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2011

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Guzy, Annmarie, "Why Honors Students Still Need First-Year Composition" (2011). *Honors in Practice -- Online Archive*. 139.

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Why Honors Students Still Need First-Year Composition

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Dear Incoming Honors Freshman,

Let me be among the first to welcome you to the honors program at Regional Public University. During your orientation today, you will be registering for your fall semester courses, and as you browse through the class listings, let me strongly recommend that you include first-year Honors Composition in your schedule even if you have taken AP English Literature and Composition or English Language and Composition courses and exams.

According to the College Board, the company that administers the Advanced Placement program, enrollment in AP has increased dramatically over the past decade. As you can see in Table 1 below, the number of high schools offering AP exams to one or more students has increased by 34%, and the number of colleges accepting AP credit has increased by 27%. At the same time, the number of students participating in the AP program has increased 140%, and the number of AP examinations has increased 155%.

Table 1: AP Participation, 1998–99 and 2008–09

Year	High Schools	Students	Examinations	Colleges
1998–99	12,886	704,298	1,149,515	3,007
2008–09	17,374	1,691,905	2,929,929	3,809

Source: “Annual AP Program Participation 1956–2009”

In a December 2009 forum titled “The Advanced Placement Juggernaut” on *The New York Times* website’s “Room for Debate” blog, six educators and administrators discuss these increases and their implications. In her entry on “The Educational Cost,” Kristin Klopfenstein attributes the increases to the fact that the AP program has been transformed from its original purpose of providing college-level material to advanced high school students into something that reaches beyond classroom instruction: “For students, taking A.P. [sic] courses signals academic ability and work ethic to prospective colleges. For high schools, having a lot of A.P. classes signals quality to the community and real estate markets. For educational reformers, offering the program has become a way to provide academic rigor with accountability in the form of standardized end-of-course exams.” In another forum entry on “Promoting Grade Inflation,”

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Saul Geiser attributes the increases to students taking AP courses to earn bonus points for their high school GPAs (for example, the 3.0 “B” in a regular class becomes a 4.0 in an AP class) and thus making their transcripts more competitive during college admissions. Geiser then argues that this tactic “has had adverse consequences for students and schools as well as the program itself. When the original emphasis was on the A.P. exams, students needed to score well to receive credit for college coursework. Today, the bonus point gives students a strong incentive to load their schedules with A.P. classes to raise their G.P.A.s, but then skip the exams.”

Despite these arguments, or perhaps because of them, the College Board is also emphasizing its claim that, in our current economic climate, students can save a great deal of money on college expenses by using AP credit to fulfill general education course requirements, including first-year composition. For example, in a .pdf flyer titled “AP and the Cost of College” provided on its homepage, the College Board states, “Most students take five or six years, and sometimes even longer, to earn their bachelor’s degrees at public colleges and universities. Students who take AP courses and exams are much more likely to graduate in four years.” They then follow up with two important financial arguments in favor of taking AP: (1) “Students who take longer to graduate from a public college or university typically pay between \$8,000 and \$19,000 for each additional year” and (2) “Taking AP increases eligibility for scholarships and makes candidates more attractive to colleges.”

While the arguments above provide a fascinating glimpse into the politics of education, none of them directly addresses the intellectual growth and development of the student. As a composition professor, I can tell you that a multiple choice exam and a timed five-paragraph essay are not equivalent to a fully developed and well-argued ten-page research paper. So, while you may have an AP score that allows you to earn credit for first-year composition, Honors Composition is still essential to your academic career in at least five ways:

1. Students who take both AP and first-year composition courses perform better in future college-level classes than students who take AP alone.

While the College Board makes some powerful arguments in favor of taking AP credit rather than general education courses, research has shown that AP courses and exams do not give students the same educational experiences that college-level courses provide. For example, in his “The Advanced Placement Juggernaut” entry, “Little Effect on College Grades,” Philip M. Sadler discusses a study that he and his colleagues conducted to examine correlations between AP science exams and introductory college-level science courses. Out of 8,594 students, approximately 850 had passed an AP science exam, and those students “did about one-third of a letter grade better than their classmates with similar backgrounds who did not take an A.P. course,” leading the researchers to conclude that “a score of 5 on an A.P. test is no guarantee of a college grade of A in the same subject.”

