside of class per week in a writing class that met for three hours per week. In my initial interviews with case-study students, I was therefore interested to find out approximately how much work students had done outside of class in high school, in order to see just how far from their experiences the college expectation proved to be. I assumed that students had spent much less time in high school working outside of class, nowhere near the two hours for every one hour of class that was being presented to them as standard for college. However, what students said in response to my query surprised me. As described earlier, I chose for case study a wide range of students, including some who had been successful or even very successful at strong
suburban or private high schools, some with more average academic records from not particularly distinguished schools, and some who had been average or struggling students at average or academically weak schools. I am characterizing schools here according to their reputations, their placement of students in college, and standardized test scores. What particularly surprised me was that even the most academically successful case-study students from the strongest high schools enrolled in the most demanding undergraduate programs described doing extremely little course work outside of school.

A prime example would be Vince, an electrical engineering student in Nan’s 101 class who had made his computer out of component parts, had done well in advanced placement courses (testing out of much of the standard freshman math and science curriculum), and had achieved high honors at a suburban high school with a strong reputation across the state. A child of college-educated parents who had relocated to the Midwest from the East Coast due to a corporate job transfer when he was in junior high, Vince told me that, while he almost always completed his high school assignments, he generally did no academic work of any kind outside of school, completing all of his homework during a study hall period. He did review for tests and also wrote papers at home, on the infrequent occasions when asked to write papers, but very rarely did he spend even as long as an hour on such tasks, though finishing high school with very nearly a 4.0 grade point average (with extra points awarded for taking advanced classes). As he put it, “I did the slide-by routine, basically, and it worked.” Vince was typical of the case-study students, for whom the prospect of spending many hours per week on school work outside of class appeared to be quite a novel idea.

Vince, however, was highly motivated—determined to do well in the writing course and in his other classes; at the beginning of the quarter, he expressed a desire to spend as much time as necessary on his 101 course work, in part because he saw writing as a potentially important part of an engineer’s work but also because he saw his own writing skills in English class generally as

okay but not particularly good. English was probably my worst subject. My mechanics are all right, but the content was never there in my English papers. The critical thinking part. I’m not sure if it’s something I can develop. I’ve never put enough time into it to really try to develop it, but I’ve never had the ability to just take a poem and get much out of it. I feel like, whatever.

When I asked why he thought the content was weak in his essays, Vince replied that most of his essays had been analyses of literature, and that literary analysis was too time-consuming. I’ve never been very good at reading. It’s my most difficult topic. First of all, I’m not a very fast reader, so it takes me a long time to do things. And then the problem is, not being a fast reader, I don’t want to go back and reread [the work] again to find things you’re supposed to find. So interpreting literature was sure a pain in the neck. . . . I don’t read. I’ve never been into that. Reading novels or anything fiction was always just boring. I read for information, I guess. That’s when I do reading.

Still, as a successful student in honors classes, Vince had taken advanced placement English and gotten a grade of B, but had elected not to take the AP test, out of a worry that he would not achieve a high enough score to exempt first-year college English. “I started to get ready for it, because I wanted to see what I’d get on it. Then, I didn’t think it was worth the $70.00, because I didn’t think I’d pass it, to be honest with you.” Yet despite his profile as an engaged, highly motivated student enrolled in the University’s selective College of Engineering, and by his own admission aiming for “the 4.0 grade average,” Vince’s idea of studying was far from the college ideal. As he described his approach to college course work early in the first quarter, “My general strategy is to figure out how much I can put off and still get a good grade.”

And as he himself stated, Vince’s strategies in first-year English 101 did not differ significantly from his somewhat casual approach to school work in high school. He did the work that he needed to do, in fact occasionally completing drafts a day or so ahead of schedule. However, he spent little more than an hour or two on his drafts and subsequently did extremely little revising. Yet once Vince found he could do basically “B” work with such an approach, and realized at the same time that “A” work would take considerably more effort, he was quite satisfied to do the minimum. In addition, despite his relatively strong academic background, Vince almost never participated in class discussion throughout the quarter. He preferred not to take part and even resented somewhat those students who did talk in class, viewing them as “you know, always the same old people, people that just like hearing themselves talk.” On the whole, while Vince was a very bright student, well-prepared for college especially in the technical areas, and while he did consistently B-level work throughout the quarter, his attitude toward the first-year writing could only be described as perfunctory; he did what he had to do to get by in the class.

