

**From Form to Meaning: Freshman Composition and the Long Sixties, 1957-1974**, by David Fleming.  
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Scholars in Composition Studies have learned much by studying our disciplinary history. The work of authors such as James Berlin, Robert Connors, Susan Miller, and Steven Mailloux has proven to be vital for understanding the development of the field. More recently, scholars have turned to local histories rather than the large histories of the authors noted above, arguing that a better understanding of the field lies in constructing and examining narratives focused on individual composition programs. David Fleming's book fits in that trend, examining the rise, fall, and resurrection of the freshman composition program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW), a large midwestern land-grant university. Fleming traces the development of the writing curriculum across the course of the century as it was adapted to meet the social and economic needs of the era. Specifically, the book focuses on the "long sixties," a tumultuous period in Madison and in the United States in general. That decade saw increasing tensions between students and faculty throughout the university; the book chronicles the especially tense interactions between graduate TAs and English faculty, culminating in 1969 in a vote by the English faculty to abolish the freshman composition requirement for incoming students, effectively ending the composition program at UW for twenty-five years. Several individuals and groups in the university and the community called for the English department to provide writing instruction, but freshman composition was not revived at UW until 1996, five years after the department launched a full-fledged Ph.D. program in Composition Studies.

Fleming's investigation of the composition program at UW was prompted by his interest in the lore surrounding the confrontation that still circulated among faculty when he joined the English department in 1998. Fleming's investigation involved numerous graduate students, including students in a seminar who helped him locate some of the first documents the book is based on as well as two research assistants, Rasha Diab and Mira Shimabukuro, who helped him delve into the archives and gather interviews with former TAs and faculty. The end result of their search is a compelling narrative of the growth and development of freshman composition and the subsequent abolition of English 102, a course that nearly all freshmen at UW were required to take.

Although the book focuses on the long sixties and the slow buildup to the battle between TAs and faculty, Fleming begins his history in the mid-nineteenth century with what he terms a "prehistory" of writing instruction at UW. Chapter 2 describes UW's shift from an antebellum curriculum that

emphasized public oratory and studies in the classics to the research-intensive model that characterized most major American universities in the twentieth century. Freshman composition began at UW during this transition to the research model; Fleming argues that the course began in this time as society began to privilege education as cultural capital, making universities crucial to the development of the professional-managerial class (6). Fleming then briefly describes the many forms composition took in the early twentieth century in response to the rapid growth (or in the case of the Great Depression, the sudden collapse) of student enrollment, examining the different iterations of course objectives and descriptions written by a succession of composition directors.

The next two chapters provide the history leading immediately up to the confrontation between TAs and faculty. Chapter 3, “The Postwar Regime, 1948-1968,” describes a remarkably stable period in the composition program, despite the explosive growth of the university’s student population. The fixity of the course contributes to the angst and frustration of TAs in the mid-1960s, who wanted to engage in more pedagogical experimentation than the rigidly structured course allowed. Chapter 4 describes the English department’s increasing dependence on TAs to teach the course as faculty dedicated their efforts to their individual specializations and their advanced undergraduate and graduate courses. As faculty withdrew from the teaching of writing, the TAs took on greater responsibilities for planning the writing curriculum, exemplified in early 1969 by a thorough revision of English 101, UW’s basic writing course.

The next two chapters focus on the crisis between the TAs and faculty that led to the abolition of the composition requirement at UW. Chapter 5, “TA Experimentation, 1966-1969,” co-written with Diab and Shimabukuro, recounts the TAs’ new approaches to teaching writing—approaches that were seen by the faculty and some university administrators as challenges to the accepted writing curriculum that had remained relatively unchanged for twenty years. The chapter centers on *Critical Teaching*, published by the university’s TA union in 1968 and 1969 with several essays contributed by English TAs, as an indicator of the TAs’ dissatisfaction with the state of pedagogy in the university. The two volumes collectively call for teaching that is less corporatized for the needs of the state and the military and more relevant to the social and political needs of the individual students, concepts that demonstrate the publication’s alignment with the general political discontent of the late 1960s. TAs began to reject the program directors’ textbook choices, most notably when TA Joseph Carr attempted to adopt *Sense of the Sixties*, a reader that emphasized contemporary social problems. Other TAs also challenged accepted grading norms, assigning higher grades in part as a critique of the grading system in general and as a challenge to the political reality that students who received lower grades were more vulnerable to the draft as the United States increased its military presence in Vietnam.

Chapter 6 provides a detailed account of the TA and faculty meetings that led to the abolition of English 102. The confrontation, ignited by Carr's insistence on assigning the *Sense of the Sixties* and fueled by department chair Tim Heninger's concern over what he saw as TAs' increasing resistance to faculty oversight, began with a meeting between Heninger and the TAs in which the TAs asked for greater control over the composition curriculum. In a series of subsequent faculty meetings in which anger escalated until police were called on to guard the doors to prevent TAs from entering, the debate about English 102 centered around what the faculty perceived to be the TAs' attempts to undermine their authority over the course until finally the course directors called for the abolition of English 102. However, the TA-faculty confrontation is not cited as a reason for ending the course; instead, the argument the English department forwards to abolish the course is that faculty in the disciplines should provide writing instruction in their majors because, according to evidence from placement exams, incoming freshmen no longer needed further preparation in composition, having received enough writing instruction in high school. Fleming offers several accounts from memos, interviews, and newspapers (the English department's choice to abolish English 102 made the front page of local papers) that cite the confrontation with TAs as the chief cause of the department's action. In other words, although the official record does not reflect the conflict with the TAs, it was generally accepted that the TA-faculty confrontation was the cause of the course being abolished.

Fleming draws a number of observations from his local history and applies them to the field of Composition Studies. Fleming argues that freshman composition is unique because of the general perception that it is a course without content, making it vulnerable to attack from multiple stakeholders while it is simultaneously protected by society's perpetual fear of a literacy crisis. Fleming offers three terms to explore the "cultural resonance and institutional instability" characteristic of composition: *generality*, *universality*, and *liminality* (200). *Generality* emphasizes how composition appears to be devoid of content, a characteristic that makes the course incredibly flexible, illustrated by the many iterations it assumed at UW. *Universality* indicates the course's mission to meet the needs of all students in the university, regardless of their background and their majors. Finally, *liminality* points to how composition and its attendant discipline exist at the margins of the academy in seemingly permanent stasis, always grasping for institutional stability and intellectual legitimacy.

*From Form to Meaning* is a meticulously researched and engaging narrative about how easily freshman composition can be abolished. The book is especially useful for readers interested in the history of Rhetoric and Composition, and how that history is frequently defined according to the peculiar social and political climate of local writing programs. Fleming's introduction offers a focused and concise history of freshman writing in the United States that many instructors may find useful for introductory

graduate courses in Composition Studies, while his archival work provides an excellent model of historical methodology. Yet while most of Fleming's book chronicles the historical events of the late sixties at UW-Madison, his terminology—*generality*, *universality*, and *liminality*—gives readers a cogent framework for reconsidering the historically troubled position of freshman composition in the university.

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