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# First-Year Cadets' Conceptions of General Education Writing at a Senior Military College

## ABSTRACT

This study investigates conceptions first-year cadets at a US senior military college bring to general education writing courses, often termed first-year composition (FYC). Using a mixed methods research design, we received survey responses from 122 cadets and conducted semi-structured in-person interviews with four first-year cadets. Our data suggest cadets stress orality, credibility, and clarity when writing for FYC. These conceptions are largely influenced by the cadet's interest and immersion in the Army yet are also strongly influenced by their brief introduction to college-level writing within this compulsory class. We conclude by arguing for two specific avenues of future research into gleaming students' conceptions of courses, specifically arguing both for exploring how conceptions all students bring to the classroom impact moments of transfer and for engaging all students in course design.<sup>1</sup>

## KEYWORDS

general education, cadets, Army writing, mixed methods, first-year composition

## INTRODUCTION

This mixed methods study reports findings on first-year cadets' conceptions of general education first-year composition courses (FYC) at the University of North Georgia, one of six senior military colleges in the United States.<sup>2</sup> We believe a close data-driven analysis of first-year cadets' conceptions of FYC and how to best teach this student population based on these conceptions is critically important to our colleagues across various disciplines for two connected reasons. First, through national and local initiatives our colleagues in US institutions will see more veterans enroll in higher education, particularly in general education course like FYC. Veterans are at the end of a military career, and cadets, through the US Army Cadet Command, are preparing to embark on a military career; however, both approach writing through codified Army standards of what constitutes good writing. Understanding cadets' conceptions of writing may help our colleagues who work closely with veterans. Therefore, this understanding of cadets is important even if faculty are not teaching cadets. Second, these enrollment numbers will and are climbing at the same time as writing studies scholars question the efficacy of FYC as a general education course (Crowley, 1998; Wardle, 2009).

In terms of types of SoTL inquiries, our project is a "what is" type of project (Hutchings, 2000) with the goal of better describing how first-year cadets conceptualize FYC writing. In Chick's (2014) language, we are "seeking understanding by bypassing assumptions, making visible what previously wasn't." Our central question shows what we aim to make visible: to what extent does a first-year cadet's immersion into the Corps of Cadets influence how they understand and approach writing for FYC,

specifically the purpose of writing? Through our emergent design and central question, we strike to the core of Poole's (2013) understanding of SoTL research as shifting "from an imperative of proof to an imperative of understanding" (p. 136).

## WRITING IN THE ARMY

Before moving into our research design and findings, we describe writing for the Army. Because of Brian Forester's wealth of experience writing for the Army as a United States Military Academy at West Point graduate, veteran of three deployments, former instructor of Political Science at West Point, and current Major, it is Brian Forester's voice speaking in this section.

A former boss of mine often remarked that "the hardest thing we do in the Army is communicate." In a profession that regularly includes strenuous physical activity, I found this statement a bit hyperbolic. Through ten years of service, though, I recognize the truth to his assertion, but to "hard" I would also add "consequential." For if, as according to political scientist Huntington (1957), the "management of violence" is the domain of the professional military officer, then a failure to communicate can spell disaster (p. 11). Therefore, military leaders must be able to communicate intent and ideas clearly to a wide variety of audiences—from subordinates, superiors, and peers in uniform to civilian government leaders and the broader population. Expecting its leaders to, in the words of former Army Chief of Staff General Odierno, "communicate—up, down, and laterally" (as cited in Department of the Army, 2012), the Army attempts to develop and refine communication skills in its officers from the undergraduate level to the various levels of professional military education (PME).

To facilitate effective communication, the Army prescribes and teaches a certain style of writing. Army Regulation 25-50, *Preparing and Managing Correspondence* (2013), notes that "effective Army writing is understood by the reader in a single rapid reading and is free of errors in substance, organization, style, and correctness" (p. 6). With the emphasis on clear communication, writing in this style is emphasized at the various PME courses an officer attends throughout a career. But even beyond the educational setting, writing remains a regular part of an Army leader's daily duties in the operational force. Administrative memoranda, training plans, information papers, and evaluation reports are routinely penned by Army officers of all ranks.

