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ENACTING AND INTERROGATING THE “ACADEMIC”  
IN UNDERGRADUATE LANGUAGE AND LITERACY PRACTICES

BY

SAMANTHA MICHELLE WASELUS LOOKER

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Paul Prior, Chair  
Professor Emeritus Gail Hawisher  
Professor Sarah McCarthy  
Assistant Professor Spencer Schaffner

## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the messages undergraduate writers receive about what writing and language practices qualify as “academic.” I consider several aspects of these messages: their broad circulation, as evidenced through discourse analysis of the “rules” presented in first year writing textbooks; their contradictions, as shown through published academic writing’s frequent violation of these “rules”; and their effects on individual students, as illustrated in two- to three-year ethnographic case studies with six undergraduate basic writers. Using feminist research methods, I worked with students as co-researchers to analyze their academic writing, their teachers’ responses to it, and their experiences with academic writing and academic language in and out of the classroom. Data included student papers (often including teacher written responses) from courses across the curriculum as well as repeated semi-structured and text-based interviews. From this data, rules of correctness and appropriateness emerged as inordinately prominent in representations of academic language and literacy to undergraduates. I argue that such rules, in holding students to standards very different from those applied to professional academics, deny students the privilege of fully claiming an identity as academic writers. Ultimately, I assert a need for pedagogical materials and research to attend to the diversity already inherent in writing and language perceived as academic, rather than perpetuating the illusion of a firmly defined academic standard. I identify sociohistoric and linguistic anthropological theories that can illuminate this diversity and draw our attention to the ideologies that interfere with teachers’ reading of students’ linguistically diverse texts for their intellectual contributions. Finally, I propose teaching and research practices that invite students to understand the pervasive influence of language ideologies and to explore the complex, shifting nature of the definitions, perceptions, and choices tied to academic writing.

*To my students,  
and especially to Ali, Anny, Areia, Hannah, Pierre, and Rob*

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## Chapter 1

### **“A Totalizing Vision”: Conceptualizing the “Academic” in Writing and Language**

My student co-researcher Areia<sup>1</sup> told me that, in a university packed with white, upper-middle-class, standard-English speaking scholars, “You can learn about other cultures and languages, but at the end of the day theirs are the only ones that are respected.”

Another co-researcher, Rob, asked, “Why are we even writing if [teachers] don’t want to know our input? We might as well just print up our source and say, ‘Here, this guy said it. I had nothing to do with it.’”

In thinking about the pedagogical practices surrounding college-level academic writing, it is easy to see where such complaints come from. Even some of the most dedicated teachers among us have exclaimed in frustration that our colleges are admitting students who “can’t even form a sentence.”<sup>2</sup> Even textbooks by expert scholars tell students not to use nonstandardized<sup>3</sup> language, write in the first person, or attempt humor in academic writing. Teachers who cross out an entire paragraph of a student’s essay because it has too many “grammar breakdowns” for them to understand or because it is “too concerned with entertaining...for an academic essay” are not isolated cases; they are indicators of the pervasiveness throughout the academy of standard language ideologies and double standards that mark as “errors” in student papers the same

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<sup>1</sup> As is further explained in Chapter 2, the names used here are the students’ real names.

<sup>2</sup> Of the three quotes in this paragraph, the first comes from a professor of writing in the disciplines whom I interviewed for another study in 2005 (and a statement that I suspect I’m not alone in having heard variations of from several university professors and teaching assistants in recent years). The other two are illustrative responses written on texts provided by my student co-researchers for this study.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this study, following the examples of scholars like Suresh Canagarajah, Judith Irvine, and Carmen Kynard, I use the terms “standardized” and “nonstandardized” instead of “standard” and “nonstandard.” I base this choice on a desire to emphasize the constructed and ever-evolving nature of these categories, since “standardized” evokes the process of standardization in a way that “standard” does not. In other words, as Woolard and Schieffelin note, a focus on *standardization* puts “the emphasis on the ideological dimension” and lets us see “the concept of a standard...more as ideological process than as empirical linguistic fact” (64).

features that regularly get professional academics in many areas and fields published and praised. There is a significant gap between what we do as professional academics and what we tell our students to do in their own writing.

My aim in this project is to examine this gap between lived practice and pedagogy, and in the process, to contribute to the discussion of two questions that belong at the center of writing studies and its pedagogy: *What is academic writing?* and *What is the place of world Englishes, non-English languages, and nonstandardized dialects in the college writing classroom?* I will argue that the answers to these questions are closely interrelated, for in order to think in a realistic and sufficiently complex way about language variation, we must realize that *all* academics command a variety of language forms. What qualifies as “academic writing” is already shot through with a multiplicity of genres, voices, and textual histories that make the category far more blurry than traditional representations would suggest (as discussed in, e.g., Biber; Cope and Kalantzis; Duff; Prior, *Writing/Disciplinarity*; Thaiss and Zawacki).

As a brief example, consider two excerpts published in unquestionably academic contexts. The first is from a social science methods textbook:

It always behooves the investigator to make the underlying rationale and goals of the analysis as explicit as possible. Fortunately, an apparatus for doing so has been developed in the form of the analysis of causal models. (Cohen and Cohen 79)

The second is from a peer-reviewed scholarly journal in the humanities:

...racism still remains a serious problem. Yes, racism. And yes, I am about to write about racism because it has not gotten better, nor has it ceased to affect people on a material level, and I am talkin about an effect I can feel to the depths of my big-black-body—like a racial hemorrhage. (Monroe 103)

These passages demonstrate (at least) two very interesting things about academic writing. First, they demonstrate that the tones and grammars used in work acknowledged as academic can vary enormously. Second, they demonstrate that the how-to rules frequently given to undergraduate students of writing simply do not reflect what is done in professional academic writing. We cannot look at the Cohen and Cohen quote and argue that academic writing requires the writer to be extremely concise and stay in the active voice at all times. We cannot look at the Monroe quote and conclude that sentence fragments, the word “I,” and personal feelings and experiences have no place in academic writing. Yet all of these assertions are frequently made when telling students what they must do to make their writing “formal,” “academic,” or “college-level.”

Common representations of academic writing, seen across university disciplines and illustrated in the following chapters, paint it as a stable category with standard requirements that students should be taught to follow. These representations, as inaccurate as they are, have very real effects; they guide pedagogies and perceptions of student writing in such a way that some types of writing qualify as “academic” while others do not (with writing featuring nonstandardized language practices all too often going in the latter category). To avoid creating exclusionary conditions that deny (usually already marginalized) students permission to call themselves academic writers, it is vital that researchers, teachers, and students interrogate the academic in order to destabilize homogeneous representations of “good” writing and “correct” English. Students are done a disservice when composition professionals keep theoretical research-based knowledge to themselves while perpetuating—or at the very least tolerating—pedagogies that offer students a tidy how-to list for writing in college. Students can much better negotiate academic writing demands when they are involved in scholarly discussions of the complexities and ideologies surrounding language and academic writing.

## Language Diversity in Writing Pedagogy and Scholarship

Efforts to support language diversity in the classroom have, like any scholarly discussion, been grounded in their historical moments. In the early 1970s, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC)'s *Students' Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL)* statement declared that students at all levels have a “right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style” (*Students' Right 2*). This statement came at a time of dramatic change in student populations at all levels. School desegregation efforts, active since the mid-1950s, were bringing previously unseen levels of diversity to K-12 classrooms, while colleges' adoption of Equal Opportunity Programs and Open Admissions in the late 1960s and early 1970s meant an influx of students with nontraditional backgrounds and different levels of preparation than college instructors were accustomed to. As Mina Shaughnessy noted in *Errors and Expectations*, basic writing was in its very early stages as a subject of scholarly inquiry at that time, and many teachers viewed differences between their expectations and students' language practices simply as a deficit on the part of the students. In line with emerging linguistic scholarship, such as Labov's *Language in the Inner City* and Dillard's *Black English*, *SRTOL* urged teachers to acknowledge the linguistic knowledge and communication skill that students from nonstandardized language backgrounds already possessed. In this way, CCCC aimed to educate teachers about dialect variation—why it occurs, what it means, and the judgments that often result—in order that teachers might avoid working from a “difference as deficit” model.

For decades now, *SRTOL* has continued to influence education and composition scholars' discussions of language, which often stress the importance of understanding and affirming students' nonstandardized dialects or “home languages.” Over time, as student populations have

continued to evolve and diversify, the array of home languages scholars advocate for has widened. Working-class and African American populations, the most frequently discussed groups at the time of *SRTOL* and open admissions, are still very prominent in discussions of linguistic diversity. In the meantime, discussions have branched out to include, for example, rural, Latino, and Native American students, as well as English language learners and speakers of world Englishes (see, e.g., Barron; Canagarajah, “Place of World Englishes”; Kells; Lu; Matsuda, “Myth of Homogeneity”).<sup>4</sup> Discussions of nonstandardized language varieties have also grown in complexity, as scholars have increasingly acknowledged the overlap among varieties and the inadequacy of labels. African American language varieties, for example, have proven to be more widely used than initial discussions suggested. As early as 1983, Geneva Smitherman and Carl Botan’s study of assembly line workers in Detroit showed Black English to be “emerging as the *lingua franca* of the US industrial workplace” and therefore to be more of “a class sociolect” shared across races among the working class (Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk* 102; see also Botan and Smitherman). Some more recent scholarship, meanwhile, has discussed the language of hip hop culture, which is firmly rooted in speech patterns historically identified as African American and yet is popular among people of a wide variety of racial, class, and national backgrounds (see, e.g., Alim; Campbell, “There Goes”; Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk*).

In addition to widening in scope, *SRTOL*’s legacy has grown to include more specific pedagogical strategies, in an effort to find concrete ways to make a place for nonstandardized language varieties such as African American English in academic writing classrooms. This inclusion of nonstandardized varieties is typically accomplished by making dialects part of the course subject matter and/or encouraging students to write in their “home languages” (e.g.,

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<sup>4</sup> As Bruce Horner has discussed in detail, the original *SRTOL* statement had no mention of languages other than English.

Campbell “Real Niggaz’s”; Elbow, “Why Deny”; Howard; Kinloch; McCrary; Monroe).

Scholars have varying levels of success with these efforts, and they continue to struggle with a variety of questions: Should dialects be discussed differently with different student populations? Do students ultimately need to edit their home language writing into more standard, academic English? In what situations might it be appropriate for students to write in nonstandardized ways? What I find striking about these nearly four decades of *SRTOL*-influenced scholarship is that it asks these and similar questions regularly but still struggles to answer them. Scholars repeatedly return to the same overarching question:

- 1992: “Why do students need formal academic discourse?” (Bizzell, *Academic Discourse* 112)
- 1999: “Linguistically diverse students and college writing: What is equitable and appropriate?” (Harklau, Losey, and Siegal 1)
- 2002: “Vernacular literacies in the writing classroom?” (Elbow, “Vernacular” 126)
- 2003: “Should we invite students to write in home languages?” (Bean et al. 25)
- 2005: “Will I be harming students if I encourage them to incorporate AAVE into their oral and written work?” (Whitney 64)
- 2008: “Why not just teach the standard?...Can students use informal language in academic writing?” (Brown 42, 205)

In sum: *What is the place of diverse language practices in academic writing and the college writing classroom?*

In the decades of scholarship influenced by *SRTOL*, two of the statement’s many arguments seem to have been especially persistent and influential. Perhaps the most obvious, evoked immediately by the title of the statement, is the notion that students have their “own”

languages—the “dialects of their nurture,” as the core statement describes them (*Students’ Right* 1974, 2). In the uptake of this aspect of *SRTOL*, students’ “own” language has often come to refer to a home language that exists in sharp contrast to the language taught in school. We should note that the original *SRTOL* did not support the idea of one homogeneous “school” or “standard” English, but it did complain that many teachers “taught *as though* there existed somewhere a single American ‘standard English’” (2; emphasis added). To this day, I would argue, many academics continue to teach and publish as though this standard exists.

A related argument, less direct in *SRTOL* but no less clear from its and subsequent scholarship’s choices of focus, is that this non-school language is a concern primarily for students who are identified as ethnic or racial minorities in the U.S. Again, the initial focus on such students was a function of historical context; the *SRTOL* background statement notes that the exigency for its creation came largely from “the social upheavals of the 1960’s, and the insistence of submerged minorities on a greater share in American society” (*Students’ Right* 1). Smitherman has confirmed that *SRTOL*’s main focus was on African American students both because of their significant representation among nonstandardized dialect-speaking college students at that time and because of African Americans’ historical prominence in struggles for equality in the U.S. (*Talkin That Talk* 387).

While focused attention to minority students and their “own language” was necessary in *SRTOL*’s historical context, though, it persists with equal vigor nearly forty years later. Our field’s continued reliance on these two aspects in discussions of language diversity and academic writing may be hampering the forward progress of our conversations. The following are some examples of how the emphasis on home language and minority students has persisted in language and literacy scholarship across the decades.

**Table 1.**  
**The Treatment of Students' Language in Selected Composition Scholarship since the 1980s.**

1986	<i>College English</i>	"For our [basic writing] students, standard English and the <i>standard forms of academic discourse</i> are a new style, a new dialect, in a sense, a <i>new language</i> " (Kutz 388). <sup>5,6</sup>
1986	<i>College Composition and Communication</i>	"The basic writers already know that <i>their home communities' standards</i> are not the only ones possible--they learn this more immediately and forcefully when they come to college than do <i>students whose home world views are closer to the academic</i> , when they experience the <i>distance between their home dialects and Standard English</i> and the <i>debilitating unfamiliarity they feel with academic ways of shaping thoughts in discourse</i> " (Bizzell, "What Happens" 300).
1991	<i>English Journal</i>	"Then one day, a student confided that <i>she wanted to learn how to speak 'correct English.'</i> She wanted a good job, and speaking 'right' was essential to reaching her goal. That caused me to rethink my philosophy; I decided that she was wise beyond her years. <i>What good was her own language if it confined her to the ghetto?</i> " (Simmons 48).
1992	<i>Theory into Practice</i>	"Despite the difficulty entailed in the process, almost <i>any African American who has become 'successful' has done so by acquiring a Discourse other than the one into which she or he was born.</i> And almost all can attribute that acquisition to the work of one or more committed teachers" (Delpit 299).
1997	<i>College Composition and Communication</i>	" <i>Academic English is not the home-community language variety for AAVE speakers</i> born in this country...The language features and practices of AAVE speakers diverge from those of academic English. The areas of divergence and related assumptions and practices contribute to <i>AAVE speakers' difficulties in learning academic English</i> " (Coleman 487).

<sup>5</sup> All emphasis in this table is mine.

<sup>6</sup> As Catherine Prendergast notes, race in composition studies has historically been "subsumed into the powerful tropes of 'basic writer,' 'stranger' to the academy, or the trope of the generalized, marginalized 'other'" (36). Therefore, it is important to see the racial undertones of discussions of basic writers, even when race is not explicitly mentioned.



**Table 1 (cont.)**

1999	<i>American Educational Research Journal</i>	“Lafayette and similar Black communities are bidialectal speech communities. <i>Slang English is the children’s mother tongue....They acquire proper English as a second dialect</i> after they begin school outside their family and community” (Ogbu 178-79).
2004	<i>Language Arts</i>	“Yet, the child who speaks in a vernacular dialect is not making language errors; instead, she or he is speaking correctly in <i>the language of the home discourse community</i> . Teachers can draw upon the language strengths of urban learners to help students codeswitch—choose the language variety appropriate to the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose. In doing so, <i>we honor linguistic and cultural diversity, all the while fostering students’ mastery of the Language of Wider Communication, the de-facto lingua franca of the U.S.</i> ”(Wheeler and Swords 471).
2008	CCCC Research Network Forum	“When it comes to learning to write in our present culture, <i>the deck is stacked against [speakers of African American Language] and speakers of other stigmatized versions of English</i> . They cannot prosper in school, college, or the workplace unless they learn to produce a language that is likely to be problematic for them: EWE [Edited Written English] is <i>farther from their home language</i> than from the home language of mainstream English speakers; and EWE is often experienced as a threat to their identity...we can validly <i>invite speakers of AAL or other dialects and cultures to take on academic tasks and write an academic essay in their home dialects</i> ” (Elbow, “Why Deny” 3).
2009	<i>Pedagogy</i>	“On the one hand, most teachers understand the need to accept the language of their students on the grounds that <i>it is the language of nurture, the students’ home language</i> . On the other hand, many of those same teachers who respect language diversity are <i>unwilling to invite the students’ languages into the classroom....</i> For students learning to write, a pedagogy that validates their home and community language varieties taps into their personal resources for learning and enables them to connect with the curriculum. These are varieties that are often barred from the classroom, that represent <i>our students’ own textual worlds</i> , and that can form the basis for instruction in academic writing” (Lovejoy, Fox, and Wills 262, 281).

Quite a few problematic assumptions persist through these examples. First, it is mostly taken for granted that the language varieties discussed are stable and easily defined. There is one “school” or “classroom” language (and presumably one universal type of school or classroom in which this language would be the only variety spoken), going by the name of “academic writing,” “edited written English,” “the language of wider communication,” “proper English,” “academic English,” or “standard English.” Furthermore, nonstandardized varieties are also assumed to be homogeneous, as the references to “African American language,” “vernacular dialect,” “slang [*sic*] English,” and “AAVE speakers” illustrate. These clear labels attached to nonstandardized language practices give two distinct impressions: that only certain students have a variety of languages to negotiate, and that nonstandardized practices stand in opposition to standardized ones. If standardized and nonstandardized are opposite—from different “textual worlds,” in fact (Lovejoy, Fox, and Wills 281)—another assumption naturally follows: The closest these two varieties can come to blending is an occasional and uncertain co-presence in the classroom.

There is a further assumption here of the active role of teachers and the passive one of students; the co-presence of standardized and nonstandardized language seems to only be possible with teacher assistance. Teachers are framed as responsible for guiding students and setting the boundaries of appropriate language; students can only learn to negotiate multiple language practices if their teachers help and allow them to do so. Nonstandardized language practices will find a place in school if teachers *invite* them—“invite the students’ languages into the classroom” (Lovejoy, Fox, and Wills 262) or “invite speakers of AAL...[to] write an academic essay in their home dialects” (Elbow, “Why Deny” 3). When students’ language practices are not welcome, teachers will “help students codeswitch” so that they do not slip into

an “inappropriate” variety (Wheeler and Swords 471).<sup>7</sup> In this way, students are constructed as needing teachers’ help to reconcile their language practices and dependent upon teachers for permission to do so at school.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, perhaps the most troubling assumption here is that, because there is no overlap between the clearly defined terms “academic” and “diverse,” diverse language practices are not already present in the classroom and the academy. When we ask questions like “What is the place of diverse dialects in academic writing?” we are assuming that academic writing is not *already* diverse. We are indexing, without interrogation, language ideologies in which there is one standard, correct way of using language and anything else is nonstandard and therefore incorrect, subpar, inappropriate, or at best “alternative.” To allow these language ideologies to persist beneath the surface is to perpetuate a false dichotomy: homogeneity, in the form of standard academic writing, versus diversity, in the form of the multiple languages, dialects, and registers for which we are trying to make space.

### **The Role of Language Ideologies**

Historically, one of the most common and least questioned assumptions about academic writing has been that it must be written in standardized English. As Paul Matsuda contends, “Implicit in most teachers’ definitions of ‘writing well’ is the ability to produce English that is unmarked in the eyes of teachers who are custodians of privileged varieties of English” (“Myth of Homogeneity” 640). Therefore, pedagogical materials such as composition textbooks

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<sup>7</sup> Recent pedagogical discourse about codeswitching, especially in K-12 education, has been problematic both in its misrepresentation of the realities of language use and in the psychological and social effects it creates for students expected to codeswitch. I will return to this issue in more detail in Chapter 6.

<sup>8</sup> I am reminded here of Marguerite Helmers’ study of teaching narratives, in which she argued that students are typically represented as inferior to and reliant upon both teachers and the academy in general. I discuss this study in relation to my own research practices in Chapter 2.

regularly tell students things like “Spoken dialect generally doesn’t fit into the kind of public writing you’ll be doing in college” (Ruszkiewicz et al. 231) or, more bluntly, “Never use nonstandard English” (Troyka and Hesse 262). A number of composition scholars (e.g., Canagarajah, “Place of World Englishes”; Lu; Matsuda, “Myth of Homogeneity”) have worked in recent decades to wear away at many of the assumptions made about nonstandardized language varieties in relation to academic work, such as that such varieties are less effective for clear communication or formal, complex messages. Canagarajah has in fact argued that “the creative strategies multilingual speakers use to negotiate their differences and...accomplish their purposes” are so effective that monolingual speakers are at a disadvantage by comparison (“Place of World Englishes” 590). Thus, our field has rich theoretical resources through which to consider the power of nonstandardized language use.

Application of such arguments to pedagogy, though, has been limited thus far, and there is much less composition scholarship, especially pedagogical scholarship, about the ideologies surrounding standardized language practices. Hence, many of our discussions continue to frame nonstandardized varieties as alternatives to be brought into academic writing, where standardized language already exists and holds dominion. The influential 2002 collection *ALT DIS: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*, for example, designates “different dialects, essay forms, cultural allusions, authorial personae, and more” as “alternatives” to “traditional discourse” (Schroeder, Fox, and Bizzell x). “The label alternative,” the editors explain, “is helpful because it gets at what is perhaps the key feature of the discourses we are discussing, namely that they do not follow all the conventions of traditional academic discourse and may therefore provoke disapproval in some academic readers” (ix). This sort of consensus—that certain forms are not traditional academic discourse and may “provoke disapproval” or another

undesired reaction—was common at the time of *ALT DIS* and remains common since (see, e.g., Bizzell, “Basic Writing”; Davis and Shadle; Elbow, “Why Deny”; Hebb; Lovejoy, Fox, and Wills; McCrary; Thaiss and Zawacki).

When nonstandardized language practices are relegated to alternative status, there is a sense of permanence to this designation, despite the fact that, as Matsuda argues, “all discourses are alternative in certain contexts, and no discourse is essentially or perpetually alternative” (“Alternative Discourses” 191-92). This permanence is a key feature of standard language ideologies, which work to maintain a strict boundary between the standardized and nonstandardized, as Wassink and Curzan explain:

Standard language ideology may be defined as a socially constructed notion of the nature, boundaries, and so forth of...a “standard” variety of a language, supported by social sanction. Such sanctions provide a rationale for codification, elaboration, and prescriptive norms for the standard, and they simultaneously provide a means for defining other varieties outside the realm of the standard or standardizable. (178)

The strictly maintained categories of standard language ideologies also carry with them heavy value judgments. Standardized language is, as Silverstein explains, “hegemonic in the sense that ideologically it constitutes the ‘neutral’ top-and-center of all variability that is thus around and below it” (219).

The ideological judgments associated with a language variety like the “standard” are formed and maintained through a process of social indexicality, which involves a connection between certain linguistic forms and certain characteristics, such that the use of a form identifies the speaker with an indexed characteristic (see, e.g., Agha; Bucholtz and Hall; Hanks; Irvine and

Gal; Silverstein; Woolard). These characteristics, marked by certain discursive approaches, often coalesce around particular identity categories, as Bucholtz and Hall explain: “Linguistic forms that index identity are more basically associated with interactional stances such as forcefulness, uncertainty, and so on, which may in turn come to be associated with particular social categories, such as gender” (Bucholtz and Hall 595-96; see also Ochs’ chapter in Biber and Finegan). It makes sense that “standard” and “academic” varieties coincide ideologically, given the similar characteristics that they index—intelligence, neutrality, and goodness, for example. Because indexicality gives language forms and social circumstances “an air of natural association” (Woolard 81), these judgments are rarely questioned.

Meanwhile, standard language ideologies are typically allowed to remain invisible and uninterrogated, like so many other identities and practices that have the privileged status of “default.” Because of the intertwining of academic and standard, the boundaries between academic and non-academic language practices become just as firmly sanctioned as those between standardized and nonstandardized. These firm boundaries do not reflect the realities of language practice, but they are maintained nonetheless; realities not reflected in the ideologies tend to be ignored. A language ideology is “a totalizing vision,” in the words of Irvine and Gal, in which language forms are imagined to be homogenous and any element that does not fit with a particular homogenous image is rendered invisible—it will “either go unnoticed or get explained away” (38; see also Woolard and Schieffelin). It takes a concerted effort to draw attention to language realities outside of the homogenous ideologies.

Just as Writing Studies scholars have worked to highlight the diversity of practices present in academic writing, linguistics and anthropology scholars have illuminated the diverse range of practices and variations that pass for “standard” English and the difficulty of identifying

or defining the standard. Rosina Lippi-Green, for instance, stresses that standard or mainstream English is “an abstraction”: “It is an attempt to isolate from the full set of all varieties of US English those varieties which are not overtly stigmatized, and which find some degree of acceptance and favor over space and social distinctions” (52). We can define standard English, she says, “much in the same way that most people could draw a unicorn, or describe a being from *Star Trek*’s planet Vulcan,” but we are much less likely to observe lived language usage that is definably and exclusively standard (Lippi-Green 53; see also Agha; Kroskrity).

Language ideologies, as Paul Kroskrity explains, “represent the perception of language and discourse that is constructed in the interest of a specific social or cultural group” (501). In the context of the academy, academic writing norms and typical representations of academic discourse values emerged historically from a relatively narrow social world of privileged white male academics. Certain language forms and rhetorical strategies became cemented over time as being the “correct” way to write academically—not because they were inherently better, but just because those who wrote in academic contexts already used those forms and strategies (or at least represented that they did). Biber and Finegan note that registers perceived as literate and academic are similar to the speech and writing of more empowered social groups, both because these more empowered groups were able to create the standards and because their power sustains access to these standard registers for learning and maintenance. The inherent power imbalance here, then, means that traditional academic language standards both undermine efforts at inclusivity and fail to reflect the evolving diversity of the academy.

## **Diverse Academic Practices, Narrow Academic Definitions**

If we look beyond the ideologies surrounding academic writing to the concrete, situated usage of language and literacy, a definition of academic writing and language is quite difficult. Abstract notions of academic writing break down quickly when we see the actual diversity in what gets labeled “academic.” Comparing across (and within) disciplines and genres, looking at the many media, formats, and tones employed to do academic literate work, we see that this category of academic is much more diverse and its boundaries much more blurry than typical representations suggest. Diversity and difference are every bit as endemic to standardized and prestige varieties of language and writing as they are to nonstandardized and stigmatized ones. When we ask questions about how to make room for language and genre diversity in the writing classroom or in academic writing in general, we might much more accurately acknowledge the fact that diversity is already present.

Part of the reason diversity goes unnoticed is that we are much less likely to notice diversity when it is in a prestigious form or context, like an academic publication. In linguistic scholarship, this noticeable diversity is called markedness, which describes, in the words of Carol Myers-Scotton, “the extent [to which a code’s] use ‘matches’ community expectations for the interaction type or genre where it is used: What community norms would predict is unmarked; what is not predicted is marked” (5-6). What is especially important to note about markedness is that, while all marked features are perceived as different from the default, there is no inherent value judgment associated with markedness; that is, something can be marked in a way that is positive, negative, or neutral. When a form is marked in a negative way, readers are more likely to notice and be bothered by the form, often missing the content. When a form is



marked in a positive or neutral way, readers are more likely to read into the text for its content and meaning, even if the form seems different from what might be expected.

Marcia Buell illustrates positive markedness in academic writing with the examples of Latin in a biology text (the word *Heliconius*), ancient Greek in a philosophy text (Richard Rorty's use of the term *θυμός*), and Spanish in a literary essay (as used by Gloria Anzaldúa). Buell points out that Latin in the sciences can simply indicate "technical precision" and may not come across as marked at all. Meanwhile, Greek in the philosophy text, without translation or even transliteration, can be marked in a way that signals elite status and actually adds to Rorty's prestige as the writer. Buell also points out that Spanish in Gloria Anzaldúa's texts, again without translation, is marked in a way that makes a strong political statement (98-99).

I find Buell's multilingual examples enlightening, and could easily add to them examples of writing in multiple dialects of English and a variety of supposedly "non-academic" registers. For example, Smitherman's use of African American English in "The Historical Struggle for Language Rights in CCCC" might be read as a marked and purposeful statement along similar lines to what Anzaldúa does with Spanish. At one point, Smitherman says, "Elisabeth McPherson, genius that my girl was, proposed that we cast the wording in the third person plural" ("Historical Struggle" 23); at another, she asks, "...what else was we gon do while we was waitin for the Revolution to come?" ("Historical Struggle" 18). Suresh Canagarajah says, and I would agree, that Smitherman makes such moves to craft a specific and deliberate voice ("Place of World Englishes"). We might also see her as illustrating the possibility of doing sophisticated academic work in a combination of standardized and nonstandardized language.

We could also look at Nancy Sommers' article "Between the Drafts," in which Sommers offers a personal narrative about her children breaking a wishbone without making explicit its connection to her argument:

Sometimes when I cook a chicken and my children scuffle over the one wishbone, I wish I had listened to my grandmother and cooked two. Usually, the child who gets the short end of the wishbone dissolves into tears of frustration and failure. Interjecting my own authority as the earth mother from central casting, I try to make their life better by asking: On whose authority is it that the short end can't get her wish? Why can't both of you, the long and the short ends, get your wishes? ("Between the Drafts" 30)

Sommers has been talking in her essay about challenging dichotomies in academia, such as the one that says you can only be academic *or* personal, not both. This story is clearly relevant to a discussion of challenging dichotomies, as it shows her challenge to the winner/loser, get your wish/don't get your wish dichotomy of the wishbone. But it also enacts a challenge to the academic/personal dichotomy through its use of a personal story and narrative style to illustrate an academic point. Never does she explicitly make either of these points, but by reading into her text, we can easily interpret them.

Unfortunately, many teachers do not grant student writers the privilege of being read into when they make nonconventional or "diverse" choices; they assume instead that students have made an error or they do not understand the academic writing context. As Lillis and Turner assert, when student texts do not match teachers' expectations for academic writing, "it is the student-writers' language use that becomes the 'problem'" (65). This is in part because of the prevailing attitude toward student writers and their writing; since students are frequently viewed

“as lacking, as deviant, and as beginners” (Helmets 45), marked features in their writing are also viewed negatively. A further reason is that much of the scholarship about linguistic and disciplinary diversity in writing has yet to make its way into classroom practice, where the idea of an academic standard is still firmly in place.

The folk knowledge that circulates of academic writing and language (especially what is often communicated to undergraduate students) is that the academic involves “proper” or “standard” English, a specific tone or perspective (often called objective, critical, or analytical—indexically tied to features like limited use of the first person and avoidance of emotionally charged language), and certain genres and forms of argumentation (most commonly, thesis-driven essays with sources that lend support, logic, and “truth” to an argument). Many of these features are what scholars like Scollon and Scollon, Gee, or Hesse describe as essayist literacy, and what Bartholomae told us students had to do in order to invent the university (see also Downs and Wardle; Thaiss and Zawacki). One common rhetorical deployment of these concepts arises when telling students what *not* to do or why their writing is not up to academic standards.

Messages about what is and is not academic abound in pedagogical materials, and, as I will describe in detail in Chapter 3, first-year writing handbooks provide particularly salient examples of such messages. The language of textbooks often encourages students to view their standards as universal (see, e.g., Bleich; Kleine); it is a language of *do* and *don’t*, *should* and *shouldn’t*, *always* and *never*. Even when the language is more nuanced, the format of handbooks tends to make it difficult to distinguish between what is a rule or fact and what is not. The numbered lists, bullet points, and boxed tips characteristic of the handbook genre lend an air of authority and objectivity. The authoritative nature of handbooks becomes more troubling as the messages they send become more grounded in standard language ideologies.

The *Simon & Schuster Handbook for Writers*, for example, provides a “Quick Reference” box with a list of “language to avoid in academic writing.” Its visual signals—bullet points, bold type, and “no/yes” structure—lend authority to the points represented, which is especially problematic when we consider what these points are. Here are the first sentences of each bullet point:

- Never use **slanted language**, also called *loaded language*; readers feel manipulated by the overly emotional TONE and DICTION.<sup>9</sup>
- Never use **pretentious language**; readers realize you’re showing off.
- Never use **sarcastic language**; readers realize you’re being nasty.
- Never use **colloquial language**; readers sense you’re being overly casual and conversational.
- Never use **euphemisms**, also called *doublespeak*; readers realize you’re hiding the truth.
- Never use NONSTANDARD ENGLISH.
- Never use MIXED METAPHORS.
- Never use SEXIST LANGUAGE or STEREOTYPES.
- Never use REGIONAL LANGUAGE.
- Never use CLICHÉS.
- Never use unnecessary JARGON.
- Never use BUREAUCRATIC LANGUAGE. (Troyka and Hesse 261-62)

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<sup>9</sup> I have reproduced the bold type, italics, and small caps as they are in the original text. This book uses small caps to indicate a key term that is defined in the glossary and referenced elsewhere in the text.

