

# **Do First-Year University Students Know What To Expect from their First-Year Writing Intensive Course?**

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**Title of Research: Do First-Year University Students Know What To Expect from their First-Year Writing Intensive Course?**

Abstract

This study involved a one-time survey of first-year undergraduate students at a Canadian University to determine their expectations when beginning a writing intensive course (i.e., the so-called “W” course, which is required of all first-year undergraduates at the University of Manitoba.) In this study, we focused on the University’s Introduction to University course, a three credit hour course designed to help students make the transition from high school to university. The course covers academic writing and research skills, and identifies ways for students to learn and study more efficiently. Of particular importance to our research, the course focuses on the process of developing mastery of the academic essay.

The purpose of this study was to see what, if any, expectations first-year students have when taking a writing course. Our research question was: What are the expectations for composition instruction of first-year students enrolled in the University of Manitoba’s Introduction to University course?

Our results indicated that first-year students had very high expectations for the kinds of writing processes that would be taught in their course. It was surprising to find that the students expected to acquire declarative knowledge in areas like grammar and punctuation to the same degree that they expected to be taught to employ strategic thinking in their writing.

## **Do First-Year University Students Know What to Expect from their First-Year Writing Intensive Course?**

The history of first-year writing courses in American universities and colleges, and to a lesser degree in Canadian universities, can trace its roots to Harvard University. The English department as a distinct discipline was established in the last quarter of the nineteenth century by Harvard University, which was, at that time, the leader in curriculum reform. The initial purpose of Harvard's English department was to provide instruction in writing (Berlin, 1987). The freshman English class was established in 1874 by then Harvard president Charles William Elliot. Elliot considered writing to be so important to his new curriculum that he made it the only requirement except for that of a modern language. By 1894, composition was the only required course in the curriculum.

For the past two hundred years, not much has changed regarding composition's place in American universities; it still occupies an important place in the academic curricula where the course has a "unique, surprisingly uniform approach to teaching writing" in most institutions (Graves & Graves, 2006, p. 9). First-year composition is a "universal requirement" (Fosen, 2006) that almost every college and university student in the United States must complete in their first year of studies. The course, therefore, has a reputation as a "roadblock" that must be completed before a student is permitted to embark on their preferred major. Maxwell (1997) said that "most students stumble through composition courses, accumulating letter grades and credit hours, without learning to write well" (p.1). He further states that the student has to be the most important part of any student-teacher relationship, meaning that the writing course should be student-centered, rather than teacher-centered.

The fact that first-year composition courses are taken by almost every first-year student in the United States, leaves the course open to criticism. Graves and Graves (2006) suggest that writing programs are built on the “deficit model”, where the goal of the course appears to be one of fixing broken writers. Howard (2007) also seems to hold this belief, stating that first-year composition needs to be seen “as part of an open-ended course of instruction, rather than as a dumping ground for the grammatically challenged” (p. 49). Fosen (2006) found that students seem to see first-year writing courses as having little cultural meaning or worth; these courses “construe writing as a remedial skill that must precede even the foundational work of students’ other general education courses” (p. 20).

Downs and Wardle (2007) observed that “first-year composition is usually asked to prepare students to write across the university; this discourse assumes the existence of a ‘universal education discourse’ that can be transferred from one writing situation to another” (p.552). The authors also suggest that more than twenty years of research has clearly demonstrated that such a unified academic discourse does not exist and have questioned what it is that students actually are able to transfer from one context to another. In fact, Downs and Wardle (2007) question how it is possible to teach students how to write in one or two semesters. They contend that instructors who try to teach writing in this way silently support the misconceptions that writing is not a real subject, that writing courses do not require expert instructors, and that writing courses are trivial, skill teaching non-disciplines.