The requirement for effective Army writing is not limited to a garrison environment. When deployed in a combat zone, Army officers must communicate intent and purpose to subordinates while also conveying critical battlefield updates to senior commanders. Writing is a tool by which junior officers paint a word picture of the situation on the ground for senior commanders that may be miles away. This became readily apparent to me as a junior officer deployed with an infantry company to Afghanistan. In the early weeks of our deployment, we would regularly spend days out on combat patrol in order to become familiarized with our area of responsibility. Much of our mission in that early phase involved gathering information that would help us and our senior commanders understand the dynamics of the area—the local leaders, the composition and capabilities of Afghan Security Forces, and specific security concerns. I often found myself jotting down pertinent details while on patrol, digitally crafting a more detailed narrative once back on the main base, and then sending that report to our headquarters miles away for analysis and further instructions. My writing, even as a junior officer, was thus a critical link in the communication of those consequential bits of information.

## FYC IN US HIGHER EDUCATION

Generic conventions, constraints, and exigencies shape how the Army makes knowledge through writing (Anson & Neely, 2010; Wilds, 1989). These conventions, constraints, and exigencies

are markedly different than those offered in a FYC classroom, yet cadets must navigate both early in their college and cadet careers. The function of FYC instruction in US institutions is a complex yet vital history to address because it shows the marked differences between writing for FYC and writing for different disciplines and professions, in our case Army writing. These differences are borne out of the historical context in which FYC arose.

FYC started as a compulsory course at Harvard in the late nineteenth century (Berlin, 1987; Russell, 1991). It is now a “uniquely American” fixture in US higher education (Connors, 1997, p. 112). 97% of surveyed US institutions include writing requirements and in 85% fulfill this requirement in the English Department, where the course is variously titled but commonly referred to as First-Year Composition or First-Year Writing (Moghtader, Cotch, & Hague, 2001, p. 464).

In 1885, Adams Sherman Hill, the Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric at Harvard, moved a sophomore rhetoric class to the first-year and named it English A (Russell, 1991, p. 53). Hill’s decision was partly in reaction to low marks on an instituted essay entrance exam first required in 1874 (Connors, 1997, p. 184). Other schools noticed, and the soil was tilled for compulsory first-year writing courses to blossom across US higher education. This proliferation occurred during a watershed moment. US universities shifted from the British to Germanic model, aligning departments around disciplines in which faculty researched and taught. With the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862, the government designated land for agricultural and mechanical colleges. Following the end of the Civil War in 1865, the US witnessed a rise in all-women’s colleges and coeducation. With rapid changes in the professoriate and student body, FYC entered the scene with designs on improving what many in higher education perceived to be disappointingly low levels of literate ability and college readiness on the part of incoming students. Indeed, Connors (1997) points to this moment as the “first American College Literacy Crisis” (p. 185). FYC became the panacea.

Though course content often varies from instructor to instructor and from school to school, most students are exposed to writing common genres: research papers with sources gleaned from library databases, close readings and critical responses to assigned readings. Many instructors implement a form of peer review where students read and respond to each other’s writing and require one-on-one conferences with students all in hopes of helping students develop broad literacy skills, particularly writing skills, which facilitate success across varied writing contexts. And here is the challenge, the challenge that brings us back to the marked differences between writing for FYC and writing for the Army. As FYC attempts to introduce student to college level reading, writing, and thinking and to prepare students for the many different majors they will pursue, FYC struggles to introduce students to anything (Russell, 1995; Wardle, 2009). In other words, because it tries to do all things it fails to do any one thing.

Students often see the writing undertaken in FYC as distinct from the rest of their college writing. Bergmann and Zepernick (2007) found

*Because [students] saw the writing they are asked to do in English classes as personal, subjective, creative, and primarily intended to ‘not bore the reader,’ they failed to see any connection between what they have learned about writing in English classes and what they see as the objective, fact-based, information-telling writing demanded elsewhere in their academic and professional lives. (p. 131)*

This “objective, fact-based, information-telling writing” sounds remarkably like Army Regulation 25-50: “effective Army writing is understood by the reader in a single rapid reading and is

free of errors in substance, organization, style, and correctness” (p. 6). Here is a clear understanding of writing offered by a specific profession that conflicts with the generalizable writing skills offered in FYC. AR 25-50 requires writing “free of errors.” Though writing teachers, too, hope their student writers pen prose free of errors, scholars of writing pedagogy have long avoided the term “error” itself because it carries negative weight leading to an overriding emphasis on mechanical correctness over rhetorical savvy (Lu, 1991; Rouse, 1979). Writing pedagogy often takes a more generous view of error, not only offering a different term in lieu of *error*, but also emphasizing that errors are contextual and what is considered an error in one discipline may be acceptable usage in another. Instead of teaching a universal rule, instructors strive to teach strategies for writing in response to the rhetorical situation in any given writing context. As such, US universities are committed to general writing instruction because of the belief that the rhetorical skills honed in FYC will provide a foundation for future writing in other disciplinary and professional contexts.

