A Book Proposal

Writing Itself

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Attention: Andrew Kinney

Submitted by

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PROPOSAL OVERVIEW

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A. In One Sentence

Researchers in the field of college writing have moved away from their traditional roots in the teaching of prose composition in favor of obscure and impractical theoretical and political concerns, to the detriment of students and teachers alike, and should return to consideration of writing itself for reasons of pedagogical best practice and self-interest in a changing academic world.

B. Premise

Imagine if the field of physics had decided to cease teaching physics to undergraduates. Imagine if computer scientists declared the study of coding old fashioned. Imagine if historians insisted that asking students to demonstrate their knowledge of history was politically untenable. Imagine if nursing programs in colleges and universities argued against the importance and value of nursing as a subject. Imagine if scholars within mathematics claimed that we lived in a post-math world. Imagine if graduate students in education wrote dissertations that were specifically designed to demonstrate their lack of interest in education itself. Imagine if the most prominent sociology conferences and journals essentially stopped accepting presentations or papers on sociology itself.

All of these hypotheticals may seem absurd, and yet they are a reality in writing studies, the academic discipline historically concerned with how people write, how writing is taught and learned, and how writing programs should be designed, administered, and assessed. Once a discipline that existed specifically to argue for writing's value and importance as a topic of academic inquiry, the field of writing studies has since come to denigrate the subject itself. The field's originators argued that teaching writing was a complex, intellectually-challenging activity, one which deserved professional recognition and the attention of researchers. But now, writing studies has rejected the traditional study of prose writing – the arrangement of words into sentences, paragraphs, and papers, in order to achieve some persuasive, practical, or aesthetic goal – in favor of a series of fads and political movements that would not be recognizable as the study of writing to the large majority of people within academia or our broader culture.

In place of the study of writing as understood by most people, the field of writing studies focuses on abstract theory that, while sometimes important and useful, has little to say about how to help students become competent writers; on technological questions that are already amply discussed in other fields, often with greater depth and grasp of technological details; on political arguments that lend credence to complaints about liberal bias in the academy, and which paradoxically accelerate conservative reforms of higher education; on pop culture

analysis, which often appears trivial and unworthy of funding to stakeholders within and outside our universities; and on other topics which are remarkably disconnected from the study of how people put words on a page.

Rather than seeking status and respect by distancing ourselves from the traditional study of writing, I argue that we can increase our disciplinary visibility, and with it our institutional security and authority, by being strident advocates for the value of prose instruction. I demonstrate that, far from having a radical impact on how colleges operate, the politicized intransigence of writing studies has marginalized the field, leaving us unable to advocate for our own values and making it easier for corporate interests to take over our field. Worse, our reticence about researching and teaching traditional prose leaves our students behind, depriving them of essential skills in an uncertain labor market. I present a vision for a reinvigorated field of writing studies, one housing a diverse range of interests and viewpoints which nevertheless focuses on our traditional subject matter. This newly focused, spirited field will be in a far better position to meet the administrative, pedagogical, economic, and political challenges of the future.

C. Audience and Promotion

This book is a hybrid, intended for both academic and popular readers alike. The target audience includes scholars in writing studies, rhetoric and composition, technical communications, and related fields, and could serve well as a text for assignment in graduate programs in those fields. The book is also of obvious and direct relevance to administrators and policymakers in academia, who must make decisions about where to direct scarce resources and how to reward research and teaching. Texts from within writing studies that consider similar issues, albeit from very different perspectives, include Susan Miller's *Textual Carnivals* (1991), David Smit's *The End of Composition Studies* (2007), and Sid Dobrin's *Postcomposition* (2011).

There is also a clear popular audience for this book. It fits comfortably within a tradition of critiques of current practices within the academy designed for popular audiences, and resonates well with books from a diverse set of ideological and disciplinary backgrounds, such as Benjamin Ginsberg's *The Fall of the Faculty* (2011), Kevin Carey's *The End of College* (2015), Leonard Cassuto's *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It* (2015) and Richard Arum and Joseph Roksa's *Academically Adrift* (2011). The book not only would reflect on current controversies about the contemporary university system, but also about the relevance and future of the humanities and the meaning of a liberal education in the 21st century, topics of perpetual interest to the book-reading public.