Canada, unlike the United States, does not have a history of prescribing true first-year composition courses that all first-year students must take. Hunt (2006) says “that there’s nothing remotely resembling the situation in the U.S., where universities have offered, for many decades, mammoth programs designed to administer writing instructions to either all or most of their first-

year students” (p. 371). Graves and Graves (2006) discovered that there is a “baffling variety of writing courses, centres, programs, and degrees offered at Canadian universities” (p.1). They further contend that “almost any approach to teaching writing has been or currently is being taught somewhere in Canada” (p.1). In fact, there is a “baffling variety” even within a single institution: “sometimes departments of faculties/colleges develop and fund their own writing centres and each centre works more or less independently creating innovative and imaginative solutions to the specific constraints of their own curricula and the requirements of their students” (Graves & Graves, p. 7). According to the authors, Canadian universities, in most cases, focus on “academic writing rather than composition” (p.6).

Smith (2006) says that “writing instruction in Canada has been changing rapidly between 1995-2005, moving in the direction of inter-disciplinarity and toward the development of professional writing and rhetoric programs housed in various departments” (p.320). Originally, these courses were taught only in the English department, but “that changed in the 1980s when courses outside the English department became eligible, greatly expanding the number of options to satisfy the requirement” (Bartlett, 2003, p. 2). Bartlett said that the main problem with this approach is that some students got excellent instruction and others did not.

At the University of Manitoba, every undergraduate student must complete a writing intensive course of some kind before graduation. These “writing intensive “courses are offered by a wide variety of disciplines. In order to qualify for the “W” designation as a writing intensive course at the University of Manitoba, there are certain requirements that must be met: 1) There must be a minimum of three pieces of written work of 3-5 pages; or, 2) there must be a minimum of two pieces of written work of 6-8 pages; and, 3) there must be a minimum total word count of 3,000; and there must be feedback on style as well as content. As well, the written

work must include a written description or argument that is clear, concise, and logically structured and that reflects an appropriate awareness of the audience or readership being addressed. As it is written, the requirement serves largely as an exit requirement and does little to indicate either the pedagogical underpinnings for such courses or the specific objectives or outcomes for such courses.

### *Learning Outcomes for First-Year Writing Courses*

First-year writing intensive courses need to be structured so that students can “take stock of the literacy skills they have already acquired, encounter new expectations, and expand their repertoires” (Carroll, 2002, p. 120). She goes on to say that first-year writing intensive courses need to lead students to be able to reflect on their learning. Writing intensive courses that emphasize rhetorical analysis and the processes of reading and writing, taught by instructors who are knowledgeable in the teaching of writing, provide the types of environment that will lead to student reflection. This focus on meta-cognitive awareness, in addition to the development of new writing skills, is as useful for the “students who already know ‘how to write’ as it is for less well-prepared writers” (p. 121). Carroll tells us “that without this awareness, good writers may find it difficult to change writing strategies that have worked for them in the past” (p. 121).

Flower and Hayes (1981) developed a writing model that facilitated the development of meta-cognition. It provided a way to account for individual differences in how writers compose. Flower and Hayes theorized that there were a “relatively small number of cognitive processes that were able to account for a diverse set of mental operations during composing” (p.188). This model led to the investigation of the effectiveness of cognitive-oriented approaches to writing instruction. MacArthur, Graham and Fitzgerald, (2006) say that “the purpose of such instruction

is to change how writers' compose by helping them employ more sophisticated composing processes when writing" (p. 188).

In undertaking our survey, we selected the University of Manitoba's Introduction to University course. This is a three-credit course designed to help students make the transition from high school to university. It is an interdisciplinary course on academic writing, research, and critical thinking. The course covers academic writing and research skills, and identifies ways for students to learn and study more efficiently. In particular, it stresses the importance of developing mastery of the academic essay. Over the course of any academic year, up to one-quarter of the University's first-year students will take the course to satisfy their "W" requirement.

The purpose of this study was to see what, if any, expectations first-year students have when taking a writing course. Our research question was: What are the expectations for writing instruction of first-year students enrolled in the University of Manitoba's Introduction to University course?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Student expectations of writing intensive courses are not always consistent with the research into the relative effectiveness of instructional procedures for improving writing. In investigating writing instruction, Hillocks (1986) observed that the important question was "to what extent are the findings about process compatible with findings about instruction" (p. 223). One might ask, similarly, whether the findings about writing process are compatible with student expectations of writing intensive courses. Writers operate with a repertoire of knowledge when writing; these include lexical, syntactic, and generic forms to generate a discourse. Writers also

have to call upon strategies that will help them process their ideas into the discourse. Hillocks (1986), differentiates between two types of knowledge: 1) declarative, or knowledge of what; and, 2) procedural, or knowledge of how. Hillocks found that traditional approaches to teaching composition have concentrated on the declarative knowledge of grammar (the naming of parts of speech and sentences). The research that Hillocks examined found that approaches that focused on procedural knowledge (sentence-combining, scales, inquiry) are more successful than those which focused on declarative knowledge.