FYC, in the words of Harris (2012), is a thoroughly “teaching subject” in that it “defines itself through an interest in the works students and teachers do together” (p. xv). Such a conceptualization of the writing classroom as an amalgamation of student/teacher learning and interaction closely aligns with central tenets of SoTL. Therefore, we pull from the basis of the discipline of writing studies, which Bizzell (2014) describes as the desire to “know who our students are” (p. 442), to understand better the conceptions first-year cadets bring to FYC.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As SoTL research begins with “the question at the heart of a particular inquiry” (Felten, 2013, p. 123), we framed our inquiry around two research questions:

- **What conceptions of writing do first-year cadets bring to FYC?**
- **What are the conceptions of writing carried by cadets who plan on commissioning into the US Army?**

## METHODS

### Methodology

This article’s mixed methods research approach is framed by social constructionist theory, which views meaning as arising through the interaction of people and historically situated contexts (Mertens, 2010), and, therefore situates stakeholder’s responses within the larger (i.e., social, historical, and cultural) context in which they arise (Merriam, 1998).

### Setting

In compliance with UNG's guidelines for research involving human subjects, we began data collection in the fall of 2014 at the University of North Georgia (UNG). With an enrollment of roughly 16,000 students, UNG has five campuses in northeast Georgia. The Corps of Cadets, created through the National Defense Act of 1916, forms UNG’s historical backbone. During the 2014-2015 academic year, the Corps comprised more than 700 cadets, about 35% of the university’s residential student population. Cadets take military science classes each semester. These classes include a physical fitness lab and leadership lab.

Like all students, cadets are required to complete FYC or bypass it by receiving a 3 on an Advanced Placement exam or receiving a 50 on a College-Level Examination Program exam. At UNG, FYC is a general education course offered through the English department as a two-step sequence: English 1101 and English 1102. The majority of students complete this sequence during their first year,

thus positioning FYC as an entryway into college-level writing. Instructors have autonomy in regard to textbook adoptions and specific course content. Curriculum outcomes are measured against the Writing Program Administrators Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (2014). Endorsed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, a national professional organization of writing teachers, administrators, and scholars, the Outcomes Statement stresses student development in rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, reading, and composing, and knowledge of conventions.

### Participant demographics

During data collection, the Corps of Cadets enrolled 796 cadets: 87% male and 13% female. 80.3% identify as White, 5.9% as Black or African American, 4.9% as Hispanic, and 4.0% as Asian American. The acceptance rate for the Corps is 59%. First-year cadets entered with an average high school GPA of 3.16 and average of SAT score of 1078. These statistics are largely representative of the UNG student body population in general: incoming first-time baccalaureate students entered with an average SAT score of 1101 and an average GPA of 3.54. However, gender demographics differ greatly. 56% of the overall student population identify as female. 13% do in the Corps.

### Data collection and analysis

To inquire into cadet conceptions of FYC, we designed a mixed methods research project that involved simultaneously analyzing quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data. We first developed a cross-sectional survey to administer to all cadets. The 23-question voluntary and anonymous survey was administered online through Qualtrics.com. The Military Science department emailed the survey link to all 796 cadets. (The complete survey is found in Appendix A). We received responses from 122 cadets with a dropout rate of 9%. We report findings in this article from first-year cadets only ( $n = 38$ ); additional data will serve our larger cross-institutional research project. While we only received a response from roughly 16% of cadets, we believe our data is worthwhile because the quantitative analysis is only one of the pillars in our mixed methods approach. Furthermore, we are encouraged by a growing body of literature finding little evidence of a connection between survey response rates and non-response bias (Keeter, Miller, Kohut, Groves, & Presser, 2000; Keeter, Kennedy, Dimock, Best, & Craighill, 2006). Consistent with convergent parallel research design (Creswell, 2014), we conducted four in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews of approximately thirty minutes while the survey was “live.” We used a purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell, 2014) to select four first-year cadet participants:

- Sawyer, first-year cadet, honors student, self-identifies as white, male. Plans to commission after graduation through which he will receive an official document of appointment into the US Army.
- Dave, first-year cadet, honors student, self-identifies as white, male. Plans to commission after graduation through which he will receive an official document of appointment into the US Army.
- Taylor, first-year cadet, self-identifies as white, female. Does not plan to commission.
- Blake, first-year cadet, self-identifies as white, male. Plans to commission after graduation through which he will receive an official document of appointment into the US Army.<sup>3</sup>

At the time of data collection, Sawyer, Dave, Taylor, and Blake were first-year cadets enrolled in FYC who had indicated in the survey interest in talking with us about their responses. We did not offer financial incentives. We contacted these participants via email and conducted the interviews in Michael

Rifenburg's office; Michael also taught two of the cadets during the same semester data was collected. To ensure cadets that their participation (or lack of) would not affect their course grade, we designed the study and wrote the informed consent document according to the ethics standard for college writing teachers and administrators: the Conference on College Composition and Communication Guidelines for Ethical Conduct of Research in Composition (2015), which, for full disclosure, Michael co-authored. This document provides guidance on conducting studies involving classes such as "We assure that pursuit of our research goals will not hinder achievement of the course's educational goals." More broadly, we used the American Educational Research Association's Code of Ethics to guide our big-picture research design. Finally, throughout all phases of our study, we endorsed the "ethical imperative to *do good*, rather than simply doing *no harm*" (Jones, Torres, & Aminio, 2014, p. 175).

The semi-structured interviews focused on learning more about the cadet's prior literacy experiences, expectations of college-level writing and Army writing, and current writing assignments in FYC. We discussed topics outside the scope of this article with participants in hopes of serving additional research projects. We transcribed the interviews and applied descriptive coding to the transcriptions. Referred to as "topic coding" in some literature, descriptive coding "summarizes in a word or short phrase—most often as a noun—the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 88). Additionally, descriptive coding leads to "categorized inventory" from which the researcher can begin to draw inferences (Saldaña, 2013, p. 89). We used our categorized inventory to shed additional light on findings from analyzed survey data. We are aware that "All coding is a judgment call" (Sipe & Ghiso, 2004, pp. 482-3) yet believe coding effectively digs through a data corpus and unearths themes.<sup>4</sup>

## FINDINGS

Applying descriptive coding to the interview transcripts reveals *orality*, *credibility*, and *clarity* are conceptions of writing cadets bring to FYC. We organized these themes chronologically according to how they appear in our categorized inventory based on our descriptive code. These themes hinge on a cadet's interest in commissioning into the US Army as a second lieutenant following graduation.

### Orality

Sawyer is a first-year student in the honors program. He is a management major and attends UNG on a competitive four-year ROTC scholarship. Unlike the majority of his cadet peers, he has already contracted with the Army to commission as an officer following graduation. Parsing through the coded interview transcripts, we are struck by Sawyer's strong connection between public speaking and writing. This connection is influenced by Sawyer's military immersion, or, more accurately as Sawyer is just a first-semester cadet, by Sawyer's *anticipation* of military expectations. Sawyer has an idea of the kinds of literate activity in which he will be engaging once he rises in the ranks of the Corps and eventually commissions. And this idea influences how he currently writes and thinks about writing. "I really think [public speaking] should be more of a requirement than it has been in the past," Sawyer said:

*People can get behind a person; it is hard to get behind a piece of writing . . . you can't really stress words and do the repetition and do all the nice little speech things that go in the movies just from a piece of paper. They can't really envision how you want it to be spoken. It just doesn't have the same feel, I think. It can move somebody, but it is better if someone is speaking it.*

Sawyer is aware that being a first-year cadet with only one semester of military experience colors his understanding of writing. Nevertheless, when Sawyer thinks about writing and what good writing looks like, he consistently returns to the need to be able to read a piece of writing aloud and for the writing to contain “nice little speech things.”