Additionally, under the first five bullet points, the chart provides examples with “NO” and “YES” beside them (with “YES” in green). So, for example, under “never use colloquial language,” we see:

**NO** Christina tanked chemistry.

**YES** Christina failed chemistry. (Troyka and Hesse 261)

The “never” and “no” included in each line are striking, leading students to believe through their absolute prohibition that no successful academic writer would do any of the things listed. While we might hope this to be true of sexist language or stereotypes, it is disconcerting to see nonstandardized English treated exactly the same way.<sup>10</sup> If we follow the page reference the box provides for more information on the “never use nonstandard English” rule,<sup>11</sup> we are told that “departures from edited American English are not appropriate in academic writing” (Troyka and Hesse 253)—again, no room for negotiation, no acknowledgment of the departures from edited American English that already exist within “academic” writing, not even space to *invite* these departures into classrooms, as scholarship has been doing for decades. Like many composition handbooks, this one demonstrates the discourses of strict rules and definitions that circulate widely in academic writing pedagogy.

Examination of individual teachers’ practices, meanwhile, can show us how thoroughly these discourses pervade even very conscientious teachers’ everyday work. The six undergraduate students I have been working with for the past two years have brought me a great many examples of teacher comments that would be at home in the aforementioned *Simon & Schuster* reference box, including admonitions like “avoid this word in academic writing” (next

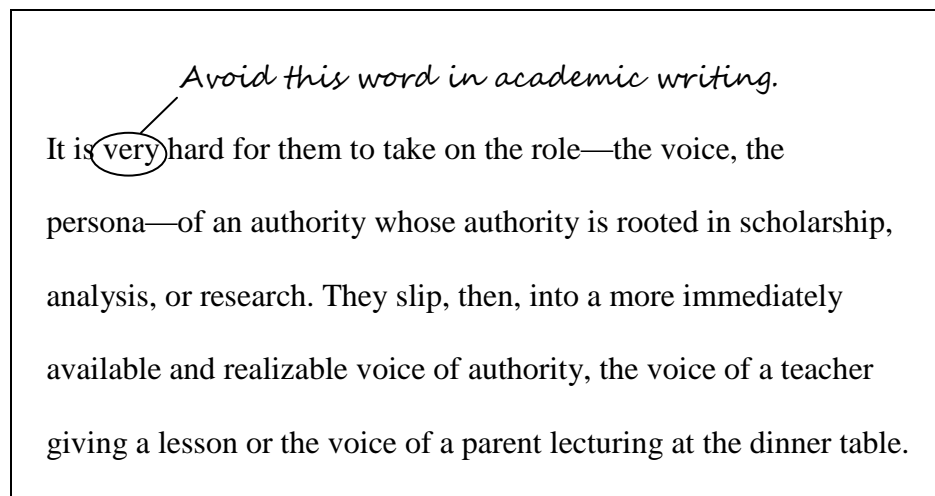
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<sup>10</sup> This parallel treatment of offensive language and nonstandardized dialects is alarmingly common in composition handbooks, as I will explore in Chapter 3.

<sup>11</sup> Each rule on the list is followed by a reference to a section in the book to turn to for more detail.

to where Hannah had written the word “very”<sup>12</sup>), “remember your audience” (next to a word choice Areia’s instructor perceived as inappropriate), and “don’t start a sentence with ‘however.’” Considering how common such comments are and how closely they match textbook discourse, they are clearly not isolated examples of individual teacher idiosyncrasies; they are persistent trends across academic practice, based on a history of standard language ideologies and discourses of student deficit.

I like to imagine published scholars receiving the same reactions to their writing that students do, maybe Geneva Smitherman being told to “never use nonstandard English,” or Nancy Sommers receiving the comment that my co-researcher Rob received when he tried to illustrate a point with an analogy: “This is more like an informal response than an academic paper. It is still too concerned with entertaining, rather than offering a clear position on the topic.” What if Gloria Anzaldúa was told to “remember her audience” whenever she used Spanish? If Hannah’s professor graded David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University” (136), would we see this?



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<sup>12</sup> One of Anny’s teachers, on the other hand, crossed out the word “really” in her paper and put “very” in its place.

What I don't have to imagine, and I like a lot less, is students receiving these sorts of directives. Not only do such directives misrepresent academic writing to students, but additionally, as the quotes with which I started suggest, students notice the double standard at work and grow discouraged by it. Rob, for example, explained to me how he has tried to model his own writing after professional writing he has been assigned to read in his classes:

It's like, if you read my stuff and you read like some of the other stuff that people write...they have like those little moments where you know they make you laugh, they make you mad, you know? And I'm thinking okay, that's exactly what I'm doing, I'm just trying to put a little something in here so you won't get bored with the reading, you know, it will keep you hooked.

As we discussed this, Rob mentioned a Naomi Klein passage he had read for his first-year composition class; he had thoroughly enjoyed the way her introduction caught his attention.<sup>13</sup> I responded by praising his attention to models: "I think that's actually a really good strategy for you, is to pay attention to people who do stuff that you like...It's like, okay, this person did it in a way that works, how'd they do it? How am I gonna do that? You can kinda keep a stash of good writing on hand and..."<sup>14</sup>

At this point he interrupted me: "Yeah, see, what good writing, though? To everybody else it's bad writing." He explained that had grown frustrated with his teacher's tendency to reject (often quite literally, by crossing out entire paragraphs) his efforts at emulating lively

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<sup>13</sup> The class read "The Branding of Learning," a chapter from *No Logo*, in which part of the first paragraph reads, "For a long time one major unbranded youth frontier remained: a place where young people gathered, talked, sneaked smokes, made out, formed opinions and, most maddeningly of all, stood around looking cool for hours on end. That place is called school" (Klein 87).

<sup>14</sup> In relaying interview data, I make a point of quoting myself as well as the students I work with, for two reasons: One, I don't want to reinforce a scholar/student opposition by leaving my students' spoken language unedited while editing my own. Two, I believe it is incredibly important for published academics, and other people whose language passes for standard on a fairly regular basis, to be conscious of and open about discussing the many ways in which our language is frequently far from formal or standard.

professional writing. His teacher's responses to his writing, from his perspective, boiled down to "Get rid of these I's, you don't do this, you don't do that," and ultimately, "Ain't good enough for us." The "us" and "you" here are typical of when Rob voices a professor's perspective, and they echo the messages sent by textbooks and other pedagogical materials: The academy is one cohesive community, of which we professors are representatives, and you students need to learn the rules.

Those of us who want to encourage linguistic diversity in the classroom but are stuck on the question of how to do so need to consider that we may be asking the wrong question. We need to ask instead how we can break apart the false dichotomy of "home language" versus "academic language" and how we can raise awareness that linguistic difference in the classroom is the norm for everyone, not the exception for a few international students or working-class students of color. We need to pay close attention to all the register and dialect and genre and style blending that already occurs, largely unremarked, within academic writing, and we need to make concerted efforts to include undergraduate students in discussions of this blending and variation. We need to acknowledge, in our students' presence, how diverse academic writing actually is and encourage them to make informed choices in their writing rather than following a set of inflexible rules.

## **Overview of Research and Chapters**

My research for this project combines longitudinal study of six undergraduate students, an auto-ethnographic focus on language-themed basic writing classes, and textual analysis of representations of academic writing circulating in the university. Through interviews and textual analysis, I have worked with my student co-researchers, all of whom qualify as what many



writing programs would term “basic writers,” to explore how pedagogical representations of academic writing have affected their understanding of academic writing expectations and of themselves as academic writers. Two distinctive aspects of my research allow me to make unique contributions to how we view undergraduate writers. First, the students occupy a co-researcher/co-learner position alongside me, for which they are uniquely trained because the classes they took with me, centered on the theme of writing and language variation in the university, gave them disciplinary knowledge of the ideas in my study. Second, my writing about my student co-researchers works actively to counter more typical representations of students that focus on teachers’ reactions and researchers’ interpretations (as described by, e.g., Helmers). These students’ voices are prominent in the dissertation, and I still return to them with evolving texts and interpretations to seek their input. Chapter 2, “Why Would I Hide? They’re My Ideas,” will describe in detail the research methodologies and traditions with which I align my study as well as my own research processes, and it will introduce my co-researchers and the structure and content of the classes in which I taught them.

Chapter 3, “Authoritative and Mysterious Texts,” examines wide-scale practices that hold student writers to different standards than those applied to published academic writers. This chapter uses textual analysis to compare the lived practices of academic writing and writers to their pedagogical representations. I illustrate the homogenous prescriptions for academic writing offered to students, as exemplified by a selection of writing textbooks, and I use examples of published scholarship in a variety of disciplines to compare these textbook prescriptions to the diversity of writing and language practices that are considered academic in practice. In juxtaposing these two types of texts, I demonstrate that pedagogical materials are constructed in a way that obscures the diversity of professional academic writing and creates a separate,

oversimplified picture for student writers that denies them the full range of options open to academic writers.

In my analysis of gaps between academic writing and its pedagogical representation, I focus especially on two issues that were salient in my co-researchers' experiences: the rules for academic language they encountered and how their opportunities to claim authority and individual perspectives compared to those of published scholars. Chapter 4, "We Have the Ideas, We Just Don't Know How to Format It," takes up the first of these issues from my co-researchers' experience, drawing from our interview discussions and examples of teacher responses to their writing. I explore the prescriptive rules and expectations that students encounter, particularly in the areas of correctness, style, diction, and argument. I also touch on students' understandings and applications of, as well as affective responses to, these rules. Through this exploration, I illustrate the problems caused for my co-researchers by oversimplified representations of the academic.

Chapter 5, "I've Got to Become an Encyclopedia," takes up the second of these two prominent issues, focusing on student authority and individuality in relation to academic writing expectations and their broader discursive lives. I consider the requirements my co-researchers have encountered for working with sources, exploring when and why they are required to cite sources rather than claim viewpoints as their own. I also examine expectations communicated for formal, academic style and how those have caused some students to feel out of place in academic writing. Finally, I focus on the common pedagogical expectation that students, especially those from language backgrounds different from standardized English, should codeswitch from their "home" language to more "academic" language when they write in college. The expectations discussed in this chapter interfere with students' abilities to comfortably integrate multiple

aspects of themselves and to feel or be considered a part of a community of academic writers, by themselves and by scholars.

Chapter 6, “All English Teachers Should Know,” reflects on the implications of this dissertation study for theory, research, and pedagogy. I emphasize the need to break apart the false dichotomy of “home language” vs. “academic language,” recognizing instead that diversity is everywhere in academic writing, because it is everywhere in all writing and language. I reflect on my own pedagogical practice as a model of reflexiveness about our pedagogies, including the theoretical principles that guide them and the images of students and academic writing they enforce. I encourage scholar/teachers to not only acknowledge the complex, heterogeneous nature of academic writing but also share our understandings with students and to extend to students the same willingness to “read into” texts that we grant published scholars.

## Chapter 2

### **“Why Would I Hide? They’re My Ideas”: Methods and Processes of Researching with Undergraduate Writers**

My central motives for this research grew out of my composition teaching experience. As I worked with students who fit many people’s definition of “basic writer,” I became concerned by the alienation and confusion my students displayed as they encountered messages about the nature of academic writing and academic language, messages that often seemed to locate them as outsiders to the academy. Many of my students routinely used social dialects and registers—or languages other than English—that were decidedly not socially indexed as prestige varieties. A key motive behind this research, then, was to involve students in inquiry about academic writing and language to the point that they could use disciplinary frameworks to analyze their own experiences, to develop a grounded critique of the presumed homogeneity of academic language and the simple rightness of standardized language varieties, and most of all to use this knowledge to empower themselves to participate in the disciplinary worlds of the university (whether they chose to analyze and align with language practices or to challenge them).

These goals have led me to several interrelated areas of inquiry. In part, I have engaged in a process of developing and implementing writing courses that focus explicitly on disciplinary frameworks for exploring ideologies around academic writing and language. Through professional-level disciplinary reading, discussion, and writing, these courses perform what I consider an essential function of bringing students into professional discourses on writing and language. I document these courses here in part to contribute to a body of pedagogical knowledge, as numerous scholar-teachers have offered their own approaches to teaching composition with an eye to language and genre diversity (e.g., Canagarajah, “Toward”; Downs and Wardle; Howard; Kinloch; Kynard, “Getting”).

I also document these courses to provide background for another portion of my research, which has involved following six of my former students over three or more semesters beyond my class. Through regular meetings and sharing of texts, the students and I have examined their literate work in and out of school, their feelings about it, and their teachers' receptions of it. Like the students in studies by Roz Ivanic, Theresa Lillis, and Kevin Roozen, these students have acted as co-researchers, joining me in selecting areas of focus and interpreting our data, a task for which they are well prepared given our shared background in writing and language study.

In the process of working together, my student co-researchers and I have examined many textual representations of their teachers' expectations for academic writing, including marginal commentary on essays, assignment prompts, and lists of tips or rules for writing. To complement these individual representations of academic writing expectations, and inspired in part by the commonalities among them, I have also examined representations of academic writing circulating on a wider scale, in the form of first-year composition textbooks. All of these means of inquiry are combined together in this dissertation as I explore the homogenous academic writing expectations conveyed to students, the intellectual and psychological effects of those expectations, and the ways in which we might instead create richer opportunities for student exploration and understanding. In this chapter, then, I will provide details of each of these aspects of my research and the theories that inform them.

## **Pedagogical Methods**

My former students are uniquely trained to occupy a co-researcher/co-learner position alongside me because the classes in which I taught them, centered on the theme of writing and language variation in the university, gave them disciplinary knowledge of the ideas in my study.

My writing-and language-focused courses emerged out of a desire to work with students to be critical participants in discourse about academic literacy and rhetorically-savvy users of a variety of dialects and registers. In these goals I am inspired by the work of Canagarajah, Kinloch, Lu, Smitherman, and a host of other scholars. My pedagogy encourages students to examine language and writing with an eye to questioning the stability of definitions and categories—a quintessentially “academic” activity, but one that first-year students in required general education classes are very rarely given the opportunity to engage in, even though they are very much ready for it. If they haven’t explicitly addressed the question “What is academic writing?” in prior schooling, they have certainly developed an implicit understanding of what it means to write academically based on years of experience interpreting writing assignments, classroom dialogue, and other cues (see, e.g., Nelson). Similarly, students who command stigmatized language varieties are well aware of the ways in which certain dialects are marginalized and the power of standard language ideology is wielded, although they might not yet use terms like “marginalized” and “ideology” to describe what is happening. Coming into college, my students’ concepts of language and academic writing routinely include phrases like “proper English” and “good writing”; I encourage them to interrogate what exactly these phrases mean, what ideologies are behind them, and what alternatives might exist to these ways of thinking. My goal is to create a space to critique common assumptions about language and consider what alternatives might exist to these ways of thinking.

To date, I have taught six writing courses focused on expectations and ideologies surrounding academic writing and language. Two of them have been the first half of a two-semester first-year writing sequence, called Rhetoric 103 at my university. Three of them have

been six-week Bridge Composition courses in the Summer Bridge Program<sup>1</sup>, which gives incoming first-year students an intensive introduction to college-level coursework during the summer before they begin their first year. Both Rhetoric 103 and Bridge Composition enroll students whose ACT English scores identify them as “basic” or “underprepared” writers, and the students are quite diverse linguistically and ethnically. Most recently, I taught an advanced composition version of the course for sophomore, junior, and senior students, and because I recruited many of my students through the Bridge/Transition program’s academic advisors, the demographic makeup of this class was similar to that of the other courses.

In discussing my pedagogical choices here, I will focus on the Rhetoric 103 course. I consider it to be the most thorough and focused version of my pedagogy, since it allows time for a sequence of four topical units that each culminate in an essay assignment.<sup>2</sup> Further, I consider it a good focal example since I met half of my co-researchers in one of these courses, and the other half in the Summer Bridge course that is a shortened version of the Rhetoric course.

In Rhetoric 103, we work through a series of assignments designed to raise our awareness of how language and writing vary and give us opportunities to question what is considered right or standard. I assign a language autobiography, which is an exploration of how language varies in students’ experiences, for the first essay; an essay on language standards and ideologies for the second; and an essay on definitions of academic writing for the third. For students’ final essays, they get to choose a topic that has interested them to argue about in more detail. Through these

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of my study, the Bridge/Transition program accepted approximately 100 at-risk incoming first-year students each year. Fifty of those students, identified on the basis of factors including ACT scores and grades as needing the most guidance, participated in Summer Bridge, a six-week intensive course of study in composition, reading, math, and science intended to strengthen their basic skills and give them a head start on their fall coursework. All students in Bridge/Transition spent their first two years of college under the guidance of the Transition program, which provided regular academic advising, smaller class sections for some general education classes, and other resources intended to keep students on the path to successful graduation.

<sup>2</sup> While some of the Rhetoric 103 readings are also used in the advanced composition and summer bridge classes, I simplify the essays and omit the “What is Academic Writing?” assignment in summer bridge, and I assign reading responses and an extended ethnographic research project in place of the topical essays for advanced composition.

assignments, we work with themes of dialect variation, register and genre variation, language ideology, identity, prejudice, and access.

The language autobiography essay is intended primarily to work with students to bring knowledge of dialect/register/genre variation into our awareness and develop a scholarly vocabulary with which to discuss it. Students come into college with a great deal of knowledge of how language and writing varies, since theirs of course does so on a regular basis, but for some students that knowledge is implicit rather than something that they have examined or analyzed. Therefore, another goal that this assignment meets is to show how much students know and can contribute to scholarly discussion. To guide our discussions and early writing, we read about ways in which language varies, such as by age (we look especially at texting and online communication), linguistic and cultural surroundings (we consider things like Geneva Smitherman's work on hip hop language and Gloria Anzaldúa's work on Chicano English and Spanish), and geographical location (examining U.S. regional variations in vocabulary and pronunciation). I encourage students to bring their own experiences to bear on our discussions of the readings, and different students find different aspects of the readings relevant to their personal lives—and not always in the ways I would expect.

I was worried, for example, that some of the international students who had only recently arrived in the U.S. might feel excluded or detached during our discussions of U.S. regional dialect variation. Yet in both of my most recent classes, international students have engaged with the regional variations in U.S. English by comparing them to the regional language variations and accompanying stereotypes in their native countries. Several of my South Korean students, for example, illustrated for me and their classmates how regional language variation in Korea carries with it very similar judgments and associations, such that Korean speakers from particular



regions face stereotypes much like those that U.S. students are used to hearing about stigmatized regional dialects of U.S. English. In the first of the two classes, I had three South Korean students, only one of whom was from Seoul, which they all agreed was the center of Standard Korean. The others were from the Southeastern cities of Busan and Ulsan, the common dialects of which they described in a way that reminded me and their U.S.-native classmates of common descriptions of New York or New Jersey speech (the student from Busan described his home city's dialect as tough-sounding, with many strong expressions), or of Southern or rural speech (the student from Ulsan mentioned that people make assumptions about the intelligence of people from her city based on their pronunciation). As they shared their examples and experiences with the class, and we all discussed them in relation to the U.S. examples we had read about, our class developed a sense of how truly global standard language ideologies and dialect-based prejudice are.

By offering their unique perspectives, students make active contributions to our knowledge and the scholarly discussion; they bring complementary information to the table rather than simply learning the given material. I encourage them to let these perspectives guide the language autobiography writing assignment, in which they then write about their own language use—what factors contribute to the many ways in which they speak and write, and how their language can vary depending on their situation and goals.

The assignments that follow the language autobiography assignment are evidence of a progression in my own thinking. Before I began focusing my course entirely on academic writing and language, I had the language autobiography essay as a stand-alone assignment, following readings by Amy Tan, Gloria Anzaldúa, and another author or two (selections from bell hooks' *Talking Back* and Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin That Talk* both made appearances).

Yet I began to notice several problems with this assignment. For one, the more I learned about language ideologies in academia and how ideas about standard academic writing are constructed, the more I realized that I was reifying standard/nonstandard binaries myself by choosing primarily articles about nonstandardized language varieties in order to talk about language variation. I then revised my language autobiography unit to include variation that isn't necessarily as marginalizing, such as the slang and texting language of younger generations and regional differences in word choice. Doing this, I also saw my students gain a greater degree of engagement with the material, since everyone recognized him- or herself in at least one or two readings—even the students who came in insisting that they just “talk normal all the time,” as one of my suburban white male students said to me.

Another problem with the original language autobiography assignment was that I kept seeing my students talk in their autobiographies about how they spoke “properly,” “correctly,” “formally,” or “academically” in certain situations, and they never seemed to feel that these terms needed defining or that anyone might question them. I realized that we needed to take a closer look at these constructs, which the language standards essay gave us the opportunity to do. This interrogation of the standard became something that I would begin in class discussion of the language autobiography unit, would carry us through the language standards unit, and then that students were ready to carry with them into the academic writing unit.

Now that I've made language and writing the focus of my entire class, the language autobiography essay is followed by an essay on language standards. In relation to this essay, we look more closely at what qualifies as standard and grammatically correct in the English language. We read about standard language ideologies and prescriptive/descriptive distinctions from authors like Rosina Lippi-Green and Robert MacNeil (scholars who provide complex

linguistic information but do so in an approachable way). Then, students are asked to synthesize and respond to authors' views on a particular aspect of the topic that they find interesting. I give students sample questions on which they might focus their essays, including "Is there such a thing as Standard English?" "What is the relationship of language standards to issues of race, class, and education?" and "What are the relative merits of prescriptivism and descriptivism?"

Most students ask themselves a lot of questions along the way to this essay. Does the language I use count as standard? Does standard necessarily mean smarter or better educated, or even just better sounding? If standard language doesn't exist, how come my mom and teachers always told me that certain things—double negatives, or "him and me" as the subject of a sentence—were wrong? What I've come to appreciate in many of my students' progressions of ideas is that, while they still believe there is a way of talking and writing that is more standard and formal, they become more willing to let go of the idea that society has a right to judge people who don't talk that way. My student (and now co-researcher) Hannah reflected the view that much of our class had agreed on a few semesters ago when she said that, because "we pick up languages from our surroundings," we can't make assumptions about someone's intelligence because of how they talk.

One idea that most students embrace wholeheartedly is that it is natural for language to change over time. Students in one of my classes quoted Robert MacNeil's sentence "Language changes because society changes" (from "English Belongs to Everybody") so often that it became almost a motto for the class. Many college-aged students feel defensive about older generations' accusations that their slang and text messaging are ruining the English language, and they feel gratified to find that their generation is far from the first to push on the boundaries of correctness. One of the things we discuss in this unit is how many terms considered fairly

standard today started out as slang terms decades ago. We explore how this process of slang speech becoming mainstream speech occurs by thinking about examples of words that younger generations stopped using when older generations took them up. As my students shared examples like “My mom says ‘my bad’ now” (followed by an eye roll), we saw language change in process.

The third essay, Academic Writing, is an exploration of what people actually mean when they talk about writing academically. We read scholarship on academic writing written for both professional and student audiences, including excerpts from Thaiss and Zawacki’s *Engaged Writers, Dynamic Disciplines* and Lisa Ede’s textbook *The Academic Writer*.<sup>3</sup> We also do some ethnographic inquiry into academic writing by talking with professors; everyone in the class interviews one and then we share. On the day that my students bring these interview results into class, we have an in-depth discussion of the similarities and differences among them and the possible reasons for them. The students make many insightful observations in the process, such as one in Fall 2008 who found it interesting that her teacher had named Standard English as one of the main features of academic writing, given that we had just finished talking about language standardization and how it devalues certain people. We also do some textual analysis in this unit: Students each find two examples of published articles that they think would definitely be considered “academic,” and they analyze what about them makes them fit that category. Then students attempt in their essays to argue something about the nature of academic writing: They might try to define what makes something “academic,” in general or in their field; they might talk about how academic writing by students and published scholars compares, etc.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Academic Writer* was our class’s one published textbook the most recent time I taught the course. Previously, I had not used a rhetoric. I do always use a coursepack of readings compiled from journal, book, and textbook sources, and I encourage students to use the Purdue Online Writing Lab ([owl.english.purdue.edu](http://owl.english.purdue.edu)) as a handbook.

Essay 4, which I call “Language, Culture, and Academia” on the assignment prompt, is an opportunity for students to make an argument about some aspect of language and writing that interests them, synthesizing and extending the inquiry we’ve done over the semester. They can pull from course readings but are also encouraged to seek resources beyond those assigned and to incorporate unpublished sources, such as their professor interviews, their personal experience, and interviews or conversations with peers. Often students’ topic choices have been influenced by their experiences with language and writing, and those topic choices help me to see that nearly every issue we cover has personal relevance for at least a few students. Anny, who later became a co-researcher in my study, wrote about the difficulties Korean international students (of which she herself is one) face in writing and speaking in U.S. academic settings, and she made suggestions for both what teachers and classmates should understand in order to help and what international students should understand in order to ease their transition. Another student felt strongly that scholars often view and discuss students in a condescending way, and she wrote to encourage instructors and researchers to acknowledge the knowledge and ability students possess in academic contexts; she was influenced in this by Jennie Nelson’s “Reading Classrooms as Text” article, which we read during our academic writing unit.

As I alluded to earlier, I have intended in part for this pedagogy, and by extension my study, to respond to composition scholars’ search for practical pedagogical approaches to accompany the theoretical attention to students’ diverse languages and literacies since the *Students’ Right to Their Own Language* statement. However, I also intend to go beyond *Students’ Right* and many of the existing responses to it because I work in my classes to explore the ways in which *all* students’ and academics’ language varies, rather than focusing only on marginalized groups and languages. I turn now to discuss how I have conceptualized engaging

in research that would align with and inform this pedagogical work and also allow me to examine how students might carry their studies in such a course with them as they move through college.

### **Ethnographic Research Processes and Methods**

George Kamberelis and Greg Dimitriadis characterize qualitative research as “systematic yet dynamic (i.e., changeable and changing)” (17). It involves an inductive analysis process in which researchers examine “multiple forms of data [...] to discover recurrent themes and thematic relations” (19). For me, this process has been a very recursive one, alternating among textual analysis, interviews for both data collection and co-analysis, and reflection. In this sense, I align myself closely with Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln's conception of the qualitative researcher as a “bricoleur and quilt maker” (5). The complex qualitative quilt created in this research weaves together multiple sources, realities, voices, and textual formats. All the while, I as the bricoleur have an active role in piecing together the quote as a whole, so self-reflexivity is essential to the process.

Specifically, I take an ethnographic approach to qualitative research. In this, I align myself with literacy researchers such as Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, who foregrounds ethnography's “focus on lived experience” (xxi). My interviews and analyses pay close attention to the language practices, perspectives, and lives of the students I have worked with for this study. As Alessandro Duranti and Charles Goodwin point out, understanding a participant's knowledge and perspective is vital to understanding that participant's actions and practices. Since I agree with Susan Florio-Ruane that “the cultural meanings ethnographers study tend to be tacit” and thus “they must be researched indirectly” (186), I have worked to maximize the

range of objects of inquiry in order to get at these cultural meanings (in this case, students' and teachers' ideologies about language and writing) as many ways as possible. Therefore, acquiring a rich picture of language and literacy practices often involves analysis on several levels with several methods.

My primary methods in acquiring and examining objects of inquiry have been interview and textual analysis. My interviews have been done in a manner that Shulamit Reinharz calls "multiple in-depth interviewing," which involves repeated meetings and eventual sharing of data to "invite the interviewee's analysis" (Reinharz 36). This sharing of data for analysis is often called member checking or participant checking (see, e.g., Lather, "Issues of Validity"; Michael-Luna and Canagarajah; Reason and Rowan). In addition to rich data, multiple in-depth interviewing also builds trust and "strong interviewer-interviewee bonds" (Reinharz 36). Over multiple semesters (at least three and in some cases up to five or more), I have met repeatedly with my co-researchers, interviewing them about their experiences with writing and language, specific texts they have shared with me, the contexts in which they write and speak, and the relationships among their writing and language practices in different settings. They join with me in analyzing examples of their writing and in identifying and analyzing relevant experiences and ideas of theirs. (For details of the interviews and texts involved in this study, see Appendix A: Summary of Co-Researcher Data.)

My textual and discourse analysis looks closely at student writing, instructional materials, textbooks, teacher responses, and interview discussion. My analysis is critical and situated, aligning with what Fairclough, Rogers, and others call critical discourse analysis (CDA) and with what Scollon calls mediated discourse analysis (MDA). As Rogers describes it, CDA involves studying (often embedded and implicit) power relations as they are indexed through

discourse. CDA examines the “relationship between the form and function of language” to “explain why and how certain patterns are privileged over others” and the “networks of discourse patterns that comprise social situations” (Rogers 4). A CDA approach helps me to illuminate the ideologies and power structures indexed in how students and teachers talk about writing, as well as the constructions of student agency (or lack thereof) that circulate in wider representations like textbooks. MDA adds a layer of attending closely to the many practices surrounding texts and discourses, and the links among those practices. As Scollon explains,

There is a necessary intersection of social practices and mediational means which in themselves reproduce social groups, histories, and identities...A mediated discourse analysis does not neutralize these practices and social structures as “context,” but seeks to keep them alive in our interpretations of mediated actions.

(4)

With an MDA perspective, I prioritize not only obviously “relevant” data, but a great deal of what might seem like asides, in order to get a full picture of my co-researchers’ literate lives, practices, and ideologies.

As a brief illustration of how contexts for writing have been just as relevant as the writing itself, particularly in understanding how the writing connects to power relations, consider my co-researchers who are former Summer Bridge students. They all come from an area in south Chicago where high school graduation rates are low and very few students go on to college. During our interviews, we periodically touched on their backgrounds and how those affected their senses of themselves as college students. Pierre, for instance, described to me his sense of the enormous difference between his high school and those attended by many suburban Chicago students. There was a student leadership program in the Chicago area where high school student



delegates got to spend a day at another high school, learning about its operations and students.

When Pierre spent a day at a more affluent suburban high school, what stood out to him was the inequality:

Their school really had all the things to prepare them for college. This is no comparison, you can't compare things we don't have to things they do have.

They had classes where they teach from PowerPoints. No teachers were teaching from PowerPoint at my high school!

We continued discussing Pierre's educational background in a later interview, and he explained that he has felt the differences in his level of college preparation acutely throughout his time at the university. Midway through his junior year, he still felt like he was adjusting to college:<sup>4</sup>

**Pierre:** I didn't go to no college prep school, I didn't go to no high school where we were in a class and students were actually paying attention and wanted to learn! *[laughter]* You know, you had your people that just sat in class, blah blah blah...students cursing the teachers out, you know it wasn't a learning environment. I came from a high school where it was never a learning environment.

**Sam:** I think that's another thing a lot of teachers assume is that you know how to be in a classroom, like that students who come here have experience with being in a classroom...and that's something some students need to learn how to do! Because they haven't had the opportunity before.

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<sup>4</sup> In my transcriptions of interviews, I use the following conventions: Brackets indicate things that were not said; *plain text in brackets* is used for small comments, changes, or additions meant to elaborate, clarify, or adjust the grammar for consistency with this text, while *italicized text in brackets* indicates a nonverbal action, such as laughing or gesturing. *Text in parentheses* indicates my best guess at a word or phrase that I could not distinguish with certainty from the recording.

**Pierre:** Yeah, exactly, and I'm still learning...College is still an adjustment to me, and I've been here for two-and-a-half years, you know, so it's like people think I should be adjusted but it's still an adjustment to me. It's still, because of where I came from, you know? Four years of going to high school, academic demands are not high...

Similarly, Areia discussed with me her awareness of the discrepancy between her everyday language practices and those considered "academic." She is very aware of this discrepancy's connection, for her, to her socioeconomic and racial background. For this reason, she has argued frequently against judgments against language varieties typically considered African American:

**Areia:** The way you speak, that's where you live...like say Black English, most of the time they [Black English speakers] live in urban areas, and like Black English is looked upon as uneducated and broken and uneducated, like incorrect English leads to being uneducated and uneducated leads to being poor because you've gotta have money to be well educated, and being poor leads to being in an urban area because that's where most poor people live.