In their research on writing as a cognitive process, Flower and Hayes (1981) identified the importance of effective decision making at critical junctures in the writing process. Flower and Hayes have said that “there is a venerable tradition in rhetoric and composition which sees the composing process as a series of decisions and choices” (p. 365) They go on to argue, however, that “it is no longer easy simply to assert this position unless you are prepared to answer a number of questions, the most pressing of which is: ‘what then are the criteria which govern that choice?’” (p. 365). Flower and Hayes ask that question even more directly: “What guides the decisions writers make as they write?” (p. 365). The cognitive process theory rests on four key points (Flower & Hayes, 1981):

1. The process of writing is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes which writers orchestrate or organize during the act of composing.
2. These processes have a hierarchical, highly embedded organization in which any given process can be embedded within any other.
3. The act of composing itself is a goal-directed thinking process, guided by the writer’s own growing network of goals.



4. Writers create their own goals in two key ways: by generating both high level goals and supporting sub-goals which embody the writers' developing sense of purpose: and then, at times, by changing major goals or even establishing entirely new ones based on what has been learned in the act of writing.

Of significance to this study is the question of whether or not students recognize the primary importance of decision making in writing. Though the survey was not designed to permit students to rank their expectations of first-year writing intensive classes in order of importance, it was nevertheless surprising to find that the students expected to acquire declarative knowledge in areas like grammar and punctuation to the same degree that they expected to be taught to employ strategic thinking in their writing.

Studies in meta-cognition have also found that students benefit from an education that permits them to reflect upon their writing process and choose between appropriate writing strategies. In particular, according to Olson and Astington (1993), meta-cognitive competence allows students to be taught in one setting and to transfer that knowledge to other subjects in other settings, as well. The intention of a meta-cognitive approach to writing is to render the implicit, explicit or, more simply to allow students to see the purposes and processes of writing. "Many cognitive researchers believe that the overall efficiency of the intellectual system depends upon meta-cognitive abilities, or 'knowing about knowing' (Ferrari & Sternberg, 1988, p.909).

## **Methodology**

### *Subjects/Participants*

Participants were 130 students recruited from first year “W” courses offered at the University of Manitoba through University 1. All participants were students enrolled in the Arts 1110 Introduction to University Course, during the 2009 Fall term. Arts 1110, is an interdisciplinary course on composition, research, and critical thinking.

Of the 130 students who filled in the survey, the majority of them fell in the under-20 years of age category (114), which is not surprising considering that it was a first-year writing course. There were almost equal numbers of female (69) and male (61) participants. As well, the sample group included students from different nationalities, including students who were ELL (English Language Learners).

### **Procedure**

Participants were invited to fill out the survey at the end of one of their regularly scheduled classes. Since the instructor was one of the researchers, it was imperative that he have no contact with the students during the survey so he left the room before the survey was distributed. The other researcher explained to the students that participation was strictly voluntary and anonymous, and assured them that, whether they chose to fill in the survey or not, their decision would not impact their grades.

Surveys took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

## **Research Instrument**

The research instrument, appended as Appendix A, was a survey analyzed quantitatively. The survey asked students for their opinions regarding what they expected to learn in the “W” writing course offered through University 1. We selected the 16 statements because they represent the stated objectives of the course, and they also represent a broad array of instructional norms and values that instructors would be expected to teach in the “W” course.

## **Data Analysis**

This survey employed a five point Likert scale which allowed respondents to specify their level of agreement to a statement. The choices ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree for each statement. There were a total of 16 statements on the survey which asked students to comment on what they expected to learn in their first-year writing course. Each item was analyzed separately using frequency distribution. The use of frequency distribution charts allowed us to determine which score occurred the most frequently for each statement (see Table 1).