The importance of oral delivery to writing was shared by Dave, a chemistry major who is also in the honors program and plans to “branch medical.” Like Sawyer, Dave has long admired the military. Based on the initial interview with Sawyer, Michael asked Dave if good writing should be able to be read aloud. Dave responded, “I would definitely have to say yes. Because whether I am explaining it to somebody or whether I stumble and have to go back, to have good writing it needs to be able to be read aloud because that really clears things up for you.” Worth noting here is what Dave thinks of when we asked about oral delivery’s importance to writing. For Sawyer, good writing should sound pleasing because soldiers often read aloud common Army genres, such as operations-orders (OPORDS) and Nine Line MEDEVAC reports.<sup>5</sup> When Sawyer thinks about oral delivery, he thinks about the audience and pleasing the audience with repetition and other spoken rhetorical devices. Dave, on the other hand, links oral delivery to aiding the writer, not the audience. For Dave, he becomes a stronger writer and improves his prose by reading it aloud to himself. Yet regardless if reading words aloud is for the benefit of the audience or the writer, Dave and Sawyer link tightly writing and reading aloud.

This tight link is not consistent with FYC expectations and illustrates the strong pull future commissioning into the Army has on disciplinary writing. Local UNG curricular outcomes for FYC do not mention orality nor do guiding professional documents such as WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (2014).

### Credibility

Of the four cadets interviewed, Taylor was the only one who does not plan to commission and who did not grow up admiring the military. Taylor comes from a family of actors. She has fond memories of acting in plays, watching her parents pen scripts in the living room, and says she “has been writing for a long time.” As a criminal justice major, she plans on working in federal law enforcement, is currently studying French and Hindi, and has a summer internship lined up with the local police department.

During our interview, Michael asked her, as we did all cadets, what is good writing. She seemed unsure how to respond to the intentionally vague question, so Michael focused attention to her FYC class and asked her what good writing looks like for that class: “I know a big part of that class is that everything is an argument . . . and everything is supported by academic research. . . A lot of that class is making sure your writing is credible.” Within her response, Taylor nods toward a commonly taught writing textbook: Lunsford and Ruskiewicz’s (2016) *Everything’s an Argument*, which is in its seventh edition at the time of this writing. Her instructor did not use this textbook, so we are unable to establish any connections between textbooks and students’ perceptions. Taylor and Michael talked more about her class, and Michael asked the question again: what is good writing? “I would go back to the credible,” she said:

*I also know that my brother really enjoyed his writing classes in college, and one of the things I found interesting is that he got to be very creative in his writing. I really enjoy creative writing and being able to not only get a credible point across but to make sure the reader is engaged. I think that that is really good writing if you can get an academic point across that is backed up academically and is still professional but it is also entertaining for the reader. That would be the*

*best kind of writing to me. And I still don't know how to balance that out. It's either straight forward scientific or it is 'that's hilarious.' I haven't figured out how to blend those two, but I believe whoever can do that has a real gift for writing.*

Taylor's response is colored by her interest not in the Army but in her brother's experience with using creativity in his college writing assignments. Taylor looks for strong writing to blend genres, to offer new, credible insights, what she terms "backed up academically." Taylor is the only cadet to mention "credible" and does so eight times. Coming from a family of actors and pursuing a career in federal law enforcement offers understanding of how Taylor approaches writing. She does not believe her conceptions of writing are filtered through her brief exposure to the Army and currently views the short writing assignments she wrote for Military Science Class (MILS) 1000 as "a lot less formal and a lot simpler and shorter."

### **Clarity**

All four cadets mentioned the importance of clarity in Army writing; however, only Blake and Taylor linked clarity with writing for their other classes. For Blake, clarity in writing is key. Blake is an Arabic major who plans to branch infantry and then go into civil affairs. His father attended West Point and, like Sawyer and Dave, has long admired the military. Blake's attitude about writing is largely shaped through his commitment to the Army and his nascent grasp of Arabic. Blake focuses on the importance of clarity in writing: "If I don't know how to tell people what I'm thinking properly then I won't be able to get my point across, to convey a message. And that is the whole point of communicating with other people. Without that I would be screwed."

For Blake, clarity is knotted with audience, a central component of rhetoric dating back to 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE conceptions of western rhetoric forwarded largely by the Older Sophists and later by Aristotle. Just as Sawyer emphasized oral delivery with attention to the audience, Blake emphasizes clarity because the need to "convey a message ... is the whole point of communicating." Clarity is also central for what Blake believes leads to strong writing for his FYC class: "Good writing for that class: first off being clear." Taylor echoes Blake's nod toward clarity in FYC. She explained to me that "I think that [credibility] and making sure your writing is clear are the two main points we [the class] focus on." When Dave gave voice to what he expects to emphasize when writing OPORDS, he said "you want clear and you don't want too wordy. They need to be able to understand what you are saying and able to act on it." Though he didn't emphasize clarity in writing for FYC, Dave links clarity with the audience, as did Blake.