Moreover, it was not the case that Vince was working harder and spending more time on subjects in Engineering, his major area of study; he said that he was working no harder in his other classes, where he was
also doing B or A level work. All of the other case-study students, with two noteworthy exceptions who will be discussed later in the chapter, similarly reported spending considerably less than the suggested amount of time on their 101 coursework. Most of the students did, however, say they were working at least somewhat harder than they had for their high school courses.

Yet Vince and also Elizabeth, an architecture major, both upper-middle-class students from Nan’s class, did state that first-year college writing was actually a good deal less demanding than their twelfth grade English classes! Both had taken the AP course at strong suburban high schools, which had involved considerable reading of literary works such as The Iliad and The Odyssey, plus novels by Shakespeare, Dickens, Faulkner, and others, as well as regular essay assignments. The other students in the class were in their view extremely strong—among the best students in the grade. In the first-year writing class, however, there was a much greater spread of students, from very bright and well-prepared to much less so, and the general academic level, as well as the nature of the work, with the emphasis on writing from personal experience and knowledge, seemed to these students much less demanding than their previous English classes in strong suburban high schools. This sense that the coursework was not particularly demanding and some of the peers not particularly bright or articulate led to a somewhat contemptuous attitude on the part of these relatively high academic students toward the course and toward some of their peers in the class. Vince and Elizabeth each expressed a bit of disappointment about the degree of difficulty of the class, though it must also be said that neither student got an A in the course with their less than stellar efforts. Both were in Nan’s opinion solid B students. Thus, at least looking at this one rather crude indicator of academic socialization, the amount of time spent on coursework outside of class, students seemed successfully to resist the teacher’s desire that they become more fully engaged in their writing. Because they could do the required work to their own satisfaction without putting in significant amounts of time outside of class, they rejected Nan’s implicit ground rule that they ratchet up the degree of seriousness with which they approach their academic work in English class.

Students’ Ways of Interacting with Authority

An equally important indicator of the degree to which the students were being socialized into the academic community as part of first-year college writing concerns their classroom demeanor, level and manner of participation in class discussion and activity, and ways of interacting with the teacher both in and out of class. Regarding such issues, I was interested in (among other things) seeing whether the students from less privileged backgrounds, who had attended academically weaker high schools and whose parents had not gone to college, would indeed possess less cultural capital, and have more trouble adjusting to the expected norms of behavior, than did the students from more privileged backgrounds.

In Nan’s 101 class, there was indeed a marked difference in the level of savvy, and in general preparation for college writing, between the two working-class students from inner city high schools, Felicity and Cindy, and their more upper-middle-class suburban counterparts, such as Elizabeth and Vince. In classroom demeanor, Felicity and Cindy seemed more like high school students than college students, a bit distracted and often not terribly involved in the activities of the course. They generally sat in a small cluster with two other young women. Shawn was a high school friend of Felicity’s, and like Felicity was from a poor background, having been brought up by her mother, who had had serious health problems throughout Shawn’s childhood. Chloe was a slightly older (early 20s) and more cosmopolitan woman who had lived in many cities and even traveled abroad quite a bit (her parents had been professional ballet dancers and then ballet teachers who toured and relocated frequently). She had just returned to school after several years of secretarial work and appeared to be at the center of this group, with the others at times competing for her attention. The foursome chatted almost nonstop during class, usually quietly, about matters of personal interest, though occasionally about the topic being officially discussed, throughout the class period. When Nan divided the class into groups, they tended to form their own circle. Privately quite annoyed by the chatting, several times during the quarter Nan talked individually to these students and asked them to be more considerate, but the discussions continued, though generally in a more circumspect manner, at least for awhile. They seemed less concerned that it was not “proper” classroom behavior to chat throughout class, or if aware, did not mind being mildly rebellious, while the more privileged case-study students, though no more engaged in the coursework, were more careful to avoid this kind of distracting, disrespectful, and potentially dangerous behavior.