## **Results and Discussion**

In their seminal research on cognitive process theory, Flower and Hayes (1981) reported that effective writing derives from effective decision-making in each of the related cognitive processes that comprise the writing act. As Gagne, Yekovich, and Yekovich (1993) reported, “writing is a highly complex activity with many component processes”, requiring “the acquisition of both declarative and procedural knowledge” and a “conceptual understanding of the nature and purpose of writing” (p. 314-15).

At the beginning of composing, the most important element is the rhetorical problem. Flower and Hayes (1981) tell us that “a school assignment is a simplified version of the [rhetorical] problem, describing the writer’s topic, audience, and [implicitly] his/her role as a student” (p. 369). Attending to these different elements can be difficult for some writers. Writing involves a complex set of thinking skills, and, writers only solve the problems they define for themselves; “if a writer’s representation of the theoretical problem is inaccurate or simply underdeveloped, then he/she is unlikely to ‘solve’ or attend to the missing aspects of the problem” (Flower & Hayes, 1981, p. 371). They further state, that, as composing proceeds, a new element enters the task environment, which places even more constraints upon what the writer can say. It is the growing text that makes large demands on the writer’s time and attention during composing. The developing and organization of ideas provides a juggling act for the writer as they attempt to integrate “the multiple constraints of their knowledge, their plans, and their text into the production of each new sentence” (Flower & Hayes, 1981, p. 371).

Flower and Hayes (1981) differentiated between novice and expert writers when discussing the cognitive processes of writing. Novice writers are “those whose writing is judged to be of poorer quality – children or first-year college students” (Kozma, 1991, p.32). Kozma defined expert writers “as those judged to have better compositions” (p.32). He discovered that “experienced writers have more knowledge, skill, and strategies, and [they have] increased experience [with structure, so that these processes] make fewer demands on short term memory” (p.33). As well, it is the differences in cognitive behaviour during writing that distinguish between the more or less experienced writers. Kozma (1991) points out that one of the most “distinctive characteristic of novice writers is that they oversimplify the representation of the task” (p.33). Novice writers tend to put all of the information they have in their long-term

memory into their compositions. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) refer to this practise as ‘knowledge-telling’. Novices have vague top-level goals and spend more time at lower-level goals, dealing with surface structure of the text (Flower & Hayes, 1981). In contrast, “experts tend to formulate the task in terms of two sets of problems or goals: those related to topic ideas and those related to their expression in the text “ (Kozma, 1991, p.33).

It is through an internalization of language and strategies for approaching new writing tasks that differentiate the novice and the expert writer. Carroll (2002) said that “one important measure of students’ growth, as writers, was their increasing meta-cognitive awareness” (p. 126). As a result, expert writers become “better able to assess their own proficiency and target areas where they were still struggling and could continue to improve” (Carroll, 2002, p. 126). Such meta-cognitive awareness helps further learning and is central to development as a writer. Carroll (2002) found that “although students value learning specific literacy skills, developing meta-cognitive awareness is equally valuable” (p. 120). Bruner (1996) argued that “achieving skill and accumulating knowledge are not enough. The learner can be helped to achieve full mastery by reflecting as well upon how she [he] is going about her [his] job and how her [his] approach can be improved” (p. 64). Carroll (2002) found that first-year writing courses with an emphasis on rhetorical analysis are appropriate places for meta-cognitive reflection. The study of meta-cognition makes it clear that students must internalize and come to know that knowledge, instructors must learn to understand how various categories of student expectations may either improve their chances of learning or possibly impede them. As a result, we were very interested in what our students’ expectations were for their first-year writing course.

In our survey, we found that 94% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they expected the instructor would teach them how to effectively use reference materials. Learning how to organize reference material is a skill that falls into the planning stage. Assignments that teach research skills can help students gain confidence and facility in using research tools, a better understanding of disciplinary criteria, and a sense of how scholars use resources in their research. However, as Hayes and Flower (1986) observed, “knowledge of a topic will not necessarily enable an individual to produce clear, much less effective writing” (p. 1108).

