

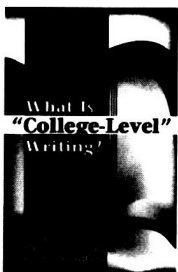
large number of students who are enrolling in such classes, we need to carefully consider what it means to teach developmental writing and what it means to be a basic writer. Bartholomae's collection, *Writing on the Margins*, invites us into the conversation.

reviewed by
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What Is "College-Level" Writing?

by Patrick Sullivan and Howard Tinberg.

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In the introduction to *What Is "College-Level" Writing?*, editors Patrick Sullivan and Howard Tinberg state flat out "that there are no simple answers to the question, 'What is college-level writing?'" (xiii) because the subject is as diverse as the students who fill first-year writing courses. *What Is "College-Level" Writing?* builds upon questions raised in Thomas Thompson's edited collection *Teaching Writing in High School and College* (NCTE, 2002), and seeks to set standards from which college writing can be judged. The essays included in *Teaching Writing* discuss bridging the gap between high school English and first-year composition classes by giving real-world examples of collaborations. The discussions in *What Is College-Level Writing?* are theoretical and pragmatic, personal, and from diverse authors; it picks up where *Teaching Writing* left off.

What Is "College-Level" Writing? begins with the essay from Sullivan originally published in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College (TETYC)*, which ultimately served as the catalyst for the book. Sullivan and Tinsberg divide their book into four sections: High School Perspectives, College Perspectives, Student Perspectives, and Administrative Perspectives. Each section comprises essays from authors in each field. The classification is natural and fluid. The main theme developed throughout the collection deals with the need for communication about what makes writing college level. Authors included range from a middle school teacher in New Mexico to a community college professor in Tallahassee, Florida. This diverse group gives examples across race, class, and geographic borders, painting a broad picture of the field.

The High School Perspectives section consists of four essays from high school English teachers. Historically, high school English teachers have been blamed for the problems in college-level writing, but not widely consulted for a solution (59–60). In her essay, "Whistling in the Dark," Merrill Davies equates her experience teaching high school English "to walking along and pretending to be confident in the dark when in fact we are scared to death" (31). Davies advocates for better teacher education and more consistent communication between high school and college instructors in order to better align high school writing goals with college expectations (35).

Expounding further on the idea that communication between high school and college educators is vital, Milka Lustenikova Mosley writes in her

essay, "The Truth about High School English," ". . . our English classes are not composition classes" (61). This is all too true and usually overlooked when discussing the shortcomings of first-year college-level writing students. Blame is often quickly placed on high school teachers for not preparing students properly. However, the high school English class, as Mosley contends, consists of literature review, grammar, study skills, vocabulary, and preparing for standardized testing—all in addition to composition (61). This essay illustrates a situation where the right hand does not seem to know what the left is doing. College professors have no idea what is taught in high school classrooms, yet they blame high school instructors for students' shortcomings, while high school teachers teach blindly in hopes of preparing students for college. The solution Mosley proposes echoes one discussed previously: a bridge in the communication gap between instructors (67).

The College Perspective section of the text includes essays from college educators discussing their ideas on what college-level writing is. It begins with an essay exploring the phenomenon of accepting mediocre work as "good enough." In "Good Enough Writing: What is Good Enough Writing Anyway?" Lynn Z. Bloom shines a spotlight on the standards set by professors and universities to illuminate the hypocrisies and double-talk often practiced by English departments. Bloom writes, "Although many American colleges and universities claim to strive for excellence, they will be reasonably contented with BS" (71). Some of the characteristics of "good enough writing" that

Bloom details include rationality, that is, a logical progression of ideas often taking the shape of the five-paragraph essay adherence to Standard English; order; decorum; and conformity, or "coloring within the party lines" (73–82). These are quantifiable and teachable skills students can easily integrate into their writing. It is the difficult-to-measure, the difficult-to-teach proficiencies, such as critical thinking, questioning authority, and experimentation with language, form, style, and voice that equate to great writing (Bloom 83).

The Student Perspective section of the text consists of three essays from college students who describe their personal experiences with college writing. The essay that takes the strongest stance on and provides the most conclusive definition of college writing in the text is included in this section. In "The Great Conversation (of the Dining Hall): One Student's Experience of College-Level Writing," Kimberly L. Nelson documents step-by-step her initial experience with writing in an advanced humanities course taken during her first semester of college. Nelson's writing is specific and personal, offering educators the student's perspective on composition. She does not shy away from giving absolutes as she exposes the raw experience students often experience.

The essay highlights ingredients that are necessary in the development of college-level writing. Nelson describes the writing process as more than words on a page: ". . . I learned that to write at the college level requires not only a thorough knowledge of the material to be discussed, but also a cogent, thoughtful, and passionately presented

synthesis of that material" (283). Nelson depicts her process as not only written but also involving oral exchange: "Reflective thinking is something we learn to do, and we learn to do it from other people" (286). Throughout the process she relies upon her professor, the university writing lab, and other students to fully flesh out ideas and organize her thoughts.

In the most practical section of the text, *Administrative Perspectives*, the essays look at writing from a departmental point of view. In "College-Level Writing: A Departmental Perspective," James M. Gentile defines critical issues facing English departments in universities across the country. Gentile describes issues administrators consider when planning an effective program, such as general education requirements, standardized syllabi, and articulation agreements. The importance of writing is sometimes lost among the politics of a university setting; however, Gentile emphasizes that administrators must always be committed to skill building and writing development (324). Gentile notes that the skills acquired in first-year composition classes are subjective and often difficult to assess, despite the fact that intellectual growth and cognitive development are the goals of administration (325). These claims directly contradict those made by Bloom in her essay on "good enough" writing. Bloom contends that the focus of universities has shifted from standards and accurate assessment to a more pragmatic approach, while Gentile contends that although the focus may seem lost amidst the red tape, it still exists. The stance each of these essays take may clash, but

it is this conflict and conversation the editors intended to promote discussion (xv).

After compiling the essays for the text, the editors took a step toward opening communication between high school and college writing teachers by posting the collected essays online, allowing the contributors to read others' work and comment on an interactive website. Some of those communications are included as an appendix, with the remainder available online at http://www.mcc.comnet.edu/faculty/college_writing/ (378). The responses raise further questions and continue discussions that the essays from the text started.

According to Sullivan and Tinberg, the goal of *What Is "College-Level" Writing?* is to foster a productive discussion among educators about college writing. Their book builds upon conversations already taking place in the field and those raised by Thompson and the contributors in *Teaching Writing*. The essays included come from a wide variety of schools and speak to multiple pedagogies. The points of view are sometimes contradictory, showing the diversity of the field of composition. But conflict will only encourage further debate, which is what the editors aimed for. The goal of this text is to attempt to define college-level writing. Although it does not deliver a definitive answer, the essays are a step forward in arriving at one. Frank discussions among educators started in and inspired by this text are vital to arriving at a definition.

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