Our quantitative survey data suggest Sawyer, Dave, Taylor, and Blake are not outliers in how they view writing. First-year cadets who responded to our survey offer similar conceptions. To better analyze our survey data, we used Qualtrics data analysis software to filter by subgroup. We first filtered the survey responses to isolate responses by first-year cadets. Out of our 122 responses, 57 were from first-year cadets. We added yet another filter. Question 8 in our survey asks respondents to answer "You will commission" on a Likert scale of very unlikely, unlikely, likely, and very likely. As our second research question asks how commissioning shapes conceptions of FYC, we selected "very likely" for the second filter. Thus, we looked at survey responses only by first-year cadets "very likely" to commission (n=38). With these two filters in place, the graph below reports on question 7 in the survey: "Why do MILS instructors teach writing?" Respondents could select any number of five potential answers:

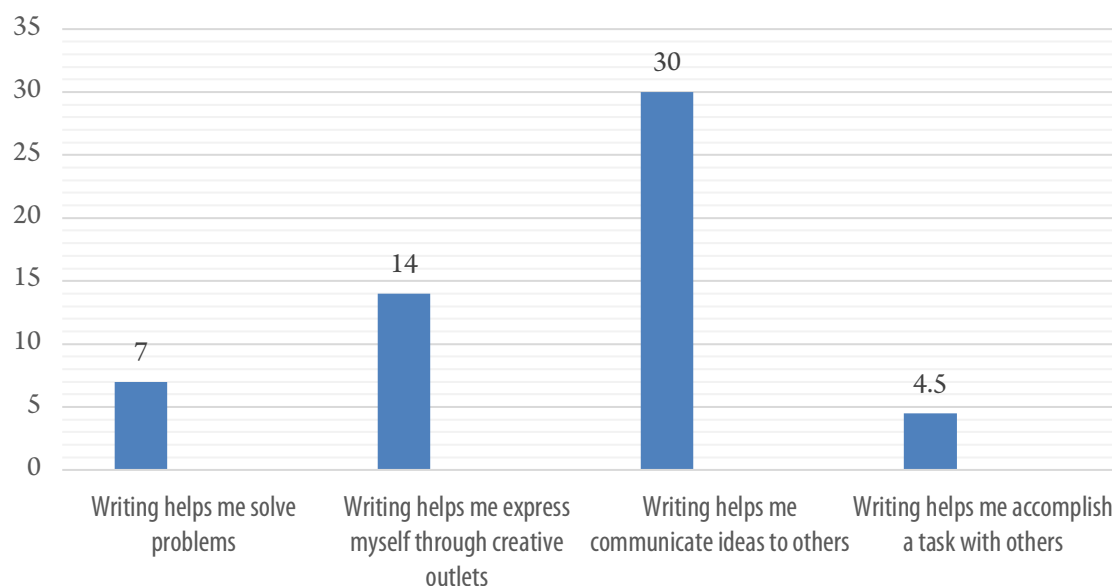


**Figure 1. Responses of 38 first-year cadets very likely to commission regarding why MILS instructors teach writing.**



Continuing with these two filters in place, the next figure reports on question 11 in the survey: “What do you think writing does? Select all that apply”.

**Figure 2. Responses of 38 first-year cadets very likely to commission regarding what they think writing does.**



In figure 1, over 95% selected “To help us communicate clearly with others.” Over 70% selected three of the four potential answers, and the common thread woven through these three potential answers is the phrase “with others.” We believe this phrase confirms our qualitative findings, which speaks to the participants’ dialogic view of writing—that writing is a social phenomenon linking people together. When we wrote this survey, we intentionally added and at times elided this phrase to see how cadets understand writing as dialogic. In figure 1, 20 out of 38 of the respondents believed MILS instructors taught writing “to help us solve problems with others.”

In figure 2, we asked “What do you think writing does?” and provided the option “Writing helps me solve problems.” In this potential response, we elided the “with others” phrase. Only 21% (n=7) of respondents selected this answer. Our data may hint at discrepancies between what something does and why something is taught, but we also believe we are looking at data which suggests, at least in the minds of first-year cadet planning on commissioning, the importance between writing and an audience, a “with others.” We link “with others” with the qualitative data suggesting the importance of clarity because clarity presupposes an audience. Our paired qualitative and quantitative data report that first-year cadets planning on commissioning share clarity as a conception of writing.