**Sam:** It's all tied together.

**Areia:** Yes, it is...but like using it against us, I don't think is right. It really, language, it can hurt you in so many ways, and...if everybody was to agree that Standard English was the best...it'd still be a problem of the poor people getting educated to learn it...

**Sam:** Yeah, not everybody has access to that dialect and the opportunity to learn it...

**Areia:** A lot of people...the teachers don't teach correctly, or they don't have the right books, or—always, everything just falls back to money!

While Areia feels, on one level, like her issues with linguistic equality are indicative of larger flaws in the public education system, she also indicts higher education for perpetuating the same sorts of linguistic prejudice that she sees outside of academia. In a paper for her first-year writing class responding to the prompt “What Is the University?” she wrote,

Most universities are dominated by the dominant race, where the dominant language is “Standard English”...It is an embarrassment that people...come to the place of “hope” and “opportunity” and can't express themselves...if they try to use their own language then it is not accepted...Minorities come here thinking they will be able to fit in because society has led them to think that great diversity lies within [the university], and when they come here they get a culture shock...They are shocked because it wasn't made for them. This is the level at which they are expected to fail.

When I discuss writing with my Summer Bridge co-researchers, then, and especially when I hear about and see responses to their writing, I have in mind this context of their backgrounds in writing, language, and education. The significance of a particular type of response to their writing—use of the words “not appropriate,” for example—is only fully understandable in this wider context. Only here do we see the effects such messages have on their self-perceptions as writers and academics. Comments on writing, I argue, evoke more than just the writing for students; they evoke a sense of their right to be in the university.

## Interview Methods and Participants

Following my language- and academic writing-focused classes, I invited some of the students to continue talking with me about the themes we had explored in the course and how those themes continued to play out in their lives.<sup>5</sup> The longitudinal student study that resulted has followed six students through several semesters of coursework, examining the situations and discourses within which they write and how they negotiate complex and sometimes competing expectations. Following my former students allows me to draw conclusions about not only how students negotiate writing practices in the university but also how opportunities to engage in scholarly conversation about and interrogation of academic language and literacy standards can facilitate this negotiation. I intend this study not only to contribute to a growing body of in-depth, deeply situated case-study research on student writers (e.g., Casanave; Chiseri-Strater; Lillis; Prior, *Writing/Disciplinarity*), but also to explore how this type of research can be used together with teacher research in order to explore pedagogical outcomes. Further, by involving students in all stages of the research process, this study, like my pedagogy, works to engage students in complex, critical explorations of academic writing and language standards.

The student study has involved several interviews with each student co-researcher about their language and literacy histories and attitudes, their current literacy practices, and the reception of their writing, as well as examination of texts both written by students and influencing their writing (such as course readings, teacher comments, or assignment prompts). As I have gathered and analyzed these data, I have been particularly interested in examining how students, teachers, and other actors define academic writing, and in analyzing moments in which students' literate practices seem to fall markedly within or outside the realm of the "academic." I

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<sup>5</sup> The Informed Consent document signed by each of my co-researchers at the start of our work together can be found in Appendix B, Informed Consent for Student Co-Researchers.

have also been attending to the ways in which diverse languages, dialects, registers, and genres interact in students' writing and in the literate artifacts and practices that surround them.

The student co-researchers include Summer Bridge and first-year writing students. I met three of them when they were students in my first-year writing class in 2007; as of this writing, they are seniors. Hannah is white and from a Chicago suburb; she is majoring in communications and has used the knowledge gained from her major as a football promoter, sorority officer, and research assistant. Ali (short for Alison), from a different Chicago suburb, identifies as half white, half Latina; her major is education with a minor in Spanish, and she wants to be a secondary Spanish teacher. Anny, whose given name is Jinyoung, emigrated with her family from Seoul, South Korea, to suburban Chicago when she was a sophomore in high school; she gained U.S. citizenship during her junior year in college. She is now studying chemistry and in the future "would like to be a dentist and go to mission trips or provide free clinic days to help people."

I met the other three co-researchers when they were students in my Summer Bridge courses. Pierre was my student in 2006; he is now a fifth-year senior finishing a Bachelor's degree in sports management. He is African American and comes from an area of Chicago's south side where few youth are college-bound; many do not finish high school. He goes back occasionally to his high school to speak to current students about why they should stay committed to their education and attend college. My other Summer Bridge students, who took my Bridge Composition class in the summer of 2008, are from the same part of Chicago. Rob, a Latino cinema studies major, went on to take my advanced composition course in the fall of 2009. He prides himself on being a no-nonsense person, unafraid of saying what he feels needs to be said, and this extends to his academic writing. Areia (pronounced ah-REE-uh) is an African

American junior studying African American studies, with a special interest in the Black Diaspora. She plans to go to law school so that she can do work that supports equality among races, sexualities, and religions; as she says, “I just want everybody to be who they want to be.”

The names used in this study are all the students’ real names. I offered my student co-researchers a choice between real name and pseudonym, in order to give them space to claim their attitudes, experiences, and writing if they wanted to. As I told my university’s Institutional Review Board when applying for human subjects research permissions, identifiability must be approached as a right as well as a risk when authorship and intellectual property are involved. Given the choice, all of the students asked to use their real names. As Pierre said, “Why would I hide? They’re my ideas.”

## **Research Ethics and Representations**

As an ethnographic literacy researcher, I face a variety of ethical issues related to the positioning of myself and my co-researchers. Scholars such as Mortensen and Kirsch point out that researchers must be reflexive about their power in interpreting data and creating narratives from participants’ experiences and texts. I am especially conscious of the need for reflexivity in this study because my primary participants, university students, have a complex and often problematic history of representation in scholarly work. As Marguerite Helmers illustrates in her book *Writing Students*, instructor testimonials have largely defined students by their “inability to perform well in school” (4), their “resistance to pedagogy” (6), and their tendency to “outrage us morally” (11). Helmers explains that students are typically represented as inferior to and dependent upon both teachers and academia in general:

The three most common tropes of writing about students...characterize them as lacking, as deviant, and as beginners. With each of these constructions, students are posited in a state of absence, dependent upon the teacher in order to be fully realized as an individual. The teacher remains at the center of the discourse, control unthreatened and authority undisputed. (45)

While Helmers' study was published in 1994, scholarly portrayals of students still look very similar. Articles in composition journals continue to describe students with words like "novice" and "inexperienced," while portraying teachers as their primary sources of scholarly guidance and exposure or enculturation to academic discourse: We "provide underprepared students with exposure to the practices and values of the academic discourse community" (Launspach 56) and guide their "acquisition of these new ways of being and communicating" (Kill 217). These kinds of descriptions create a "them/us" dichotomy in which professors and TAs are insiders to academia and students outsiders.

A primary goal of my work is to push back against such representations and to upset the binaries in research and teaching that almost always include students on the side of absence and disempowerment. This goal drives several key aspects of my methodology, the first being that I encourage the students with whom I work to take a very active role in the research. They and I have worked in cooperation to set the topics covered in interviews and to choose texts and experiences that present interesting and relevant examples for the study. I went into initial meetings with my student co-researchers with a set of interview questions to work from, including "How do you define college-level writing?" "How have your college instructors tended to respond to your writing so far?" and "What people or ideas have influenced how you write essays?" However, after the first interview, I rarely needed to ask questions other than "How are

your classes?” “What are you working on?” or, simply, “What’s going on?”—and sometimes, not even that. The students set the agenda for our meetings, often arriving with stories and documents prepared, and sometimes even initiating the meetings when their stories couldn’t wait. (Rob once urgently requested a meeting with me after some particularly critical remarks from his first-year writing teacher, telling me in an email, “Looks like my style of writing is going to die for sure.”) While some of the students’ agendas were right in line with the sorts of questions I had already asked—bringing a graded paper to show me how teachers were responding to their writing, for example—many of them weren’t.

Ali, for example, came to an interview wanting to tell me about her class on immigration, cross-listed in Latino Studies and Asian American Studies, because discussion in that class was troubling her. The problem she was having, she told me, was with “talking in an academic language.” In this small, discussion-driven course, the teacher and two of the other students talked at a level Ali perceived as very different from that of her own language and, possibly, from that of the rest of the class, since they tended to remain silent as she did. As she described the situation, her teacher and two peers

talk in this way that like I understand it, but I would never think to use words like that initially. And I feel stupid because like I can’t express myself in that way.

And so I don’t want to raise my hand in that class, because like I’m afraid I’m not going to say it right or something, and everyone’s going to be like laughing at me in the corner, like that’s my biggest fear.

While I will discuss the register differences Ali outlines in more detail in Chapter 4, I want to focus for right now on the circumstances of our interaction. After Ali raised this topic of discussion, she continued to work through it with me, explaining how her professor would



frequently talk above the students' heads: "She'll ask her questions in ways that I have to think about it for a second, and then I have to be like 'oh, that's what she's talking about,' and I'm just kind of like, why can't you say it like that to begin with?" Meanwhile, Ali told me, the course readings were aimed at more of a general audience and were much more approachable than the teacher's questions. Therefore, Ali understood the readings and the issues at stake, but she was uncomfortable voicing her knowledge in class, as much as she wished she could: "I'd rather be able to like raise my hand with confidence and kind of sound like I knew what I was talking about."

I was pleased on multiple levels that Ali had brought these concerns to me, since our discussion was a mutually beneficial interaction for us. I was able to give Ali feedback and encouragement on an academic issue that was troubling her, doing my best to reassure her that the teacher's spoken language did not necessarily indicate an unwillingness to hear students like Ali. I told her,

Some people get so just engrossed in their academic work that they can't talk to normal people. I know a lot of people like that! They just can't take it down a notch to talk to people who haven't read everything that they've read. And it doesn't mean they're not willing to listen to those people; they just can't express themselves to those people.

Ali felt reassured after talking to me and told me she'd try to talk and to encourage some of the peers she had befriended to talk as well—something that she was indeed able to do, as I found out in a later interview. I, meanwhile, received data that I would not have gotten if Ali was not alert to the sort of data we had been discussing and comfortable enough with me to share it, feelings of insecurity and all. Would I have thought to ask the question, "What registers are

employed in the spoken discussion in your writing classes, and how do your registers compare to those used by your teacher and other students?” I certainly hadn’t at that point. Since she shared my interest in language issues and was alert to data, though, Ali thought to bring it to me and thus enriched my research.

Similarly, Rob maintained an intense interest in writing style differences and preferences, which I first noticed in my summer class, throughout his participation in the study, and this sustained interest has led to fascinating data for me as well as to fulfilling, active inquiry for him. When Rob was a sophomore, he registered for my advanced composition class, which was a more advanced language and academic writing themed course with an emphasis on ethnographic research. When it came time to do a research project in the class, he chose to look into how students are discouraged from using their own voices in their writing, or as he put it, “academic writing and the laundry list of things you can be able to put into and the other things that you are damned for life for putting into a paper.” Rob was no longer just participating in my research at that point. He was taking up the research for his own purposes. When I asked him in an interview the next semester why he chose the topic that he did, he said that it was based on his experience transitioning from Summer Bridge through his first and second semester writing classes. He had immediately identified with our composition class’s topic of language variation, which he saw as having deep personal relevance to him and his classmates:

It started with the topic in Bridge. The first assignment opened doors and gave us something to write about. It was just life experience—“Is she for real? We can talk about this? We’ve got stories for you!” This was important. It was a perfect topic for us. It gave us a good comfort feeling, you just gotta come in here, paper, pencil, brain, and just say what you have to say.

Then, he said, “Freshman year came crashing down.” This was when he visited me repeatedly with heavily marked-up papers in which he didn’t feel the teacher was ever reading beyond the grammar to his points; whole paragraphs were crossed out, marked “awkward” or labeled as “not knowing what [they’re] trying to say.” Rob explained to me that he and his peers were used to some degree of criticism in their writing, but this was more than he could take:

We take detours. We’ll start struggling, take a beating from a red marker, heal up, revise. It’s street strategy, basically the same rules as out there. We know most of us can survive the beating. But eventually something is going to block us.

Personal matters on a paper, like the whole ‘awkward’ thing. Personal statements are like a punch in the stomach, they stop us in our tracks.

Truly, though, this didn’t stop Rob in his tracks. Instead, he channeled that frustration into research the next semester. The process of that research, and our discussions throughout and since, have been richly informative for both of us.

The paper Rob wrote for my class was called “Jumping through the Hoops of Academic Writing.” In it, he wove together scholarly quotes on academic writing, his own opinions and experiences on the topic, and interviews with other students with similar experiences and backgrounds to his. The “hoops” his title refers to are college writing teachers’ expectations, to which students are expected to conform, as he wrote in the paper, “like a well-trained circus animal.” Some of those hoops, he wrote, “will have that ring of fire around it,” and those are the ones he finds particularly hard to jump through. Among those, he wrote, is differentiating between academic and expressive writing and finding a personal voice:

When writing academically, you are simply following a teacher’s expectations of what has been turned in before you ever came here, so it’s a simplified route for

you to take when writing, but some of us writers can be very expressive and will be lead off that path onto something that can fulfill our needs to be heard through our writing, rather than to be just like every other student who writes to get their instructor off of their back.

In this paper, then, he again comes to this idea of a student taking detours from the direct path. This is something that he claims as part of his writing identity, something he is comfortable with even if it is not always well-received.

Rob, to me, epitomizes how personally fulfilling being granted the status of co-researcher can be for a student, and how amazing the data from such students can be when they gain this status. Truly, our interactions have focused on things that interest both of us. They are not just interviews, but conversations in which we both learn. This is the case with Ali and the rest of the students, too. They have gone beyond being co-researchers in my project to be thoroughly skilled researchers in their own lives.

In encouraging students to take an active role in my research, I have been guided by perspectives from feminist research and ethnography. As Shulamit Reinharz describes feminist research, it works to create social change, involve the researcher as a person, and form a deep relationship with research participants. Joanne Addison and Sharon McGee describe feminist research as “challenging some of the academy’s long-held beliefs concerning what knowledge is, how it can be constructed, and who is allowed to be in the position of labeling and owning knowledge” (*Feminist 2*; see also Lather, *Getting Smart*). In this sense, feminist methods are very compatible with Critical Discourse Analysis’ emphasis on power relations and their representations in discourse. Feminist pedagogies and research methods, as Gesa Kirsch explains, “represent challenges to established power--the power of tradition, of knowledge, of

position. And often such challenges are pursued collaboratively, whereby conventional hierarchies of researcher/subject and teacher/learner are leveled to permit greater cooperation and creativity” (97). While some degree of power imbalance is inescapable in a situation where one person is the primary teacher and researcher, I see the feminist collaboration and cooperation between researcher and participant as key in beginning to blend these roles and lessen the hierarchy inherent within them.

Another vital aspect of feminist interview research that inspires my treatment of student co-researchers is what Reinharz calls “believing the interviewee” (27). It is “a controversial idea,” she says, because “science relies on skepticism” (28).<sup>6</sup> In place of that skepticism, a feminist researcher can choose to hear what his or her interviewees have to say and communicate it with minimal interference. For me, this approach is intensely useful toward the goal of treating students as scholars, for my co-researchers’ interpretations should carry weight with or without mine supporting them. Further, foregrounding students’ voices allows me to work toward my goal, inspired by Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe, to have an “ethical understanding of agency” in my research. Following Dell Hymes, I believe in the “empowering of participants as sources of knowledge” by examining what the socially situated events in these students’ lives mean to them (xiv; qtd. in Florio-Ruane 187). Overall, like Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, I am interested primarily in understanding what students’ literate experiences mean to *them* (xvi).

In addition to encouraging students to take an active co-researcher role, another result of my desire to destabilize common representations of student writers is that I foreground my own

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<sup>6</sup> As Gesa Kirsch and Jacqueline Royster explain in their recent article “Feminist Rhetorical Practices: In Search of Excellence,” feminist scholarship has for decades pushed against more historically traditional definitions of rigor and excellence within research practice. I agree wholeheartedly with Kirsch and Royster that it is vital not just to acknowledge the existence of such feminist work but to view its methods and values with a “metacognitive awareness...about the ways and means of the work and about its dynamic potential for engendering qualities of excellence” (642).

positioning in interpreting the data so as to avoid any illusion of objective authority. Because my six co-researchers are all former students of mine, I am always simultaneously researcher and teacher. I am also learner, mentor, friend, advocate, ally, and more. To some, this list might be little more than a list of obstacles to objectivity. What I would argue, though, is that the multiple roles I play in my research, which deepen my connections to the students and deepen the connections we can make among various aspects of ourselves, are far from a flaw. They're a strength. I have come to believe that embracing multiple roles in the process of ethnographic research, being our full selves rather than striving for an impossible objectivity, creates richer data than we might otherwise have and enables us to make a greater impact on our participants' lives, the field, and society. Like Carmen Kynard, "I'm not an observer anywhere in what I'm talking about, and I don't pretend to be" ("I Carry"). Rob and Ali, then, are not unique among my co-researchers in being people I've worked with in roles of both researcher and teacher, both collaborative scholarly colleague and supportive friend.

This research is not meant to represent a wide range of pedagogies or to develop a full picture of first-year writing students. However, the breadth of the patterns I document in representations of academic language and writing and the depth of the students' experiences encountering such representations in their academic lives argue for another kind of generalizability, one that can move into wider discussions of pedagogical practices related to issues of language ideology and of the effects of language ideologies on writing students and teachers. Throughout the dissertation, I offer my own critical self-reflection about teaching and research practices, as I work to bring my practice in line with the theory I value and to critically examine my handling of language variation in the composition classroom. I hope through this reflection to engage in dialogue with other scholar teachers about their practices and their ways

of reflecting on them. Further, I see deep value in contributing more individual stories to a body of ethnographic case study knowledge. Along with scholars like Marilyn Sternglass and Christine Casanave, I see myself responding to Chiseri-Strater's call for "more ethnographies of college students' literacies," and specifically to expand the scope of ethnographic data to continue to push toward representing "students of various ethnic backgrounds in a range of college settings and across the academic disciplines" (166). In the next chapter, I work to set the stage for the inquiry with my co-researchers reported in Chapters 4 and 5 by examining widely circulating representations of academic writing, academic language, and standardized language.

### Chapter 3

#### **“Authoritative and Mysterious Texts”: Messages Sold to Students and Teachers about Academic Writing**

In David Russell’s “Activity Theory and Process Approaches,” he reports the experience of seeing four bright yellow one-word posters on his daughter’s elementary school classroom wall: PREWRITE. WRITE. REVISE. EDIT. Reflecting on how something so complex as writing processes became so effectively distilled down to four words, Russell contends that “the discipline of composition studies, like other disciplines, commodifies the products of its research and theory to make them useful to practitioners, clients, customers, students” (85). Such commodification, he argues, is a necessary process, for otherwise many teachers and students would not have access to or understanding of theoretical scholarship. While there is always a risk of oversimplification making the commodities “useless or counterproductive,” Russell proposes that increased efforts at disciplinary innovation and dissemination might “keep teachers and their students from holding onto a pedagogy/content, a process/product, when it is no longer useful, as many relics of the past are enshrined in curriculum (and in cardboard reliquaries tacked to classroom walls)” (86-87).

At this point, there are a great many relics enshrined in writing curricula that our disciplinary innovation has yet to move us past. Statements like “Write only in Standard English” and “Avoid passive voice” may not be printed on posters, but they are firmly stuck to the figurative classroom walls of pedagogical representations and practices. Even if we could fight the “no longer useful” commodifications of research, what of those that were *never* useful, or even true? What of the pet-peeve word choice issues that show up on graded essays, assignment sheets, and writing guidelines as “Avoid \_\_\_\_ in your writing,” where the blank might contain *a lot, very, things, due to the fact that, basically, or even I or is?*



In the next chapter, I will look more closely at individual teachers' comments in the contexts of the student work at which they are directed. In this chapter, I want to focus on the wider context of writing pedagogy that encourages oversimplification of academic writing to undergraduates. Our most widely distributed pedagogical materials commodify academic writing in a way that I will argue is not accurate or productive but rather misleading and divisive. Perhaps nowhere is this commodification more readily apparent than in our discipline's literal commodities: the textbooks that we write and make our students buy.

### **Representations of the Academic in Composition Handbooks**

Textbooks provide undergraduate students with varying degrees of what David Bleich identifies as "direct instruction":

A textbook is assumed to tell students what is the case, what they should do when they have to write essays or other kinds of papers. Textbooks in science say: this is the case in the universe. Textbooks in writing say: this is how you should write your papers. The "voices" of science and writing textbooks are declarative and directive. ... Writing textbooks don't teach alternatives because they are textbooks, which are expected to give instructions. (Bleich 17)

As Bleich makes clear, undergraduate textbooks are generally regarded as sources of rules and facts, an outlook that may be appropriate when these books serve as study guides for tests in which each question has one right answer, but tends not to be conducive to exploring options or adding complexity. Writing is far from the only discipline in which this is a problem—"this is the case in the universe" is likely also a gross oversimplification of most scientific research—but such direct instruction seems especially out of place in writing courses, where many pedagogies

(e.g., Davis and Shadle; Downs and Wardle; Kynard, “Getting”; Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk*) encourage students toward original thought and a unique style.<sup>1</sup>

I will focus specifically here on the genre of composition handbooks, directed primarily at first-year writing, both because their instruction is arguably the most direct among composition textbooks and because they make the most explicit mention of language issues. Debra Hawhee calls the composition handbook “a doctrine of mechanical correctness” that works to create a universal set of expectations for the surface features of student writing (507). These books also, Hawhee contends, create expectations for writing teachers, writing classes, and the discipline as a whole:

Composition handbooks serve two important institutional purposes: (1) they function as a site for the articulation of what is deemed important subject matter for composition classrooms—that is, handbooks write the discipline; and (2) they effectively shape teacher and student subjectivities—that is, they discipline the writer. (504)

Essentially, then, composition handbooks reflect our priorities by outlining what students need to understand about the things we consider important. This being the case, we need to carefully consider what our handbooks are saying to students and teachers.

To survey composition handbooks, I chose to focus on commonly used handbooks in an effort to access the most widely circulating representations of academic writing. Because textbook sales data is exceptionally difficult to acquire, I chose to define “commonly used” based on number and frequency of editions published.<sup>2</sup> All of the handbooks I examined are in

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<sup>1</sup> In a large-scale national survey, Witte, Meyer, and Miller found that “originality” ranked seventh among public university teachers for “text features teachers think influence them when they grade papers” (47).

<sup>2</sup> Many thanks to Peter Mortensen for his advice on this matter.

their sixth or later edition and have released a new edition every two to three years in the last decade. I limited my selection to the fullest-sized version available of each handbook, although many of the handbooks listed here also have “pocket” or “compact” versions. The handbooks examined in this chapter are:

- *The Longman Handbook for Writers and Readers*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., from Pearson/Longman (Anson and Schwegler)
- *The Little, Brown Handbook*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., from Pearson/Longman (Fowler and Aaron)
- *The Bedford Handbook*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed., from Bedford/St. Martin’s (Hacker and Sommers)
- *Prentice Hall Reference Guide*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., from Pearson/Allyn & Bacon (Harris)
- *The Wadsworth Handbook*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed., from Wadsworth/Heinle (Kirsznner and Mandell)
- *The St. Martin’s Handbook*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., from Bedford/St. Martin’s (Lunsford)
- *Keys for Writers*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., from Wadsworth/Heinle (Raimes and Jerskey)
- *The Writer’s Brief Handbook*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., from Pearson/Longman (Rosa and Eschholz)
- *The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed., from Pearson/Longman (Ruszkiewicz et al.)
- *Simon & Schuster Handbook for Writers*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed., from Pearson/Longman (Troyka and Hesse)

While I do not contend that this is an exhaustive list of handbooks in the category of widely-used, full-sized handbooks released by major publishers, I do believe that it is extensive enough to be representative.

Composition handbooks, being directed at first-year writers and their instructors, aim to introduce students to college-level writing and to the standards to which they will be expected to conform. Almost invariably, these books paint a picture of a cohesive academic community, with shared standards and expectations. This cohesion is implied throughout handbooks by statements that tell students what to do in college writing or what an academic audience will expect. Most handbooks have a chapter titled something like “Expectations for College Writing” (Lunsford), “Writing in Academic Situations” (Fowler and Aaron), or “How Do You Write in College?” (Ruszkiewicz et al.). Many handbooks also make more explicit statements about a unified academic community. *The Longman Handbook for Readers and Writers*, for example, identifies academia as a single discourse community, explaining that “a discourse community consists of people with shared goals and knowledge, a common setting or context, and similar preferences and uses for verbal and visual texts” (Anson and Schwegler 2). The academic community, this handbook says, is one of “three major communities of readers, writers, and speakers,” the other two being public and work communities (Anson and Schwegler 4). A chart describing these communities lists idealized roles, goals, forms, and characteristics for each. The forms and characteristics, for instance, are as follows (Anson and Schwegler 4):<sup>3</sup>

ACADEMIC	PUBLIC	WORK
<b>Forms</b> Analytical report; interpretation of text or event; research proposal or report; lab report; scholarly article; annotated bibliography; grant proposal; policy study	<b>Forms</b> Guidelines; position paper; informative report; letter or email to agency or group flyer or brochure; action proposal; grant proposal; charter or mission statement; letter to editor; Web announcement	<b>Forms</b> Informative memo; factual or descriptive report; proposal; executive summary; letter or memo; guidelines or instruction; promotional material; minutes and notes; formal reports; internal and public Web sites

<sup>3</sup> As I mentioned in Chapter 1, the visual cues are significant here in addition to the content. I have reproduced the use of full caps and bold type from the original chart; the chart also uses different colors to shade in each column.

**Characteristics** Clear reasoning; critical analysis; fresh insight; extensive evidence; accurate detail; balanced treatment; acknowledgment of competing viewpoints; thorough exploration of topic

**Characteristics** Focus on shared values; advocacy of cause or policy; fairness and ethical argument; relevant supporting evidence; action- or solution-oriented; accessible presentation

**Characteristics** Focus on tasks and goals; accurate, efficient presentation; promotion of products and services; attention to organizational image and corporate design standards; concise, direct style

By contrasting things like an academic focus on “clear reasoning” against a public focus on “shared values” and a work focus on “tasks and goals,” *The Longman Handbook* constructs the three communities as internally cohesive while also distinct from one another.

As they claim a cohesive academic community, handbooks also represent themselves and the classes in which they are used as representative of this community. *The Little, Brown Handbook* advises students to disregard individual variation among teachers in favor of viewing teachers as representatives of academia in general:

Like everyone else, instructors have preferences and peeves, but you'll waste time and energy trying to anticipate them. Do attend to written and spoken directions for assignments, of course. But otherwise view your instructors as representatives of the community you are writing for. Their responses will be guided by the community's aims and expectations and by a desire to teach you about them.

(Fowler and Aaron 166)

With statements like this, composition handbooks support efforts to make their standards, and those of the teacher and class, appear to be universal academic standards for writing. As Michael Kleine contends, writing textbooks “posture as authoritative and mysterious texts, prescribing writing behaviors and establishing standards of good writing without revealing how and why the values underlying the advice that they give were constructed historically” (139). Students are

therefore discouraged from interrogating the arbitrary standards presented or imagining alternatives or exceptions to them.

This lack of alternatives is of course not universal across all handbooks. *The St. Martin's Handbook*, for example, advises students that there is a difference between “conventions,” which can be flexible and varying, and “hard-and-fast rules” (Lunsford 15). Even when the language is more nuanced, however, the format of handbooks tends to make it difficult to distinguish between what is a rule or fact and what is not. The numbered lists, bullet points, and boxed tips lend an air of authority and objectivity. As Bleich argues,

The language of simplification, of boiling down, of giving summary sections and “bullets,” is present in every textbook... While it is true that more people will likely buy a book if its language seems simple, or if there are both complex discussions and “boil-downs,” it is also true that pedagogical and mercantile purposes conflict on this score. Teachers who write and use the textbooks are forced by the language of the text to teach the erroneous thought—for example, that there “are” four categories—and they are forced unconsciously to present the text's language as exemplary. (34)

Given these authoritative visual cues, then, even though the text of the *The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers* encourages students to view distinctions among formal, informal, and casual style as “points on a continuum rather than hard and fast categories” (Ruszkiewicz et al. 210), the accompanying chart on “Levels of Formality” does not reflect that flexibility. Instead, we see three columns labeled **FORMAL**, **INFORMAL**, and **CASUAL**, showing students and teachers three distinct registers with different expectations for tone, word choice, format, and other factors. Here are several lines from the chart (Ruszkiewicz et al. 211):

**FORMAL**

Abstract and technical language; precise vocabulary: *the diminution of nationalistic sentiment*

Impersonal tone; infrequent use of *I* or *you*

Serious and consistent tone and subject matter

Standard formats or templates for presentation

Scholarly books and articles; technical reports; academic papers and projects; job application letters; legal and some business correspondence; some speeches

**INFORMAL**

Mix of abstract and concrete terms; direct language: *the weakening of patriotic feeling*

Occasionally and comfortably personal; some use of *I* and *you*

Moderate variations of tone and subject

Text supported by images and design elements

Newspapers and editorials; general interest magazines; newsletters; popular books; serious blogs; some business letters; professional email; .com and .org Web sites; oral presentations

**CASUAL**

Concrete language; slang and colloquial terms: *nixing the flag waving*

Unapologetically personal; frequent use of *I* and *you*

Wide variations in tone and unexpected shifts in topic—sometimes light and satirical

Aggressive melding of words, images, and graphics

Special interest magazines; personal email; personal letters; listserv postings; personal Web sites and blogs<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, *The Writer's Brief Handbook* gives students a somewhat nuanced explanation of Standard English—"American Standard English (see pages 129-132) is the customary level of formality used in academic writing, but even within the fairly narrow confines of that standard there is room for individual differences of expression so that your writing can retain its personality and appeal" (Rosa and Eschholz 48). However, glancing at the pages cited and seeing the only large, full-color heading on one page, things seem much less nuanced:

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<sup>4</sup> I found this particular chart especially problematic in its treatment of online writing, since it places all ".com and .org websites" into the "informal" category and all "personal Web sites and blogs" in the "casual" category, while giving no mention of online sources at all in the "formal" category. Aside from the fact that many personal sites and blogs are themselves .com sites and all .com and .org sites are unlikely to exhibit the same level of formality, in an age of increasing online and open access publishing, the complete lack of online formats in the "formal" category is a glaring omission.

### **3b Use Standard English**

This subheading appears within the “Appropriateness” chapter of the text’s “Word Choice” section, on page 130 where the above quote directs readers for more information about Standard English.

These brief directives become reminiscent of Russell’s “PREWRITE. WRITE. REVISE. EDIT” example, especially when they refer to processes. One of the *Simon & Schuster Handbook*’s Quick Reference boxes, for instance, gives a “Sample schedule for a research project” that is divided cleanly into three overarching steps (Troyka and Hesse 524):

#### **PLANNING**

1. Start my research log.
2. Choose a suitable topic for research.
3. Draft my research question.
4. Understand my writing situation.
5. Take practical steps:
  - a. Gather materials and supplies.
  - b. Learn how to use my college library.
6. Determine what documentation style I need to use.

#### **RESEARCHING**

7. Plan my “search strategy,” but modify as necessary.
8. Decide the kinds of research I need to do:
  - a. Field research. If yes, schedule tasks.
  - b. Published sources.
9. Locate and evaluate sources.
10. Compile a working bibliography or annotated bibliography.
11. Take content notes from sources I find useful.

#### **WRITING**

12. Draft my thesis statement.
13. Outline, as required or useful.
14. Draft my paper.
15. Use correct parenthetical citations.
16. Revise my paper.
17. Compile my final bibliography (Works Cited or References), using the documentation style required.



With these three separate stages and their accompanying tasks in numerical order (the chart also provides space for due dates next to each), there is no room here for the possibilities that these steps might overlap or that the process might be recursive.

Whether addressing language use, source use, or any number of other issues, there are many inherent contradictions and problems within handbooks' commodified explanations. Additionally, if we explore published academic writing, comparing the handbook prescriptions to the discourse of the "academic community" that they claim to represent, we can see that while textbooks' descriptions of academic writing often have a great deal in common with one another, they have much less in common with published scholarship. At this point, I want to look in detail at representations of academic practice in relation to two common handbook topics: language use and source use.<sup>5</sup>

### **Textbook Definitions of Academic Language**

Typical first-year composition handbooks have a chapter, and in some cases several, on word choice. Exploring these chapters helps us see how issues of academic language are framed, including how terms like "formal" and "standard" are defined and how their appropriateness or inappropriateness to academic writing is explained. When it comes to defining the language of academia, many composition handbooks look remarkably similar. Within the style and word choice sections of the handbooks, a selection of typical topics and keywords occurs across most texts. As an illustration, let's examine the chapter contents of several of these books. In *The Bedford Handbook* (Hacker and Sommers), Chapter 17, "Choose Appropriate Language," students are given a series of directives in the chapter subheadings:

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<sup>5</sup> I have chosen to focus on these because they were especially salient topics in my interview discussions with undergraduate students about academic writing. I will talk about student perspectives on these issues in Chapters 4 and 5.