The more classroom-savvy Vince, on the other hand, deeply resented the attendance policy requiring him to come to class regularly, believing that he would do just as well attending infrequently. Even though he generally sat next to Chris, a friend and a student in his major who was taking most of the same classes, he resisted the urge to chat during class. Of course, Vince also did not take part in sanctioned class discussion, saying toward the end of the quarter,
To be honest, those class discussions are starting to get pretty old with me; it seems like the same thing over and over again. I was telling you before about how I don't say much at all, but now I have no desire to say anything. It's just people with the same ideas, coming out with their little things. It's so predictable sometimes what's going to be said.

But despite his not participating in discussions, Vince made sure through his papers and his one-on-one interactions with Nan, that she knew he was a serious student. He tended to write about academically oriented topics, such as the principles of flight for his essay explaining a concept, and two papers specifically discussing school situations, both of which were concerned with problems of grading. The first was his significant-event essay discussing an incident of perceived injustice in his junior year of high school, in chemistry class when many students in the class got the answers to a take-home test from students a year older and therefore got higher grades than Vince and several others, who had done the work without outside help. The second was his problem-solution essay about his college computer programming class, in which the tests included material not covered in class and points seemed to him to be deducted rather unfairly by the teaching assistant in charge of grading. Certainly in these papers discussing school assignments in considerable detail, Vince came across as a serious student, if perhaps in Nan's view an overly grade-conscious one.

Felicity, however, gave a somewhat different impression. She was a working-class student of Puerto Rican descent from a very disrupted family and an urban high school that sent few students on to college. Enrolled in a special program for underprepared students, she had managed to take the required composition placement exam, which most likely would have placed her in a remedial section. Felicity quickly became dependent on Nan, went to see her during office hours, called her regularly at home (a practice Nan encouraged, particularly with struggling students), and would look to Nan for what began to seem like more than a healthy amount of guidance. Felicity's dependence began to feel excessive even to Nan, who had a nurturing, maternal quality in her teaching and was especially concerned that students like Felicity, from weak schools, poor homes, and difficult backgrounds, and with fairly weak writing skills, get the help necessary to pass the class. In fact, Nan was so concerned about students like Felicity, and to a somewhat lesser extent Cindy, whose writing was also marginal in many ways and who, Nan feared, might not pass the class, that she acknowledged lowering her expectations for those students coming in with relatively stronger writing skills and academic backgrounds. Thus, she now worried that the course was too undemanding for those more accomplished students. Indeed, bright students coming in as competent writers, including Elizabeth and Vince, found the course surprisingly easy, put in only minimal time, and were still able to come out with the B grade which they were fairly satisfied to get. As Nan put it, "These students and others like them probably don't even need the course; they could probably pass it in the first week." These students were thus able to focus the greater part of their efforts on coursework in their majors, and did not need to alter significantly their high school approaches to writing.

Students' Approaches to the Writing Process

But what, then, were students doing with the time that they did spend working on their assignments for first-year writing? For the most part, they were writing and, to a lesser extent, revising their papers. Students had other assignments for the class, which mainly involved reading sample essays and keeping a journal, but they reported spending minimal time on these activities, largely because such work accounted for only a small proportion of the course grade. To examine more closely how students spent their time on coursework outside of class, I will look at their responses to a second underlying ground rule concerning the requirement that students extend and develop their writing process, making greater use of prewriting and revising. This goal of the course appears prominently and in several different guises in the mission statement. English 101 is intended to encourage students to reflect on their own writing processes and to recognize those patterns or habits that have or have not served them well; to teach students to try a wide range of invention strategies, emphasizing the importance of what Donald Murray calls "writing from abundance," and of writing multiple drafts before the deadline draft; and to persuade students that revision means more than recopying a paper or correcting superficial errors; to teach students how to revise their drafts, moving them ever closer to being reader-ready.

These goals were stressed in both Sherry and Nan's classes, with considerable class time given over to learning and practicing invention techniques, working on revision, and providing peer and teacher feedback on drafts.