Orality is a slightly different case. And here is where we offer a limitation of our study. Though we do believe that orality, like clarity, necessitates a “with others,” we did not anticipate finding orality as a conception of writing cadets bring to FYC. Since we interviewed our participants at the same time as we gathered survey data, we did not include survey questions that spoke to orality. Such an occurrence is one limitation of the convergent parallel mixed method research design in which quantitative and qualitative data are simultaneously gathered.

## DISCUSSION

Dave, Sawyer, and Blake have early, positive memories of the military. For Dave, whenever “I said I want to be that guy someday, it was always somebody in the military”; in seventh grade, Sawyer devised a checklist he believed would help him gain admission into federal service academies; Blake’s dad went to West Point, and for Blake the Army became “this intrinsic thing, like this is my calling.” Now at UNG, Blake and Sawyer signed a contract to commission following graduation. Dave plans to attend Ranger School and branch medical. Dave, Sawyer, and Blake bring these perceptions—what they *anticipate* writing and how—to bear on FYC. Taylor does not. Put differently, Dave, Sawyer, and Blake, though they have not engaged directly with Army writing and will not until they are juniors and seniors at UNG, have a perception of what genres and conventions Army writing contains, and they approach FYC with these perceptions. Their interest in commissioning directly influences these perceptions. Our three interviewees anticipate future genres and conventions. Sawyer knows soldiers deliver OPORDS orally, for sake of rapidly dispelling information to a large group. Though Dave has not been deployed, he speaks of the need for clarity, just as Michael, a veteran of three deployments does earlier: Army writing needs to be “full of facts” and not “too wordy” because “if you are out in the field, people’s lives may be on the line.” Blake, who also has not been deployed, agrees: “If I don’t know how to tell people what I’m thinking properly then I won’t get my point across.”

Conversely, Taylor has no early memories of admiring military life and does not come from a military family. But she believes the Corps will prepare her for a career in federal law enforcement. She does not bring Army influenced perceptions of writing to bear on FYC. She is the only cadet we interviewed who spoke of the need for credibility, which she understands as a mixture of ethos and authorial attribution. Curiously, Anson and McNeely (2010) found credibility manifesting itself as authorial attribution is largely underemphasized in Army writing. According to Anson and McNeely, texts such as field manuals, standard operating procedures, and policies are “recycled, repurposed, and appropriated without the need for individual authorial attribution” (p. 1) because “getting jobs done effectively and efficiently” (p. 1) takes prominence over accurately stating and referencing the original source.

Two things are of note here: one, our themes do not neatly link with a specific community of practice. At the beginning of our research, we anticipated that our themes would link with only Army writing or with only FYC writing. Instead, our themes are a mixed bag. Cadets’ conceptions of writing

benefit and conflict with their exposure to the Corps and FYC. Though Sawyer argues ardently for the inclusion of more oral delivery in FYC, orality will be of most benefit in the military and not most classrooms. Credibility, though only mentioned by Taylor and not embraced in Army writing, is critical to constructing an argument for FYC. Clarity serves FYC and the Army, unlike orality, which serves Army writing, and credibility, which serves FYC. Second, and in tandem with the first, though Dave, Sawyer, and Blake are novices both to FYC and Army writing, they unknowingly constructed perceptions serving both communities of practice and may better prepare them for success in both spaces. Though all three are fixated on a life in the military, they have a foot in both worlds—the classroom and the drill field.

## CONCLUSION

When students step into any classroom in any discipline and in any country, they bring with them a wealth of curricular and non-curricular experiences affecting their academic performance. This is particularly true for the FYC classroom, a compulsory class on many campuses. In describing the conceptions Taylor, Sawyer, Blake, and Dave bring to FYC, we give voice to these experiences because if we—college educators—are serious about improving the quality of general education courses, particularly FYC which already has an audience for jettisoning the class from the curriculum (Crowley, 1998), then we need to hear from the students. We need to wallow in Hutchings’s “what is” question and richly describe what is going on when students with a strong interest in and exposure to the Army enter a compulsory writing class. We need to, in Poole’s (2013) words, be sure we are “representing complexity well” (p. 141).