- Stay away from jargon
- Avoid pretentious language, most euphemisms, and "doublespeak"
- Avoid obsolete and invented words
- In most contexts, avoid slang, regional expressions, and nonstandard English
- Choose an appropriate level of formality
- Avoid sexist language
- Revise language that may offend groups of people

*Keys for Writers* (Raimes) Chapter 34, "Choose the Best Words," gives students a similar series of directives in its contents (I have included sub-subheadings in a few of these to provide a comparable level of detail):

- Use a dictionary and a thesaurus.
- Use exact words and connotations.
- Monitor the language of speech, region, and workplace.
  - The language of speech
  - Regional and ethnic language
  - The jargon of the workplace
- Use figurative language for effect, but don't overuse it.
- Avoid sexist, biased, and exclusionary language.
- Avoid tired expressions (clichés) and pretentious language.
  - Avoid clichés
  - Distinguish the formal from the stuffy
  - Avoid euphemisms

The *Prentice Hall Reference Guide* (Harris), meanwhile, divides this material into two chapters and uses labels rather than directives, but the content is still very much the same:

#### Chapter 35: Unnecessary and Inappropriate Language

- Clichés
- Pretentious language
- Offensive language

#### Chapter 36: Appropriate Language

- Standard English
- Levels of Formality
- Emphasis
- Denotation and connotation
- Colloquialisms, slang terms, and regionalisms
- Jargon and technical terms

Several elements of these examples are particularly noteworthy. First, notice the evaluative nature of the chapter titles. The tips here are intended to foster “*appropriate* language” and use of “the *best* words,” and as we see within the text, the “best” words are the standardized ones.

Second, notice the topics that are grouped within these chapters. In all of these examples, and nearly all of the handbooks I examined, issues of formality and dialect are addressed together with issues of offensive language and incorrect word choice. They are combined in word choice chapters and in lists of language to avoid; recall from Chapter 1 how the *Simon & Schuster Handbook for Writers* lists “Never use nonstandard English” and “Never use regional language” right alongside “Never use sexist language or stereotypes.” One is even sometimes used to introduce the other, as in *The Longman Handbook*’s chapter on “Appropriate and Respectful Language,” which starts its introductory section with a discussion of sexist language, concluding in the following short paragraph:

No matter how you feel about specific issues, as a writer you *must* be concerned with the reactions of readers to the way you represent men and women and members of minority groups. You don’t want to alienate your readers, prejudice people against your ideas, or perpetuate unhealthy attitudes. (Anson and Schwegler 666)

We might expect that the chapter would go from here to a discussion of ways to avoid language exhibiting prejudice against a particular sex or race. Yet immediately following the above paragraph, the first two subsections of the chapter are “Home and community language varieties” and “How dialects influence writing.” As their titles suggest, these sections are much less about *representing* minority groups than they are about *being* them. They contain an unusually nuanced discussion of the ideological dimensions of standardized language and the obstacles that students

from nonstandardized language backgrounds may face in their writing (which I will come back to at the end of the chapter), but the question of why this discussion occurs here still remains. Are we to understand nonstandardized language as alienating or disrespectful? At the very least, it seems, we are to consider it just as “inappropriate” as sexist language.

Finally, notice the repetition of key terms: All three examples use the labels *formality*, *regional* language, *jargon*, and *pretentious* language in their subheadings, as well as the labels *euphemism*, *slang*, *standard*, *nonstandard*, and *cliché* in either the subheadings or the text beneath them. The consistent usage of these terms in the above examples, and in the word choice sections of first-year writing handbooks as a whole, communicates a sense of shared priorities, that these are the issues that matter when advising students on word choice in academic writing.

In the text discussing these priority areas, the evaluative language of the chapter titles persists. Handbook descriptions of standard and nonstandard language are full of value judgments about appropriateness, quality, and goodness. The *Prentice Hall Reference Guide*, for instance, tells students that “Standard English, the language used in *respected* magazines, newspapers, and books, is the language you are expected to use in academic writing” (Harris 220; emphasis added), and *The Writer’s Brief Handbook* calls Standard English “the kind of written English that appears in *quality* newspapers and magazines and in textbooks” (Rosa and Eschholz 179; emphasis added). *The Bedford Handbook*, meanwhile, states, “Although nonstandard English may be *appropriate* when spoken within a close group, it is *out of place* in most formal and informal writing” (Hacker and Sommers 209; emphasis added).<sup>6</sup>

Even when attempting to alleviate some of the value judgments surrounding standardized and nonstandardized English, the handbooks often undermine themselves. The *Simon & Schuster*

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<sup>6</sup> This example is particularly interesting in its designation of nonstandardized language as inappropriate for not only formal but also *informal* writing; it restricts nonstandardized language exclusively to speech.

*Handbook* tells students that “Edited American English, also known as Standard English...isn’t a special or fancy dialect for elite groups. Rather, it’s a form of the language used by educated people to standardize communication in the larger world” (Troyka and Hesse 252). This description begs the question: Are “educated people” who have the power “to standardize communication in the larger world” not an “elite group”? Another particularly vivid illustration of self-undermining handbook messages is this juxtaposition of paragraphs in *The Wadsworth Handbook*:

No absolute rules distinguish standard from nonstandard usage. In fact, some linguists reject the idea of nonstandard usage altogether, arguing that this designation relegates both the language and those who use it to second-class status.

Note: Keep in mind that colloquial expressions, slang, regionalisms, and nonstandard diction are almost always inappropriate in your college writing.

(Kirsznner and Mandell 572)

Acknowledgment of the fact that “nonstandard” labels can “relegate” languages and speakers “to second-class status,” immediately followed by a note that “nonstandard” diction is “almost always inappropriate in your college writing,” is difficult to see as anything but an endorsement of this second-class relegation. These sorts of contradictory messages pervade handbooks, creating a sense that anything slightly nonstandard is not only non-academic, but also *less than* academic.

In the meantime, handbooks often lack a clear definition of what exactly they define as nonstandard. In a typical example, underneath the “Use standard English” heading mentioned in the previous section, *The Writers’ Brief Handbook* includes three paragraphs distinguishing

among “standard English,” “nonstandard English,” and “slang.” Here, nonstandard English is described as “acceptable and functional...if it is used within the social and regional contexts that it is found”<sup>7</sup> and slang is designated “inappropriate in most writing” (Rosa and Eschholz 130). Standard English, meanwhile, is described only as “the English used by educators, civic leaders, and professionals in all fields, and...the language of the media” (Rosa and Eschholz 130). Though the actual features of this variety remain undefined, its appropriate usage is defined very clearly, in the context of clear distinctions of “(un)acceptable” and “(in)appropriate,” and the value judgments they imply.

Along with “standard,” “formal” is a nearly universal term used by handbooks to describe the language valued as appropriate for academic writing. As when describing standard language, handbooks are quite clear about the appropriate circumstances for using formal language: As *The Scott, Foresman Handbook* says, “Choose formal language for academic writing” (Ruszkiewicz et al. 210). In contrast to standard English discussions, though, handbook discussions of formal language tend to be more explicit about exactly what features make language “formal.” *The Wadsworth Handbook* describes formal language as follows:

Formal diction is grammatically correct and uses words that are familiar to an educated audience. A writer who uses formal diction often maintains emotional distance from the audience by using the impersonal *one* rather than the more

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<sup>7</sup> This example is also interesting because it seems to include a problematic usage, with “that” where “where” might be preferred. This suggests another way in which handbooks hold student writers to different standards than published writers. Entirely error-free prose is rarely achieved without close editing by a series of people—and sometimes not even then, as this example shows—yet students are often expected to eliminate all errors from their texts through their own editing. The editing checklists common in handbooks represent editing to students and their teachers as a step-by-step process that one person can and should complete. (One of *The Writer’s Brief Handbook’s* editing checklists, incidentally, includes “Is my diction exact?” and “Have I committed any usage errors?” [Rosa and Eschholz 24].) Such representations, I would argue, can serve to reinforce many teachers’ association of student errors with lack of effort. I wholeheartedly agree with Lunsford and Lunsford when they state, “Those who believe that we ought to be able to eliminate errors from student writing may need to realize that ‘mistakes are a fact of life’ and, we would add, a necessary accompaniment to learning and to improving writing” (801).

personal *I* and *you*. In addition, the tone of the writing—as determined by word choice, sentence structure, and choice of subject—is dignified and objective.

(Kirsznner and Mandell 568).

Here we see some of the same value judgments that we saw in standard English discussions; the use of “dignified” to describe the tone of formal diction is an especially clear example. In contrast, *Wadsworth* tells students, “Informal diction is the language that people use in conversation and in personal emails. You should use informal diction in your college writing only to reproduce speech or dialect or to give your paper a conversational tone” (Kirsznner and Mandell 569). These descriptions of formal and informal language share interesting similarities with those in *The Little, Brown Handbook*, as shown in the following two bullet points from *The Little, Brown*’s list of “common features of academic language”:

- It creates some distance between writer and reader with the third person (he, she, it, they). The first person (I, we) is sometimes appropriate to express personal opinions or invite readers to think along, but not with a strongly explanatory purpose...
- It is authoritative and neutral...writers express themselves confidently, not timidly.<sup>8</sup> They also refrain from hostility...and enthusiasm. (Fowler and Aaron 169)

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<sup>8</sup> When considering these examples from *The Wadsworth Handbook* and *The Little, Brown Handbook*, recall from the earlier discussion of indexicality that the characteristics indexed by linguistic forms tend to connect with certain identity categories. The example I quoted from Bucholtz and Hall in Chapter 1 connected “forcefulness” and “uncertainty” with masculinity and femininity, and it would not be a stretch to connect an adjective like “dignified” to social class. If academic language is described with the same words that index masculinity and upper class status, women and working class students are at an immediate disadvantage for access to the status of “academic writer.”

*The Little, Brown Handbook* and *The Wadsworth Handbook* descriptions are similar in giving a fairly traditional image of formality, which involves objective language and maintaining a neutral and impersonal distance.

At this point, I want to take a more detailed look at several of the features involved in creating the sense of formality and neutrality that handbooks agree is vital to academic language use. Specifically, I will look at objective (rather than “enthusiastic”) word choice, third person point of view, and avoidance of indirect language, particularly euphemisms.

### Objectivity and neutrality

Of the above claims *The Little, Brown Handbook* makes when describing formal academic language, the second bullet point’s statement that academic writers “refrain from enthusiasm” feels to me especially striking. My initial personal reaction was one of vehement argument: Scholars get *excited* about knowledge, about other scholars they admire, about their research and the things that they discover through it. Yet I realize that traditionally, we have been encouraged to suppress outward expressions of this excitement, at least when we publish. Detachment is a key aspect of the essayist literacy historically promoted within many humanities and social sciences disciplines, as James Gee explains: “Essayist literacy as a Discourse is founded on the idea...of people transcending their social and cultural differences to communicate ‘logically’, ‘rationally’, and ‘dispassionately’ to each other as ‘strangers’ (the basic assumption behind the essay) in a thoroughly explicit and decontextualized way” (156-57). As a result, academic writing is viewed as having, in Patricia Bizzell’s words, “a typical worldview...[that] speaks through an academic persona who is objective, trying to prevent any emotions or prejudices from influencing the ideas,” (“Intellectual Work” 2). Despite this history, though, many scholars are challenging this detachment, preferring to acknowledge the



excitement inherent in scholarly inquiry and the subjectivity that comes with any decision to pursue a line of thinking and write about it. Feminist theory and research methods (see, e.g., Kirsch; Reinhartz) pose a direct challenge to the objectivity of traditional scholarly representations, as do other recent evolutions in qualitative research (as described by Kamberelis and Dimitriadis). To use Robert Davis and Mark Shadle's words in describing their teaching and theorizing, many scholars are making a "movement away from the modernist ideals of expertise, detachment, and certainty, and toward a new valuation of uncertainty, passionate exploration, and mystery" (418).

Whether or not such a movement is theorized, exceptions to the "rule" of dispassionate scholarship already abound in published academic work. Scholars express excitement about influential figures in their field and culture, as in this mechanical engineering monograph's treatment of Leonardo DaVinci: "DaVinci, of widespread fame and a brilliant mind, was able to develop machines with a high level of genius because he lived in an environment that accepted his ideas" (Paz et al. 91). They show enthusiasm about the work of scholarly contemporaries, as does journal editor Joan Sieber in introducing an issue of the *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*: "Equally exciting to this editor is the genius of the many who design research on ethical issues and submit their manuscripts to *JERHRE*, and the genius of outstanding reviewers whose advice results in profoundly insightful revisions of those manuscripts" (Sieber 1). (Recall also Geneva Smitherman's description of a colleague as "genius" when she proposed a solution to the problem of gendered pronouns in drafting *SRTOL*, as mentioned in Chapter 1 [Smitherman, "Historical Struggle" 23].)<sup>9</sup> Further, even in the most

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<sup>9</sup> Within *The Little, Brown Handbook*, the word "genius" is an example of the sort of enthusiasm that should be avoided in academic writing.

technical fields, experimental discoveries inspire excitement that is expressed in published writing, as in this journal article from *Catalysis Communications*:

The catalytic activity of palladium catalysts was also examined.  $\text{Pd}_2(\text{dba})_3 \cdot \text{CHCl}_3$  gave a little lower yield and  $\text{Pd}_2(\text{dba})_3$  was less effective (Table 1, entries 5 and 6). *To our delight*, using Pd/C as catalyst in the absence of phosphine ligand, the yield was comparable to the corresponding reaction using  $\text{Pd}(\text{PPh}_3)_4$ . (Hu et al. 347; emphasis added)

When we see scholars across disciplines expressing “delight,” finding academic work “exciting” and worthy of labels like “genius,” it seems disingenuous to continue to tell ourselves and our students that it is somehow not academic to express enthusiasm in writing.

#### Using the first person

Often, the use of any sort of personal language is associated with insufficient objectivity for academic writing, so handbooks frequently encourage students toward third person point of view in their writing. “Formal” language is in the third person, which we are told is more appropriate for the goals of formal academic writing because it provides the “distance” encouraged by texts like *The Little, Brown Handbook*. Meanwhile, first person has its place, but that place is mostly outside of the formal academic essay: All first person but the very occasional “I” is restricted to informal writing. As the *Prentice Hall Reference Guide* says, “Some readers consider first or second person writing as too personal or informal and suggest that writers use third person for formal or academic writing” (Harris 129). Initially, this would seem to make first person a fairly negotiable element of formality, subject to the preferences of particular readers. However, the text goes on to make the issue less negotiable by clearly defining the role of the first person: “First person is appropriate for a narrative about your own actions and for essays

that explore your personal feelings and emotions” (Harris 129). This sort of statement gives first person a role outside of most of the textual varieties privileged in academia, and also serves to reinforce the exclusion of personal forms from academia. If first person is for actions, feelings, and opinions, and third person is for academic essays, it would seem to follow that actions, feelings, and opinions do not belong in academic essays.

In published academic writing, though, first person is regularly used, even in disciplines such as hard sciences where first person and personal opinions have traditionally been represented as inappropriate. In a study of scientific journal articles, Chi-Hua Kuo found frequent use of “we,” for purposes ranging from outlining methods and goals—e.g., “In this section, *we* consider a number of spatial/spatial frequency representations” (131)—to identifying disciplinary knowledge—e.g., “realize the further objective of what *we* call knowledge refinement” (126; emphasis in original). In a similar study, Iliana Martínez found especially frequent use of “we” by scientists for the function of “stating results/claims,” as in “*Xtrp* may function as an SOC in *Xenopus* oocytes. In support of this, **we** found that *Xtrp* was exclusively localized at the plasma membrane in *Xenopus* oocytes” (186; emphasis in original).

While the simple existence of first person in published academic scholarship already destabilizes claims about its absence, the ways in which first person is used also frequently blur related distinctions between the academic and the personal, or between “personal opinion” and “explanatory purpose” (Fowler and Aaron 169). When David Bartholomae, for example, says that his students’ essays “are evidence of a discourse that lies between what *I* might call the students’ primary discourse...and standard, official literary criticism” (146; emphasis added), or Mike Rose contends, “The more *I* think about this language...the more *I* realize how caught up *we* all are in a political-semantic web that restricts the way *we* think about writing in the

academy” (342; emphasis added), they are undoubtedly explaining important theoretical concepts. However, we might also call these concepts their personal opinions, which are arguably vital to the nature of theoretical academic discourse, even (or perhaps especially) when expressed in the first person. As Ken Hyland asserts,

Writers gain credibility by projecting an identity invested with individual authority, displaying confidence in their evaluations and commitment to their ideas. ...First person then, is a powerful means by which writers express an identity by asserting their claim to speak as an authority, and this is a key element of successful academic writing. (1091, 1093-94)

From this perspective, first person, and its accompanying visibility of personal identity and perspective, may serve an important role in establishing a scholarly ethos. When students are discouraged from use of the first person for anything but storytelling, they are denied that opportunity for authority. First person, then, seems to be one of the many places in which the discrepancy between textbook representations and academic practices is rooted in ideas of who does and does not have the right to speak their opinions. (I will discuss this in more detail, in relation to specific students’ experiences, in the next chapter.)

“Never use euphemisms.”

As part of encouraging objectivity, handbooks also tend to discourage word choice that might be perceived as indirect or slanted; frequent targets are words and phrases perceived as euphemisms. *The Writer’s Brief Handbook* states that students should avoid euphemisms in order “to be direct and clear” (Rosa and Eschholz 131), and the *Simon & Schuster Handbook* tells students to “never use euphemisms” because “readers realize you’re hiding the truth” (Troyka and Hesse 261-62; the rest of the rules in this “Language to avoid in academic writing”

box are listed in Chapter 1). *The Wadsworth Handbook* makes a similar declaration, telling students that “college writing is no place for euphemisms. Say what you mean—*pregnant*, not *expecting*; *died*, not *passed away*; *strike*, not *work stoppage*” (Kirsznner and Mandell 573). In these examples, there is a clear sense that euphemisms are not “the truth” or “what you mean”; instead, as *The Bedford Handbook* tells students, they are usually “needlessly evasive or even deceitful” (Hacker and Sommers 206).

In addition to being another example of the value judgments handbooks often attach to language represented as nonacademic, these treatments of euphemisms are also interesting for the specific words and phrases that are chosen, including *chemical dependency*, *correctional facility*, *downsize*, *passed away*, and *preowned*. These words are presented as if they are always euphemisms, always meant to deceive or disguise truth, as in *The Bedford Handbook*, which provides a two-column chart with “euphemism” on one side and “plain English” on the other (Hacker and Sommers 206):

EUPHEMISM	PLAIN ENGLISH
adult entertainment	pornography
preowned automobile	used car
economically deprived	poor
negative savings	debts
strategic withdrawal	retreat or defeat
revenue enhancers	taxes
chemical dependency	drug addiction
downsize	lay off, fire
correctional facility	prison

Interestingly, one of the euphemisms it lists, *correctional facility*, appears within one of its handbook counterparts as part of a thoroughly non-evasive explanation: *The Wadsworth Handbook* mentions in its “Writing in the Social Sciences” chapter that “students in a sociology class might write about a visit to a state correctional facility or to a homeless shelter” (Kirsznner and Mandell 378).

Further, in published scholarship, many of these words are not only present (thus showing that they do have a place in academic writing), but they are used in ways much more complex than a simple label of “euphemism” would suggest. Take the example of “passed away,” which is a featured euphemism in three handbooks: *The Wadsworth Handbook* (in the quote on the previous page), *The Little, Brown Handbook* (in a section titled “Revising indirect or pretentious writing”), and the *Simon & Schuster Handbook* (which describes euphemisms like “passed away” as “avoid[ing] the harsh reality of truth” [Troyka and Hesse 263]). In published scholarship, “passed away” seems to be a very common phrasing in prefaces and footnotes that acknowledge a coauthor, influential colleague, or expert in the field who has died. For example, the first footnote in a *Developmental Biology* article includes a tribute to an influential thinker: “This article is dedicated to the late Professor Haruo Kanatani who passed away on February 13, 1984, in the memory of his contributions to the study of oocyte maturation” (Hashimoto and Kishimoto 242 n. 1). The dedication on the first page of a *Robotics and Computer-Integrated Manufacturing* article, meanwhile, reads,

One of the authors of this paper, Sun-Jae Kim, was a graduate student at M.I.T., working actively on the Thinking Design Machine project. He passed away unexpectedly. He was a man with a great promise. His untimely departure from this world is a loss to engineering, industry, and humanity at large. (Kim, Suh, and Kim 243)

In these examples, we might see the choice of the phrase “passed away” as somewhat euphemistic, but for reasons not so much truth-obscuring as respectful. This is a specialized, possibly euphemistic usage, but still clearly a common one among academics, which counters the assertion that a euphemism like “passed away” does not belong in academic writing.

“Passed away” is not simply present in academic writing, though; it is also present in situations where it is arguably not remotely euphemistic. Take the following two examples from clinical research journals. In a *Gynecological Oncology* article, Amit et al. use “passed away” right before using “died”: “All patients who were identified by the PET/CT as having a disseminated disease *passed away* or are currently undergoing chemotherapy. Six out of eleven patients with local recurrence *died* or are alive today with the disease” (67; emphasis added). An *AIDS* article by Kjetland et al. contains a similar pair of sentences: “Twelve of 527 people had *passed away* 12 months after the baseline investigation. Although the cause of *death* was not known, 11 of these had been HIV positive at baseline” (597; emphasis added). In these instances, with “passed away” used alongside “died” or “death,” the phrase is clearly not acting as a euphemism for “death.” Instead, it seems to be chosen to vary word choice—something many of us encourage student writers to do. This prohibition of so-called euphemisms like passed away, then, both misrepresents the territory of academic writing and underestimates the flexibility of language in general.

### **The Role of Citation**

Just as handbooks’ word choice chapters present a limited view of what academics can do with language, source use chapters tend to paint a limited picture of what we can do with other academics’ work. The essentials of source use, as communicated in handbooks, might be summed up as “Back up your points and don’t plagiarize.” The *Simon & Schuster Handbook for Writers* provides a fairly typical example of the source use directives given by composition handbooks:

Using sources well means using *quotations*, *paraphrases*, and *summaries* to create a synthesis of those materials and your own thoughts. It also means documenting your sources and avoiding *plagiarism*....Pulling together a *synthesis* of your sources and your own thinking about the topic means:

- Mastering the information from each source
- Finding relationships among the pieces of information from various sources
- Adding your own thinking to the mix (Troyka and Hesse 567; emphasis in original)

Like word choice, source use has an affiliated set of handbook keywords that appear in nearly every text, including most commonly the terms *quotations*, *paraphrases*, *summaries*, *synthesis*, *documenting* and *plagiarism*, all present in the above example. These keywords are mostly about fair and accurate representation of sources, leaving aside the many other things academics do with sources besides simply relay their content. The problems with such a narrow focus for source use discussions are multiple, but I want to focus on two in particular here: 1) that they limit the possible ways students can conceive of interacting with sources, and 2) that they frame sources as student writers' primary way to gain authority.

#### Source use(s)

In studying “the functions of citations in academic writing,” Nigel Harwood identifies eleven purposes that citation of published scholarship can serve for academic writers. Within each of these eleven purposes he specifies multiple subcategories. Within the “tying” function, for example, Harwood finds three ways in which scholars connect their work to that of others: “Tying citations aligned authors with (i) other sources’ methods/methodology; (ii) specific schools of thought/disciplinary traditions; or (iii) debates on specific issues” (508). With multiple



subpurposes listed under each main purpose, Harwood draws attention to an enormous range of things people can do with citations, from demonstrating competence to pointing out inconsistencies in another's argument to providing further reading in a topic that will not be discussed. (For further discussion of the many purposes of scholarly citation, see also Crane on the creation of an "invisible college" through citation of others in a field or subfield, and Merton [30] on citation as a confirmation of one's independent thought or discovery.)

Given the wide variety of motives for citing sources in academic publication, it is unfortunate that handbooks (and wider pedagogical discourse) often present source use to undergraduate students in a very limited manner. In handbooks, "sources" typically equal "support," and "source use" equals "not plagiarizing." As in the case of language issues, the chapter titles and subtitles of handbooks' research writing chapters are telling here; this full-color subheading in *The Bedford Handbook's* "Writing MLA Papers" chapter (Hacker and Sommers 494), for example, vividly illustrates the focus on support in source use:

### **50c Use sources to inform and support your argument.**

Chapter titles and subtitles also create a very limited vision of the research process. Most of the handbooks I examined organize the process similarly to the *Simon & Schuster Handbook* example shown earlier in this chapter (figure 3.3), with all of the research happening first and then the writing. If students follow the process in the order the textbooks demonstrate, they will go through chapters on how to determine their topic, how to find library resources, how to evaluate sources for trustworthiness and bias, and how to take notes and keep track of source information. These are repeated themes in many handbooks' research sections, including that of the *Prentice Hall Reference Guide*:

- Chapter 59: Finding a Topic
- Chapter 60: Searching for Information

- Chapter 61: Using Web Resources
- Chapter 62: Evaluating Sources
- Chapter 63: Collecting Information (Harris);

*The Writer's Brief Handbook:*

- Chapter 9.1: Developing a Research Strategy
- Chapter 9.2: Finding Sources
- Chapter 9.3: Selecting and Evaluating Sources
- Chapter 9.4: Keeping Track of Information (Rosa and Eschholz);

and *The Scott, Foresman Handbook:*

- Chapter 43: How Do You Plan a Research Project?
- Chapter 44: How Do You Find Information?
- Chapter 45: How Do You Evaluate Sources? (Troyka and Hesse).

Once sources are gathered and it comes time to use them in the writing, then, we might expect to see detailed information about the actual uses to which they may be put. Instead, we get chapters like the *Prentice Hall Reference Guide's* "Using Sources and Avoiding Plagiarism" chapter (Harris 378-403), which includes the following subheadings:

- Understanding why plagiarism is wrong
- Recognizing plagiarism and documenting sources responsibly
- Summarizing without plagiarizing
- Paraphrasing without plagiarizing
- Using quotation marks to avoid plagiarizing
- Using signal words and phrases to integrate sources

Here, the chapter title and all but one of the subheadings includes a mention of plagiarism, sending a very clear message to students that not plagiarizing should be their main concern when thinking about how to use sources. This handbook is not alone in sending this message. After the process of finding sources has been covered in *The Wadsworth Handbook*, for instance, students have three remaining chapters to read about research writing:

- Chapter 15: Summarizing, Paraphrasing, and Quoting Sources
  - Writing a Summary
  - Writing a Paraphrase

- Quoting Sources
- Integrating Sources into Your Writing
- Chapter 16: Synthesizing Sources
  - Understanding Synthesis
  - Writing an Explanatory Synthesis
  - Writing an Argumentative Synthesis
- Chapter 17: Avoiding Plagiarism
  - Defining Plagiarism
  - Avoiding Unintentional Plagiarism
  - Revising to Eliminate Plagiarism

As these examples show, in addition to the focus on plagiarism, handbooks' treatment of source use tends to rely on the same keywords italicized in the earlier *Simon & Schuster Handbook* example: summary, paraphrase, quotation, and, occasionally, synthesis. The keywords in the headings match the content of the chapters. In the handbooks I examined, an average of 26 pages deal with the parts of the research writing process after finding sources, and on average 22 of those pages are devoted to either avoiding plagiarism or quoting, summarizing, and paraphrasing. This particular collection of key source-use skills creates a very clear sense that students' primary goal in writing a research paper is representing the words and ideas of others accurately and ethically.

Only on rare occasions do handbooks address the issue of what sources can do besides give support to a student's argument, and on these occasions, the only other option typically provided is presenting a counterargument. Here is a suggested outline provided by *Keys for Writers* in the "Organize your essay around ideas, not sources" section of its "How to Use, Integrate, and Document Sources" chapter:

1. First point of support: what ideas I have to support my thesis and what evidence Fuentes and Jones provide
2. Second point of support: what ideas I have to support my thesis and what evidence Smith and Fuentes provide

3. Third point of support: what ideas I have to support my thesis and what evidence Jones provides
4. Opposing viewpoints of Jackson and Hayes
5. Common ground and refutation of those viewpoints
6. Synthesis (Raimes and Jerskey 147)

In discussions of counterarguments, students are typically given a very straightforward sense of how a counterargument will strengthen their own argument. As in the above outline, the sources for a counterargument are there only to be refuted; as the *Simon & Schuster Handbook* says, “You might research to find out what people who disagree with you believe and, more important, why. You can then explain the shortcomings of their views or explain why your position is better” (Troyka and Hesse 516). Use of sources, then, may occasionally mean relaying the source’s perspective in order to argue against it, but it much more commonly means relaying its perspective unchallenged. Compared to the many things published academics can do with sources, such accounts offer a very limited view.

### Sources of authority

One possible explanation for the emphasis on accurate (and plagiarism-free) representation of sources is that students are being trained to derive much of their authority from sources. Every handbook I examined mentions authority in at least one of its source-related chapters, and the messages sent to students are similar across handbooks, as the following examples demonstrate:

- “The scholarship of acknowledged experts is essential for depth, authority, and specificity” (Fowler and Aaron 556).
- “Well-chosen quotations can lend a note of authority and enliven a document with someone else’s voice” (Troyka and Hesse 574).

- “Quotations from respected authorities can help establish your credibility by showing you’ve sought out experts in the field” (Lunsford 270).
- “A source’s words—particularly those of a recognized expert on your subject—will lend authority to your presentation” (Kirsznner and Mandell 200).

What these representations seem to overlook is the possibility that students might have authority of their own. When handbooks speak of sources as “essential” for authority, as what will “lend” authority to the students, they deny the students’ own authority and instead ask them to rely on published sources for a temporary authority that will never be truly theirs. This kind of representation of authority was an especially prominent concern among my student co-researchers, as I will discuss in Chapter 5.

These representations also overlook the complex relationship that academics have to authority figures. A citation of a like-minded authority in one’s field is sometimes meant to add authority to one’s own points or to establish one’s right to speak, true. Yet sometimes it is inaccurate to say that the authority originates with the source; as Robert Merton describes, scholars sometimes come to a project already “stocked with their own ideas” and then “find in [an] earlier book precisely what they had in mind” (30). They might cite such a book in their writing, then, not because it was the source of the ideas but because “ideas take on new validity when they are independently expressed by another” (Merton 30).<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, academics attach multiple significances to their authority figures, such that their primary reason for citing someone in a publication may go far beyond or be only tangentially related to the authority associated with that person. In this regard, Amy Robillard asserts a strong affective rationale for many of her and others’ citation choices:

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<sup>10</sup> As I will discuss in the next chapter, my student co-researcher Areia experienced this feeling several times when her course readings legitimated for her ideas she had had previously, and she subsequently had trouble thinking of these ideas as “belonging” to the published scholars.

We cite the people we cite because we feel certain things toward them. Judith Goleman has had a tremendous impact on my scholarly growth. My citation of her work in this essay functions not necessarily to showcase my expertise in Goleman's work but as a kind of public acknowledgment of the impact she's had on my thinking. ...Carolyn Kay Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman*... seemed to be putting my social class experiences into words, words that I hadn't been able to find up to that point. When I then cite Steedman's work in my own, I am representing an affective relationship at the same time that I am representing an epistemological relationship. (261-62)

In this explanation, full of feeling and "affective relationship," Robillard expresses the complexity of connections academics often feel to their sources and to their intellectual influences more broadly. Despite common representations that value objectivity, we often are tied to our fields and our authorities in ways distinctly personal and emotional.

As we connect ourselves to our fields, "authority" may not relate just to the individual writer; scholars use citation to advocate for the authority of particular viewpoints and of their disciplines as well. Sara Trechter and Mary Bucholtz, for example, use citation to assert the authority of anthropologists within the field of whiteness studies:

Although the burgeoning field of whiteness studies encompasses a panoply of disciplines within the humanities and social sciences...it owes a special debt to anthropology...anthropologists have been at the vanguard of scholarship in the critical investigation of whiteness. The influential studies of such researchers as Karen Brodtkin (1998) and John Hartigan (1999) have enriched the field by

demonstrating the importance of historical, geographic, and ethnographic specificity in understanding the workings of whiteness. (3)

Here, Trechter and Bucholtz are not just, or even primarily, working to enhance their own authority to talk about whiteness; they are demonstrating how others in their field have created authority for the entire discipline.

