

Topics in Composition: Composition, Cognition, and Consciousness
ENGL 7823/8823
Spring 2026
Wednesdays 5:30 – 8:30

What happens to us when we write? What happens *in* us as we write?

Writing instruction became an object of academic study in the mid-twentieth century, and early theorists wondered about invention: where do our ideas come from? In the 1970s and 1980s, “cognitivists” tried identifying and describing what occurs in the brain during the production of written discourse. The social turn upended things, with some decrying the cognitivists for what was characterized as their sort of black box concept of mentation that excluded the social, cultural, and political influences brought to bear when one picks up a pen or sits down at a keyboard to compose. Cognitive explorations of writing moved from departments of English into departments of psychology and schools of education.

Neuroscience advanced. Consciousness studies emerged as an interdisciplinary field of inquiry. The specter of AI looms. Yet still we write, still we teach writing. Do we now know more about what happens in our brains when we write? Do we understand how writing may affect, or be implicated in, consciousness? We will explore these questions by beginning with some historical considerations before moving into contemporary theorizing, all the while reflecting on what such speculations may mean for those interested in the study of writing.