

History of Composition
ENGL 7801/8801
Wednesdays 5:30 – 8:30

College writing instruction began about 150 years ago, and fundamental questions about it persist: Why teach writing in college? What should be taught? Should it be required? Can effectiveness be assessed? The first-year writing course—“freshman comp”—in particular has been marked by controversy— and innovation. Writing Studies emerged as an academic discipline, writing program administration gained status as a professional identity, and advocating for the importance and improvement of writing for all students became matters of moral and civic importance. Rhetoric was reclaimed as foundational, written composition was declared an object of scholarly inquiry, WAC (writing-across-the-curriculum) and WID (writing-in-the-disciplines) initiatives were launched, and Business Writing, Professional Writing, and Technical Communication courses and programs arose. Nevertheless, debates continue regarding the relevance, efficacy, purposes, and curricula of college composition. This course traces the historical arc of college writing and explores the social forces and cultural values that have informed writing instruction over the past century as well as the pedagogical practices and commitments of those charged with teaching college writing. The goal is to provide those interested in the teaching and learning of writing a panoramic view of what’s come before so that we might be more fully prepared for what lies ahead.