Compared to simple descriptions of “lending” authority provided by handbooks, the relationship of source use and citation to authority in published scholarship is far more complex. As I will explore further in Chapter 5, commonly circulating representations of source use, exemplified by its treatment in handbooks, give students an extremely limited picture of what they can do with sources. As a result, in such representations, students are denied access to the full complexity the ways academics interact with other academics’ work, much as they are denied access to the full complexity of academic language use.

### **The Commodification Question**

I want to connect these specific examples back to the wider issue of commodification in textbooks. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of this commodification is that it is assumed to be a natural part of textbook creation: We must (over)simplify things to make them understandable to students and less experienced teachers. This view, however, is simply not accurate; it is very possible for textbooks to complicate issues. For example, *The St. Martin’s Handbook* and *The Longman Handbook* provide proof that even mass-marketed handbooks can treat issues of standardized English in more nuanced ways. Both of these handbooks contain content that, rather than repeating the same keywords that organize the word choice chapters described earlier, describes the issues at hand in ways supported by linguistic scholarship.

*The Longman Handbook* (though it remains problematic in its parallel treatment of nonstandardized language practices and discriminatory language) foregoes absolute usage rules like “Use standard English” (Rosa and Eschholz 130) or “Never use nonstandard English” (Troyka and Hesse 262) in favor of advice that encourages awareness of power relations and ideological factors:

- Learn to see dialect variations as “rules”
- Understand Standard English as a function of power and social prestige
- Become aware of the grammatical variations in your home dialect
- Become aware of oral language influences
- Consider your word choices
- Distinguish between slang and dialect
- Recognize hypercorrection

In these directives—which are, somewhat unfortunately and incongruously, subheadings within the “Appropriate and Respectful Language” chapter—students are encouraged toward awareness rather than rule-following. The writers provide nuanced explanations and linguistic vocabulary for the issues at hand, distinguishing, for example, between register and dialect and between dialect and slang. They explicitly confront the arbitrary nature of language conventions with such statements as “Double negatives are acceptable in hundreds of languages around the world, so there is no logical reason why they should be incorrect in English. In fact, they were once perfectly acceptable and were used by Chaucer and Shakespeare” (Anson and Schwegler 667). The “Recognize hypercorrection” section is especially interesting for its acknowledgment of an issue often faced by speakers of nonstandardized dialects that is much more complex than the typical concern about students using the nonstandardized dialect in “inappropriate” contexts. *The Longman Handbook* explains hypercorrection as follows:

People who use a nonmainstream dialect may become aware of certain language habits that are not considered the norm. When they shift registers in formal



situations, they may consciously or unconsciously try to “repair” their speech.

Sometimes they may unwittingly create a new error in trying to be correct.

Linguists call this phenomenon **hypercorrection**. (Anson and Schwegler 671; emphasis in original)

As they go on to give an example of someone using “I” as a grammatical object, the writers effectively show student readers that academic language use is much more complicated than simply always choosing the more standard or formal variety.

*The St. Martin’s Handbook* is similarly challenging to conceptions of standardized and nonstandardized language, especially in how it addresses questions of nonstandardized language’s appropriateness in academic texts. Instead of telling students that they always need to shift out of their “home” dialects for academic writing (something which even *The Longman Handbook* does), *St. Martin’s* asserts that “standard,” “ethnic,” and “regional” varieties of English, as well as “other languages”

can all be used very effectively for the following purposes in your writing:

- to repeat someone’s exact words
- to evoke a person, place, or activity
- to establish your credibility and build common ground
- to make a strong point
- to get your audience’s attention (Lunsford 525)

In the discussions around different types of language and different reasons for using it, *The St. Martin’s Handbook* shows students that clarity and objectivity may not be the only goals they have in writing. In fact, they might make deliberate choices to defy a convention, even to the

point of using a language their readers are unlikely to understand. This point is especially clear in the handbook's discussion of using languages other than English:

In general, you should not assume that all your readers will understand another language. So, in most cases, including a translation...is appropriate. Occasionally, however, the words from the other language will be clear from the context...At other times, a writer might leave something untranslated to make a point—to let readers know what it's like not to understand, for example. (Lunsford 524)

In this explanation, we see students being given a complex choice about language, one that published academics can make in many situations but students are rarely allowed to, especially by handbooks.

For the most part, though, composition handbooks continue to present a relatively unified representation of academic language, filled with moralizing messages on themes like appropriateness and deference to authority. Despite the commonalities among textbooks, though, examples abound of published academic writing that violate handbook rules and destabilize judgments about appropriateness or formality. In the next chapters, we will see these issues situated in the context of individual students' experiences, exploring some of the ways they encounter such messages in their classes and the consequences these messages have for their self-perceptions as academic writers.

## Chapter 4

### **“We Have the Ideas, We Just Don’t Know How to Format It”: Students Encountering Rules for Grammar, Diction, and Arguments**

When confronted with “rules” for academic writing, as they so often are in their textbooks and in their teachers’ guidelines and feedback, college students experience numerous contradictions. They struggle to reconcile the presentation of tips and requirements, frequently implied or outright stated to be universal, with the changeability that they have seen in these rules across times and spaces.

For many college students, the first jarring experiences with such contradiction and changeability occur early in college, when they begin to perceive that the rules in high school, which were represented as “good writing” and often even “college-level writing,” do not apply in many college contexts. Ali experienced this contrast between high school and college expectations most strongly in the area of essay structure:

In high school...they made you follow like the five-paragraph rule, the opening and the closing and the three supporting paragraphs, and they made you state the three paragraphs that you were going to write about in your thesis, and it’s different in college, or at least in the classes that I’ve taken...Your introduction has to have a thesis but your thesis doesn’t necessarily have to like point out the three points, you just have to like allude to what you’re going to talk about, and...the structure’s different, and that allows you to like write better, almost ‘cause you’re not like confined to like a certain way of doing something...I remember in high school like my opening paragraph and my closing paragraph, I think only like a sentence was different. *[laughing]*

At the time of this interview, when Ali was a sophomore, she laughed about her high school experience because she had come to understand that college teachers rarely consider it appropriate to do something like write a conclusion that restates an introduction nearly verbatim. Yet the contrast had surprised her when she was a first-semester college student, since in high school she had had only one teacher who allowed her a level of freedom in structuring her essays that she felt approximated what she found in many of her college classes. The rest of the teachers represented their rigidly prescriptive academic writing requirements, such as having a single-sentence thesis statement that includes the topics of all three body paragraphs, as general rules for successful essay writing.

A significant amount of scholarship has been devoted to bridging the gap between high school and college writing (e.g., Addison and McGee, “Writing”; Sullivan and Tinberg; Thompson), and popular representations of that gap and the frustrations surrounding it circulate widely among college teachers and students. Many students, several of my co-researchers included, can name college teachers who have told them to “forget everything you learned in high school about writing.” Teachers and students alike wonder why high schools teach students rules that they will only have to unlearn. Yet as the last chapter began to address, college (and particularly first year) writing pedagogies often contain equally rigid rules that will require an equal amount of unlearning when students move on to other contexts.

The checklists and prohibitions found in writing handbooks are only part of a web of factors sustaining the illusion that academic writing is cohesive and easily definable. Many individual teachers’ practices are simultaneously caught in and maintaining that web. The discourse surrounding academic writing supports college writing teachers in attributing very specific situational judgments (say, that of this specific teacher on this specific day in this

specific class discussing this specific assignment) to an entire discipline or to all of academic writing. These judgments may contradict one another, much as they contradict students' high school learning and the possibilities they might see in published writing. While the judgments themselves are variable, their existence and intensity continue to be common, supporting a widespread belief that is possible to define, identify, and teach universal rules of good academic writing. Connected closely with this belief is another that students *need* to be taught these universal rules, since they come into college lacking knowledge of them, out of language and writing conventions very different from those they are entering. According to this belief, students need explicit instruction and should not be confused by too much complexity.

As I will explore in this chapter and the next, however, these simplified rules seem far from beneficial for students. My co-researchers' experiences display several ways that students suffer when situational choices or preferences are represented as universal rules. They lose opportunities to explore and understand the complexity of writing. They see the contradictions between one "rule" and another rule or practice and become confused, frustrated, or resentful. They begin to question the motivations or credibility of the rule's source, or they question the suitability of their own writing or thinking for academia because they cannot (or choose not to) make their writing fit the rule.

Here, I am arguing that, as many of the previous chapter's examples suggest, strict, moralizing rules about attributes like "appropriateness" and "authority" are not just about language choices or citation practices in writing. They are not just about what writers put on the page; they are about the writers themselves. Within my co-researchers' experiences, messages about stylistic and grammatical details, argument, formal and informal writing, and source use emerged as key to their encounters with representations of academic writing. These messages

affected how the students perceived not only *what* academic writing is but also *who* could qualify as academic—and whether they were among the people entitled to claim this privileged identity. In this chapter, I will focus in detail on the rules for writing that my co-researchers have encountered, including style and grammar, diction, and thesis statements. In the next, I will consider the messages they have received about the relationship of their language practices, personal viewpoints, and authority to scholarly writing and language.

### **Targeting Surface Issues**

College students receive a great many directives for grammar and style in their writing, and while only some of them come from the sorts of textbooks discussed in the previous chapter, many more of them sound just like those textbooks. My co-researchers have brought me numerous examples of spoken directives, pedagogical materials, and essay feedback that firmly told them what words to use and avoid, how to keep their language formal enough for academic writing, and why they should consider such things a priority. Often, these messages assumed a remedial attitude toward students, indexing assumptions that the knowledge and effort they brought to writing tasks were insufficient.

#### A focus on grammar and stylistic preferences: “We have the ideas” (Areia, Rob, and Ali)

In the second semester of Areia’s first year, she bonded closely with her writing teacher, who shared her passions for politics and activism and encouraged her to voice the opinions she felt needed to be stated. Areia “love[d] him” and “loved that class.” Her take on this instructor’s priorities was that he thought the students had excellent critical thinking skills but needed much more work on grammar. This was why, Areia believed, he focused much of his instructional attention on grammar and style issues: “His main focuses were like the sentences and stuff like

that, like grammar and sentences, because he said we have the ideas, we just don't know how to format it and to...organize it."

When she brought me graded essays from the class, Areia drew my attention to the instructor's commentary about both grammar and content issues. On her brief essay about gendered behavior expectations, for example, the teacher had commented on nonstandardized subject/verb agreements, corrected punctuation errors, and reworked her sentence structures. He had also made substantive comments about her argument. Areia was particularly pleased by one question, written next to a paragraph discussing the judgments women often face for becoming pregnant out of wedlock, which asked her, "Do women *get* pregnant? Or are they *made* pregnant by a man?" Despite (or perhaps because of) the presence of multiple levels of commentary, though, Areia still perceived grammar to be the teacher's main concern. As Nancy Sommers has pointed out, comments about surface issues paired with comments about content and other broader issues "give the student an impression of the importance of these errors that is all out of proportion," making it "difficult for a student to sort out and decide what is most important" ("Responding" 150-51). It is therefore not surprising that Areia saw surface error as her teacher's primary concern, especially since, as her agreement with the idea that "we have the ideas" suggests, she was herself more concerned about her grammar than her thinking.

Another source of Areia's perception was a sheet of "20 Guidelines for Good College Writing (AKA goals for our class)" that the teacher distributed at the beginning of the semester. As Areia showed me the list and her notes on it, I noted that surface concerns by far dominated it. Of the twenty items, only six addressed issues beyond the word or sentence level.<sup>1</sup> With fourteen of the twenty good writing goals focused on surface issues, then, it makes sense that

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<sup>1</sup> These six items encouraged students to "care about" their writing, attend to their paragraph organization, consider their audience, create interesting and significant introductions and conclusions, maintain a consistent level of detail and focus throughout the paper, and "answer the 'so what' question."

Areia perceived from early in the semester that grammar was a priority for this instructor. Further, while a number of the surface-level guidelines were rules of correctness, such as avoiding comma splices and misspellings, more of them were stylistic preferences reminiscent of composition handbook guidelines for formal word choice. Some examples of these included “Eliminate the word ‘things’ from your written vocabulary,” “Avoid vague subjects and verbs,” “Avoid tired, weary, overused expressions (clichés),” and “Eliminate second person and contractions from formal prose.” Like the handbook examples in Chapter 3, these felt to me like the sorts of absolute “rules” that are frequently broken by published “formal” academic writers. Still, Areia took notes on and circled key terms in all types of items on the list, seemingly accepting the list’s and her instructor’s focus on surface issues.

Areia’s teacher was far from unique in giving students these sorts of directives or assigning this much priority to grammar. Ali and Rob both had teachers who commented frequently on stylistic and grammatical issues and who often devoted the bulk or the entirety of end comments to surface concerns, even when an essay exhibited potentially serious problems with their argumentative reasoning or their interpretation of the subject matter. This stress on grammar often caused my co-researchers to struggle to understand what their priorities should be in improving their writing.

In some of Rob’s courses, a strong focus on grammar led instructors to assume issues with content where they may not have existed. For example, in one interview, we discussed a marginal comment from Rob’s first-year writing teacher that drew attention to a paragraph’s “grammar breakdowns,” saying that the surface issues “suggest a ¶ without a clear sense of purpose or focus” that “doesn’t know what it is trying to say.” These sorts of comments were frequently confusing to both Rob and me. In this case, I could not determine how the instructor



made the jump from grammar, style, and tone problems to lack of purpose and focus. Rob's paragraph had a topic sentence, which stated, "Not all classes that employ PowerPoint is a disaster like the Geology class, some courses can successfully use PowerPoint; it's just the how it is presented and the instructor who is presenting it." The paragraph then went on to support this topic sentence by detailing an example of a political science professor who made good use of PowerPoint to improve his instruction. Rob concluded by reiterating the contrast between this class and the geology class he had criticized in the previous paragraph: "Unlike the method used in the Geology Lecture, Political Science shows effectiveness in the classroom." There was still certainly some language finessing that could be done here, but I read the content as having solid potential and the paragraph as having a cohesive focus and purpose.

Such comments were also confusing to Rob because, like Areia and like the students Sommers evokes, he perceived a focus on grammatical error that often overwhelmed any attention to more paragraph- or essay-level concerns. He was especially overwhelmed by the quantity of errors his teachers would flag. Of this particular teacher, Rob said, "He always says, oh, if you see a lot of writing on your paper, that means, you know, it's a good thing, cause now like you know what to fix up later. But that doesn't help at all, 'cause that means I gotta fix everything!" Within the paragraph described above, there were many corrections to specific language issues in addition to the marginal comment; however, there was no sense of how these issues related to clarifying the paragraph's purpose, so Rob did not in fact know what to fix.

While Rob's grammatical errors sometimes seemed to lead teachers to assume problems with his content or structure, other times they caused teachers to downplay other sorts of problems. In a cinema studies essay Rob brought me, for instance, he received a two-part end comment that first encouraged him to get "assistance with [his] writing skills...punctuation,

grammar, etc—the basics,” and then informed him that his “own reasoning [was] contradictory” because it was difficult to reconcile some of his critiques of the film with his conclusion that it was a “perfect comedy for all generations.” The instructor chose then to address the grammar issues first, despite perceiving a major contradiction in Rob’s argument. Whether the instructor made a conscious choice to comment in this order or simply wrote major concerns in the order they came to mind, this end comment suggested to both of us that Rob’s grammar issues should take priority over his reasoning.

Ali experienced similar issues with teachers prioritizing grammatical and stylistic issues. In response to a comparative literature essay on *The Inferno*, for instance, she received mixed messages about the primary concerns she should have for her writing. From class discussions and assignment sheets, Ali had gathered that her teacher wanted students to pay special attention to contextual and thematic issues in the texts they were reading. Ali indicated that the complexity of these texts and the teacher’s emphasis on firm textual (and sometimes historical) evidence had caused her some trouble: “She expects a lot of like contextualizing, going into the setting in the text...and she likes you to be really specific...so that’s a little hard.” In this essay, Ali had connected Dante’s story to Christianity in ways her teacher questioned. Ali had written that “Dante using these characters to replace the gods and goddesses in other epics shows how *The Inferno* is embodying the Christian ideals as opposed to following the structure of the general epic” and that “Dante makes the story into a Christian epic by adding references to Christianity and eliminating any references that would relate his work to a polytheistic religion.” In response, the teacher wrote critical marginal comments next to Ali’s sentences, pointing out that Virgil was not Christian and that there are frequent references in the text to polytheistic Greek and Roman religions, even emphasizing with capital letters that Dante makes these sorts of references

“CONSTANTLY.” In spite of these potentially serious issues with content, the final comment focused only on issues with passive voice and run-on sentences. The instructor advised Ali to limit use of passive voice because it weakens arguments and makes papers wordy.

Given that Ali seemed to have had a particularly difficult time producing an analysis that her teacher felt was supported by textual evidence, this end comment was surprising. Both research (e.g., Connors and Lunsford) and everyday representations tell us that students expect to see general impressions of an essay’s strengths and weaknesses in the end comment, so this comment communicated to Ali a strong priority on grammatical issues, perhaps stronger than the potential concerns with Ali’s textual interpretations. This priority contrasted sharply with those the instructor had previously voiced in class and displayed an emphasis on writing “rules” that Ali had not previously understood the instructor to have.

This end comment and its brief explanation for why to avoid passive voice is typical of rules often offered to students. It echoes the messages sent by many of the textbooks I examined; *The Simon & Schuster Handbook* states that “the passive voice is less concise—as well as less lively—than the active voice” (Troyka and Hesse 245), and *The Little, Brown Handbook* says that “the active voice is usually stronger, clearer, and more forthright” while the passive “can deprive writing of vigor” (Fowler and Aaron 299). These in turn echo the view of institutions like the Little Red Schoolhouse curriculum (“match characters with subjects and actions with verbs” [“Make”]) and Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* (“the active voice...makes for forcible writing” [Strunk]). None of these messages, though, explain how passive voice interferes with features like vigor and forcefulness. In the case of Ali, more detailed explanation of passive voice’s connections to wordiness and argument strength also was unavailable. Ali was just asked to accept that active voice makes arguments stronger. This was a rather misleading

criterion for good argument, and one that did not connect with messages Ali received previously, that good arguments are defined primarily by their support from textual and historical evidence.

As composition research shows, Areia's, Rob's, and Ali's teachers are far from unique in their emphasis of surface issues over content. Paul Matsuda contends that "people often see form over function" when reading academic writing that has a significant number of markedly nonstandardized features ("Transnational English(es)"), and seeing form translates to commenting on form. In a recent analysis of instructor commentary on student essays from a variety of disciplines, Lesa Stern and Amanda Solomon found that "the sheer numbers of technical corrections stood in sharp contrast to the dearth of comments on ideas presented within the paper" (36).<sup>2</sup> This "dearth of comments on ideas" likely results directly from the "form over function" problem; instructors have difficulty reading past grammar to evaluate content, argument, and structure. As Chris Anson explains,

teachers' reading processes can be slowed or frustrated by errors that, while not severe, or while in a state of increasing acceptance, are still "noticed" because a teacher wants to catch everything and bring it to the student's attention. In such cases, it may be difficult to attend to meaning because the hunt for errors moves the form of the text into the foreground. (17)

As Anson and others have found, this "hunt for errors" and urge to "catch everything" can be confusing for both teacher and student, and frequently leads to decreased focus on the content of student essays (see also Connors and Lunsford; Shaughnessy; Stern and Solomon). My co-

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<sup>2</sup> This study, which examines papers from undergraduate students at a medium-sized university, adds recent examples to a historical pattern. Stern and Solomon point out that their findings support previous research by Connors and Lunsford, and I would add that it also supports Shaughnessy's and Sommers' even earlier arguments about teachers giving extensive attention to surface issues either alongside or at the expense of more holistic writing concerns.

researchers, therefore, are among many students experiencing a confusion of priorities resulting from excessive focus on surface error.

Assuming the knowledge “inside” students: “Remember to proofread” (Hannah and Anny)

Hannah has also repeatedly expressed frustration with teachers’ emphasis on surface details rather than the content of her writing: “There’s a lot of requirements, and I think it’s so ridiculous...I understand the concepts, like just because my name’s on the right hand side or the left hand side, it’s not that huge of a difference. It’s just frustrating.” In the communication class where she was told to avoid the word “very” in academic writing, she also consistently received end comments telling her to “remember to proofread.” Similarly, Anny tended to get grammar-focused comments in her dance class, and we talked in an interview at some length about one end comment telling her that she needed to “brush up on [her] grammar.”

Both Anny’s and Hannah’s end comments reflect a common pedagogical attitude that, as Carolyn Ball, Laura Dice, and David Bartholomae describe it, “pretends...crucial knowledge is located ‘inside,’ in a student’s native intelligence or powers of logic or intuition” (340). The comment about brushing up on grammar constructs Anny as someone who could write relatively error-free prose if she simply refreshed her memory, as the instructor suggested, about “sentence structures and how to use tenses.” This is, of course, far from the true situation: Anny has only been speaking English for four years at this point, and her grammar is, unsurprisingly, not entirely native-like; she needs to continue to learn and practice—not brush up—in order to improve her sentence structure. As Paul Matsuda contends, “It is not unusual for teachers who are overwhelmed by the presence of language differences to tell students simply to ‘proofread more carefully’ or ‘go to the writing center’; those who are not native speakers of dominant

varieties of English are thus being held accountable for what is not being taught” (“Myth of Homogeneity” 640).

Likewise, Hannah has not “forgotten” to proofread; she has caught everything that she could catch on her own and, in the case of one essay where her teacher took off points for lack of proofreading, she actually had her roommate read it over as well. We puzzled, then, over the implications of “remember to proofread”:

**Sam:** Teachers...just assume that if there’s mistakes it’s because you weren’t paying attention.

**Hannah:** Well, I spelled “cleats” wrong every single time. And I spelled it wrong in my speech, *and* in my PowerPoint. I *consistently* spelled it wrong, so it wasn’t gonna change. [*laughter*]

Hannah cannot “remember” how to spell “cleats,” or that she is not supposed to use “very,” because she did not have the knowledge in the first place. As Ball, Dice, and Bartholomae argue,

The wealth of legitimated knowledge must be acquired; it can never, we would argue, be produced by acts of remembrance...When we fail to recognize in our teaching that some knowledge can never come from inside, from the self, we implicate ourselves in an educational practice which locates “error” in the student rather than as an effect of discursive systems which marginalize some students and reward others. (341)

When students are asked to remember things they have never learned, the blame for perceived errors is placed squarely on them, which is often inaccurate. This assumption of the knowledge “inside” students is not restricted to surface issues, though (Ball, Dice, and Bartholomae cite

“Remember your audience” as a common example); it extends to assumptions about what students know in all aspects of writing.

### **Expectations for Word Choice**

Formal diction: “Use big words that you don’t understand” (Ali and Hannah)

In her first year, Hannah took a class in which the teacher’s response to her work caused a severe blow to her self-perception as a writer:

**Hannah:** In high school, you know, I was one of the top kids in my class, so I felt confident in my writing, my teachers really liked my writing. Then I came here, had [a literature seminar], and uuuummmm

**Sam:** What did [the teacher] say to you? Didn’t she say something about like you don’t read a lot?

**Hannah:** Yeah, she said by my writing she could tell I didn’t read a lot.

This teacher’s responses to Hannah’s writing focused heavily on surface issues, and particularly on vocabulary and formality. Hannah recalled the density of the comments, which she had shared with me because she was in my first-year writing class at the same time: “Remember I’d show you like the papers, and we both couldn’t understand it? ...She would just tear you to shreds.”

Going forward into her other classes, Hannah retained a sense that she was someone who wrote like she talked and whose word choice was different from what many other college-level writers produced:

I feel like I, I’m a good writer, but for some reason I’m always ashamed like asking someone to edit my paper because a lot of my writing, I don’t know when it changed but it used to never be like this, a lot of my writing is like how I speak,

like I don't look at a thesaurus and see how I could increase my word vocabulary, you know, I just say what I want to say, you know, I don't want to try confusing people, it's just my thoughts. ...I always wonder what people are thinking about my writing, you know, it's always like, I'm not embarrassed by it because I think it's well, until they do tear it to shreds and then I'm like "oh no..." So I go back and forth, because I think my ideas are there, it's just when other people look at it, they can be like, "Well, you can say it in this way," and I'm just like, "Oh, why didn't I *think* of that?"

While Hannah felt that she had legitimate reasons for keeping her word choice fairly simple ("I don't want to try confusing people"), she still worried that others might judge her for it. I often admired Hannah for continuing to ask peers to read her writing despite her worries. For her, it seemed, these worries were outweighed by a desire to make her writing less like her speech: "What I'd say verbally I do type down, so like I like getting that other perspective because it can only improve it...you're getting two different perspectives that I can tie into one...like a new way to say what you're thinking."

The handbooks that I examined for Chapter 3 represent a strong distinction between spoken and written diction, and students are discouraged from using their spoken language in their written essays.<sup>3</sup> *Keys for Writers* refers to "colloquial language and slang," which are to be avoided "in a formal college essay," as "the language of speech" (Raimes and Jerskey 370). Very similarly, *The Wadsworth Handbook* calls "colloquial diction...the language of everyday

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<sup>3</sup> As Douglas Biber discusses in *University Language*, there are indeed measurable differences between written and spoken language in academic settings. He contends that these are largely due to the "production circumstances of speech and writing" (214); in the case of word choice, since "it is difficult to access rare specialized words in real-time circumstances," such words are more common in writing than in speech (218). I would stress here, though, that this is a matter of degree. Words are unlikely to show up entirely in one context or the other, and the categories "colloquial" and "formal" are not static or mutually exclusive, nor do they map neatly onto "speech" and "writing," as the next example of Ali will illustrate.



speech” and says that it should be used in college writing “only to reproduce speech or dialect or give your paper a conversational tone” (Kirsznner and Mandell 569). As Hannah’s example suggests, some teachers also rigorously maintain these sorts of distinctions, telling students not to write like they talk and pushing them toward what they perceive as a more literate vocabulary. Internalizing such distinctions, then, Hannah grew “ashamed” of her own vocabulary.

Ali, too, found word choice a struggle. In her diction, she had trouble not only being “academic” but also understanding the point of doing so. She recalled first getting the message that academic word choice meant using long, obscure words from her high school teachers:

Wording...was really like proper, it was really like, “Use big words that you don’t understand.” And I’m kind of like, why?...I don’t even know those words, I don’t even use those words anymore. There was *no* purpose....Like they make you use big words to I guess promote like bigger vocabulary for yourself, but when really am I going to use those words? When I’m out with my friends or I’m out like giving a speech, those words are not going to come up because I can barely pronounce them.

After spending much of high school being pushed to use big words in her writing and assigned to read dense literary texts, Ali remembered being relieved by the relatively casual nature of much of her assigned reading when she got to college: “It wasn’t always very like scholarly articles, because I don’t think writing’s always about that...I mean there’s use for it, yes, but to get your point across and to write a well-worded essay, I don’t think it’s necessary.” As this begins to suggest, Ali’s word choice in her writing was influenced in part by her preferences as a reader; she disliked writing with “big words” because she valued reading more accessible writing.

However, Ali felt a great deal of pressure to switch into more formal language in academic contexts. Some of this pressure came explicitly, as in a comparative literature paper where the instructor's end comment asked her to "please try to vary your word choice." Throughout the paper, the instructor had underlined several uses of the words *disguise*, *help*, and *problems*, presumably as examples of words she should seek synonyms for. Much of the pressure for elevated diction, though, came implicitly. As I mentioned briefly in Chapter 2, Ali took a class in her junior year in which she felt very uncomfortable participating in discussion because of the level of diction used by the teacher and some of her classmates. Of the teacher, Ali said, "I don't understand where she got her words from," because the articles assigned for the class were written in much simpler language. Even so, Ali said that some students were comfortable talking at the teacher's level because they were "well versed" enough in the theory to "talk the talk" with complex language. A few even disapproved of the course readings for not having more academic word choice:

We read something and it wasn't written like scholastically, it was really written like just talking to you, and he [my classmate] was saying how that wasn't directed to our class because we're all like part of academia and how we should all have a bigger vocabulary than that. And I remember...I was kind of like, my vocabulary's not that big and I *liked* how he wrote it, like I can understand it, I was like that's the *point*, to reach it out to everyone, not just those in academia. Because like we're learning a lot about race and it doesn't just apply here; it applies everywhere!

Like Hannah, Ali saw legitimate reasons for keeping language more simple, and she did not see her vocabulary as indicating a lack of sophistication in her thinking. However, she still felt the

need to defer to people with larger vocabularies: “I’m pretty well versed in racism, and how it’s all constructed...and I would have liked to talk, but I felt silly talking!”

Ali’s experience presents an interesting challenge for the common equation of writing with elevated word choice and speech with simple or colloquial word choice. In this case, she experienced spoken classroom discourse that was far more formal than the written language shared in that same class. Further, both her and Hannah’s experiences suggest that the imperative to use “big words”—to shift away from the diction they were more comfortable with—did not make them behave like academics so much as outsiders to academic language. Hannah felt like she needed others’ help to get her language where it needed to be, even though she was often very uncomfortable sharing her writing because of the inadequacy she perceived in her language. Ali’s own perceived inadequacy caused her to remain silent in academic discussions despite having a great deal of conceptual knowledge. Without the expectation to move away from their spoken vocabulary, Ali and Hannah might have had much more engagement and confidence in their academic discussions and behaviors.

#### Multilingual and multidisciplinary vocabularies: “I think I studied hard” (Anny)

Anny’s experiences raise other interesting questions about the boundaries that typical representations place between academic and nonacademic language. Because Anny only began learning English as a sophomore in high school, she has packed an enormous amount of language learning into a relatively small time period. One thing that has allowed her to do this so well is that she does not consider classroom language situations to be fully separate from other language situations. Anny has no problem switching her language for different situations (the most salient example being that her parents do not speak English, whereas most of the other people she interacts with are Korean/English bilingual or other English speakers), but she has

found it most beneficial to blur distinctions between the classroom situation and the rest of her language learning. This began very soon after her family came to the U.S. and she enrolled in ESL classes in high school:

**Anny:** I started to learn English in high school. I was in ESL program in high school, so I started from the beginning, like from first level, and then—I think I studied hard [*laughter*] so I moved up...

**Sam:** So what was your experience like in ESL in high school?...

**Anny:** There were a lot of Korean friends in high school, so like if I didn't try hard, and if I didn't try to (make) American friends, maybe I would not speak English at all.

**Sam:** So there were opportunities to speak Korean if you wanted to just do that.

**Anny:** Yeah, you could just go to school without speaking English, but like I felt like if I don't speak and practice English hard, I'm not going to be able to speak English at all after graduation...I just joined a lot of clubs and activities, like cross country, like choir, and orchestra...so like I could make a lot of friends. So I had more chances to speak English compared to other friends. I think that's why I could learn how to speak English more...

**Sam:** So you learned, a lot of your learning of English wasn't really in the ESL classroom, a lot of it was outside in social situations and things

**Anny:** Yeah. When I was in ESL, there were a lot of Koreans, and like students from Europe, and Chinese, Japanese, so like I had to speak some English but not that much.

In her description, Anny illustrated how her classroom work and her social skills have been thoroughly intertwined in her language learning. I observed evidence of this in the ease and comfort with which Anny participated in class discussion in my first-year writing class; she remains one of the most vocal of all the English language learners I have taught in mainstream writing classes.<sup>4</sup> It seemed that her social English-learning efforts had given her a jumpstart in learning English in high school and had also provided her with experience practicing her English in potentially intimidating situations that served her well in college. Thus, she had benefited greatly from her ability to move her knowledge and learning across situations.

The trouble for Anny came when she encountered boundaries that did not allow her to transfer her language knowledge across situations. These boundaries often came in the form of differing teacher expectations for language use—differing both in how concerned they were about language and in what aspects of language they emphasized. Being a chemistry major, Anny was accustomed to understanding her writing situations in essentially two categories: English classes and everything else. In her understanding, “For English class...they care about a lot of grammar things, but for usual class they don’t care about grammar, like, if they get what I meant.” Anny’s two-semester first-year writing sequence had supported her impression that English teachers care about grammar. In my class first semester, language and grammar formed much of the subject matter and I would comment on trends in usage that I saw in her papers, while in her second semester class, the teacher often did extensive grammar editing on final drafts. Anny contrasted these experiences with those in her chemistry classes, where comments were typically made only on the clarity and accuracy of the information she wrote about. Her teachers’ comments on chemistry lab write-ups tended to be along the lines of “You should note

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<sup>4</sup> Both among my teaching colleagues and among educational researchers (e.g., de Jong and Harper; Wong et al.; Yoon), there is often concern about English language learners’ limited participation in mainstream class discussions.

that trimyrustin is insoluble in acetone” or “A mixture of hexane and ethyl acetate would work fine.” So far, this focus on content had played out through her other non-English classes as well, including a general education course she took in recreation, sports, and tourism.