When looking at what was expected in terms of learning the rules of structure and grammar that govern academic writing, we found that 72% agreed or strongly agreed that they would learn the rules of structure and grammar, 10% of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed, and almost 18% of the students had no opinion. This expectation that a writing intensive course would focus on rules of structure and grammar is consistent with Hayes and Flower’s (1986) finding that novice writers will focus to a greater extent on error avoidance than on communicating meaning. Atwell (1981), working within the Flower and Hayes cognitive process model (1981), discovered that less-skilled writers had the goal of avoiding mechanical errors. It is, however, at odds with the literature guiding the teaching of writing. Hillocks (1986) found that grammar study had little or no effect on the improvement of writing. He went on to say that the findings of research on the composing process do not give us a reason to expect that the study of grammar or mechanics will have any effect on the writing process or on writing ability as shown in the quality of written products. Flower and Hayes (1981) also observed that competent writers do not just generate sentences, but they generate them after thinking about purpose and content.

In our study we found that 87%, of the students, agreed or strongly agreed that they would learn to think critically, only 1.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 12% had no opinion. Because Flower and Hayes (1981) argue that the “process of writing is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes which writers orchestrate or organize during the act of composing” (p. 366), the ability to exercise critical thought during the composing process seems to be a skill of particular importance. A difficulty with the survey was that the operative definition of critical thinking was not provided in the question and therefore it is not clear whether the respondents were answering with the same understanding of the term as we assumed.

We found in our study that only 2% strongly agreed that they expected that they would read a number of books in class, 27% agreed, 38% had no opinion, and 35% disagreed or strongly disagreed. There are two aspects of reading in a writing class that are worthy of consideration: 1) that it might provide access to various schemata or skeletal frameworks; and, 2) that it might provide access to sources of information. Flower and Hayes (1981) suggest that writers may be guided by schemata of various kinds in their writing processes. Hillocks (1986), however, has said that, according to available research, the study of models does not have much impact on the improvement of writing.

We found that 92% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they expected to learn the conventions of formatting using such guidelines as APA or MLA, 5% had no opinion and 2% disagreed. Hayes and Flower (1986) have noted that some writers “write poorly because they do not have command of effective writing formats at the sentence, paragraph, or whole text levels” (p.1108). They further found, in their research, that “expert writers draw on textual

conventions and genre patterns in other discourse schemas to give shape to their planning” (p.1108).

In the survey, 79% of the students, either agreed or strongly agreed that they expected to receive a rubric or marking outline from the instructor for every assignment in the course, while 5% disagreed and 15% had no opinion. Hillocks (1986) found that the use of rubrics or scales enabled students to think about matters beyond the level of syntax: to evaluate information, to organize information, and to concentrate on the purpose of the whole. He further discovered that the studies on marking criteria indicated rather clearly that engaging writers actively in the use of criteria, whether that applied to their own writing or to the writing of others results not only in more effective revisions but in superior first drafts.

The survey revealed that 85% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that, in addition to the rubric, they expected to receive a grading policy that would indicate how papers would be graded. Only 3% of the students disagreed, while 11% had no opinion. Hayes and Flower (1986) observe that strategic knowledge plays an important role in complex writing tasks allowing students to monitor and direct their own writing processes. By understanding the grading policy, students are better able to determine whether “the writer’s goal is simply to say what he or she knows about the topic” (p.1108) or rather the goal is to select and organize that knowledge into a package designed for the reader.

When asked if they expected to learn how to edit and revise their papers, 88% said that they agreed or strongly agreed with that statement, fewer than 1% disagreed. Surprisingly 12% had no opinion. In their research, Hayes and Flower (1986) found that “college freshman devote less than 9% of their composing time to reading and revising” (p. 1110). They further note that



the “more expert the writer the greater proportion of writing time the writer will spend in revision.” (p. 1110). In addition, they realized that “experts and novices differed systematically in their implicit definitions of the revision task” (p.1110) with experts defining revision as a whole -text and novices defining revision as a sentence-level task.