A decade or so ago, most students seemed to enter first-year college writing with an extremely limited understanding of the intricacies of the writing process, having had little experience in prewriting or revising. Indeed, for all but a few students, revising appeared to mean "doing it
over in ink" and correcting a few surface errors. These days, however, increasing numbers of students, trained by teachers with Writing Project experience, enter the first-year writing course with some background in process-oriented pedagogy. These students have some experience with such aspects of process pedagogy as prewriting in its various forms, including not just outlining but also cubing, looping, freewriting, and brainstorming; journal-keeping; peer feedback; and revision. These students have learned that writing is a time-consuming activity that can involve considerable thought and effort and can even require rethinking. The students from suburban high schools all expressed familiarity with the "writing workshop" approach. Elizabeth, for example, who said, "Cubing? Oh, we did that in junior high," she remarked. Even Felicity, from an urban high school with a weak academic reputation, which sent only a small percentage of its graduates onto postsecondary education, said that rough drafts and required revision were a normal part of her routine for writing papers in English class. More students these days also have experience writing their essays on word processors, which make revision considerably more doable. Yet despite more students using computers and having been exposed to invention and prewriting strategies and to the greater advantages of writing more than one draft, there was in both Nan's and Sierry's classes considerable resistance on the part of students to the teachers' desire that they extend their writing processes.

The 101 course, particularly in the beginning weeks, emphasizes invention and provides numerous opportunities for students to practice prewriting strategies both in and out of class as they prepare the first essay assignment. Moreover, for every essay, students are required to write a rough draft and bring it to class for peer feedback several days before the actual paper is due. It would seem, therefore, that an extended writing process is almost built into or required by the first-year writing class. However, an examination of the case-study students' approaches to the essay assignments reveals a different, more complex, and, one might say, more depressing picture. Students were particularly resistant to the idea of prewriting. They much preferred, and were more accustomed to, simply coming up with the kernel of an idea fairly quickly along with a general plan which was never written down, and then writing the essay, conceived as an essay rather than as a rough draft, without spending much time exploring various possibilities or considering different directions their writing could take. The one area where students would take some time, often days, in fact, was in choosing a topic. This tendency seemed to stem most often from a mixture of indecision and procrastination. Many students had a difficult time either thinking of a subject that fit the assignment and that they were interested in or knew enough about, or of choosing between a range of potential topics.

This inability to decide fairly quickly upon a topic had unfortunate consequences in the time frame of the quarter, in part because it limited the amount of time students could take in conceptualizing and writing their papers, but also because prewriting activities nearly always took place right around the time when the essay had been assigned. Especially in Nan's class, where structured invention activities were particularly stressed, students would typically spend a good deal of class time generating ideas about their topic, and in this time prewriting approaches would be modeled and practiced. However, as I learned from my case-study interviews, often students would not yet be committed to a topic when the prewriting exercises were going on. And so in many cases the students could not really take advantage of the prewriting exercise. Vince would often simply stare off into space or rack his brain trying to decide upon a topic during the twenty or thirty minutes of class time when his teacher, Nan, was leading the class step by step through a cubing, questioning, or brainstorming activity designed to help students generate and organize material for writing about their chosen topic. As Cris put it, when discussing how she wrote an argumentative essay on date rape, a subject very important to her, "I really don't understand the planning process. I just wrote it. That's how I feel, and that's how I do it." Or in the words of Elizabeth, "I don't prewrite. I just write." To a surprising extent, then, students in first-year writing seem to resist teachers' efforts to have them take greater advantage of the composing process, particularly when it comes to invention, generating, conceptualizing, and organizing their ideas for a piece of writing. They do not understand it, they are rather mystified by it, and also do not believe in it. It could be that students are simply continuing to use strategies which, as Janet Emig (1971) suggests, have been effective in their high school writing assignments, where the predominant aim is the kind of knowledge-telling that does not require much planning. Moreover, many students in the first-year college course seem to feel they do not need to do more and find evidence supporting this belief, as they are able to write at least competent papers and earn B grades without engaging in significant amounts of prewriting.