Then, in spring of her sophomore year, Anny took another general education course, this time in dance, and found that this teacher’s priorities were different. We had an interview shortly after she got back her first essay, and Anny summed up her reaction to the teacher’s response as “I didn’t expect that she would comment about grammar that much.” The teacher had made a lot of edits to Anny’s grammar, many of them article or preposition corrections, and she had also criticized Anny’s choice of terms:

**Anny:** She wanted us to write, use “movement” instead of like “actions,” and she wanted to use “piece,” instead of saying like “show” or “performance.”

**Sam:** Oh, okay, so she had specific words she wanted you to use to describe different things?

**Anny:** Yeah.

**Sam:** Interesting. Had she told you that before?

**Anny:** Not really, like she told us after this paper, she said like, for next time, use “movement” or “piece,” the words for the dance...

**Sam:** [*skimming essay comments*] So she asks you a lot of questions [about your meaning], she makes a lot of grammar corrections... What did you think of this?

**Anny:** I thought that this was just about like the dance piece, like I thought that she like doesn’t exactly care about the grammar.

In the last turn in this conversation, in which Anny says “the dance piece,” we can see that she is already beginning to adopt the preferred vocabulary and is quite capable of doing so. However,

since Anny indicated that the instructor had not signaled this preferred vocabulary before she submitted her essay, she had relied on her previous knowledge from classes in non-English disciplines. Based on Anny's prior experience with essays in the disciplines, she had not expected the dance teacher to make grammar and diction a priority.

I asked to see the assignment sheet, curious if there had been any clues there, but there was no mention at all of grammar or preferred terminology. However, Anny was fairly certain that these surface issues were the reason for her receiving only six points out of eight on the essay:

**Sam:** It doesn't really say anything on the assignment sheet about that part of the grade is going to be for grammar.

**Anny:** No, no.

**Sam:** Huh. Do you know, the other people who got six out of eights, was it because of grammar for them too?

**Anny:** Yeah, grammar, and then they used like different words, like for example they used like "performance" or "show" instead of "piece," so they got points off...I think most people were struggling with the grammar, because like she generally talked about like "work on grammar, and then go to the Writers' Workshop."...Then she told, like most people didn't mention about the choreographers, and she told us to like write the name of the choreographers and performers.

Here, Anny's previous experience with writing in the disciplines, in which surface features were not a significant issue as long as her teachers "get what [she] meant," was not transferable to this new context. For Anny, who in future essays made a point of using terms like "piece" and

“movement” and sought my assistance with her grammar, the problem was less with the existence of this teacher’s rules for grammar and diction and more with the fact that she had not perceived them as stated explicitly. As I will explore in the next section, my co-researchers had similar problems with unstated rules, particularly in the area of thesis statements.

### **Rules for Arguments and Thesis Statements**

Theresa Lillis and Joan Turner have argued that transparency (or lack thereof) is a crucial problem in teacher-student communication about writing. In a study of student writers, they observed a specific problem with the words used to describe conventions:

Whilst the student-writers knew that they were expected to write within a particular configuration of conventions, they were constantly struggling to find out what these conventions were. Terminology widely used by tutors<sup>5</sup> and/or in guidelines to name academic writing conventions raised more questions than answers. (58)

Faculty, Lillis and Turner explain, often assume that students will understand exactly what they mean by directives like “write an introduction” or “cite authorities.” In my co-researchers’ experience, they and I observed this same problem. In the above example of Ali, the professor’s judgment of a “weak argument” caused by passive voice carried no explanation to help her determine why the argument was weak or how active voice would help her make it stronger,<sup>6</sup> much like “knowing that they had to *write an introduction* told the students little about what was

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<sup>5</sup> Lillis and Turner’s study focuses on the context of U.K. higher education, where tutors routinely provide the bulk of feedback on writing.

<sup>6</sup> Passive voice itself is a similarly obscure term to many students, despite teachers’ tendency to assume that students will understand the problem if they write “passive voice” next to a sentence on an essay. I have had to explain the term to multiple students who have come to me with graded papers from other classes (Rob and Ali included), and I have even had to explain it to undergraduate writing-tutors-in-training who had fully internalized the “don’t use passive voice” rule without actually knowing the accurate definition of the term.



required in an introduction” (Lillis and Turner 58, emphasis in original). Many of my co-researchers have encountered particular trouble with assumed transparency related to thesis statements. When an instructor asks for a “strong,” “clear,” or “good” thesis statement, that request is only occasionally followed by a definition or description of what this means.

Undefined and unstated terms: “Saying ‘good thesis’ was not going to help” (Hannah and Anny)

Hannah brought up this issue in the context of one of her communication classes, in which the teacher would be assigning only one paper for the semester and it would be a major portion of her grade. She was frustrated because the teacher had repeatedly mentioned considering “good thesis statements” essential for their essays, and she was unsure what this meant. Normally, she would have used her typical strategy for dealing with vague directives: “For classes that have like more than one paper, my theory is kind of like do what you think is right the first time, and then see how that results, and by the second time you’ll get it down.” In this class, though, there was no second paper, so Hannah struggled to figure the teacher’s expectations out for herself:

**Hannah:** The teacher can (say it) as much as they want, but like saying “a good thesis,” okay, what is that? You know, that can mean different things to different people...so it’s difficult...

**Sam:** So what did you end up feeling like “good thesis” meant to your comm teacher?

**Hannah:** Um, I think that was actually something I always struggled with...I don’t know if I ever truly accomplished that, to be honest with you, because I know the way I write, and I mean, I didn’t really know how to change it that much. You know, like saying “good thesis” and scribbling things on the board

was not going to help me. So...when someone edited my paper I'd be like can you check the thesis? You know, and if they said it was pretty good I had to go off of that because I didn't know what she was thinking and how she would think of it.

For Hannah, a teacher's reminder to have a "good thesis" was far from sufficient because, as she pointed out, "that can mean different things to different people." Since the adjective "good" is so subjective, Hannah did not feel comfortable making that judgment for herself without any criteria. In this case, then, she could get another judgment of thesis quality from a peer. If someone else thought her thesis statement was good, she would feel validated and safe to submit it; this was true not just for thesis statements but for many other aspects of her writing as well.

Interestingly, Hannah's comments about never quite understanding what this teacher meant by "good thesis" came after her telling me about her good grade on the paper: "I ended up getting a B-plus on that, which was awesome, super excited about that." As she recalled the teacher's comments, the only significant problem with the essay had been that she had "just misinterpreted one thing" in "connect[ing] the theory with the media." Hannah was unable to find the graded paper to show me, but she did not recall the teacher making any comments about her thesis. Presumably, then, her thesis had been "good," but the lack of definition in class or explanation on her paper meant that Hannah still did not understand why, a fact that clearly continued to bother her in spite of her good grade.

Anny shares Hannah's strategy of applying feedback on a paper to subsequent papers when a teacher's expectations are unclear. In one of her classes, she had written a paper that reported others' arguments without understanding that she needed to be making an overall argument of her own:

For the first time...I wrote like some statements or perspectives of other people, but like the teacher wanted me to write my thinking, so like she just pointed out that I have to write what I thought. So for the first one I got like lower grade than I usually got later, but after that I fixed it.

Once she had feedback on this first essay, Anny understood that the teacher wanted her to structure her essay around a thesis of her own, so she was able to use this knowledge in future writing. What Anny took from this experience was that, as she said, “every teacher wants a different writing style,” and that sometimes even when a word like “thesis” is not invoked, teachers may assume a shared understanding of the concept and its importance. When Anny does not have previous feedback to work from, she told me that she asks the teacher for guidance—“I just send email to ask how I should write an essay, or I went to office hour and ask questions.” In this way, she can adjust her strategies to individual teachers’ standards.

Explicit and subtle arguments: “Yeah, it’s about racism!” (Rob)

Even with teacher guidance, though, students still struggle to understand and work from abstract concepts like “good thesis,” especially if they have often needed to adjust their definitions from class to class. This was the case with Rob. As he described to me, he has often felt a tension between courses and teachers that ask for an explicit thesis and those that want a thesis to be more subtle. During one of his first-year writing classes, he described an interaction with his instructor about his thesis during a one-on-one tutorial:

He just writes it up, like, “Okay, what’s your thesis?” Well, my thesis is this.

“Okay, write it down.” Okay, let me do it. See, but I don’t know if he wants it in like big, big letters like *this is my thesis*...I think most assignments want a thesis

but a more like subtle form, so I just try, I just try to sneak it in as best I can,

but...[then] people just don't understand like what the hell you're writing about.

What Rob suggests here is that, even after he knew what his argument needed to be, he did not necessarily have a sense of how prominent of a thesis statement he should have in the paper. In his own perception, he could err on the side of either too much or too little subtlety. Additionally, he struggled to understand this specific instructor's expectations since, as he had learned from previous experience, writing or discussing things in tutorial sessions did not necessarily mean that the exact words used in tutorial should be put into his paper.<sup>7</sup>

On one hand, Rob longed for the sort of directives he experienced in his speech class, where he felt he was explicitly required to make his thesis very obvious. He found that explicitness very different from his perception of his first-year writing class or of generally how academic writers handle thesis statements:

**Rob:** See...like my speech class, oh God I love that class, cause thesis. [*sweeping gesture at table in front of him, as if to display something*] This is it. And like my preview? [*sweeping gesture*] This is it right here. So they know exactly what's going on. But this, like, you've got to play with it a little.

**Sam:** So you like to try to sneak your thesis in when you can.

**Rob:** ...It's like just trying to put it in, but like subtle...not trying to make it all obvious.

**Sam:** Not like beat people over the head with your thesis statement.

**Rob:** Yeah, like, "Hey, did you know that this paragraph's about racism? Yeah, it's about racism!"

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<sup>7</sup> As I will explore in the next chapter, Rob often felt a disconnect between his teacher's face-to-face and written feedback.

**Sam:** Attention please!

**Rob:** Yeah

**Sam:** This paper is about race!

**Rob:** ...I don't want it to be so obvious, just make it subtle, you know just make it so that we can understand what you're talking about...

**Sam:** Mm-hmm. So do you think [your writing teacher] is one who wants a more obvious thesis?

**Rob:** I don't know...he just said like make a thesis. That's it. I try to do it, but like I guess it's just like mixed feelings...make it obvious, but then again don't make it obvious.

As Rob perceived it, his instructor just wanted him to “make a thesis,” but had not explained to him how explicit this thesis should be. Like Hannah and the students in Lillis and Turner's study, then, what Rob had to work with was a term, “thesis,” that often was assumed to be self-explanatory but was not so to him.

What I find especially interesting in Rob's discussion of thesis statements is that, contrary to many typical representations of students, he does not necessarily consider the easiest approach to be the best one for his writing. In his speech class, he knows exactly what he needs to do with his thesis, but given an opportunity to try a less explicit approach, he does not “want it to be so obvious.” This is well in line with Rob's typical attitude toward writing: He does not mind a struggle; in his opinion, it is more important that he maintain a style that feels authentic to him and the points he is making.

## Learning from the Rules

As an English language learner, Anny is intimately acquainted with the frustrations of trying to follow rules that do not always apply. She cited articles as one of her most persistent sources of frustration:

**Anny:** For me, it is very hard to use an article, because sometimes you use the article in front of words, but you don't use the article in front of words sometimes, and then for some case you use *a*, but sometimes for other case you use *the*. So, I know that you use *the* if you already mentioned about the topic before, but like it's not the case for every time.

**Sam:** Right, sometimes like if there is only one of the thing, you don't have to have mentioned it before, like "the sun"...

**Anny:** I think some people know the rule, but it's hard to like use it for paper. ...It's hard to interpret.

**Sam:** Right, right, because every time you're hit with a specific noun that you have to decide whether to put an article in front of or not, rules only work so far.

**Anny:** And like when I was in high school, I was in ESL, so like we learned about grammars....If you take an exam on grammar, like people do well, but if you have to write a paper, it's kind of hard to use that grammar in a paper....I feel like when teachers like explain why it's wrong, we get it, but it's kind of hard to write a paper with the grammars that we have learned.

The native English speakers researching with me cited similar problems with following rules while writing. Hannah told me that she "get[s] comma happy" because she often is not certain whether she needs a comma in a specific place and tends to default to putting one in. For her, this

is partly an issue like Anny's of struggling to apply abstract rules in specific writing contexts, but it is also an issue of not knowing many rules of sentence structure to begin with. Hannah explained that she "never really learned" grammar because, even in elementary school, teachers were assuming that she already knew it:

Fourth grade through sixth grade I had this thing called SWAS [School Within a School, a gifted program], which focused a lot on English...so we could write a lot, we did a lot of independent research, but during that, they assumed that you knew like adverbs, adjectives, and stuff like that, and I didn't, so since then I've felt like I've kind of missed out.

Within this chapter, there have been a number of examples of teachers who seemed to have assumed that certain "rules" didn't need explaining. However, Ali struggled to understand what passive voice was and why it made her argument weak. Rob was unable to interpret essay comments including labels like "CS" (for comma splice)<sup>8</sup> and "run-on sentence" because he did not understand the meanings of these errors and the rules for fixing them. Hannah could not identify any place where her teacher had defined "good thesis." My own reading of written responses on their papers and the work of other scholars in the field (Matsuda, "Myth of Homogeneity"; Ball, Dice, and Bartholomae) is consistent with their sense that they were being held accountable to "recall" things that they had not been taught.

In all of this, as in general trends revealed in response research, both my co-researchers and their teachers were preoccupied with surface concerns and definitional details, spending much less time than they might have on broader issues of the content the students were

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<sup>8</sup> Rob didn't know what CS stood for. After telling him, I asked if he knew what "comma splice" meant and if he remembered me teaching it in the Bridge Composition course (I genuinely wasn't sure if I had). He responded, "All I remember was like the semicolon was your friend, you know?" This demonstrated to me that he recalled the term "comma splice" and how he might fix an instance of it, but the label "CS" did nothing to call up this knowledge or help him apply it in this particular case.

communicating. This analysis suggests that teachers' priorities communicated significant messages about the status of students and of their writing. In general, I concluded that students' texts were treated not as academic texts, to be read into for the knowledge and ideas they contributed, but as something very different, something more like a test of their ability to follow (often unstated) directions. With their texts not read as academic texts, I would argue, the students themselves also could not be read as academic writers. In the next chapter, I will explore further messages that constructed my co-researchers as lacking in the authority of published academics and consider how the priorities presented here combine with those messages to teach students that they cannot fully claim an academic identity.



## Chapter 5

### **“I’ve Got to Become an Encyclopedia”: Students Making Sense of Their Relationship to Academic Writing and Writers**

Over the last several years, my student co-researchers have not just juggled competing sets of rules and priorities from their different teachers. They have also worked through competing senses of their own places in academia, and of who they needed to be in order to succeed as academic writers and in the university in general. Roz Ivanic describes student writing as “the product of their developing sense of what it means to be a member of a specific academic community, of who they are and how they want to appear to be” (343). I would expand this and say that their writing and language, and others’ response to it, is also a crucial *source* of this “developing sense” of membership. In my co-researchers’ experiences, commentary about their source use, formality, and ability to take an academic (as opposed to personal) tone was particularly important in how they perceived themselves as academic writers. Additionally, the expectations they perceived in classroom contexts interacted in complex and often challenging ways with the expectations for their language, writing, and behavior in other contexts.

#### **Sources, Support, and Authority**

Early on in our research relationship, when I asked my co-researchers what they thought made college-level academic writing distinct from other types of writing, nearly all of them included source use as a primary factor. In college, they told me, student writers have to provide and cite published perspectives to support their own points. At first, it felt like they were internalizing the simplified “sources = support” equation promoted by textbooks and other pedagogical discourse, but as I talked with them more, it became clear that they had many

questions about this representation and that they were pushing at the boundaries that distinguished them from the “authority” of published scholarly sources.

Ali: “I will put you in your place.”

Since Ali takes classes in a variety of departments, including Latino/a Studies, Spanish, Political Science, Sociology (her original major), Comparative and World Literatures, and Education, she has become aware of a large amount of variation in the way different teachers and disciplines view students’ use of documented source material. A number of Ali’s classes have asked her to rely primarily on her sources for the points she makes in her writing, as she described in an interview conversation about one of her comparative literature classes:

I had to do a term paper on...how Morocco invaded Spain, and like the effect that it had on Spain...My teacher really liked that paper, I was so proud of that paper, cause it was like ten pages, and I was really happy because like, what’s the rule of thumb, I read it somewhere that like your paper should be a certain percentage of your words and a higher percent is like quoted material, and that’s what the teacher wanted, so I did that, just like quotes, quotes, quotes, quotes, quotes...I remember that’s what she wanted, and like I wrote it for like that purpose, to get a really good grade on it, and I did! I was really excited about that. ‘Cause, I don’t know, but it wasn’t that difficult because it wasn’t my opinion, it was just stating facts...It was a research paper, so I didn’t really have a lot to say on the topic other than this is what happened, it led to this, this is what happened, and this happened as well.

As Ali reviewed the cultural influences of Morocco on Spain, she found herself needing to use a great deal of source material and “not a lot of my voice”; as she said to me, “I mean, what would I really say? It wasn’t like I was there when it was all happening.”

I find it especially interesting in Ali’s description that she evokes a “rule of thumb” in which students’ papers should have a higher proportion of quotes than their own words. Frequently, handbooks and similar materials will tell students not to “overuse” quotes. *The St. Martin’s Handbook*, for example, says, “Although quotations can add interest and authenticity to an essay, be careful not to overuse them: your research paper is primarily your own work, meant to showcase your ideas and your argument” (Lunsford 271). It may be difficult for many students, though, to reconcile this advice, or any advice that encourages them to see research papers as “your own work,” with a constant emphasis on the need for support from published sources. This is especially true in cases like the one Ali describes, in which she was rewarded for what some handbooks might call “overuse” of sources.

Ali’s Latino studies course the following semester, on the other hand, had very little in the way of formal source use requirements. “It’s more give your opinion of this,” she said, “or why did this happen, or how do you think this could change?” The teacher seemed to actively discourage source use, as Ali explained in an interview:

**Ali:** On the page she’ll give us for our essay it’ll say...you’re only allowed to use like a quote, like *one*, from like the entire theoretical (piece) we read...You’re only allowed to paraphrase twice. It’s supposed to be very limited...what you say is what should really be the voice.

**Sam:** Okay, so you have to really pick well [*laughter*] what quotes and paraphrases you do use

**Ali:** Yeah, and it's like if you want to use one, you can only have one, so you have to like really pick and choose, and really...make sure it defines your point too.

Because of the limited focus on print sources, Ali came to prefer her writing for the Latino/a Studies classes, perceiving it as giving her an opportunity to make an original contribution. She explained:

**Ali:** Latino Studies is actually the only class I really enjoy writing for, because like it really like, it's different in the way that it's like presented. (You can think things over), and like there are a lot of resources on it, but not as much as political science. There's a lot of like thought still happening.

**Sam:** So you can still think of things for yourself, like not everything has been said already?

**Ali:** Right, so, it's really good. We always have like class discussions on like different topics.

Ali's statement that Latino/a Studies has "a lot of thought still happening" is a very perceptive one, reflecting the field's relative youth compared to many other areas of study. This factor, combined with the tendency of teachers in this department to promote student thinking and expression over quotation from sources, meant that Ali felt very comfortable voicing her own views in her writing for Latino/a Studies.

On Ali's papers, her teachers' comments about source use were consistent with the impressions of their priorities that she got from class discussions and assignment sheets. Her comparative literature teacher's comments tended to be text-focused, looking for Ali to justify her arguments with concrete examples from the readings. In a reading response to a St.

Augustine text, Ali wrote, “In his confessions we see how fond St. Augustine is of the idea of being close to the Lord,” and her teacher wrote beside it, “Where? Examples from text?” We discussed similarly text-focused comments across other reading responses and essays from this class, such as “What do you base this on?” and “Is this really a central event/concern?” Comments on Ali’s Latino/a Studies essays and responses, on the other hand, tended to be focused more on Ali’s perspectives, as did the essays themselves. In a reflection on cultural attitudes toward Mexican immigrants, for instance, Ali wrote without any cited sources and frequently marked the points as her own perspectives with phrases like “In my mind” and “I believe.” After writing that “the phrase [“Mexican Immigrant”] makes me think of men and women wearing very tattered clothing escaping some type of injustice...[they] do not have a lot of money and they are escaping a world where they cannot make better of themselves,” she grounded her assertion in her own family’s experiences:

My grandparents were Mexican Immigrants and as a child I have heard of many stories regarding why they left Mexico and the circumstances they were under before they left...Mexico is a difficult country to reside in and I heard very sad stories...of my grandparents not having any money and living in poverty and that is why they decided to...find a better life for themselves.

Throughout the paper, Ali’s teacher underlined key words in her text, including *tattered*, *injustice*, *circumstances*, *sad*, *money*, and *poverty*. Given the words underlined and the lack of any other comments about them, the underlining seemed to be the teacher’s strategy for aiding reading and showing attention to Ali’s perspectives. At the end of the paper, the teacher wrote an end comment thanking her for “sharing” her “personal experiences and observations.”

It is important to note here that Ali's reason for preferring the citation expectations in Latino/a studies to those in Western Cultures was not that she disliked citing or providing evidence, but that Ali believed personal experience to be a legitimate source and she perceived that her Latino/a Studies teachers shared her opinion. She did not equate the need for fewer print sources in her Latino/a Studies classes with a decreased need for informed argument. In these courses, Ali perceived that students were encouraged to develop their own opinions first, but then to find research or real-life examples that support those opinions. (Drawing on Merton's words, discussed in Chapter 3, we might say that students were "stocked with their own ideas," and those simply "[took] on a new validity" from the sources they found [30].) Opinions that were not based in some sort of factual support, therefore, received little credit from Ali's teacher—or from Ali herself, as she described to me when discussing her research for a writing assignment about whether undocumented workers should receive health care:

Part of it [the assignment] was like "Do you believe this should happen?"...and asked what my opinion was on the topic, and the rest of it was like supporting that opinion that I had with the articles that we found...People talk about it all the time, it's such a big topic, like controversial, yes and no, well, it'd have to be "yes" [do give undocumented workers health care]...Because really when you look at the stuff, "no" just doesn't have anything at all...We had to look it up and like I found like a website and it was just bashing, and I was like, you guys are stupid...this should not exist!...It's just like, be informed on a topic. If you're going to really like fight it, inform yourself on it because like if I hear you say something about it and I'm informed about it, I will, I'll put you in your place. I'll be like nope, that's not it.

Here, Ali was clearly taking a position of authority on the issue of health care for undocumented workers, and she felt justified in critiquing others whose arguments were less informed than hers.

Despite being a sophomore fresh out of basic first-year writing at the time of this Latino/a studies class and interview, Ali was already far beyond the role that first-year writing texts and other pedagogical representations would typically allow her. Ali was not simply finding experts to “back up” her perspectives; she was claiming expertise from her own experience, and she was critiquing others who had neither the personal expertise nor the expert support to legitimate their opinions. Her example here significantly complicates the very common representation that students “need” published sources to support them. On the contrary, Ali believed that her Latino/a Studies classes encouraged her to do original thinking, as in the case of one teacher she described:

Basically like her mindset is trying to get us to form opinions on different matters, that’s what she’s really trying to promote, like not “read this and this is what you should feel.” ... You really have to form an opinion, but she’s giving us the tools to do so, and she’s like helping us, like “Let’s do this,” and it makes it better...she’s like kind of holding your hand but she’s like giving you that space.

Observing the contrast between her description of her source-heavy comparative literature paper in which there was “not a lot of my voice” and that of her Latino/a studies work in which contributed to the “lot of thought still happening,” I would contend that Ali’s relationship to knowledge became more empowered when she was permitted to interact with sources in the complex manner of published academics rather than the simplified “use sources to...support your argument” (Hacker and Sommers 494) manner promoted by many handbooks and teachers.

Areia: "I'm just as smart as them."

Like Ali, Areia has found published sources to be a significant part of college writing, and one of their most prominent roles has been in validating her own ideas. Areia describes having views she held in the past confirmed by published scholars as an especially rewarding facet of her college experience; she very much enjoys using sources in ways that can connect her thoughts to their thoughts. As she explained in an interview, "I like explaining other people's ideas and connecting with my ideas...like the smart professors...my ideas can link to their ideas...That's cool, like finding that out, that was a good discovery." This discovery first happened when we began reading about issues of language ideology and discrimination in our Summer Bridge Composition class:

**Areia:** We were reading that stuff and we were talking about language and stuff that I just used to have thoughts about but never used to discuss with anybody, because...I couldn't find the words to really...give them a clear meaning of what I was talking about, so I just never talked about it because I couldn't really find like you know vocabulary, and I couldn't give them really a good description about it. And then I came to Bridge...and I was reading and I was like, Oh my God, like this is so cool, like I already knew this!...It was really good like to know that like I'm just as smart as those people...that write, the authorities, I'm just as smart as them...

**Sam:** You're like, I'm one of these scholars now! [*laughter*]

**Areia:** Yeah, it was so cool discovering that!...Like I knew...what I was thinking, it had to be true because there's just so much evidence, but nobody never knew



what I was thinking, I never told anybody because I couldn't find the words I wanted to say to say it!

Through her exploration of published scholarship, Areia found validation and a vocabulary for ideas that she had previously struggled to express and understand. Prior to college, she told me, "I always thought I was a Martian or something...[because] I always like had a different mindset than everybody else...and when I came here, I'm like, these people have the same ideas I do!" Areia came out of Bridge and into her first-year writing class, then, well prepared to continue seeing many of her own views echoed in the readings and to let those readings both legitimate her views and expand the depth of her thinking.

In Areia's first semester, her first-year writing teacher assigned the students to read Nancy Sommers' "Between the Drafts."<sup>1</sup> Areia chose to spend nearly half of one of our interviews talking with me about this article, since she saw Sommers expressing many of the beliefs that she herself holds about writing. Because Areia believes herself to be "just as smart" as published academics, she is frustrated when she is not granted the sort of authority that they are. Sommers' views on authority in writing, specifically on how student writers are rarely given authority on their own, resonated with Areia's own opinions. As she described Sommers' argument to me, "She wants it to be as if you are your own support, you're your own authority, and your experiences is just as good as theirs." Areia continued to tell me about Sommers, beginning to weave the text together with her own views about how academic writing expectations take away students' individual authority:

Authority just undermines...It takes away from the individual writing, not skills but like ideas, individual ideas...If you're elaborating on someone else's ideas, it's like you have your own ideas, but...you have to compare your idea with theirs

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<sup>1</sup> The class was using the Bedford/St. Martin's reader *Composing Knowledge* (Norgaard).

or support your idea with theirs in order to get full credit, or just (seem) like you know what you're talking about.

As we talked, Areia opened up the class's reader and pointed me to some of her favorite statements in Sommers' article. First, she showed me,

Successive drafts of my own talk did not lead to a clearer vision because it simply was not my vision. I, like so many of my students, was reproducing acceptable truths, imitating the gestures and rituals of the academy, not having confidence enough in my own ideas, nor trusting the native language I had learned. I had surrendered my own authority to someone else, to those other authorial voices.

(Sommers, "Between the Drafts" 135)

And then she pointed me to another excerpt: "Our students are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with authorial intent. Given the opportunity to speak their own authority as writers, given a turn in the conversation, students can claim their stories as primary source material and transform their experiences into evidence" (Sommers, "Between the Drafts" 137). As we reflected on these passages, Areia discussed her own impressions of revision, at least revision for a grade in a class, as frequently undermining individual students' intent: "I don't like when you revise...[and it] takes away from your main points, from your main arguments...I like revision, but it's (nice if) I don't have to change my ideas around and then they, I don't forget my ideas but it's not exactly what I wanted to say."

Areia mentioned that her first essay assignment for the writing class would need to be revised because it had not followed the instructor's guidelines. As Areia explained, "it was like mainly expository when it was supposed to be a narrative...I have to do like the whole essay

over.” Areia had liked her original version, and was disappointed that she would need to change it:

The teacher wants me to do what the assignment is saying, and...I mean of course I’m gonna do it because I want the grade, but it’s kind of hard to like get my point across and meet the teacher’s expectations...Sommers was saying that too...it’s like you’re being someone else in that paper, like you’re doing it just because, for the grade, or for the paper...My ideas were really direct, and like when I change the essay...it’s going to mess up my whole idea, but I’ll do it to get the better grade, I have to revise to get the grade or whatever...Oh my god, I started on, I started to revise it and I have to just—I’ll do it later.

As Areia was struggling to get past the stress of reworking an entire essay, she was most troubled by the thought of having to alter ideas that she was proud of. “I just don’t want to change it,” she explained, laughing. “But I have a copy, so I’m going to keep it.”

I could certainly see why Areia was drawn to “Between the Drafts.” Having previously struggled to have confidence in her own ideas and being excited and reassured when she saw her experiences and opinions supported in published writing, she knew how important it was for students to feel like they had authority. Also, having just experienced a requirement for revision that made her feel like she had to defer to the authority of others at the expense of her own, Areia was pleased to see in Sommers’ article some validation of her own feelings about the experience. As Sommers describes, Areia felt pressured to “surrender [her] own authority to someone else” in the process of revision (“Between the Drafts” 135), and this bothered her deeply because she was not an “empty [vessel] waiting to be filled with authorial intent” (“Between the Drafts” 137) but someone with a strong sense of the ideas she wanted to communicate.

Later that semester, Areia encountered another situation in which ideas she had previously been considering appeared in a course reading. In the second and third essays she wrote for that class, she made use of a favorite term, “oppressor,” in talking about issues of race and language. Her synthesis essay on the topic of “What Is the University?” argued, as Areia described in an interview, that “the university is a place that is...built for certain people to prosper and certain people to fail...an institution where people are...built to be successful in life but not their own way.” At one point in her essay, then, she stated that the university is a “place that is designed for the oppressors and only the oppressors to succeed.” In the next essay, a rhetorical analysis of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, Areia asserted that King’s use of Standard English was a savvy rhetorical decision based on his knowledge of his audience. She wrote:

Being that Standard English was and still is the language of the majority for him to speak it so well and fluently helped his argument a great deal...He understood that he needed Standard English to reach the oppressors and gain their full respect and attention.

Next to Areia’s use of “oppressor” in both of these essays, her instructor suggested that she should give credit for that term to bell hooks, whose essay “Teaching New Worlds/New Words” had been a recent assigned reading for the class (Norgaard). The instructor referred to “oppressor” as “hooks’ language” and “her terminology.”

Areia had indeed read the assigned bell hooks reading before writing these essays, and she had quoted “Teaching New Worlds/New Words” elsewhere in the “What Is the University?” essay. Why, though, would this be the only place Areia might have encountered the word “oppressor” or come to find it useful? Although she cannot remember where she first heard the

term, I know that she was already using it in class discussion during Summer Bridge—possibly inspired by our readings from Geneva Smitherman’s *Talkin That Talk*, possibly not. Smitherman also talks about Standard English as the oppressor’s language, and our class spent quite a bit of time talking about power and oppression in language ideology.

I was also troubled by the idea of “oppressor” as belonging to hooks because, when Areia and I revisited “Teaching New Worlds/New Words,” we saw that hooks is in fact not even claiming the term for herself. She cites Adrienne Rich’s poem “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children,” which contains the line “This is the oppressor’s language yet I need it to talk to you.” That line, and the phrase “oppressor’s language,” often shows up in quotes in hooks’ essay. Chains of language like this one, in which Areia’s use of “oppressor” can be traced back to multiple sources, each of which can then be traced back to other sources, are the norm for not just academic language but all language. As Bakhtin describes it,

The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions; it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own. (*Dialogic* 293-294)

Since all language and writing is dialogic, with all words carrying a history of prior uses and anticipating a future of many more, we cannot credit a single word to one person any more than we can credit it to the dictionary (see also Prior, *Writing/Disciplinarity*; Scollon; Wertsch). In

these examples with “oppressor,” Areia had attempted to “take the word, and make it [her] own,” but she was challenged on her appropriation.