Only one of the statements in the survey asked students to report on their expectation regarding the summarization and analysis of text. We found that 87% of the students said that they expected to learn how to summarize and analyze, 12% disagreed and 11% had no opinion. During the writing process, writers have to be constantly summarizing the information that they have, analyzing how the material fits into the discourse and making decisions about the suitability of the information. From these decisions comes the rewriting and reviewing that is a necessary part of the writing process.

Ninety-seven percent of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they would learn how to write a thesis statement, fewer than 1% disagreed and 2% had no opinion. In writing a thesis statement, the writer has to accomplish a great deal of explicit planning before writing so that he/she will have a more detailed representation of what he/she wants to say. It is the reciprocity between writing and planning that enables the writer to learn, even from a failure, and to set a new goal. Flower and Hayes (1981) see the planning process as one in which the writer uses “a goal to generate ideas, then consolidate those ideas and use them to revise or regenerate new, more complex goals,” (p. 386). As Flower and Hayes see it, the “function of the planning process is to take information from the task environment and from long term memory and to use it to set goals and establish a plan to guide production of a text that will meet those goals” (p. 387).

We found that 94% of the students expected to learn how to develop ideas logically with sub-topics, examples, and explanation. No one in the class disagreed, and 6% had no opinion. Hayes and Flower (1986) found that, in the planning process, writers “frequently identify sub-goals on the route to ... major goals” (p.1107) and that “the sub-goals may, in turn, have their own sub-goals” (p.1107). Significantly, Hayes and Flower discovered that the ability to arrange goals in a hierarchical structure is necessary for successful writing. In addition, they observed that the “the perception of dissonance” (p.1110) is often a cue for the writer to change the text.

When asked if they expected to learn how to organize ideas coherently, 95% of the class agreed or strongly agreed with that statement. There were no students who disagreed and 5% had no opinion. Hayes and Flower (1986) report that the “network of goals is ...a dynamic structure” (p.1109) which is “built and developed and sometimes radically restructured even at the top levels, as the writer composes and responds to new ideas or to his or her own text” (p.1109). They further note that “writers set up top-level goals that they develop with plans and sub-goals” (p/1109). The process of learning to organize ideas coherently seems to be related to this response to changing priorities in the text. As Hayes and Flower (1986) note, the ability to “[modify] writing goals may be essential for good writing” (p.1109).

Seventy-nine percent of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they expected to learn how to craft clear, concise and varied sentences, approximately 5% of the students did not agree, and 17% had no opinion. Flower and Hayes (1981) say that, when a writer is trying to construct a sentence, he/she may run into a problem and call in a condensed version of the entire writing process (e.g. the writer might generate and organize a new set of ideas, express them in standard English, and review the alternative). Teaching students how to write more syntactically mature sentences is important (Hillocks, 1986). In sentence construction, writers must make decisions

about which details are important and which are not. Hayes and Flower (1986) found that the major differences between expert writers and average writers were that the expert writers wrote significantly longer essays (786 words per essay for experts and 464 words per essay for average writers) and that experts wrote significantly longer sentences (11.2 words per sentence for experts and 7.3 words per sentence for average writers). They suggest that this ability to work in large units is, at least in part, what it means to be a fluent writer.

The students who agreed, or strongly agreed, that they expected to learn how to write for a specific audience and purpose comprised 85% of the students, no one disagreed and the remaining 15% had no opinion. Hillocks (1986) discovered that “only a very few studies have dealt with how awareness of the needs of particular audiences affects writing” (p. 234). In his meta-analysis, Hillocks found that specifying the audience does not result in better pieces of writing. In fact, specifications of audience and purpose may make the task too complex for some writers.

Only 60% of the students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they would work collaboratively in their writing, 8% strongly disagreed and, 32% had no opinion. Hayes and Flower (1986) found that students had difficulty detecting faults in their own texts, suggesting that writers’ knowledge of their own texts may make it difficult to recognize problems. Flower and Higgins (1991) observed that “the presence of a partner forces writers to explain, elaborate, or in some cases, simply try to articulate thoughts, doubts, fragments, assumptions, and ambiguities that are often left unsaid in thinking to one’s self” (p.4). They further discovered that “in the social dynamics of collaborative planning not only the teacher but each partner models constructive planning, in the form of rhetorical, reflective thinking, for the other” (p.10). Thus, the partner in collaboration provides a scaffold (Vygotsky, 1987), that helps writers not

only attend to the parts of the problem, but to persist and elaborate their thinking, and to consolidate what eventually emerges from the writing process. It should be noted that our definition of collaboration was not given out to the students on the survey, which could have led to a different interpretation from the one we intended.