Students were similarly resistant to the idea of revising their written work, though perhaps more willing to revise than to prewrite—and they were also more or less required to do some revision. For each essay as-
ignment, students had to bring to class a rough draft which would be reviewed by other students in the class, and possibly by the teacher as well. Sherry occasionally organized peer feedback as a “read around” format in which she and the students read a variety of drafts, as many as they could get through in a class period, and wrote written comments on the drafts, giving no oral feedback. She believed that students’ comments were often more candid and useful when given in writing because students were too often unwilling to go beyond a very superficial approval of the draft when speaking face-to-face. Nan organized her peer feedback sessions as “editor’s days” in which students worked in pairs providing one another with detailed feedback. After the initial papers, students were not required to attend these sessions unless they were doing poorly in the course, though many did take part, usually more than half the class. Each student was asked to read one or two drafts thoroughly and carefully and to provide extensive written comments on it. And students were required to show that they had carefully considered the comments of their editor.

The emphasis in both classes was to ensure that students wrote a draft, received constructive feedback on the draft, and took advantage of the revising process. Yet what often happened was that most students were extremely reluctant to revise in any kind of substantive way, and did so only if they were very insecure about the quality of their draft. More often, students would make a few small changes based upon the comments of their peers, but make the changes primarily because they felt they were required to. Both Vince and Elizabeth, on the first writing assignment, went against their best instincts and made a change based on their editors’ feedback because they wanted to show Nan they were being responsive to peer suggestions, but each later regretted the decision, feeling they had actually weakened their essays. As Vince puts it, “Dr. Reitz said I probably should not have agreed with the editor in this case. She liked the original ending. You know, we turn in both the first copy and the second copy. I was kicking myself. I had it better the first time.” Such incidents raise the issue of the nature and quality of peer feedback, which will be discussed in the next chapter in examining the development of students’ analytic stance.

Exceptions to the Rule: Joshua and Rachel

The two case-study students who departed most significantly from this pattern of what amounts to one-draft writing with minimal invention or revision, both from Sherry’s class, were Joshua and Rachel. They appeared to have very different motivations from one another for carrying out the assigned coursework, with Josh consumed by a deep interest in his topic and a desire to communicate in writing, and with Rachel impelled by a fear of failure and a willingness to do what her teacher asked of her, in addition to a strong work ethic and what she termed “a desire to learn as much as possible.” These two students stood out among the others for their willingness to put considerably more than a minimal amount of time into their essay writing and to devote much of that time to generating ideas, writing several different versions of their papers, and making a number of substantial changes in their drafts. Unlike the other case-study students, they appeared to grasp most fully and act upon their teacher’s ground rule that they engage in a complex and extended writing process.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Joshua was a successful Civil Engineering student in Sherry’s class who had recently moved to this midwestern city from a nearby southern state with his family; his father had taken a position with a large corporation in the area. He was something of a study in contrasts.

Josh had not taken school writing very seriously in the past, though receiving good grades for his work. He described revision in his high school writing assignments as a “joke,” explaining that when his eleventh-grade teacher began requiring students to turn in a rough draft with their essays, he and his friends would deliberately write the draft after completing the essay; much the way students sometimes describe doing a required outline after writing. “Everybody, what they did was write their essay, and then in homeroom or something they would write a rough draft real quick.” Indeed, Josh and his friends began competing to see who could make up the worst, sloppiest, most incoherent, problem-ridden rough draft; a competition he finally appeared to win, with his victory having a surprising effect upon the teacher’s process emphasis. After printing out his essay, he would go back to the computer and “take out sentences and mess things up and make it look like I wrote crap. I was typing stuff in there and just playing around.” After doing this sort of whimsical post-rough draft for several essays, Josh turned in a draft that was as bizarre and incomprehensible as he could make it, mainly as a joke, thinking that his teacher probably did not even bother to read the drafts, and somewhat curious to see whether or not she did. But it turned out that she did read the drafts, and his obviously doctored draft upset her so much that she read it aloud in class, to Josh’s considerable embarrassment. However, the teacher subsequently dropped the requirement that students hand in a rough draft, a change that Josh attributed largely to his own semidefiance of her policy.
And yet, despite his previous scorn for the idea of doing more than one draft, Joshua got very involved in his 101 essays, said that he was beginning to see the rationale for substantial revision, and for some of his papers did make fairly major changes. His involvement in the writing was closely related to the fact that he was able to more or less choose his own topics within the overall parameters of the assignments. A serious mountain biking aficionado who not only rode frequently but had strong opinions about issues and laws relating to his hobby, had worked in a bike shop, and subscribed to several biking publications, Joshua found a way to write about different aspects of mountain biking for every paper except the first assignment. For the "explain a concept" paper, he prepared an overall description of mountain biking, organized chronologically around a single trip from the planning stages through to the post ride soak in the bath. For the problem/solution paper, he considered the issue of trail maintenance, and what mountain bikers could do to help. For the argument essay, he discussed the importance of wearing helmets. And for the profile, he wrote about a colorful bike shop he had worked in his hometown. As he explained, "What made the class go so well for me was that I was able to link every essay to a subject I liked and was interested in."