Research in composition studies similarly demonstrates that AP English courses and exams are not equivalent to college-level first-year composition courses. In 2006, the top journal for quantitative research in English, *Research in the Teaching of English*, published an article titled “Are Advanced Placement English and First-Year College Composition Equivalent?” In this article, researchers administered questionnaires to 497 students in a 200-level (sophomore) general education course, and they chose a subset of 182 students for analysis of the students’ essay assignments. The researchers divided the students into three groups: AP 3 or higher plus First-Year Composition (AP + FYC); AP but no First-Year Composition (AP/no FYC); and no AP or a score below 3 and First-Year Composition (no AP/FYC). The students wrote two three-page writing assignments, each of which was scored twice on a 1–9 scale, with 9 being the top score. As you can see in Table 2 below, the researchers found that the AP + FYC students had average scores at least one full point higher than the AP/no FYC students (Hansen et al. 478).

Table 2: Essay Scores by AP Status

	N	% per group	Mean \pm Std error
AP + FYC	22	12.1	6.47 \pm 0.24
AP, no FYC	33	18.1	5.42 \pm 0.20
No AP, FYC	127	69.8	5.13 \pm 0.11
Total	182	100.0	5.35 \pm 0.09

Source: Hansen et al. (478)

Students who took both AP and First-Year Composition had an average score of 6.47 while the students who took only AP had an average score of 5.42. The researchers concluded that “exempting students from college writing based on work done in high school may be unwise because more instruction in writing at college appears to solidify student learning. First-year writing courses that build on strong college preparatory work may best prepare students for writing expected in other college classes” (Hansen et al. 461). As an incoming honors freshman, you probably attach importance to not only your grades but also your overall academic performance, so consider carefully how Honors Composition will help to prepare you for future courses in your major and in the honors program.

2. You need time to acclimate to college-level writing tasks.

Just like “regular” students, honors students come to college with a wide variety of high school writing experiences. Depending upon the school you attended, you may or may not have taken AP or International Baccalaureate (IB) classes. You may have taken one or more composition classes, or you may have covered basic writing instruction in your literature classes. You

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may or may not have written at least one formal research paper, and you may or may not be familiar with MLA citation style. Students in the Hansen et al. study completed questionnaires about their writing self-efficacy (worth to oneself), their writing apprehension, and their high school writing experiences, and the researchers found the following:

Students in the study reported that, on average, high school English teachers taught grammar, spelling, and punctuation less than once or twice a week, focusing heavily instead on literature. Fifty-five percent of students wrote research papers only once a year or not at all. The most heavily assigned types of writing were five-paragraph essays, book reports, comparison-and-contrast papers, and answers to questions about reading assignments; 87.3% of these assignments required three pages of writing or fewer. Seventy-nine percent of students reported spending five hours or less per week on writing assignments for all their classes. (481)

To be successful in college-level writing tasks, both in your major and in the honors program (think about that capstone project!), you need to move beyond those types of writing listed above toward lengthier, more fully developed papers based upon scholarly research and argumentation. Honors Composition will give you the time you need to begin developing your writing in that direction.

3. You need time to acclimate to college-level research tasks.

Today's students are well-versed in widely accessible web-based resources, but college-level research writing demands use of discipline-specific resources beyond the high school library, the public library, Google, and Wikipedia. For example, the assignments in my Honors Composition course focus on becoming familiar with research and argumentation in a student's prospective discipline. In researching debatable issues related to their majors, my students write five major assignments:

- a. an analysis of a website on the topic;
- b. a rhetorical analysis of a scholarly book related to the topic;
- c. an analysis of the content and format of a professional journal in that discipline;
- d. an annotated bibliography with a minimum of 20 sources on the topic; and
- e. a formal research paper.

Another problem some honors students encounter in college-level research tasks is academic dishonesty. Anecdotal reporting on our campus reveals a

common attitude among the “regular” students that honors students excel because they cheat. My own experience suggests otherwise in the majority of papers I read, but I do catch the occasional honors plagiarizer. Excuses range from simple laziness and overreliance on work completed in high school to the more problematic issues of pressures to maintain a high GPA (for the scholarship, the family, or graduate school) and to preserve the image of the perfect student.

Honors Composition will give you time to develop not only your research and citation skills but also the time-management skills necessary when advancing from high school to college-level work.

