**Tour of TYCA**

**The following is a summary of a presentation by Eric Meyer at the 2012 TYCA Midwest Conference in Lincoln, NE—October 11-13.**

**Title of Presentation:** Documenting Success: A Film About College Writing Featuring Two-year College Transfer Students

**Title of Film**: *Writing in College: Students and Professors Talk About Their Craft*

**Link to film**: <http://users.stlcc.edu/emeyer/>

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**Overview**

During a recent sabbatical project, I filmed interviews with former St. Louis Community College students and their university professors about the college writing students experienced after they had transferred to various universities within and outside the St. Louis area. My original intention was to make a few multi-media clips to show current students what they might expect in terms of the nature and amount of college writing. The resulting film footage was so powerful, I turned it into a documentary film about college writing featuring those students and their faculty. *Writing in College: Students and Professors Talk About Their Craft* features students and professors in various disciplines discussing their deep understanding of the purpose and nature of college writing. I was amazed at how engaged the students had become in their own learning and writing processes and how well they were able to articulate the value of writing in their own lives. Ultimately, the film bolsters confidence in my own teaching and provides my current students with a real sense of where they are going and how central writing—and hard work—is to their journey. I use the film in small portions within all my literature and composition classes.

So, take just a few minutes to view the first short chapter of the film, “[Introduction,](http://users.stlcc.edu/emeyer/Ch00Intro/Ch00Intro.html)” to get a sense of how deeply students understand what we are all trying to instill in them in each of our college composition classrooms. I hope you find the film useful in your own classes—it certainly resonates with most of my current students.

Below is a more comprehensive description of the project, the film, and how I use it in my classes. Please skip to **How I use the film in class** below if you are not interested in a description of my process.

**Conception**

As we all do as new instructors, I started thinking early in my career about motivation in composition courses. If I could only get certain comp students to realize how important writing is— how central it is to the rest of their college career and beyond—if I could do that, then they would engage more fully in the course. I often would invoke scenarios of juniors and seniors feverishly reading and writing their way through term papers —usually to little effect on the first-year college students in front of me.

It gradually dawned on me that many students were not able to imagine with any authenticity these scenarios. They could not project themselves into these future rhetorical situations. So I thought about getting former students who have already been successful at the university, students who have already experienced the nature and amount of college writing to do the talking for me. And film, of course, seemed the most appropriate and efficient way to engage a young audience.

**Process**

I went into the project wanting to know some *basic* things:

—What is college-level writing?

—How much writing do juniors and seniors do?

—How important is writing to the discipline?

—Why do professors assign so much writing?

—What is the relationship between writing and learning?

—How have you grown as a writer since your first day in college?

—To what extent have composition courses contributed to your success?

—How well has the two-year college prepared you for junior- and senior-level work?

“What is college-level writing?”—a seemingly basic question, but of course, even after two book-length collections of reflections by some of rhetoric and composition’s leading scholars (NCTE’s *What is College-Level Writing?* Vols. I and II), we continue to struggle with an adequate response. As important as the *what* is the *why* of college writing. If students more clearly understood the why, then they should be more willing to value and practice the what.

Down this path of thinking I began some preliminary research. One of the most interesting articles was by Muriel Harris in the first volume of *What Is College-Level Writing?* In “What Does the Instructor Want? The View from the Writing Center,” Harris discusses Linda Flower’s distinction between “writer-based prose” and “reader-based prose” (125). Reader-based prose is the more mature “adult-level” writing as opposed to the more “adolescent-level” writing many of our students perform. This distinction, to me, seemed the most central issue in their development as writers and thinkers in charge of their own intellectual process. I made it the center of my questioning as I interviewed each student—and each professor. The deep response I received from almost all the participants was more than thrilling for me. I knew I was on to something important.

**Discoveries**

In the **“**[**Why Write?**](http://users.stlcc.edu/emeyer/CH01WhyWrite/CH01WhyWrite.html)**”** chapter of the video, I found out that students (and their professors) deeply understand the distinctions between writing as communication and writing as process of discovery, including the complex relationship between writing and learning. By the time they reached the upper division, these students had developed fairly sophisticated ideas about why we write in college. They had moved from writer-based prose to reader-based prose and internalized the reasons and values behind this move. This, for me, was the most meaningful discovery—how *deeply* students understood *why* we write in college. And the most exciting, the most professional-life-affirming realization is that they had learned this largely at the community college—mainly, but not exclusively, in the college composition classrooms.

*This* made the entire project worthwhile. Indeed, this makes the *entire project* worthwhile—the entire project of teaching composition and the entire project of education. The method is qualitative and the evidence anecdotal, but the results were for me extremely powerful. The results make each frustrating day, every vexing paper, all the puzzling and puzzled students, all worthwhile.

**How I use the film in class**

I use the film in a variety of ways:

1. I show the “[Introduction](http://users.stlcc.edu/emeyer/Ch00Intro/Ch00Intro.html)” during the first week of class to give students an overview and to motivate them to engage in my course from the start. It also gives them some very good peer role models with whom they usually identify.
2. I show certain segments within the semester as they fit within my syllabus as they reinforce the concepts of the course.
3. As I show certain chapters to students, I start to engage them in a rhetorical analysis of the film. As we learn about unity, coherence, organization, thesis, argument, refutation, tone—whatever it is we are working on—I ask students to identify and explain these same features in the film.
4. This analysis leads inevitably to a discussion of the process of filmmaking. I then engage students in my own process and describe the common elements between the process of research and writing and the process of making a film.

I build the film into the syllabi of all my courses—literature, composition, and interdisciplinary studies. Of course, the film is most useful in composition courses at all levels. I’ll focus here on *College Composition I,* the first of our two-course first-year sequence.