It was interesting to see that 94% of the students agreed, or strongly agreed, that they would be able to transfer the writing strategies they learned in first-year composition to other courses that they were taking. No one disagreed that they would be able to transfer the strategies and 6% had no opinion. While it is encouraging that students believe so strongly in the transferability of writing skills, their optimism is not supported by research. Carroll (2002) tells us that “while some college faculty members and administrators cling to the myth that adequately prepared students should be able to write fluently and correctly on any topic, at any time, in any context, ...even students who are generally successful in high school are unable to fulfill this fantasy” (p. xi). Transferability of writing skills across the disciplines continues to be a question that is problematic.

This study demonstrated that students have high expectations of their writing class, though it is not clear whether they believe each of the topics identified in the survey to be equally important. We did not discover, for instance, whether their expectations of instruction in writing strategies were higher than their expectations of instruction in matters of declarative knowledge. In fact, we do not know whether the prompting provided by the survey suggested expectations to the students that they might not have already had. We consider this study to be a pilot that will enable us to focus future research on students’ expectations more precisely.

## Conclusions and Limitations

The premise of first-year writing courses is that they can help students become better writers. Instructors of these courses operate on the assumption that they can suggest effective writing strategies that will indeed help foster better writing. Carroll (2002), in her study of first-year college students, found that students did not necessarily learn to write better, but they did “learn to write differently – to produce new, more complicated texts, addressing challenging topics with greater depth and complexity” (p. xii). She goes on to say that her study “demonstrated that the ‘basic skills’ necessary to negotiate complex literacy tasks in college go far beyond the ability to produce grammatically correct, conventional, thesis-driven school room essays” (p. xii). It is not clear that students have the same understanding of the cognitive skills necessary to produce successful essays.

Our study attempted to find out what it is that first-year students expect to learn in their writing intensive courses. We were hoping that the data would prove useful to writing specialists who teach first-year writing courses, and to faculty who want to improve student writing. The statements in the survey identified various aspects of writing instruction, ranging from declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge.

When we reviewed the results, it became apparent that the majority of the students surveyed had many common expectations for the writing intensive course in which they were enrolled. The majority of the students’ responses to the statements on the survey were in the agreed/strongly agreed category. These strong expectations were not anticipated since we were not sure if first-year students had developed any expectations at all. It was clear that they had.

Albertson (2006) observed that “students need more explicit teaching of assumed, basic literacy practices”. She further states that “one of the major areas for improvement is in encouraging faculty to teach with more explicit methods so that more students can move from where they are situated in their literacy competence to where the faculty expect their students to be”. In other words, faculty have to “offer an earnest commitment to improving instruction and student performance” (Andrade, 2007). By identifying students’ expectations of the writing class and comparing those expectations to the instructor’s intentions, the instructor is better able to identify the dissonance between the students’ understanding of writing instruction and the instructor’s pedagogical practice. In understanding that dissonance, the instructor is better able to enter into the kind of conversation with his or her students that results in a mutual understanding of the writing process.

Once the data were analyzed it became clear that the data was heavily skewed in the categories of agree and strongly agree. In short, it appeared that students, expected to learn everything about the writing process, and did not distinguish between the importance of any of the topics identified on the survey. In retrospect, we realized that we should have structured our study using a pre- and post-test format. This would have allowed us to compare the students’ expectations prior to the class with their reported experiences at the conclusion of the class. In addition, we feel that it might have been useful to survey the students using a rank order scale rather than the Likert scale. In using the rank order scale, we would have discovered not only the writing processes students expected to learn, but also the relative importance that they assigned to each. We also feel that we ought to have provided operative definitions for some of the terms to ensure that the students’ understanding of those terms corresponded with our own.