4. Your writing is not as good as you think it is.

When Hansen et al. compared students’ questionnaire responses to their rated essays, they found that “successful completion of an AP examination without subsequent university-level composition experience can lead students to have inflated self-confidence in their writing ability and even to resist further instruction” (485). This resistance has been documented elsewhere in studies such as Sarah A. Henderson’s “Why Do I Have to Be Here? The Advanced Placement Student in First-Year Composition: Problems and Issues in Cognitive Development.” In her presentation at the annual Conference on College Composition and Communication, Henderson argued that the writing of first-year composition students who have taken AP English often “is not outstanding or even satisfactory” and that these students “present the strong and disturbing impression of being developmentally stuck” as they resist more challenging college-level instruction and constructive criticism inconsistent with the successes they achieved in AP.

To explore this issue further, I recently reviewed papers from all of the Honors Composition courses I have taught over the past decade to look at frequency and types of errors that honors freshmen make in the first major writing assignment for the semester. I chose the first assignment because it typically represents the high school-level writing skill with which students enter college, and I decided to review errors because (1) they are easily quantifiable and (2) anecdotal reporting in honors education argues that honors students demonstrate stronger mastery of grammar and mechanics than “regular” students.

For the website analysis assignment, my students apply a list of questions from our university library’s webpage on evaluating Internet resources to websites related to their research paper topics. The required format for the paper is three to five double-spaced pages with one-inch margins and 12-point Times New Roman font. From nine Honors Composition courses, I collected a total of 118 website analysis papers. For this study, papers were marked for common errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling. As shown in Table 3 below, most papers contained multiple errors in grammar and mechanics.

Table 3: Honors Composition Error Frequency Statistics

Papers	118.00
Pages (total)	385.50
Pages per paper (avg)	3.27
Errors (total)	994.00
Errors per paper (avg)	8.42
Errors per page (avg)	2.58

You can see that the average page length was just over three pages, and students made an average of almost eight and a half errors per paper, or over two and a half errors per page. Table 4 below lists the five most common error types found in these papers.

Table 4: Most Common Errors in Honors Composition Papers

Error Type	#
Comma error	392
Spelling error	181
Run-on sentence	114
Dangling modifier	60
Quotation mark error	57

Comma misuse was the most frequent type of error, constituting 39% of the total errors made. In addition to those listed above, other types of errors included subject/verb disagreement, comma splices (grouped as a sentence boundary issue separate from general comma misuse), conjunction misuse, apostrophe errors, unclear pronoun antecedents, and sentence fragments. In short, your papers aren't as perfect as you think they are, and even skilled honors freshman writers need to work on grammar and punctuation in their papers.

5. You don't want to have the writing style of an eighteen-year-old high school senior forever, do you?

Throughout the course of your academic career, your writing style has improved, and it will continue to develop as you move through your degree program and into your career of choice. Look back at papers you wrote during your freshman year of high school, and see how much your writing changed since then. Now, as good as you think your writing is at the moment, picture yourself twenty years in the future: do you want to be a forty-year-old doctor or lawyer or engineer with the writing style of an eighteen-year-old high school senior? Even your professors cringe at articles that they published when they were graduate students or new professors, and these items are in print forever for the whole world to see.

In Honors Composition, you will learn to express yourself in increasingly sophisticated ways through a variety of opportunities. Not only will you gain experience through writing more challenging assignments, but you will do so in the company of a more culturally diverse group of peers than you had in your high school English classes, peers of equal or greater intellectual caliber who will prompt your growth through feedback on your writing and who will challenge your conceptions about argumentation and about the world in general. Also, in addition to the guidance that your honors director provides, I can review your research interests as outlined in your papers and then help you to connect with professors who specialize in these areas and who can mentor you in both your writing and your future professional development opportunities. Opting out of Honors Composition may speed you more quickly toward graduation, but truncating your college years will deprive you of the valuable time and experiences you need to develop into an effective, mature writer and researcher in your field.

Dedicated, thoughtful writing instruction at the college level will push you out of the comfort zone of your old writing habits toward a more professional, scholarly style that is appropriate for undergraduate research and beyond. Even an honors freshman who performs above average for freshman-level writing can still be challenged productively to push his or her writing skills to the next level. As Hansen et al. argue, "To intentionally deprive students of writing instruction with policies that encourage them to do less of it is not unlike encouraging them to bypass healthy foods and consume foods with empty calories: neither course of action is good for the individual or for the nation" (490). As you prepare to register for your first semester at Regional Public, think carefully about the writing tasks you will be completing in your major and in the honors program, such as that capstone project, and make the choice to sign up for Honors Composition.

Sincerely,

Your Honors Composition Professor

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