I use the film in small chunks. I show the **“Introduction”** chapter during the first week. Part of the rhetorical goal of the introduction, as the students in the film introduce themselves and describe their majors and name their universities, is to get current students *outside of* our classroom, our college, our city—outside themselves, *and* outside the discipline of English. The concepts and values we teach in the composition classroom—indeed, in any classroom—are “universal” as opposed to merely provincial or just what English teachers care about. Instead, the suggestion is that these values are the general, foundational values in each discipline at each college and university around the country. This in an attempt to stave off the “I don’t know what *you* want” syndrome when it comes to evaluating their work. “It’s not me,” I tell students. “I’ve only learned about these values moments before you have, in the grand scheme.” The film helps me start that long, Sisyphean trek. The student introductions also give current two-year college students very real role models that embody their “future selves.” They can much more clearly project themselves into future majors at a variety of local and out-of-state universities. And the projection is less naïve since these successful students are discussing the *hard work and complex processes* they had to struggle through to get there.

The “**Introduction”** also provides an overview of student attitudes towards their current writing and an important look into their reflections on how difficult writing seemed for them in their first year of college. The chapter suggests that though language is “natural,” writing is—and most importantly, *can be*—learned. It ends on an upbeat note, with St. Louis University psychology student Laura Fewell saying that “what is difficult now will be as easy as can be…as you continue to develop your skills.”

Within the next week of the semester, I show the “**Why Write”** chapter, which first provides an overview of how much students are writing in college and how much of their semester’s grade is based on written work. The chapter then provides some of the most thoughtful reflection on the purpose of writing in college. Students and professors push beyond the notion of writing as mere communication. Writing “deepens one’s understanding,” says dean and history professor Robert Bliss (Pierre Laclede Honors College at University of Missouri—St. Louis) in the film. Students and professors discuss the relationship between writing and thinking and how writing helps develop a much deeper understanding of the subject than merely discussing the topic. Washington University biology student Doug Larson says that writing in the biological sciences “forces” him “to become conversational about the topic.” Laura Fewell discusses the notion that writing helps us “find ourselves in everything.” Eugene Lang College English major Miranda Carter quotes E. M. Forster: “How do I know what I think until I see what I say.” Others pick up on the same idea claiming that writing *is* thinking, that writing gets students outside of themselves. I find this the most thoughtful and useful chapter and always show it early in the semester.

The **“**[**What Is College Writing?**](http://users.stlcc.edu/emeyer/Ch02What_CollegeWriting/Ch02What_CollegeWriting.html)**”** and **“**[**The Writing Process**](http://users.stlcc.edu/emeyer/Ch03_WritingProcess/Ch03_WritingProcess.html)**”** chapters are a fairly nuts-and-bolts look at the features, the structure, and the process of college writing. They reinforce what we are learning in the course and provide other examples and opportunities to make the case that it is not just English professors or composition textbooks that value the basic qualities of effective writing or see the value in a deliberate writing process.

**Beyond the content—the rhetoric and composition of the film**

In addition to the content of each chapter, I also engage students in an analysis of the rhetoric of the film. I use this film and many others in the composition classroom to engage students in rhetorical analysis and to compare and contrast the two media—film and writing. Of the introductory chapter, for example, I ask students about the effect of delaying the fact that the students—who all identify themselves as students in various disciplines at various universities around the country—all started at a community college, *our* community college. What effect is the film trying to have on them? What is the result?

I also ask students, after the “Why Write?” chapter ends, what they think is the “thesis” of the chapter and where did the chapter present it? The very last words of the chapter are University of Miami history professor Warren Dym’s as he summarizes the main points of the chapter, that writing is both a process of discovery and a product by which that discovery is communicated: “So it’s clarity of ideas and expressing those ideas.” After students (usually) identify the thesis, I go back and show the very end of the chapter to reinforce the concept, often to quite a few “aha” looks on their faces. Throughout the semester, then, I use this film and bits and pieces of other films to show the rhetorical features that both film and writing have in common (media literacy is always a part of my course). Each chapter of the college writing film is unified, coherent, has a clear structure, as does the film as a whole. Each chapter is developed, each quotation purposefully chosen and situated with others. Each chapter contributes to the overall argument. Some moments in the film work as refutation. Overall, it gives students alternative visual and aural examples of rhetoric and composition by allowing them to do a close reading of film in conjunction with the essays we analyze in the course.

**My own process**

In addition, I engage students with my own writing and filmmaking process. I tell them how I began thinking about the project, what it was going to be originally, and how it came to be as I discovered unexpected things. I emphasize that constructing a film is quite similar to constructing an essay. I walk them through some of the decisions I had to make while creating the film, from the overall organization, focus and “big ideas,” to other decisions such as pacing and rhythm, transitions between clips, music, and tone. I also discuss the amount of work—especially how much footage I collected to get just fifty minutes of finished film (I collected over nine-hundred minutes of raw footage). This is an important lesson for them since it relates directly to one of the most difficult problems in much of their early writing—*development*. I simply show them how much seemingly over-preparation I put into each chapter. This relates to their own reading, thinking, and researching—most of which is often thin, superficial, short. I show them the Production Chart for each chapter, which astonishes many students because of all the detailed, time-consuming work that goes into even a short video chapter—or a short essay.

**Conclusion**

Overall, most students respond very positively to the film. Seeing their peers in successful situations and hearing them speak so eloquently, so thoughtfully about college writing, about learning—seeing them so *engaged* in their own education—seems to stir something within the current group of students. Of course, this is no magic bullet; the film is but one more tool in our kits. But it does give a unique, powerful, and immediate look into the near educational future of our current students—and that seems to motivate at least some of them.