Largely, as Joshua suggested, because it gave him a kind of nostalgic pleasure to write about his favorite subject and old stomping grounds, often bringing in anecdotes and situations and people from his hometown and earlier life, he got deeply engaged in his essay writing. He typically spent most of a day in writing an essay, reading drafts aloud to his family at dinner time and revising based in part on their suggestions. In preparing his final portfolio, Josh even provided photos of aspects of mountain biking related to his essay topics, inserted between the essays, creating a kind of theme unifying his written work for the quarter. Moreover, he was a serious student with a strong work ethic, a curiosity about life, and a love of language. For example, he enjoyed learning about a variety of subjects from Egyptian history to British romantic poetry, and he liked to pepper both his spoken and written language with occasional use of archaisms. Yet even Joshua rarely spent more than a day on his essays, typically on either Tuesday or Thursday when he did not have classes, made few changes in response to comments by his peers, and like his classmates spent very little time on the other parts of his coursework for 101, such as the journal or the reading assignments, which counted for only a small part of the grade and which he therefore saw as less central to the course. I would argue that it was largely Joshua's greater subject matter knowledge and interest in the topic of mountain biking that accounted for his seemingly more serious investment in the course. Other students appeared not to have topics about which they considered themselves to have some expertise. Or if they did, as in the case of Vince and his computer background, they seemed to feel either that there was not much to say about the topic, it was not appropriate for English class papers, or the teacher would not be interested in reading about it.

Josh's experience raises the question of whether he may have achieved too high a comfort level, and whether he might have been better off in some ways, more challenged, for example, if he had been encouraged, or required, to write about topics other than mountain biking. Certainly he did not explore a very wide range of material for his 101 papers, staying within areas where he himself was the expert, writing about topics he well understood. Sherry, his teacher, wrestled with this issue, deciding not to push him into other areas largely because he seemed so much more engaged in his writing than did most of the other students, but also because within the overall topic of mountain biking he was able to explore a number of different possibilities and types of topics, including several kinds of argument, explanation, and narrative, even reflection. As Sherry put it,

There was a temptation to insist that he stay completely away from bicycles after the concept essay; obviously, one goal in FE 101 is to expose students to varied writing experiences and topics. Yet, I was impressed with his attempts to look differently at one general topic, at his efforts to explore relationships between a personal fascination (mountain bikes) and various rhetorical approaches. He never led me to believe he was being intellectually lazy, and I decided to let him explore.

Josh seemingly found a motivation to engage his writing at a deeper level than that of most of the other case-study students. And he was rewarded for his interest, and his output, with consistently very positive evaluations from his teacher. By end of quarter, he was seriously considering submitting some of his work to a trade publication and was beginning to think of himself as a "real writer" and a budding expert on mountain biking. By focusing upon a topic which he was both interested in and knowledgeable about, Joshua was able to achieve a mastery of the course ground rules which to a large extent set him apart from his classmates, giving him a distinction as a strong writer in the class which he clearly enjoyed. In Chapter 6, which discusses English 102, it will be interesting to see how Joshua responded to a situation in which he could not always rely on comfortable and familiar topics of his own choosing.