I am in a strong position to promote this book. Purdue's rhetoric and composition program is one of the oldest and most respected within the field of writing studies. I have a large network of academics and scholars who would spread the word about the book. As Communications Editor of a popular online journal in the field, I am plugged in to the major publications and communities in the field where ideas and opinions are spread. I can also publicize the book through the network I've developed as a writer and blogger. While my readership is comparatively small, my readers are influential and connected; as a prominent

writer friend once said to me privately, "not many people read you, but everyone who reads you writes professionally." My readership is passionate and has long supported me financially, demonstrating the likelihood that they will purchase the book themselves. My work has been discussed in major publications like *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today, New York Magazine, Slate, The Huffington Post, The New Republic,* and many others. (Sometimes even positively!) I have many friends within the world of professional political and cultural writing, and I could easily find willing readers to discuss and potentially blurb the book.

D. Manuscript

Manuscript Status: Two chapters are completed and available for your review on request. Two others are partially written. All six are fully outlined, and a significant portion of primary research has already been completed.

Anticipated Length: 200 - 225 pages

Anticipated Completion Date: Eight months from proposal acceptance

E. Author

I am a writer and academic who recently completed a PhD in Rhetoric and Composition at Purdue University, where I studied writing pedagogy and administration, English as a Second Language, and applied linguistics. A child of the academy, I grew up on a college campus, and my father and his father were professors. My network of friends and family has always included a large number of academics at a wide range of institutions. I have thus had a lifetime of exposure to the American university, its culture, and its idiosyncrasies.

I'm also an experienced and successful writer and blogger. I have been writing since 2008 on issues relating to politics and culture. My work has appeared in *Harper's Magazine, The New York Times Magazine*, *The Los Angeles Times, The New Republic, The Washington Post, Politico, Playboy, n+1, The Huffington Post*, *The Observer, Salon*, *The New Inquiry*, *Jacobin*, *Talking Points Memo*, *In These Times,* Andrew Sullivan's *The Dish*, and others. My work on culture has been linked to and discussed on many of the most widely-read publications and websites in the world. I regularly contribute academic work to journals and books, attend conferences within the field, and am an active participant on listservs and online communities dedicated to writing studies and related fields.

F. Chapter by Chapter

Chapter One: When We Left Writing Behind

Chapter One provides both a historical overview of the changing world of writing studies and related disciplines and empirical evidence of the trend I describe. I briefly gloss the history of the field and its painful, contested emergence within English departments, particularly its quarrels with literature faculty. I use historical sources to demonstrate that writing studies gained disciplinary status by articulating the value of the teaching of writing and of research devoted to that teaching. Drawing inspiration from the work of scholars like Richard Haswell, Susan Peck MacDonald, and Benjamin Miller, I then demonstrate

empirically that the study of written prose and its teaching has declined dramatically in the field's prominent journals, conferences, and doctoral programs. Finally, I discuss how these changes alienate the field of writing studies from broader conceptions of writing in the university system, leading to an inability to communicate meaningfully with educators in other departments and a corresponding lack of institutional investment in our programs and our pedagogy. I argue that the definition of success in writing must come from a negotiation between what scholars in writing studies believe and what other stakeholders in our institution believe, and that such negotiations can proceed without jeopardizing the theoretical and political commitments of the field.

Chapter Two: A Room of Our Own: Disciplinarity, Knowledge Making, and Service

Chapter Two discusses the disciplinarity obsession within writing studies – the field's own constant interrogation of what the field is, what its standing within the university system is, and what its values are – and why these considerations are so ubiquitous. I argue that the "service anxiety" within writing studies, or the fear that other disciplines view writing pedagogy as a service discipline rather than a legitimate area of research inquiry, has pushed scholars to develop ever more obscure interests, creating a field that seems bizarrely disinterested in its own subject matter. I go on to argue that in fact, the best way for writing studies to secure respect and autonomy within the broader university system is through a clear focus on teaching writing, as the ability to write effectively is an essential skill for college students and thus of natural interest to other fields. I incorporate the theories of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Disciplines (WID), which argue that writing education must take place simultaneously across various units of our institutions. I demonstrate how research in these areas makes clear that we lose standing within the broader academic world when we fail to reflect understanding of what instructors in other fields define as success in writing. I argue that WAC and WID programs afford us the possibility of both developing deeper mutual understanding between scholars in writing studies and other fields, and sites where the value of our work can be recognized by the broader university.

