Many people think of vocabulary as the list of words that they studied in elementary school, but in the context of higher education, the word *vocabulary* typically refers to the language we use to talk about and within a given discipline. In biology, the word *cell* is fundamental to the field, for example, and in sociology, the word *population*. Likewise in composition: the vocabulary we use allows us to talk about writing and texts in specific ways. Some of the vocabulary writers use point to features within a text, like a thesis or claim; opening and closing paragraphs; and different sentence structures. Some of the vocabulary we use allows us to describe the processes we engage in when we write: to describe the process of composing a first version of a text and then second and third versions—it’s helpful to have the words *draft* and *revise*. We have words for other processes we engage in when we write—*invention*, *peer review*, and *publication*—and definitions for each. Moreover, as fields develop and we learn more, we may lose some words and add others. The word *genre* wasn’t used in writing studies thirty years ago, for instance, but we understand today that experienced writers use *genre* as an idea and as a word to think about how to compose.

The members of a field or community are defined by a common language that allows them to refer to the same ideas and practices: the word *cell* means very different things in biology, the basis of life, than it does in criminology, a place where someone awaiting trial or convicted of a crime resides. In composition, we have a language as well, a set of vocabulary terms that can help us understand and practice writing well.