

Spotlight on First-Year Writing

Editors' Introduction

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Editors of this section have said versions of this before, but we feel compelled to say it again—working with student writers is an incredibly rewarding and educational job. Though we both work with first-year writers regularly, working with writers who are not our students provides us a glimpse into the writing process of those we don't know; these writers teach us a great deal about working with student writers. We hope we learn to ask better questions and read texts and rhetorical intention differently. To work so closely with young writers as they learn more about making careful rhetorical choices is a joy. Student writers work so hard over quarters or semesters to write thoughtful, well-researched essays, and then for a time we get to work with them as they revisit those choices.

This year, the number of essays with arguments based on interesting and thoughtful primary research was impressive. The topics of papers submitted included:

- why students' reading preferences are linked to gender stereotypes
- how McDonald's develops literacy for employees and customers
- how texting does or does not influence first-year writers' expression
- preference for reading traditional textbooks versus narrative texts
- differences in reading preferences by gender
- how researchers develop authority

These essays asked thoughtful questions and the writers conducted thorough research. Not only did researchers pursue conscientious research (clearly requesting participant permission, carefully articulating research goals to participants, etc.), but their papers also meticulously presented their findings in logical organization and discussion.

To build on this successful batch of projects, in the future, we'd like to see writers and instructors working toward imagining publication. Here is what we're looking for: student researchers to engage with text out in the world—current speakers and writers using language, making choices, learning and experimenting with language. When research writers consider questions such as “What are the repercussions of rhetorical choice? How do audience members respond to messages when ——?” students discover some fascinating observations. We ask that instructors help students conceive of a project looking toward publication. What would *YSW* gain from this? What are important questions to ask about this topic? Planning a project from beginning to end and thinking about realistic work with participants is an important learning goal in research writing courses;

aiming toward a *YSW* publication can provide writers a realistic goal, and it is one that requires support from thoughtful instructors.

The publication process remained the same as it has been in the past. Students sweat over their amazing research projects, receive well-deserved praise from instructors, and decide (with encouragement from instructors) to send their pieces to *YSW*, usually revising again with instructor support, after the academic term ends, before submitting. This year student reviewers from Stanford University and Montana State University read each essay twice and offered detailed written responses. Their responses provided us, the faculty editors, with clear and insightful readings of the essays; the reviewers worked hard on this, and their efforts are appreciated.

It was peer-reviewer insights that encouraged us to invite three writers to submit revisions for publication. From there, student writers received in-depth responses from us on draft after draft. As writing teachers, we regularly face criticism and response, thus we know how difficult it can be to come back to a text over and over. These writers showed a level of energy and enthusiasm for the process that was impressive. Of the three students we invited to revise, two completed the process, so that the fourth year of *YSW*'s Spotlight on First-Year Writing includes two impressive pieces.

Michaela Cullington submitted a study, "Texting and Writing," that combined research in a variety of modes—interview, survey, and discourse analysis. Throughout the revising process, she extensively reorganized and streamlined her paper and sharpened her focus on an explanation of her key finding, the mismatch between how much "textspeak" actually appears in student writing and teachers' perceptions on that question.

Brett Feldman's essay, "The Words of War: The Political Rhetoric of Barack Obama and John F. Kennedy," started out as an analysis of John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, mentioning the current political situation only in passing. Upon revision, this focus changed dramatically—he developed an entire new section on Obama's inaugural address and compared the styles and goals of the two presidents. Eventually Feldman incorporated theoretical discussions into the first half of the paper to build a lens through which to analyze the rhetoric of both presidents; then he carefully looked through this lens as he crafted an analysis and comparison of the speeches.

We are grateful to be able to work with students like Brett and Michaela (and their instructors David Shawn and Laurie McMillan). These writers show what even new scholars are capable of when they're highly engaged, well taught, and focused on contributing to knowledge-making rather than just transmitting existing knowledge. As such, they're models for us all.