Course Introduction

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Welcome to Composition I online! If you’re like most students, you’re in this course not because you want another chance to show off your writing skills but because you’re required to take this class to receive your degree. And, whether you’ve recently graduated from high school or you haven’t taken a writing course for fifteen years, you’re all coming into this course with a “history” and “identity” as writers. My guess is that with your experiences with writing (whether positive or negative) have left many of you with some misgivings about your own ability and potential as a writer and even with some misunderstandings about the purposes and practices of writing.

Unfortunately, I am no longer surprised when a student turns in the first paper and says something like, “I know this isn’t any good. I’m not a good writer. One of my teachers in high school told me that” or when a student comes up to me after the first day of class and says something like, “Don’t expect much out of me this term. I’m a terrible writer, and I’ve known that since middle school.” These students have been told by others or have decided for themselves that they are “bad writers.” And, all too often, they take this label and etch it in stone, like their current writing abilities are unchangeable character traits that will follow them to their graves, their tombstones someday reading, “John Doe, Mediocre Writer” or “Jane Doe, Bad Writer.” Of course, this is not the case. While honest self-evaluation and critical feedback play a significant role in your development as a writer, adopting a defeatist attitude about your ability to develop writing skills will only discourage you as you continue in this course and may even become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I’m sure none of you will be surprised to hear that some students come into a college writing class with the exact opposite experience. They have received an ‘A’ on every paper they’ve written throughout middle school and high school. They have even earned a gold star on every penmanship worksheet and sentence writing activity since kindergarten. These students come to a writing class having received accolades and encouragement from their former teachers, and while they might not be excited to be in yet another writing class, they have acquired a confidence that can serve them well as they approach their writing assignments. These students have been told they are “good writers,” and they gladly accept this label.

At this point, I’m guessing that if you have come into this course with the “bad writer” label, you’re feeling a little jealous of your “good writer” peers. And if you fit into the latter group, as I did as a student, I’m guessing you’re feeling pretty fortunate not to have to deal with years of insecurities and negative feelings about writing. But what you may not realize is that the “good writer” label can also lead you to develop problematic attitudes about writing and can limit you in your development as a writer. Every term in every writing class I’ve taught, I’ve had at least one student whose growth as a writer was inhibited by his or her “good writer” label. Usually, these are the students who are deeply discouraged or mildly infuriated to receive the first paper back and find that they’ve received anything lower than an A. Many of them feel insulted that I would have the gull to even offer suggestions for revision. They are the students who insist that the fault lies not with the development of their ideas, the
polish of their grammar, or the quality of their organization, but with my ability to recognize greatness when I see it. Too often, because these students have done well on high-school-level writing assignments, they feel entitled to an A on their college assignments, but they do not believe they should have to demonstrate higher-level thinking or stronger writing skills. They believe they reached their full potential as writers before ever coming to college and that nothing more should be expected.

Obviously, if you adopt such an attitude, you cannot gain much from a writing course, and you will not grow as a writer. In fact, in some cases, I have even seen a self-proclaimed “bad writer” outperform a self-proclaimed “good writer” because of the attitude and work ethic with which each student approached the class. Am I suggesting that if you’re a skilled writer you should adopt a self-deprecating attitude about your abilities or be ashamed of your prior successes? No. Am I suggesting that none of you will get an A on your first paper? No, of course not. I am suggesting, though, that you should not be content to simply maintain the writing skills you developed in high school. Instead, you should recognize that a college-level writing course will offer you a chance to develop and hone your skills, but you will have to put in some effort to do so.

Whether you have accepted the label of “bad writer” or “good writer” or whether you fall somewhere in between, your identity as a writer and attitude toward writing are probably influenced, at least in part, by some common myths about writing.

One myth I often hear from students is that “good writers” are born that way. From the moment they leave the womb, they’ve got the innate gift of forming eloquent sentences, offering creative insights, and communicating their ideas. However, for most people, this simply is not the case. Sure, some students might be more predisposed to enjoy and excel in writing based on their reading habits, their personalities, and their interests, and a few people in each generation may even have an inexplicable gift. But, by and large, writing ability develops just like the ability to play the piano, shoot a free throw, or do a science experiment: through study, practice, critique, and more practice. Though not everyone is going to be a concert violinist, all-star basketball player, or ground-breaking scientist, most of us could become competent musicians, athletes, or science students if we were willing to put in the time and the effort necessary to do so. Similarly, though few writing students go on to become Pulitzer-prize-winning authors, we can all learn to write competently, but like any other skill, becoming a competent writer will require time and effort.

Closely related to the myth that writing well develops from an innate talent is the myth that writing should be easy. A lot of students think that if they can’t sit down and spit out a brilliant three-page paper in three hours, they must not be good writers. And this is where discouragement sets in. When you find yourself spending hours on an essay or unable to come up with ideas quickly, you might be inclined to throw your hands up and say, “I just can’t do it. I’m not a good writer.” But listen to what Anne Lamott, a New York Times best-selling author, says about writing in her book Bird by Bird:

People tend to look at successful writers, writers who are getting their books published and maybe even doing well financially, and think that they sit down at their desks every morning feeling like a million dollars, feeling great about who they are and how much talent they have and what a great story they
have to tell; that they take in a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as the court reporter. But this is just the fantasy of the uninitiated. I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not one of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant first drafts. ....We all often feel like we are pulling teeth, even those writers whose prose ends up being the most natural and fluid. The right words and sentences just do not come pouring out like ticker tape most of the time....For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. (37-38)

In other words, even acclaimed and skilled writers have to work long and hard to write well. Whether you have considered yourself a “bad writer” or a “good writer,” you should not be surprised or discouraged to find yourself putting in a great deal of time and effort preparing for and writing each of your essays—that’s what it takes to write well.

Finally, I think both the concept that good writers are born that way and that writing should be easy are based on a faulty understanding of the what learning to write academically is all about. Although foundational skills like sentence structure, style, tone, mechanics, and organization all matter a great deal in all written genres, learning to write academically involves developing and applying strong critical thinking skills as well. Stuart Greene and April Lidinsky, authors of From Inquiry to Academic Writing, explain that successful college-level writing requires you “to learn to think like an academic, read like an academic, do research like an academic, and write like academic” (1). To do so, they suggest that you will have to learn to approach writing differently, to cultivate new “habits of mind.” This means that you have to develop the ability to identify and raise significant questions about issues, to explore multiple points of view on a given issue, to engage in the ongoing academic conversations about issues, and to approach writing as a process. This term you will be asked to learn and practice these habits of mind. Though they may not come naturally to you, and while they may be a bit laborious and frustrating at times, ultimately, they will help you become better readers, better writers, and better critical thinkers.

I hope that as you build upon the foundational writing skills you’ve already acquired and as you work to develop and hone stronger critical thinking skills this term, you do not let labels of “good,” “bad,” or “mediocre” limit your efforts or diminish your potential.

Works Cited