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## Appendix A Survey of First-Year Students

**Survey of Undergraduate Students in Arts 1110 Intro to University**

*Thank you for agreeing to participate in our study by filling in this short survey. Please do not put your name or student number on the survey; these surveys are meant to be completely anonymous.*

Gender      Male              Female

Age              Under 20      20-25              26-29              Over 29

1. I expect my instructor to teach me how to effectively use reference materials.

Strongly Agree      Agree              No Opinion      Disagree              Strongly Disagree

2. I expect to learn the rules of structure and grammar that govern academic writing.

Strongly Agree      Agree              No Opinion      Disagree              Strongly Disagree

3. I expect to learn how to think critically.

Strongly Agree      Agree              No Opinion      Disagree              Strongly Disagree

4. I expect to have to read a number of books in this course.

Strongly Agree      Agree              No Opinion      Disagree              Strongly Disagree

5. I expect to learn the conventions of how to format an essay (eg. APA, MLA).

Strongly Agree      Agree              No Opinion      Disagree              Strongly Disagree

6. I expect to receive a rubric or marking outline from my instructor for every assignment in this course.

Strongly Agree      Agree              No Opinion      Disagree              Strongly Disagree

7. I expect my instructor to give me a grading policy concerning how papers are graded in this course, over and above the rubrics.

Strongly Agree      Agree              No Opinion      Disagree              Strongly Disagree

8. I expect to learn to edit and revise my papers for re-marking.

Strongly Agree      Agree              No Opinion      Disagree              Strongly Disagree

9. I expect to learn how to summarize and analyse text.

Strongly Agree      Agree      No Opinion      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

10. I expect to learn how to write a thesis statement which establishes the main idea of my paper.

Strongly Agree      Agree      No Opinion      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

11. I expect to learn how to develop ideas logically with sub-topics, examples and explanations.

Strongly Agree      Agree      No Opinion      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

12. I expect to learn how to organize ideas coherently.

Strongly Agree      Agree      No Opinion      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

13. I expect to learn how to craft clear, concise, and varied sentences.

Strongly Agree      Agree      No Opinion      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

14. I expect to learn how to write using a tone appropriate to audience and purpose.

Strongly Agree      Agree      No Opinion      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

15. I expect that I will work collaboratively with my fellow students at some time in this class.

Strongly Agree      Agree      No Opinion      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

16. I expect that I will be able to transfer the writing strategies I learn in this course to other courses I am taking.

Strongly Agree      Agree      No Opinion      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

**Table 1 Results at a Glance – Survey of First Year Composition Students**

<b>Statement – I expect to ...</b>	<b>Strongly Agree/Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree/Disagree</b>
<b>Learn how to use reference materials</b>	93.8%	5.4%	.8%
<b>Learn the rules of structure and grammar</b>	72.3%	17.7%	10.0%
<b>Learn how to think critically</b>	86.9%	11.5%	1.5%
<b>Expect to have to read a number of books in class</b>	26.9%	37.7%	35.4%
<b>Learn how to format an essay using APA, MLA</b>	92.3%	5.4%	2.3%
<b>Receive a rubric or marking outline for every assignment</b>	79.2%	15.4%	5.4%
<b>Get a grading policy, over and above the rubric</b>	85.4%	11.5%	3.1%
<b>Learn how to edit and revise</b>	87.7%	11.5%	.8%
<b>Learn how to summarize and analyze</b>	86.9%	11.5%	1.5%
<b>Learn how to write a thesis statement</b>	96.9%	2.3%	.8%
<b>Learn how to develop ideas logically</b>	93.8%	6.2%	0%
<b>Learn how to organize ideas coherently</b>	94.6%	5.4%	0%

*Continued...*

<b>Learn how to craft clear, concise, and varied sentences</b>	78.5%	16.9%	4.6%
<b>Learn how to write for purpose and audience</b>	84.6%	15.4%	0%
<b>That I will work collaboratively</b>	60%	32.3%	7.7%
<b>Learn how to transfer writing strategies to other courses</b>	93.8%	6.2%	0%

**Source: Data from First-Year Writing Survey – University of Manitoba**

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