In the wake of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, more commonly known as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, US instructors will see an increase of students with a military background. We are not just writing to our US colleagues. Many US schools are actively designing study abroad opportunities specifically for cadets. Project GO, an initiative of the Defense Language and National Security Education Office, provides study abroad scholarships to cadets. US cadets are pursuing international education opportunities, and we must adjust our pedagogies to account for this growing student population. Therefore, we believe our findings warrant future additional research in two areas. First, in her longitudinal study of student writing, Beaufort (2007) writes that “Freshman writing, if taught with an eye toward transfer learning and with an explicit acknowledgement of the context of freshman writing itself as a social practice, can set students on a course of life-long learning” (p. 7). We draw attention to the phrase *transfer of learning* because discussions of transfer are gaining international prominence across disciplines, particularly within SoTL research (Driscoll, 2014). Though transfer has been of interest to education psychologists since the turn of the twentieth century, we believe disciplinary (Wardle, 2007; Moore and Anson, 2016) and interdisciplinary (Adler-Kassner, Majewski, & Koshnick, 2012) discussions of transfer will only gain more prominence because of high-stakes internal and external assessment and attention from higher administration and legislatures on the role and efficacy of general education classes such as FYC. Moreover, Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak (2014) in their book-length study of a writing curriculum designed to teach for transfer, argue for the importance of student’s prior knowledge and perceptions of writing for successful transfer (p. 5). Anson (2016) adds nuance to Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak’s argument about the importance of prior knowledge by arguing successful writing transfer is a “universal challenge... regardless of prior experience” (p. 519). Though we agree that mapping the prior knowledge of learners is the answer to the challenge of transfer, we believe future research would do well to connect with students across a range of general education courses to sketch out conceptions specific slices of our student population bring to these courses. We

contribute by pointing attention to a specific student population. While continuing to consider how general education skills transfer to other cognitive activities inside and outside of higher education, let's begin our discussion of transfer with how our students perceive the skills needed for a specific general education course and using this knowledge to scaffold into the cognitive skills and threshold concepts needed for success in the course.

Secondly, in conjunction to seeking students' conceptions from across a host of general education courses, we would do well to follow the growing interest within composition studies of "giv[ing] voice to students, seeing them as able, engaged, and full of potential as knowledgeable individuals and able learners" (Wardle & Downs, 2012, p. 126). One way by which we give such agency to our students is through SoTL's steady interest in engaging student voice, particularly in course design. In this article, we did not touch on how instructors and the department designed the 176 sections of FYC offered at UNG during our data collection. We also did not focus on the course design of the four specific FYC sections in which our interview participants enrolled. However, we nod toward course design briefly here at the close and reflect on collaborative work by Delpish, Darby, Holmes, Knight-McKenna, Mihans, King, and Felten (2010). If, as our data suggests, students bring unique ways of knowing and being to the classroom, ways influenced by their engagement with literacy across a host of different rhetorical situations, some curricular some extracurricular, then we believe we have an obligation to connect to these experiences and to channel them into the work of the classroom. One way to do so is through quelling the dominant voice of the classroom (i.e., the teacher) and allowing other voices to guide the construction of the class. As Fink (2003) asserts, "the most significant bottleneck to better teaching and learning in higher education" (p. 24) is the overall design of the course. In hopes of relieving this bottleneck and connecting with what our students already know, we suggest allowing the co-construction of a course in hopes that the "equalizing of voices makes transformational learning possible" (Delpish et al., 2010, p. 112). Our students lead exciting, surprising, and rich literate lives outside of our classrooms. We need to tap into their rich repository of experiences to ensure the important work of the classroom extends to the rest of their college career and beyond.

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## NOTES

1. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Military Academy, the United States Army, or the Department of Defense.
2. The United States has six postsecondary schools designated senior military colleges (UNG, Texas

- A&M, VMI, Citadel, Norwich, and Virginia Tech). These six schools offer military Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) programs under Title 10 of the United States Code.
3. This name is a pseudonym, as are all participants' names in this article.
  4. We slightly edited excerpts from interviews. False starts have been omitted. Punctuation and capitalization have been added.
  5. An OPORD is a written product, often times delivered orally, that conveys a military unit's overall plan for an upcoming operation. A Nine Line MEDEVAC report is a template soldiers use to capture key information about a casualty and request medical assistance accordingly.

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