In contrast to Joshua, Rachel was one of those students who felt she knew little that was of value about anything and that nothing much of
interest had happened to her. Her significant-event essay was a lighthearted piece about the time she thought a small snake had crawled into her sleeping bag on a family camping trip. A student in the College of Nursing with a parochial school and working-class background, partial to math and science courses, she considered English her least favorite subject and one of her weakest, though she did enjoy writing poetry of the rhyming sort, mainly for herself as a cathartic way of working through personal issues, rarely shared with others. Yet Rachel was a “good” student in the sense that she was conscientious, followed directions, and had a very strong work ethic. The previous year, her sister had been a first-year nursing student at the University and had very nearly failed her composition class during the fall quarter. As a result, Rachel was very worried that she herself would have problems, and was thus doubly inclined to work as hard as she could.

About her efforts in 101, she said, “I’m working in English because I have to get a good grade on this paper if I want to pass, basically. I mean, I’m working on it and putting time into my essays, rather than writing them at the last minute, which I tended to do in high school.” She was also noteworthy in being one of two students to volunteer for an interesting and challenging class activity for the third essay of the quarter, in which students were to discuss a problem and propose a potential solution to it. Sherry asked for students to bring multiple copies of a rough draft to class for the rest of the class to work on as a way of practicing giving peer feedback in small groups. Rachel (along with another student, Chuck, who liked to write about boating-related issues and did so on almost every paper, though with less success than Joshua had writing about mountain biking) agreed to do so, saying she wanted the additional feedback but also wanted to find out “what people really think of me as a writer.”

Rachel’s problem/solution paper was on the issue of procrastination, focusing primarily on her own tendency to procrastinate in her school work but considering her habit of procrastination to be fairly typical among students. She specifically dealt with the tendency of busy students with nearly full-time jobs to put assignments off until too close to the due date, then have to hurry to complete the work. The paper was addressed to a teacher audience, asking for some understanding on the part of teachers who always seem to think their class is the only one students are taking, but also suggesting ways teachers could break assignments into parts to discourage students from procrastinating and find other incentives to encourage students to make better use of their time. As it turned out, during the class activity students spent so much time working on Rachel’s paper that they were only able to spend a few minutes on Chuck’s draft.

despite feeling rather nervous that her classmates “were going to dislike the essay,” afterwards she said she found the experience quite helpful in getting her to work hard on her draft earlier than she otherwise would have, as well as in providing her with considerable feedback with which to sharpen her ideas and improve her draft.

As another illustration of the extent to which Rachel was a cooperative and engaged student, she was also willing to take part in class discussion, and did so with evident sincerity and satisfaction, taking the ideas under discussion seriously, despite appearing to be nervous as she spoke. Her face would get a bit red and she would gesticulate as she tried to make her points in a way that she didn’t in one-on-one conversation. Indeed, she felt a responsibility to participate in discussion, saying, “It bugs me when the teacher tries to get discussion going and everybody just sits there. I’d always be willing to say what was on my mind.” For one class session when students were preparing to write the problem/solution essay, Sherry arranged a group discussion about the issue of teen pregnancy that was to take the form of a PTA meeting, with students taking certain roles, such as sex education advocate, concerned parent, unmarried teen father, and student council president, as the rest of the class observed, almost as a talk show audience. The idea behind this activity was that students could practice defining problems, proposing solutions, and addressing varied audiences, while discussing a topic of interest and importance to students. The discussion proved to be a tense and awkward activity, and something of a disappointment to Sherry, with some of the students treating the subject matter very lightly and playing to the crowd, a few other students arguing rather heatedly, and one student, herself an unmarried teen mother, leaving the class in tears. The primary joker was Bart, a former high school wrestler who liked to draw attention to himself by making flamboyant and often flippant comments. For example, he told! students during the beginning of the quarter introductions that he had been arrested twice for assault, wrote his first paper about having his jaw broken during a Golden Gloves boxing match against a well-known opponent, and his second paper about a supposed aphrodisiac he and his girlfriend had used. He did his “author of the day” piece about a fatal car crash involving his brother, only to state laughingly after students expressed hushed condolences that the piece was fiction rather than autobiography. Cast as a conservative father for the roleplay exercise, Bart generated nervous laughter by declaring in a “redneck” accent, “I want mah son to wear a ‘jimmy head’ when he does it!” and making other such lighthearted comments. Yet despite the atmosphere of levity, Rachel tried hard to inject a note of seriousness into the proceedings, arguing as forcefully and straightforwardly as she
could that high school students needed more sex education and more access to birth control.