In her final draft of the Martin Luther King analysis, Areia simply added a parenthetical citation to the end of her sentence, so that it read “He understood that he needed Standard English to reach the oppressors and gain their full respect and attention (Hooks).” Regardless of where she had actually gotten the term, she acquiesced to the teacher’s authority and gave the attribution requested, to “get the grade,” as she described it, or “reproduc[e] acceptable truths,” in Sommers’ words (“Between the Drafts” 135).

The idea that “oppressor” could be any single person’s terminology does not seem well grounded, but Areia’s instructor still reacted to her use of the word in two different papers by asking her to credit it to a published academic recently assigned in the class. I would argue that there are two issues at work here, both of which are systematic problems and far from unique to this individual teacher. On one level, this is another example of a case where pedagogy has yet to catch up with scholarship, since scholarship on the dialogic complexity of language has long belied the possibility of a word coming from a single source and encouraged us to see all language use as an appropriation to some degree (Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Dialogic*; Prior, “Literate Activity” and *Writing/Disciplinarity*; Wertsch). At the same time, two pedagogical expectations that thoroughly defy this theory continue to persist: 1) that students should cite a source for everything they claim, an idea evidenced by unequivocal textbook statements like “You must document anything you learn from a source. This includes ideas as well as specific language” (Troyka and Hesse 573); and 2) that any language not in quotes should be entirely students’ “own” (The *Little, Brown Handbook*, for example, urges students to “be wary of any expression you have heard or used before” [Fowler and Aaron 522]).

Also, though, it is an example of the limiting effects of circulating representations of student writers. Because, as Helmers, Sommers, and others have argued, teachers often view students in terms of what they lack, as “empty vessels waiting to be filled with authorial intent” (Sommers, “Between the Drafts” 137), it remains difficult to push back against those representations to the point that teachers can credit students with the knowledge that they already have when they arrive in our classes. Because textbooks tell students and teachers that students need to find published sources to give them authority, we have trouble acknowledging that students can have more complex relationships to sources, such as that described by Merton (in Chapter 3) in which a source reaffirms, rather than provides, the authority.

Rob: “Hey, I learned this.”

When Rob came into my research his first year in college, he felt strongly about the importance of citing sources. He told me that his high school classes never encouraged him to cite sources until senior year; before that, students wrote mostly their own opinions and experiences. In senior year, Rob said, they were taught citation and told “in college, this is how you’re going to write.” Before senior year, teachers rarely talked about college. Because he and his peers were taught citation so late, Rob felt disadvantaged in his college writing, where he definitely saw citation being a crucial issue. Students he knew who got good grades on their essays cited experts regularly: “Now that I read students’ papers that come here or that came here, they use a lot of [cited sources], and that’s what like helped them pass all their courses and all that, so I figured that’s what I gotta do.” He reported that his first-semester writing teacher also stressed citation with him a great deal, and he came to understand that using sources was one of the primary criteria for a good grade on a paper:

It's like she expects you to use citations, you know like you gotta use it or else you aren't going to get that much of a good grade...If she doesn't see a little bit of citation in there or like quotes that you're using with the author's name, she'll mark you down for it.

Indeed, on his first essay for this teacher, he received a low grade, which he told me was primarily because he had "completely ignored the whole cite thing." He took this as a learning experience and told himself, "Okay, you gotta do what you gotta do, just learn to follow the directions...stick to the cites."

He took this lesson with him to other classes, too, even if the teacher did not expressly stress citation. In his first cinema studies class, Rob explained, he did not get a sense of the same strict expectations his first year writing teacher had, but he still thought that they might exist, especially in terms of citation:

He's like an easy type of guy, he's really relaxed in class, you know, he just laughs with us. But I know, like knowing that he's a teacher, he's still going to want to see some citations and all that sort of thing, so I might as well just dish it out and, you know, I'd rather be safe than sorry.

Although Rob perceived the teacher to be more relaxed about formal essay requirements, then, he had come to assume that the requirement for citation would be there regardless. He followed that unstated requirement, preferring to be "safe."

Toward the end of his first year, though, Rob was beginning to question the expectation that he should rely on sources. (This doubt tied closely to his evolving skepticism toward the idea that he should leave his personal style out of his academic writing, which I will discuss in



the next section.) That second semester, his first-year writing teacher distributed an article to students with a rather bleak perspective on undergraduate research papers, as Rob described:

It was...just talking about your research paper, and one quote said like now, what you're writing has already been said, you know, like there's nothing new to your research paper. And I got to thinking, like, so why bother even writing a research paper if there's like, what, a different way that you can reorganize information? Or like what the hell is supposed to be different about it? Like I'm thinking, personal opinion! But then again you can't do that anymore, so what, you know, go use your sources then? Like what is so different about every research paper when you're just saying the same crap?

Rob was growing more and more frustrated with his impression that, although his sources were permitted to express opinions, he was not. "There's no opinion from you," he said; "you're just basically taking somebody else's and just reorganizing it."

When Rob joined my advanced composition class the following year, he began to formulate an even stronger critique of how students are taught to work with sources. The critique had two main elements. First, college students are forced to rely on published sources to make points, which he saw as stifling to the students. Second, if this reliance is required for success in college writing, then students from less privileged high school backgrounds, who may not have been instructed in citation or encouraged to seek sources beyond their own experience, are at a serious disadvantage. This was his sense from his own background; as he described in an interview toward the end of his sophomore year, "High school was like...write what you know, write what you like...I didn't hear a lot of terms until I got here." When he first was assigned an annotated bibliography in college, he "didn't know what the hell this was." He felt like his high

school's attitude of encouraging students through a message of "I want to hear what *you* have to say" left them unprepared for the emphasis on source use in college:

Be honest, when you go to college, it ain't going to be about you, it's going to be about information, cause that's all you'll ever be, just you know you'll be the giver of information and you'll find it and give it out... You have nothing to do with the subject, you're just a guy who went to the library and found an article and said "Hey, check this out." That's it.

Like Areia (and like Sommers), Rob was deeply troubled by the idea that students are often assumed to come to college with nothing to offer, and thus are expected to get their information and authority from published scholarship. He did not think it was fair for some students to come into college unprepared for the emphasis on sources, but more than that, the emphasis on sources was itself unfair to students.

In "Building a Mystery," Davis and Shadle outline a key problem with the student research paper genre:

We would like to believe that research writing teaches valuable skills and encourages students to commit to the academic ideals of inquiry and evidential reasoning. However, it may be as often the case that the research paper assignment teaches students little more than the act of producing, as effortlessly as possible, a drab discourse, vacant of originality or commitment. (419)

This observation falls well in line with Rob's perception of the issue, but it fails to note that students often already share the ideals of inquiry and originality that teachers and scholars are hoping to teach them. Students like Rob may come into college already valuing learning and wanting to learn more, but the requirement to reproduce source material without personal

commentary is, as Rob says, “kind of unfair”: “You rob them of what they can learn...Like hey, I learned this, what I think about this is...and even if they’re right or wrong, they still have an idea.”

Rob’s perspectives on research writing raise a question that several other co-researchers raised as well, and not just in relation to sources: Why are student efforts to make original contributions so often stifled?

While we were discussing source use, Ali expressed surprise at her impression that some teachers want students only to relay others’ views. Like the above Western Cultures example, Ali also felt that her Art History class encouraged students to repeat others’ perspectives—in this case, those the professor outlined in lecture:

**Ali:** That class is a lot of like reading, and writing about what we feel about—well not really what we feel, actually, it’s more like what we’re supposed to feel, like what he’s taught us we should be feeling or what certain things should be representing to us.

**Sam:** So is a lot of what you write...out of like lecture and things?

**Ali:** We just took our midterm and...it was all like what we read about in class...One [question] was like, he gave us three pictures that Diego Rivera had painted, and we had to talk about like what they represented, and what’s the difference between the pictures. [*shrugs slowly*]

**Sam:** Don’t know?

**Ali:** It’s like, uhhh [*laughs*], I was like, I thought art spoke to us in many different forms. I guess not.

Ali was surprised that her teacher had required a correct answer about what a painting represented, rather than encouraging the view that “art [speaks] to us in many different forms.” Beyond this, she was also confused more generally about why teachers would do things that she viewed as discouraging originality. She explained,

I would have assumed that like teachers would want to hear the voice of the student as opposed—‘cause that just has to seem really boring, in my opinion, if like all the papers have to be structured (in a way), and they’re all writing about the same thing, like I wouldn’t be happy if I was the teacher! I would be like [*drawing letters in the air*] A, B, like start picking letters out of the alphabet and like giving it to them because it all seems very uniform...I mean I guess it [heavy reliance on sources] promotes a different style of writing, and I understand that, but every paper that you write? No.

Ali’s point of view here was echoed by Hannah—“They want you to write what they want to hear, which I don’t know grading how that’s possible because I would get sick of all the repetitiveness, like okay, I’ve read this 20 times now”—and by Rob—“It must be hell for you guys...I’m pretty sure you’ve got to get like the same paper, you know, ‘It’s just the same blabber that I get every time’...How can the students stand out from all this, you know, just plainness?”

As I am regularly reminded by reading Jennie Nelson’s “Reading Classrooms as Text” alongside my students, overly directive writing assignments tend to encourage students to conform to a formula for a grade instead of going through the thorough inquiry and critical thinking that teachers often say they hope to see in students’ writing. Just as writing handbooks undermine themselves by sending contradictory messages, then, writing teachers frequently

undermine their goals by giving assignments and feedback that ask students to focus their attention on eliminating passive voice and finding a source to back up every point they make, at the same time as they ask them to care about their topics and create original arguments.

## **Personal and Academic Identities**

As I imagine is already clear, my co-researchers often find themselves in the position of resisting, either overtly in their writing or covertly in their thoughts and spoken comments, their instructors' priorities. They often prefer to give priority to expressing individual ideas and original arguments. They also resist the implication that certain linguistic forms or discursive practices, particularly those that they find effective in published writing and in many contexts in their own lives, are inappropriate in their academic writing.

Implicit in many instructors' judgments about "appropriateness," like those of many textbooks, are standard language ideologies that grant elite status to certain forms and marginalized status to others. There is often an expectation that students will *codeswitch* when writing in academic contexts, avoiding language perceived as nonstandardized, informal, or their "own" or "home" language. Recall the definition from Wheeler and Swords in Chapter 1 of codeswitching as "choos[ing] the language variety *appropriate* to the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose" (471; emphasis in original). Whether or not teachers use this term to describe what they are promoting (and, as I will touch on in the next chapter, many linguists would argue that this definition is actually a misuse of the term), this opposition between *home* and *school*, *personal* and *academic*, *informal* and *formal* is strong and persistent.

Vershawn Young, pulling from Keith Gilyard, argues that promoting the ideologies of codeswitching is unacceptable because of what Gilyard terms "enforced educational

schizophrenia,” in which, as Young describes, “black students are forced to see themselves as embodying two different racial, linguistic, and cultural identities” (Young, “Your Average” 705).<sup>2</sup> Young argues that this schizophrenia leads to a feeling that one must change not only language varieties but self-perceptions and cultural identities in order to successfully codeswitch. As the experiences of my co-researchers in this section will illustrate, they feel the tie between language and identity strongly. Subsequently, disapproval of their language often reads as indexing disapproval of their identities.

Formality and informality: “I always put a voice into my writing” (Rob)

Rob’s biggest struggle in his academic writing has been to maintain what he considers to be an authentic style. This was a particular concern during his second semester first-year writing class, in which he felt that his writing style was “going to die for sure” because his instructor frequently crossed out large portions of his draft and told him that his choices of tone, structure, or wording were too informal to be appropriate for academic essays.

The first essay assignment for that class was to make an argument responding to articles the students read about PowerPoint software’s negative effects on student learning. Within his first draft, Rob included this paragraph:

Now I read these articles and I would have to agree with most of them, but then I find myself being a hypocrite, because as a University of Illinois students, I have also tilted my head towards the sky to see a screen that has PowerPoint slides with information that is highlighted and an atmosphere that gives me the feeling that this is an ad for a monster truck rally, “SUNDAY! SUNDAY!!SUNDAY!!!” I try not to put myself down about it because if I go against PowerPoint in the position

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<sup>2</sup> Gilyard and Young draw here from W. E. B. DuBois’ concept of “double-consciousness,” which DuBois described as the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” without any “true self-consciousness” (chap. 1 para. 3).

I'm in, I get bad grades so I just to think of the positive things that come out of PowerPoint, it easier to take notes, helps out on memory, where else are you going to see a ten foot Pangaea for Geology class. Hypocrite or not, the articles present strong arguments and facts about the terrible uses for PowerPoint and the lack of face to face time you have with others.

Rob showed me that when his instructor read this first draft, he literally x-ed out nearly every paragraph in it, leaving only one full paragraph and parts of another intact. The above paragraph is the only one in which nothing was crossed out, yet the instructor did flag it as being “more like an informal response than an academic paper.”

When I read the paragraph during one of our interviews, I laughed aloud at the “SUNDAY! SUNDAY!! SUNDAY!!!” analogy, which prompted Rob to tell me about his instructor's initial reaction in their face-to-face tutorial discussion of the rough draft: “He did the same thing. Laughed. Loved it....As soon as he read that Sunday Sunday he died, cracked up...[said] ‘I like that analogy.’” In the final draft, Rob did a lot of restructuring, including eliminating or moving much of the content from the above paragraph (and losing the “Where else are you going to see a ten foot Pangaea?” question that I rather enjoyed). However, he kept the reference to monster truck rallies, in part because he recalled that his instructor had praised the analogy. When I asked Rob how the analogy turned out in his final draft, he showed me where it had ended up (in the middle of the last body paragraph) and how his instructor had responded in grading the final draft:

**Rob:** I have that same quote, you know, “Sunday, Sunday, Sunday!” in my final draft, he liked it, he didn't say anything about taking it off...

**Sam:** So what happened in the final draft?

**Rob:** See, see, um, where is it [*flipping pages*]...says it all out, I thought in office hours— [*pushes paper over to me*]

**Sam:** [*reading*] We agreed in tutorial to get rid of this.

**Rob:** We did not agree on anything! You laughed. That was it.

**Sam:** Yeah, cause he says here [in the first draft], it's more like an informal response than an academic paper, but he doesn't really say what about it, huh.

Rob was surprised to see his instructor's reaction to his use of the analogy in the final draft, given that he had interpreted the instructor's reaction to it as a positive one. Having not been in the tutorial, I of course cannot verify whether Rob was told to remove the monster truck analogy. However, given that Rob had a general impression of the instructor as someone who tended to be more critical in his written comments than he was in person,<sup>3</sup> it seems possible that the instructor intended for Rob to read the marginal comment "more like an informal response than an academic paper" as indicating a problem that he needed to fix or delete. Rob, on the other hand, used different criteria—his instructor's laughter—to determine that in fact the paragraph was an especially good one.

The previous summer, when I had Rob as a student, I did not try to talk him out of writing in a more informal style; what I did do was tell him to be careful in thinking about the

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<sup>3</sup> This was another part of our PowerPoint essay discussion:

**Rob:** Like man, I'm so damn great at making analogies but I suck at writing.

**Sam:** [*laughing*] Well, that's good! I mean at least enjoy the praise when you get it.

**Rob:** This, it's like a short praise, though

**Sam:** Yeah, and then a big X. [*laughs*] Good job here! Mehhe [*buzzer sound*]

**Rob:** ...Like he just looked at my recent one and like...“Oh, okay, this is good, this is good.” I'm like yes! All right! “Okay, here you go” [*mimes handing back graded essay*] You know, X [*laughter*]

**Sam:** Not so much. So, I know one thing that I notice sometimes is like teachers present different faces face-to-face versus like in their comments, like sometimes one is a lot more friendly than another.

**Rob:** Mm-hmm, oh yeah, it's like the song, “Smiling faces tell lies,” you know they don't always tell the truth...so you do got to be careful sometimes...they may be smiling, but they're a mad man when it comes to grading stuff.



effect that he wanted to have on his reader, since ideally his writing should make a reader laugh or become angry only if that was his intention.<sup>4</sup> I brought this back up during our conversation:

**Sam:** We talked a lot over the summer about things having, like, having the desired effect on your audience. If you want to crack ‘em up, if you want to piss ‘em off, whatever...

**Rob:** I’m saying, that’s what I want to do, though! ...and I did, I made you laugh, but no!

By Rob’s and my earlier criteria, then, this had been a very effective piece of writing: Rob wanted his reader to identify with and be amused by his point, and the instructor’s laughter and approving comment—“I like that analogy”—showed Rob that he had succeeded. What Rob had not understood from the instructor’s written comment, though, was that his goals were not in line with the instructor’s goals for the assignment. In his end comment on the final draft, the instructor wrote that the essay was “still too concerned with entertaining, rather than offering a clear position on the topic.”

As the discussion of Rob in Chapter 1 illustrated, he values entertainment as a goal for writing. He also does not see entertaining and informing as mutually exclusive; writing he admires tends to make a solid point while also being entertaining enough to hold an audience’s attention. To him, a large part of that entertainment is inviting the reader to identify with the writing, like he saw Naomi Klein doing in an assigned reading excerpted from *No Logo*. In another of his essays, Rob had quoted a part of this reading that he admired: “For a long time one major unbranded youth frontier remained: a place where young people gathered, talked, sneaked

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<sup>4</sup> In one instance, Rob was being somewhat accusatory toward his reader, stating that “you” make many negative assumptions about people who talk certain ways. I told him that, since I didn’t make such assumptions, I felt somewhat insulted to be addressed that way by his text. I told him insulting his reader could legitimately be his purpose at times, but I didn’t get the impression that it was in that particular case, and he agreed.

smokes, made out, formed opinions and, most maddeningly of all, stood around looking cool for hours on end. That place is called school” (Klein 87). When Rob showed me this quote in his essay, we talked about why he liked it:

**Sam:** So she’s talking about this place where they hadn’t branded yet, but young people did all this stuff, they stood around and looked cool.

**Rob:** Yeah, I mean, I’m like yeah, I did that...like all right, you know, I like this, okay!...It connects to me, you know, I like that.

The monster truck rally analogy, then, served a similar purpose in that it was an image that was both funny and familiar; Rob felt that readers would identify with it, and his instructor’s initial reaction reinforced that feeling for him.

In the final paper he later wrote for my advanced composition course, Rob elaborated on his desire to connect with an audience:

I write my papers for everyone, not a certain type of audience; I always put a voice into my writing, it is never a drone of repeated information that has been overused by other students...I try to make it seem interesting by using the voice that is in the paper and make it seem as if the paper is talking to you as a person.

Rob’s writing, then, blurs a common representation of the boundaries between the academic and the personal, since he endeavors to make academic points in a personal tone. Because of this, he was especially disappointed by what he perceived as his instructor’s efforts to depersonalize his writing. In one interview, Rob summed up the message he was getting as “Get rid of these I’s.” I asked him to explain:

**Sam:** “Get rid of these I’s”?

**Rob:** Yeah...that's hard to just write a paper and stay on the subject but not try to mention like your own personal thoughts...'cause I remember he told me just get rid of the I's, just try not to make it as narrative...

**Sam:** Uh-huh. It's interesting, teachers have very different attitudes toward *I*.

**Rob:** From here I could tell that...like you need to start getting rid of the *I* 'cause you know like later on like it's not gonna be as narrative as you think, it's just going to be straight like formal writing... It seems like I've just got to cut all that off...and just make it more informational. I've got to become an encyclopedia in order to get my word out, you know?

**Sam:** That's frustrating.

**Rob:** It is!...I think one of the obvious reasons of like being in college is just being yourself, you know being unique, I mean hell, that's what got me through like [high] school, you know, just being unique and being myself, and now—

**Sam:** Now you feel like they're—

**Rob:** Yeah, I'm saying it doesn't cut it here.

Since Rob saw the use of “I” and other informal elements as being indicators of his uniqueness and personality, he struggled to see how he could remain present in his writing without them.

At the time, Rob's emotions about these issues tended toward frustration and defeat. He saw his instructor's prohibitions against using the first person and creating entertaining, casual prose as indicative of his future in college and as something he might never overcome:

**Rob:** I don't know, it's just like demanding so much when you can do so little about it. Or you just try to do as best you can and yet, eh, it ain't going to do nothing for you.

**Sam:** So you feel kind of like your efforts aren't getting acknowledged?

**Rob:** Yeah, like I'm trying, like oh dear God am I trying, I just want to have—  
like, awww, “Ain't good enough for us.”

This idea of not being good enough or being rejected came up several times in our conversation around this paper. Having his writing crossed out, he said, was particularly discouraging:

They just gotta, aaaagh [*makes big x-ing motion with hand in air*], you know,  
pretty much just tear out your heart, saying like you suck as a writer, just ugh, fix  
that!...I mean like it would bring anybody down, to see that much writing that  
you did, and just ugh, pulled out, like “Nope!”

To Rob, then, these responses became more than attacks on his style and on his desire to put himself into his writing; they told him that his writing, even when he made a strong effort, was typically worthy only of deletion and suggested that not just his writing but also Rob himself was being “crossed out” of the community of university writers.

As I have mentioned in previous chapters, Rob grew to resist this deletion, deciding instead to write according to his own priorities. Once he was finished with first-year writing, his feelings of defeat turned into more of a proactive anger, which he channeled into his project for my advanced composition class. His final essay draws on complex published scholarship (including an article from the *Journal of Pragmatics* [Baratta] that we had to spend an hour parsing because I didn't understand it myself) and interviews with other students, and the essay enacts Rob's refusal to separate the academic from the personal by interweaving this more traditionally “scholarly” content with manifesto-like personal arguments. Here are some of my favorite excerpts from the latter:

I had my moments of drowning in a flood of the college banter of “how to improve on this” and the jargon...that teachers use on me as they cross out many papers of mine...I stood there silent nodding my head to their advice well I say no more to that and I know that it is only writing and a paper in a college level writing course but as the red markers did their job, my words screamed as they were marked off, telling me to shut that voice down and forget it. No more to that...out of spite for those who close our mouths with the reasons why we need to change our ways for a grade!...That is the one hoop that has been lit for us expressive writer...but those writers who share my scars just walk around that hoop because we will not jump. I don’t care if I haven’t passed this hoop, I show my scars with pride, nothing is easy without fighting for it. Do I feel like I didn’t accomplished what I wanted without that hoop? Hell no, because as a writer I found where I needed to be and my style of writing to show the world, so if anything I have to thank myself for failing to jump through that hoop.

In his paper, Rob breaks quite a few of the “rules” for academic writing laid out by teachers and textbooks. (No complaints here, although I did draw his attention to a few usage problems and tried to encourage a few more periods and semicolons for readability’s sake.) At the same time, he makes a compelling argument about the damage done to student writers by arbitrary rules and obstacles, and vividly illustrates how important it can be for them to feel that they have authority over their own writing and language.

Expectations for codeswitching: “They don’t want to see my personality here” (Areia and Pierre)

In considering power structures surrounding writing and language expectations, it is important to acknowledge the dispersed nature of this power and its messages. Many of the

messages come from teachers and pedagogical materials, but they have also become so diffuse as to be part of students' general sense of the university and how they should behave there. As Areia showed in her "What Is the University?" essay that I introduced in Chapter 2, she perceives that higher education expects students, and particularly African American students, to change who they are in order to fit in in academia. In that essay, she wrote that the university

is a place where they teach you to act accordingly to the White Americans handbook....Most Universities are dominated by the dominant race...[and] the most valued and utilized language is Standard English. People want it to remain this way. They are afraid that if this changes then their rank and status in America will be reduced.

Areia has observed standardized language to be part of an array of cultural expectations in academia that she believes are tied to racial power structures. As we talked through her ideas in an interview, she noted,

The way society made it is that if you go to the university you're going to get the best jobs and you'll be successful...but people come here, and when like they get here, it's not what they thought it was. Or if they come here, and it's like going well and everything, they don't even know that they're changing, that they're being conformed to a different culture or a different way of life...they just, they're doing it because society makes it seem like they have to.

The assimilation Areia described in her essay and her discussion around it has been acknowledged by a number of scholars as an important concern for college composition pedagogy. Drawing from Berkenkotter and Huckin, Prendergast asserts that "within a given discipline or community there are discourses that are more dominant than others,

and...membership in a discipline or community is in some way contingent upon aligning one's voice with the dominant discourse" (49). This dominant discourse, for Areia, takes the form of the "White Americans handbook" that she sees universities as teaching from.

In Areia's own university experience, she has felt strong pressure—for instance, from the guidelines and corrections of her first-year writing teacher—to make her language conform to standardized English conventions. Significantly, though, she emphasized that some of the strongest pressure for linguistic assimilation has come from her friends. As Areia's friends have worked to make their speech and behavior conform to university expectations, they have expected her to do similarly:

**Areia:** I mean like my friends, like a couple of my friends they all...want to be more like you know the dominant race. They'll be like, "Why do you talk like that?" or "Stop talking like that," and they're just, I don't know, they're confused, they think they like should be like everybody else.

**Sam:** So are they from similar backgrounds to yours?

**Areia:** Yeah...I guess they've been taught that, well everybody has been taught that that's the way, you know, that's the way you have to be in order to make it or whatever....I'll be in a conversation and I'll you know be talking my Black English or my slang or you know young people talk and I'll curse sometimes, I curse a lot—

**Sam:** *[laughing, whispering]* Me too, it's okay

**Areia:** And they'll be like, you know, "Stop saying that" and "Talk right," and you know, why? Can you tell me who says so? Why do I have to do that? And

they just...don't know what to say to me, they just be like, they just shake their head...they can't give me an answer.

While Areia had come to expect linguistic directives like “talk right” from people affiliated with the university, she was surprised to hear them coming from her friends. To Areia, such friends exemplified the assimilation that she had observed, and perceived as expected, in the university environment. Her questioning—“Who says?”—is indicative of her efforts to resist this assimilation and to expose the ideologies behind it.

She gave me a specific example of a recent instance in which her paralanguage (such as loudness) and her gestures did not conform to her peers' internalized expectations for an academic environment:

**Areia:** Me and my friend got into an argument yesterday because we were on the bus or whatever, and it's this song called, um...it's a dumb song, basically, something about [*makes gunshot noises, pantomimes shooting*] um, “Paper Planes.”

**Sam:** Yeah, the M.I.A. song.

**Areia:** Right, I was singing it and I was like [*pantomimes shooting*] on the bus or whatever [*laughter*] and...my friend's like, [*whispers*] “Don't do that! Are you crazy?” I'm like, what did I do? “You're scaring them! You don't do that on the bus!” and all this stuff, and I'm like, what is wrong with you, like I didn't even do anything, I'm just being myself....She's just so into what people say about her... she wants to be like how society makes it, like speak standard English, and you know walk and talk standardly, and she thinks that's just what everybody should be like, and she's black too, like me, and...it just frustrates me sometimes because



she doesn't act like that at home, but when we're out in public she (does). I don't like the fact that you have to change like the way you are...I'm being myself, do I have to change just because we're here [at school] and we're in front of a bunch of white people or whatever, do I have to really change my identity, do I have to talk like them, and...it really made me mad because she just, "You don't act like that!" and "You're acting ghetto!" and who says I'm acting ghetto? Like where did that come from?

S: Yeah the label "ghetto" is really just a problem.

A: Yeah, exactly, and I'm like, who puts that label on us? Why am I, I'm being myself, how is that ghetto?

This example is interesting to think about alongside Simmons' question that I cited in Chapter 1; regarding the idea of students' "own language," she asked, "What good was her own language if it confined her to the ghetto?" (48). Areia enacts a challenge to this sort of thinking here: It is not her or her language that is "confin[ing] her to the ghetto," it is the people and structures who assign her that label and determine it to be incompatible with the university.

Pierre reported experiencing similar pressures to be "academic" in his language and behavior, but since many of his friends are not college students, he has received equally strong pressure to avoid exhibiting qualities marked as "academic" when not at school. He told me that he struggled with this because he often wanted to share what he was learning with his friends:

I'm learning new things, you know learning about life, stuff like that, where they don't get to see and experience, so, you know, I have to tell a couple of my friends that I played football with in high school....They have the nerve of judging me sometimes because I go to college, and like my whole viewpoint on

things and the way I dress and carry myself has changed from them since they been knowing me from high school.

His choices in communicating certain topics and opinions, combined with changes in the messages he communicated nonverbally with his dress and behavior, caused his friends to perceive him as elitist, which he vehemently denied being. He said, “I know people often misinterpret my actions, think that I’m being judgmental or I’ve changed, think I’m higher than everyone and I’m not...I don’t believe I’m above no one.”

In talking with Pierre about this, I mentioned Vershawn Young’s “Your Average Nigga,” specifically the part about “enforced educational schizophrenia.” Pierre engaged with this idea immediately, laughing appreciatively at the description of his situation as “schizophrenia”:

**Sam:** He talked about what he called like educational schizophrenia [*Pierre laughs*], like that you feel like you’re having to be multiple people at once because you’re—

**Pierre:** I feel like I have to be like some kind of bi-personality, yeah...I have to have...two different types of personality, my personality here when I’m at the university and my personality there when I go back home and hang with my friends I went to high school with...Because usually they [my friends at home] don’t want to see my personality here. Then they start with their criticism and everything.

Like Areia has done with a number of scholarly sources, Pierre saw this one as a reflection of his own experience and quickly and enthusiastically identified with it. He solidified his connection to Young’s ideas by generating a linguistically creative term, “bi-personality,” to describe his understanding of what he had just heard. Pierre told me in another interview that he frequently

makes these sorts of connections in his college reading and writing: “I compare my experiences to the things being stated in those writings [readings assigned for class]... You can make, you know, a certain type of argument there.”

These sorts of connections are one way that, throughout his college experience, Pierre has endeavored to bridge his two personalities. For example, when he can, he uses personal narrative as an argumentative strategy in his academic writing, a practice for which he cited some of his favorite rappers, like Lupe Fiasco, as influences:

A lot of my writing is from my experiences, of what I’ve been through... A lot of the music I listen to influences my writing. Music teaches you a lot about their [rappers’] experiences; you get different perspectives on life. It’s very thought-provoking. (They’re) not telling you you should do this or that, just stating the facts about what could happen.

According to traditional essayist literacy definitions, the narrative approach Pierre describes would not be viewed as appropriately academic. By Bartholomae’s standards in “Inventing the University,” student essays that tell “only a story” and fail to speak “as a person at a remove from that experience interpreting it” lack academic authority and are not well received by teachers and graders (158). To Pierre, though, the use of personal experience has benefited his academic writing: “That’s why I actually like write a lot of good papers.”

As mentioned in the previous section, Ali and Areia have likewise done well when they have brought their personal experiences into conversation with published sources. I see this practice as an example of what scholars like Young and Canagarajah call code meshing, or “merging” nonstandardized and standardized language practices in one text (Canagarajah, “Place of World Englishes” 598). Young advocates code meshing as a more realistic and equitable

alternative to the codeswitching that causes “educational schizophrenia,” arguing that codeswitching “takes place in the mind, is essentially ideological...[but] code meshing is what happens in actual practice—because in reality the languages aren’t so disparate after all” (“Nah, We Straight” 59).

Looking at Areia’s writing, I see other discursive practices that evidence code meshing. For example, she employed proverbs in essays for both of her first-year writing classes. The “What Is the University?” essay starts with two: “Since I was a child my mom has told me not to believe what everybody says and never follow anyone else’s footsteps but Gods’. ‘Everything you hear ain’t true and everything you see ain’t good,’ my mom would say.” In the second semester class, an essay on high-crime neighborhoods includes the sentence “Like my daddy always tells me you either let it make you or break you.” Proverbs are considered by a number of scholars (Richardson; Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk*) to be characteristic of African American language practices, but instead of shifting away from them to a form of support more common in essayist literacy or to language that would be considered less “clichéd” by many academic standards, Areia used them to her benefit (two B-plus essays, no comments on the proverbs).

As Young argues, a code meshing model benefits students because

meshing does not require students to “hold back their Englishes” but permits them to bring them more forcefully and strategically forward. The ideology behind code meshing holds that peoples’ so-called “nonstandard” dialects are already fully compatible with standard English. Code meshing secures their right to represent that meshing in all forms and venues where they communicate. (“Nah, We Straight” 62)

In this discussion of “force,” “strategy,” and “rights,” Young represents students as having a degree of agency that they are often not granted. Whereas the labeling of linguistic features indexically tied to many students’ identities as “inappropriate” for academia strips students of much of that agency, promotion of code meshing could be one way to start giving some of that agency back. Also, as Canagarajah asserts, code meshing has potential to impact academic discourse as a whole, since “inserting the oppositional codes gradually into the existing conventions...will serve to both play the same game and also change its rules” (“Place of World Englishes” 599). I would add to Canagarajah’s point here by stressing that many “oppositional,” or at the very least unconventional, codes are already woven through the “existing conventions”—no insertion needed. A large part of the work that needs to be done, then, is to draw more attention to the diversity of the conventions themselves.