Chapter Three: Pulling Up the Ladder: Grammar and the Self-Interested Student

In Chapter Three I consider the Grammar Wars and language prescriptivism from the standpoint of someone within writing studies. Despite common assumptions to the contrary, researchers and administrators within writing studies tend to fall squarely against grammar instruction, often representing such instruction as old fashioned, reductive, even politically conservative. They argue instead for a focus on global concerns of rhetoric and style, and for a cosmopolitan rejection of any normative vision of language or writing at all. This attitude is exemplified by the Students Right to Their Own Language statement, an official statement of the field's major professional organization and conference which asserts that attempting to regulate student language in our classes amounts to linguistic hegemony. While their intentions are good, these scholars risk "pulling up the ladder" by denying students the control and precision in writing that they themselves use in their own writing. Whether we like it or not, control of grammar and mechanics is an important element of success both elsewhere in the university system and in the workplaces that are the ultimate destination of

most of our students. I argue for a hybrid approach to grammar, pursuing neither the reductive, rote learning that writing scholars fear nor the "anything goes" approach that threatens to leave students behind. Instead, we can and should embrace the teaching of grammar and mechanics in situ, as a form of rhetorical and stylistic attention that students should pay to their own texts.

Chapter Four: Whose Resistance? The Paradox of Critical Pedagogy

Chapter Four considers the ways in which critical pedagogy and similar political visions of college teaching have contributed to the demise of writing within writing studies. While the work of Paulo Freire and others in the critical pedagogy tradition is vital and generative, the embrace of these philosophies by college instructors leads to contradictory and self-defeating consequences. As writing studies scholars like Thomas Rickert and Richard Miller have pointed out, when critical pedagogy is adopted by college instructors, the power relationships become confused and paradoxical. After all, if instructors want students to resist in the classroom, and the students give the instructors what they want, that's not resistance. In this way, organic student resistance becomes appropriated by the very educational authority that Freire and others criticize. What's more, by playing so perfectly to conservative claims of liberal bias in academia, in the long run the popularity of critical pedagogy contributes to corporate reforms of the American university. Finally, I argue that the ability to write persuasively is a key skill for activists, and that helping our students develop this ability amounts to support for their radical efforts in and of itself.

Chapter Five: Assessment and Ownership in the 21st Century University

Chapter Five concerns assessment in the contemporary university, and how writing programs have rendered themselves unprepared for a new wave of standardized tests and top-down assessment regimes. While a large literature on writing assessment exists, resistance to empiricism and quantification leave scholars from writing studies largely outside of broader policy debates about testing and assessment. In turn, this leaves us unable to advocate for our values and best practices in contexts where our opinions might make a difference. I argue that we can retain our skepticism towards claims of objectivity, and our advocacy for qualitative inquiry, while still engaging with numbers and formal empiricism where useful. In order to do so, we will have to restructure our doctoral programs to make some of our graduates conversant in quantification and social science. Then, we will better be able to defend our autonomy and our ideals.

Chapter Six: Reforming Process: Towards an Iterative Writing Pedagogy

For many decades, college writing pedagogy has been approached through a process model that teaches students to see composing as an ongoing evolution rather than as a journey to a single, defined endpoint. Writing teachers frequently stress to students that they define writing not through their finished papers but through the process with which they composed them. This orientation is noble, but in practice, the process model suffers from an artificiality that limits its usefulness. Students are frequently taught to move mechanically through stages such as Invention, Research, Composition, and Revision. Experienced writers, however, very rarely write texts in this rigid fashion. In place of the traditional, stages-based process model,

in this chapter I define and advocate a form of writing process pedagogy defined by iteration – demonstrating small, repeated evolutions of specific sentences and paragraphs to students, and encouraging them to practice such moves themselves. In much the same way that a math instructor might lead students through many examples of specific arithmetic problems before letting students attempt them themselves, writing instructors should lead students by showing them direct and real examples of how sentences, paragraphs, and papers change over time. The result will be a writing pedagogy that is at once more practical, more effective, and more true to the writing process of skilled and professional writers.

Epilogue: Writing as Soulcraft, Writing as Tool

The epilogue of this book amounts to a valediction of writing, itself – not just as a means to an end, but as an end itself, one of both practical and personal value and significance to students and teachers alike. I argue for the intertwined nature of writing's practical, aesthetic, and rhetorical value, rescuing writing and writing instruction from the various boxes they have been forced into by theorists – boxes like the rhetorical, mimetic, and expressivist philosophies. I criticize the notion that we must privilege writing as either a matter of personal expression or of appeal to others, arguing that all writing is inherently both. I close by describing all of the ways in which a talent for expressing myself in prose has enriched my life: personally, professionally, academically, financially, socially, romantically. I argue that in a world obsessed with the latest technologies, constantly ready to declare itself post-text, the written word remains a unique and privileged mode of address, and that if we teach students to use it effectively, we and they will be better for it.