The case of Rachel is paradoxical in two different ways. First, in a class emphasizing critical thinking and with a teacher intent upon developing students a more intrinsic interest in and motivation for learning and communicating ideas, it was Rachel, one of the most cooperative, not complacent of the case-study students, who was practically the only one to do the kinds of critical thinking and employ the extended writing process suggested by her teacher, Sherry. But she did so more out of a sense that she was following directions, doing what she was told, than out of a critical spirit of inquiry. Hers appeared to be an almost uncritical acceptance of the requirement to think and write critically as an approach which, while difficult and time-consuming, would help her achieve her desired level of success in the classroom. The more independent thinkers such as Elizabeth, who took a critical and often negative attitude toward the class and the subject matter, were far more likely to reject the teachers’ advice about taking a critical, interpretive approach to their coursework and about spending time planning, generating ideas, and revising early drafts. Susan Jarrett, in her essay, “Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict,” illustrates ways in which traditional, process-oriented, decentered composition classes that discourage disagreement while privileging personal expression can actually mask inequities and oppression. Conversely, the case of Rachel suggests that a student stance of questioning and critique, when that is the teacher-sanctioned classroom approach, can itself be a form of cooperation and compliance.

A second paradox in the case of Rachel is that, in a course designed to help students become more self-motivated and intellectually engaged in their own education, it was in part a fear of failure, along with the coercive power of the grade, that motivated her to work as she did in the course. She was not particularly interested in the kinds of writing she was being asked to do, but was worried about not passing the course and wanted to achieve a high grade if she could. Combined with her general ambition, conscientiousness and a professed “desire to learn as much as possible,” she ended up doing solid B work. More important, from a teacher’s perspective, she ended up taking Sherry’s suggestions and pedagogy very much to heart. Toward the close of the quarter, Rachel commented: “I’ve learned [through this course] that planning helps keep me from going off on tangents and that revision helps me explain my ideas better.” She also proved to be a successful student generally in her first quarter of college, earning A’s in all of her other classes. Yet it is somewhat ironic that the student to enter most fully into the critical,

analytic ways of writing stressed by the 101 curriculum was the student who most carefully followed directions and did litte questioning of the curriculum. Because most students’ primary goal seemed to be to get through the class with a minimum of effort and as much as possible maintain their accustomed approaches, while still doing as well as they could, and because students were able to do fairly well without significantly altering their approaches to writing, the course apparently did not succeed to the extent desired by the curriculum developers in getting students to employ a more fully developed writing process.

Lad Tobin, in his book, Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Class (1993), argues that composition pedagogy’s emphasis on student-teacher and student-student cooperation tends to obscure the competitive, achievement-oriented attitudes which often motivate students even in classes of teachers who attempt to de-emphasize competition. He also suggests that competitive attitudes, in moderation, while probably close to impossible to do away with, are also not necessarily unhealthy or destructive but can help provide students with the motivation needed to learn. Rachel’s experience in the 101 course supports Tobin’s claim about potentially beneficial effects of competition. Motivated not so much by a desire to do better than others as by an eagerness to do well in order to achieve personal success, and by a concomitant fear of doing poorly, Rachel adopted the critical literacy strategies advocated by her teacher and ended up feeling that, as a writer, she had benefited substantially from this approach.

In the following chapter, I turn to a related consideration, the development of the analytic stance, focusing on two “flashpoint” areas in which interesting and complex conflicts took place regarding the type of critical approach student were expected to adopt. These flashpoint areas involved problems in explaining a concept, and conceptualizing and addressing opposing points of view in an argument, two particularly difficult interpretive tasks in which students and teacher often had conflicting agendas.