## Chapter 6

### **“All English Teachers Should Know”: Rethinking the “Academic” and Its Representations**

As my co-researchers’ experiences and a variety of published and unpublished pedagogical texts have illustrated, there is a substantial gap between how academic writing and language work in the lived practices of academics and how academic writing and language are represented pedagogically to undergraduate students. There are also substantial reasons why this gap should matter to us, including implications for students’ self-identification as academic writers and their access to higher education.

Pedagogical messages, whether implicit or explicit, typed in a handout or casually mentioned in class, have contributed significantly to how my co-researchers understand academic writing, language, thinking, and authority. They have also contributed to these students’ questions and struggles regarding fitting their language into the category of “academic language” and themselves into the category of “academic writer.” The guidelines and grading practices they have shown me, in which standardized and stylistically preferred language often receives more attention than students’ conceptual knowledge or the clarity and support of their arguments, communicate messages to students about academics’ priorities. These priorities, and the accompanying expectation that students will codeswitch away from “less academic” practices, give impressions that are inaccurate at best and linguistically exclusionary at worst. Teachers’ practices such as crossing out entire sections of students’ papers or insisting on support from published sources suggest an authority structure in which teachers and published academics have more control over academic writing—even students’ own papers—than students have. Undefined terms like “good thesis” or “weak argument” imply that these judgments are

universal and that students should already understand them if they are part of the community of academic writers. In all, experiencing such practices may lead students like my co-researchers to question whether they qualify as academic writers and, in many cases, invite them to suspect that the answer is “no.”

Based on this research, I am arguing that it is vital for scholars and teachers to acknowledge that clearly defined categories and rules do not accurately reflect the reality of how language works. We must learn to truly see the diversity inherent in academic writing, not just the diversity that jumps out at us because it is especially, and often negatively, marked. Just as importantly, we must also share our understandings in all their complexity with students rather than giving them misleading and oversimplified representations. As the sophisticated observations and uptakes of my co-researchers demonstrate, students benefit from the opportunity to engage in complex discussion of language and writing varieties and ideologies. Specifically, they develop more complete understandings of the expectations and responses they and their writing will face as well as a stronger sense of themselves as scholars with authority in how they deploy their language.

## **Reflections**

### On reading into student writing

In a paper called “Ethical Segregation,” written for his second-semester writing class, Rob discussed the “safe” activities that the University sponsors to encourage students to interact with people from backgrounds different from their own. He argued that the University should do more for minorities than “forcing them to be active.” During an interview, he showed me his first rough draft, which he had just gotten back from his instructor covered in comments. In the first

paragraph of the draft, Rob had mentioned a leadership program in his dorm and commented, “Funny thing is that not a lot of ethnics groups are in it, just your usual preppy, white people.” I asked him to tell me more:

**Sam:** So is the LEADS program like a diversity thing?

**Rob:** I mean, there’s a bunch of white people in there so you know like we usually tend to stay away. You know like me, my roommate, and a couple other guys are like the only like Latino guys there and just like, I don’t know, it doesn’t really like blow our minds, like [*fake-enthusiastic voice*] “Oh, do this, do that, you’ll get pizza!” I’m like eh.

**Sam:** [*laughing*] You’ll get pizza?

**Rob:** Yeah I mean we just usually tend to ourselves, so, and you know besides we can’t even like relate to none of them, they’re all living somewhere like way out in Illinois like Bolingbrook.

**Sam:** Mmm, one of those happy little suburbs.

**Rob:** Or just someplace I never even heard of, I mean you look at the door, we’re like the only three people that say Chicago all on the same door. That’s it.

**Sam:** Oh, do you have your hometowns on your door?

**Rob:** Uh-huh, yeah, like our names and our hometowns, you know, you get some weird (ones) like Wasaga, Illinois, or just like This Place, Illinois, or That Place, Illinois. Us? Chicago, Chicago, Chicago.

I continued to read through this first paragraph, in which Rob talked about programs that his dorm put on to celebrate different ethnicities. Then I turned the page and encountered a big X



over much of the next paragraph, the first of many X's I would eventually be seeing on his papers for this class. I cringed before I even realized I was doing it, and he noticed:

**Rob:** You cringe?

**Sam:** Yeah.

**Rob:** Why?

**Sam:** I don't know, that big X.

**Rob:** Well, is it true to you, or no?

**Sam:** ...I guess I'm not sure what the crossing out is for here.

**Rob:** See, I think what he just like crossed it out for was 'cause it's just other information that doesn't really deal with the stuff I'm talking about.

The paragraph we were examining started with the statement "Despite the university's best effort, the campus is still highly segregated." In the crossed-out passage that formed the last three quarters of the paragraph, I saw that Rob had listed several historical examples of discrimination and reflected on the "life time of oppression and abuse" that some ethnic groups have experienced.

In explaining why the instructor might have crossed out this part of the paragraph, Rob pointed me to a note next to the X saying that the historical information seemed to be "a huge tangent" from where the paragraph started out. I was curious what Rob's reasoning had been for adding this information:

**Sam:** So you talk about like the American history of segregation and discrimination.

**Rob:** Yeah, yeah, see I bring in more like a history paper.

**Sam:** So why, I mean why to you is that relevant?...I think to me, like if I was to approach this as a teacher, my instinct would be more to try to get you to explain more, like how this relates to your point, cause I think there are ways it could, definitely. Like...what is kind of the main argument you're making?...

**Rob:** Like, even from then till now you know we still got a sense of segregation between ethnic groups, or just any type of groups, you know, there's still going to be separation no matter what.

**Sam:** Mm-hmm. So segregation continues to exist...I'm getting the sense in your intro that there's kind of these little like efforts at making diversity happen but it feels really forced.

**Rob:** ...Most of the things happened like in my dorm, you know, they always have the [*fake-enthusiastic voice again*] "Oh, come on by!"

**Sam:** 'Cause what I think is interesting about the stuff that's crossed out here is like you're saying okay, there's been all these discrimination things that have happened. If anybody reads *slavery*, *Jim Crow laws*, um, *internment camps*, stuff like that, they immediately know that that was a real problem in terms of how race was handled, that was segregation, that was a problem. I feel like the point you're making is that there's still stuff that's going on that's every bit as segregating, but we don't know to identify it as that. Like is that, I mean, is that kind of along the lines of what you're getting at?

**Rob:** Yeah. [*pause*] I mean, I can try to say it, but like I can't really you know sum it up as you could do it, you know, just it's hard to do that.

**Sam:** It is hard, I think it takes a lot of practice to be able to, I mean, I struggle with this too. Like I sit down with my dissertation director and he...says what I wanted to say so much better than I could...I think whenever you're pushing yourself to write at a level that you're not quite comfortable with yet, it's like you need somebody to model for you how to do it.

Clearly, this conversation took a lot longer than putting an X over the paragraph. In fact, it probably should have taken even longer; looking back at it now, I wish I had asked Rob a few more questions and encouraged him to articulate a bit more of his point before I summarized my impression of it.

I know that many instructors do not have the time to discuss potentially tangential parts of essays with their students in detail and that the above conversation was largely a privilege of Rob's and my co-researcher relationship. However, even with limited time, there are ways to ask questions rather than crossing out large chunks of student text. Writing something like "Can you clarify how this discussion relates to your argument?" would take only seconds longer than an X, and it would be far less likely to deny the validity of the student's thinking or communicate to the student that "you suck as a writer," as Rob felt the X's did. Even a simple question mark was far more encouraging, as he told me in comparing this instructor to his writing instructor the previous semester: "[She] didn't do that! She circled, she said, question mark, What's that? Hmm? 'Go ahead, just say it.' I'm like, okay! I'll say it. No X or nothing like that." The questioning strategy of Rob's first-semester teacher allowed him to feel like his writing had potential, like there were ideas that needed to be elaborated or clarified, not deleted. His teacher was willing to read into his text and look for the meaning behind it, thus motivating him to keep working and to feel like he would be heard.

As response scholarship tells us, Rob's reaction is shared by many students whose teachers make the sorts of edits his did. Richard Straub contends that comments made in the form of "sweeping editorial changes" can be "disrespectful" and "usurp control over student writing" (247). Yet such comments remain common; the teachers studied by Connors and Lunsford often took an editing role in commenting on student papers, and "the editing was often heavy-handed and primarily apodictic, concerned more with ridding the paper of problems than with helping the student learn how to avoid them in the future" (217). As I mentioned earlier, more recent studies like Stern and Solomon's show that such editing persists in teacher commentary.<sup>1</sup> Connors and Lunsford argue that this editing focus comes from the fact that, too often, teachers are "looking at papers rather than students" (217). Likewise, Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch contend that taking control of student texts is often the result of trying to make students' texts conform to the teacher's "Ideal Text," which they argue is much less productive than reading for a match to the writer's intent.

Brannon and Knoblauch point out that most writers are read with the goal of understanding ideas:

The incentive to write derives from an assumption that people will listen respectfully and either assent to or earnestly consider the ideas expressed. And ordinarily readers will make an honest effort to understand a writer's text provided that its ideas matter to them and provided that the writer's authority is sufficient to compel their attention. (158)

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<sup>1</sup> Extreme examples like the extensive cross-outs Rob showed me are rare in the literature, but I would argue that this does not mean they are not happening. As Stern and Solomon point out, many response studies collect texts from teacher volunteers, who likely provide "their most conscientiously graded papers" (34). Studies like Stern and Solomon's that collect texts from students themselves might show a more accurate picture of the full range of response happening.

In this, Brannon and Knoblauch sum up the benefits of being read into that are often denied to students. They stop short of truly challenging how we read students, however, citing the difference between a typical reading situation and a teacher reading a student text: “The teacher-reader assumes, *often correctly*, that student writers have not yet earned the authority that ordinarily compels readers to listen seriously to what writers have to say” (158, emphasis added). The only authority Brannon and Knoblauch grant students is that to determine what they intended to write; students are constructed as needing to be evaluated based solely on whether their text matches their intent, without any sense that they might have something to say that would impact their teacher or a broader audience. Granted, Brannon and Knoblauch were writing in the early 1980s, and a great deal of work has been done since then on promoting students’ authority and autonomy in relation to their writing. On the other hand, though, I would contend that the responses that my co-researchers and many other students receive to their writing suggest that the above view toward student authority is still a very common one. As Lea and Street argue, teacher feedback “works to...construct academic knowledge and maintain relationships of power and authority between novice student and experienced academic” (43).

In the context of recent evolutions in higher education, in which increasing numbers of students are from nonnative or nonstandardized English backgrounds,<sup>2</sup> this concern is especially timely. As scholars of language variation in composition remind us, people still rarely read past form when it breaks from typical academic writing expectations, especially when, as Canagarajah asserts, that form is produced by writers perceived as “novice authors” (“Limits of Hybridity”; also Matsuda, “Transnational English(es)). My co-researchers, like many

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, as Matsuda (“Myth of Homogeneity”) reminds us, such students have been in universities for much longer than they have been visible in scholarship.

undergraduate students, are rarely granted the privilege of being read into because of still-prevailing ideologies about standardized English and student writers.

### On codeswitching

In Chapter 1, I cited examples of scholarship continuing to contrast students' "home languages" with academic language. The three most recent articles cited (Elbow, "Why Deny"; Lovejoy, Fox, and Wills; Wheeler and Swords) all contain substantial discussion and promotion of codeswitching. The popularity of this approach in recent years is problematic, especially given how codeswitching and its usefulness are being defined. Models of codeswitching, most often targeted at urban black students and other students who command marginalized dialects of English, contend that they should learn to switch from that variety into standardized English when in school situations, much like a bilingual Spanish-English speaker can switch between Spanish and English. A bilingual Spanish-English speaker, though, also has the option of using both, something denied to students restricted to a single language variety at a time under the codeswitching model. In *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, Kathryn Woolard offers a typical linguistic definition of *codeswitching*: "an individual's use of two or more language varieties in the same speech event or exchange" (73-74). A key component of most linguistic or anthropological definitions is something like Woolard's phrase "in the same speech event or exchange," but pedagogical discussions of codeswitching in relation to "home" and "academic" languages tend to advise not blending codes together within one instance but separating them into their respective "appropriate" contexts. This is, as Young and others have argued, not so much codeswitching as language segregation. Discussing similar rules in international contexts for using World Englishes (WE) and Mainstream English (ME), Suresh Canagarajah summarizes typical rules for language segregation as follows:

WE for literary texts; ME for “serious” texts.

WE for discursal features; ME for grammar.

WE for informal classroom interactions; ME for formal production.

WE for speaking; ME for writing.

WE for home; ME for school.

WE for local communication; ME for international communication. (“Place of World Englishes” 594)

Canagarajah contends that these rules carry forward from *Students’ Right*, which he describes as “a policy of tolerance (i.e., permitting nonvalorized codes to survive in less-prestigious contexts), not promotion (i.e., making active use of these vernaculars or developing them for serious purposes”) (“Place of World Englishes” 596).

Ultimately, much more troubling than the potential technical inaccuracy of the label “codeswitching” are the potential consequences of the associated concepts for already marginalized student writers. Such students are much more likely to face scrutiny for their deviations from what is perceived to be standardized and academic. Anthropology scholar Jane Hill articulates the concept of a “white public space” in which there is “(1) intense monitoring of the speech of racialized populations...for signs of linguistic disorder and (2) the invisibility of almost identical signs in the speech of Whites” (680). This is significant to codeswitching because, as Young asserts, codeswitching is taught “to avoid errors in standard grammar,” but that “won’t work because all writers and speakers make errors” (“Nah, We Straight” 71).

In order to change the perception of students’ languages, then, it is not enough to “valorize” dialects. Young argues that one of the biggest problems at work here is

equating language with racial identity—because it's that equation that seems to transform the effort to teach black students to speak and write differently into the effort to alter who and what they believe they are. ... The only way I see to achieve...equal prestige [for dialects] is not by accepting pluralism but by undoing the erroneous assumption that the codes...are so incompatible and unmixable because they're so radically different. It's almost as if the very people who would never accept the idea that black people and white people are radically different are happy to displace that acceptance onto a vision of white and black language. ("Your Average" 704, 706)

Young's argument here also applies nicely to designations of language as academic or nonacademic. In the current higher education climate, with many efforts to increase diversity in student populations, very few people would say that there are fundamental differences in the scholarly potential of students from non-dominant ethnic or language backgrounds. But many would not hesitate to point to particular features in student writing *that are tied to exactly these ethnic and linguistic backgrounds* and say that these are not academic, are in fact wildly different from what qualifies as academic, and that they must be changed if a student expects to succeed in college.

#### On "rules"

While completing the writing of this dissertation, I was also on the academic job market. This meant that I explained the arguments I was making in the dissertation to a great many people. When I said I was arguing that we shouldn't hold student writers to standards that bear very little resemblance to what published academics do and then claim that we're teaching them academic writing, many people were skeptical. At least five people told me verbatim, "They



have to know the rules before they can break the rules.” To these people and others who share this viewpoint, I say:

First, academics don’t use clichés.

Second, we have no business calling directives like “don’t use the first person,” “eliminate passive voice,” or “avoid *very/things/is*” rules when there are so many disagreements and exceptions surrounding them. We lack proof that these are even widespread preferences, never mind rules.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the chronology assumed here is deeply faulty. Even if we could negotiate the rules down to conventions and agree that there are some conventions general enough that student writers would benefit from knowing, there is no reason to assume that we must teach and enforce following these conventions *before* considering ways to “break” them and reasons for doing so. Based on my experience, I would instead advocate teaching them simultaneously because students should understand everything they do in their academic writing as a choice, informed by the fullest possible understanding of all their options, the reasons one might choose each option, and the ideologies underlying those reasons.

Simultaneous learning and breaking of rules is not something promoted by most pedagogical discourse, and there may be some legitimate reasons for this. It may, for instance, simply not be possible to fit a lengthy, nuanced discussion of certain stylistic preferences into the limited space possible in a handbook or a marginal comment. I would argue, then, that any issue for which this is the case would be better left out of such spaces altogether. Is there anything to be gained from an oversimplified representation that conveys little or no truthful or useful information? This is a particularly concern for textbooks, I would argue, as they deny students any possibility of negotiating with their authority through questions or discussion. If, as Kleine

asserts, students tend to “internalize” their composition textbooks’ content and priorities, it is essential that we take more care about what our textbooks are telling students. Discussions of language and source use too often ask students to internalize rules that are inane at best and outright lies at worst, while at the same time schooling students in the idea that they have no authority other than that which they can borrow from published academics.

### **Final Thoughts and Implications**

In part, I intend this dissertation to push on theoretical understandings of language diversity in academic writing. Three premises, to me, are key here: First, diversity is everywhere in academic writing, because it is everywhere in all writing and language; literate activity is dialogic and distributed, and boundaries between registers and dialects are quite permeable (Canagarajah, “Place of World Englishes”; Matsuda, “Alternative Discourses”; Prior, *Writing/Disciplinarity*; Young, “Nah, We Straight”). Second, we have historically tended to notice only some forms of diversity in academic writing; we are conditioned by language ideology to identify with and read meaning into prestige varieties while policing or disregarding nonprestige varieties. Third, therefore, if we work to acknowledge the diversity within the standard and become conscious of the ideologies and processes that lead us to view certain deviations from what we view as standard as more marked than others, we can create a more realistic picture of academic writing and language that avoids equating diversity with disempowered groups. I hope that continued research into the situated, diverse practices of published academic writers (along the lines of Canagarajah, “Place of World Englishes”; Thaiss and Zawacki; and Young, “Nah, We Straight”) can help to further illuminate these practices and the diversity they reflect. I would also advocate further scrutiny of the treatment of language in

composition textbooks, in order to push for a narrowing of the gap between academic practice and its pedagogical representations,<sup>3</sup> as well as a reconsideration of the potentially exclusionary language ideologies presented.

Methodologically, I advocate more widespread acknowledgment of the great resources that undergraduate writers can bring to our scholarly inquiry. My participants' co-researcher status has benefited this research by giving me information and data I may never have thought to ask for, and it has benefited the students by encouraging conscious attention to the ideologies about language and writing operating around them and creating space for reflection and discussion on what they've noticed. I agree with scholars like Theresa Lillis, Marguerite Helmers, and Carmen Kynard that attitudes toward student writing and writers in composition discourse often limit scholars' abilities to see students' authority, intelligence, and potential contributions. This is incredibly unfortunate, since we can benefit from listening to students and seeing the language-related knowledge and experience they already possess, as well as the understandings they develop through classroom work, as resources for both pedagogy and research. Students' viewpoints, with or without researchers' interpretations, are vital tools for better understanding the effects and effectiveness of our pedagogy and pedagogical scholarship. In research and pedagogy, students should be seen as scholars—by teachers, by researchers, and by themselves.

Pedagogically, I hope that this study helps illustrate the profound effects that oversimplified rules and categories have on students' perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as writers. When students are encouraged to focus on concepts and opinions rather

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<sup>3</sup> In 1999, Peter Mortensen summed up the views of “a good many critics of composition textbooks” by stating that “there is a serious gap between what research and textbooks say about the teaching of writing” (219). I contend that this sort of critique remains valuable today for two reasons: One, the gap is still here, and two, not enough has been done specifically in the area of language ideologies, which has especially strong implications for how academic writing standards connect with access to higher education.

than arbitrary rules, they thrive. When they are restricted to those arbitrary rules, their work begins to feel futile, like it is contributing nothing that the teacher (and the world) hasn't seen a hundred times over. If writing teachers are to get past unwarranted focus on these rules, they need to truly interrogate the assumptions behind them. Underneath absolutes about what is and is not academic lie language ideologies that dictate exclusionary standards and expect certain students to keep their "home language" out of school while allowing other students to engage freely in code meshing. As we perpetuate universal rules for academic writing, we also perpetuate power structures that maintain inequalities in access to academic writing, and to academia as a whole.

In undergraduate writing classes, it is vital that pedagogical materials and practices reflect the full picture of academic literate practice, rather than oversimplified prescriptions that create a stark separation between students and scholars. When I have explored my own pedagogical practices in this dissertation, I have intended them not as a model for what everyone should do, but as a model of reflexivity about our pedagogical content and the image of students and academic writing it enforces. Because I want students to be viewed as scholars by us and by themselves, I have worked to engage them in professional-level conversations about academic writing. My classes' readings, discussions, and essays have encouraged a nuanced level of thinking frequently absent from textbooks. I have seen, both in my classes and in working with these students for multiple semesters beyond them, that students who have engaged in professional-level discussions of academic writing have a more productive understanding of academic writing expectations, a better grasp of how their own writing is received, and a stronger sense of the choices they have in following and challenging conventions.

I can envision many other ways of having complex writing and language discussions with our students (inspirational examples can be found in, e.g., Curzan; Downs and Wardle); the important thing is that we have them. At this point, many practices and materials in composition pedagogy are operating in sharp opposition to—possibly even actively negating—composition scholarship, by painting a homogeneous picture of a fundamentally heterogeneous topic. They are also undermining the spirit of student inquiry and empowerment that many of us try to create in our classrooms by maintaining a sizable gap between what scholars know and what students know. Students *are* scholars, and thus need to know what scholars know.

So do teachers, for that matter. In advocating a “writing about writing” pedagogy, Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle argue that “instructors must be educated in writing studies” to teach a writing-focused curriculum; when they aren’t, we must ask “how FYC students are currently being served by writing instructors who *couldn’t* teach a writing studies pedagogy” (575). Similarly, I would ask if first-year (or any-year) writing students can be properly served by instruction that isn’t backed by linguistic and writing studies principles of how writing and language work.<sup>4</sup> In 1974, *Students’ Right to Their Own Language* argued, “All English teachers should, as a minimum, know the principles of modern linguistics, and something about the history and nature of the English language in its social and cultural context” (*Students’ Right* 15). If only this message of *SRTOL* had pervaded the field of writing studies to the degree that other messages have, teachers might have a better understanding of the diversity of all language and thus less of a tendency to marginalize students with negatively marked

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<sup>4</sup> While Downs and Wardle are among a number of scholars who have made excellent arguments for the professionalization of first-year composition through specialized faculty, my aim here is not to argue that writing teachers need to be writing studies or linguistics scholars. I would contend, though, that writing programs, even when many of their instructors’ primary expertise is in areas other than writing studies, can and should do a great deal of professional development work to encourage instructors’ learning and growth around issues of writing and language. Especially as university populations continue to grow more diverse, these topics are essential material for new teacher orientations, pedagogy seminars, professional development workshops, and the like.

language practices. Diversity does indeed need to be valued in academic writing and language, but valuing diversity doesn't mean allowing it in. It means acknowledging that it's here, it's been here, and it's staying.

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## Appendix A

### Summary of Co-Researcher Data

**Pierre Garner:** Co-researcher since Fall 2008. Student in my Summer Bridge Composition class, Summer 2006.

*Interviews:* October 2008, February 2009, September 2010

*Other interactions:* Frequent contact (1-2 times per month) in 2006-2007 school year to discuss work for first-year writing. Occasional (2-4 times per year) email and facebook contact since for recommendations and quick updates.

**Alison (Ali) Martinez:** Co-researcher since Fall 2008. Student in my Rhetoric 103 class, Fall 2007.

*Interviews:* October 2008, February 2009, October 2009, February 2010, March 2010

*Texts:* Political science: 1 essay with response (5 pp)

Latino/a studies: 2 essays with response (8 pp)

Comparative literature: 4 essays with response, 1 draft (10 pp)

*Other interactions:* Regular (every 1-2 months) visits to office during 2008-2009 to drop off data and chat; occasional after that year. Regular email contact 2008-2010; occasional after those years.

**Areia Medlock:** Co-researcher since Fall 2008. Student in my Summer Bridge Composition class, Summer 2008.

*Interviews:* two in October 2008, November 2008, October 2009, April 2010

*Texts:* 1<sup>st</sup>-year writing, semester 1: 4 essays with response, 4 drafts, 1 portfolio reflection, 1 assignment prompt (44 pp)

1<sup>st</sup>-year writing, semester 2: 6 1-page reflections with response, 3 essays with response, 3 assignment prompts, 8 other course documents (35 pp)

*Other interactions:* Regular email and facebook contact Fall 2008-Fall 2009, occasional after that year. Occasional office visits.

**Hannah Prince:** Co-researcher since Spring 2009. Student in my Rhetoric 103 and Rhetoric 104 classes, Fall 2007 and Spring 2008.

*Interviews:* February 2009, April 2009, October 2009

*Texts:* English literature: response only (1 p)

Recreation studies: 1 essay with response (8 pp)

Communication, 100-level: 1 essay with response (2 pp)

Communication, 300-level: 2 essays with response (6 pp)

Religion: 3 essays with response (10 pp)

Art history: 2 essays with response, 1 draft, 3 in-class essay exams with response (19 pp)

*Other interactions:* Regular email contact throughout 2009. Occasional email and facebook contact since then. Occasional office visits to drop off data 2009 and 2010.



**Robert (Rob) Sigala:** Co-researcher since Fall 2008. Student in my Summer Bridge Composition course, Summer 2008, and my advanced composition course, Fall 2009.

**Interviews:** October 2008, February 2009, March 2009, May 2009, October 2009, March 2010, April 2010

**Texts:** 1<sup>st</sup>-year writing: 3 essays with response, 2 drafts (22 pp)

Advanced composition: 1 essay with response (18 pp)<sup>1</sup>

Cinema studies, first class: 1 essay with response (5 pp)

Cinema studies, second class: 2 essays with response (12 pp)

**Other interactions:** Regular email and facebook contact for last three years. Regular visits to my office during 2009-2010 to drop off data or chat.

**Jinyoung (Anny) Yoo:** Co-researcher since Spring 2009. Student in my Rhetoric 103 class, Fall 2007.

**Interviews:** February 2009, February 2009, March 2009, April 2010

**Texts:** 1<sup>st</sup>-year writing: 1 essay (5 pp)

Dance: 3 essays, 2 essays with response, 2 drafts, 1 assignment prompt (30 pp)

Art history: 1 essay (8 pp)

Labor and industrial relations: 1 essay (6 pp)

Chemistry: 4 lab write-ups with response (9 pp)

Other: 6 personal statements and application essays with 4 drafts (30 pp)

**Other interactions:** Frequent email contact Spring 2009-Spring 2010—sent me data and received recommendations and application feedback.

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<sup>1</sup> Since I taught this course, I also have much of Rob's other writing from it, but I chose for this study to focus only on the final project that all of his other work led up to.

## **Appendix B**

### **Informed Consent for Student Co-Researchers**



**I L L I N O I S**  
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

#### **Department of English/Center for Writing Studies**

288 English Building  
608 South Wright Street  
Urbana, IL 61801

### **Informed Consent for** ***Case Studies of Undergraduate Writers' Language*** ***and Literacy Practices in Academic and Nonacademic Settings***

#### **Purpose of the study**

You are invited to participate in a study that I, Samantha Looker of the Department of English, am conducting under the direction of Professor Paul Prior, also of the Department of English. I am interested in exploring the relationships among your writing and language practices in a variety of academic and nonacademic settings. I intend to gather a number of case studies like yours in order to examine how students negotiate among their many varieties of writing and language when writing a text, as well as how different texts and contexts influence one another. I hope that this research will provide valuable information on the way that academic and nonacademic languages, literacies, and contexts interact.

#### **What the study involves**

If you agree to participate, we will negotiate the specific texts and contexts to study and discuss. In general, though, I will ask you to consider four kinds of participation. First, I will ask you to participate in interviews with me about your experiences with writing and language, specific texts you have shared with me, the contexts in which you write and speak, and the relationships you see among your writing and language practices in different settings. Second, I will ask you to provide copies of academic and non-academic texts that you are writing or have written. Third, I may ask you to identify people who are involved in your writing practices (such as teachers, tutors, or peers). In some cases, I may ask your permission to interview these people about their work with you and/or specific texts you have written for or with them. (I would ask you for specific permission for any individual contact and share texts only if you approve.) Finally, I may ask you to participate in interviews about, be observed in, and/or possibly be audio- or videotaped as you engage in selected activities related to your writing (e.g., attending courses or tutoring sessions, participating in routine social or workplace activities). Again, we will decide together on the specifics of what we study. Because a key goal of this study is to follow your practices over time, I hope that you will participate periodically over a semester or more. (Of course, as is stated below, you have the right to discontinue your participation at any time.) Because another key goal of the study is to give my participants a strong role in the research, I may also invite you to participate in follow-up interviews in order to share my emerging interpretations of the data and to seek your comments and responses.

### **Publication and identifiability**

The results of this research may be published in journal articles, electronic publications, or books and may be presented in professional conferences or lectures. I may quote from or describe recorded activities or interactions, any texts you have written that you have made available for the research, and any interview comments you have made. If I take video of any activities, I may use still images in written publications or oral presentations and play excerpts of audio- or videotapes in oral presentations of the research; I will ask specific permission for this at the time of recording. It is likely that you could be recognized by people who know you if they hear or read such reports of the research.

To limit somewhat your identifiability, I can use a pseudonym for your name in all of my drafts and final reports of this research. (However, if some of the texts that you provide for the research are published texts, then I would need to use your real name in research reports to quote from those texts.)\

Regardless of whether you are referred to by a pseudonym or not, to safeguard your privacy, I will keep any identifying data (audio- and videotapes, copies of your writing, interview transcripts) in a private office where others will not have access to them and I will not release such raw data to anyone else.

### **Your rights, benefits, and concerns**

You may benefit from the opportunities this research offers to reflect on your writing and language and on the relationship among your practices in a variety of settings. However, the primary benefit of this research is to increase basic understanding of how students negotiate the variety of languages and styles they command and how they manage their writing in different communities. Such understanding may eventually improve ways of teaching and using writing in educational settings.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Whether you choose to participate or not has no bearing on your access to or use of any services that I or others might offer in any context, and it has no effect on your grades or status at the University of Illinois. You may withdraw at any time after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participation in this research.

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact Samantha Looker (217-333-1335, [slooker@uiuc.edu](mailto:slooker@uiuc.edu)) or Paul Prior (217-333-1006, [pprior@uiuc.edu](mailto:pprior@uiuc.edu)). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (collect calls accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at [irb@uiuc.edu](mailto:irb@uiuc.edu).

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

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Please review and check off the options below to ensure that I know how your data may be used. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me.

- I agree to participate in interviews about my writing and language and the relationships among the different contexts in which I write and speak (Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ ),

understanding that my interview comments might be quoted, paraphrased, or replayed in reports of this research. (Specific permission for recording and using interview material will be requested at the time of any interview.)

- I agree that any texts that I have written and have provided for this research may be quoted or paraphrased in publications or oral presentations (Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_).
- I agree to consider being observed (and possibly audio- or video-taped) in activities related to my writing (Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_). We will work together to identify relevant sites or activities, and specific permission for use of each recording will also be obtained at the time of any observation.
- I agree to consider requests to interview secondary participants about their role in my writing (Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_), and to consider requests to share texts that I provide for this research with those secondary participants (Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_).
- Choose **one** of the following:

\_\_\_\_\_ I would prefer to be referred to by a pseudonym rather than my real name in all reports of this research.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would prefer to be referred to by my real name in all reports of this research.  
(If you provide texts published under your name as part of your participation in this study, I can only use the texts if you check this option.)

I have read this informed consent form and checked answers to the questions above, I am 18 years or older, and I agree voluntarily to participate in this research.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(print name)

### **Author's Biography**

Samantha M. W. Looker received a B.A. in English Linguistics with a Women's Studies minor from Arizona State University in 2003. She received her M.A. (2005) and Ph.D. (2011) in English with a Writing Studies specialization from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her interests include composition pedagogy, linguistics, writing across the curriculum, first-year writing, basic writing (although she frequently refuses to use that term), feminist and ethnographic research methods, teacher response, and writing centers. As a graduate student, she served as Assistant Director of the Academic Writing Program and a peer advisor to new teaching assistants. She has taught first-year and advanced composition as well as composition theory, and has taught and coordinated pre-first-year composition in the Summer Bridge program. She has also worked as a consultant and tutor mentor in the Writers Workshop, continuing the interests she developed as an undergraduate Writing Center tutor at ASU. Starting in Fall 2011, she will be Assistant Professor of English and Director of the Writing-Based Inquiry Seminar program at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh.