

“Contextualized” Courses in English Composition

Contextualizing English Composition to Student Pathways

League 2020



Greg Campbell
Andrew Rusnak

The objective behind “Contextualized” courses in English composition is to offer writing curriculum alternatives for students committed to CCBC’s six academic pathways:

- [Arts \(Performing, Media, Music, Visual\);](#)
- [Business, Law and Education;](#)
- [General Studies;](#)
- [Humanities and Social Sciences;](#)
- [Science and Health Careers; and](#)
- [Technology, Engineering and Mathematics](#)



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Photograph by Bob Krist, Corbis

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How we grouped pathways and respective faculty coordinators:

Curriculum Development Contextualized Composition	English Faculty
Technology, Science, Engineering	Andy Rusnak
Pre-Allied Health (Nursing, Dental Hygiene)	Jessica Floyd
Business, Law, Criminal Justice	Annmarie Chairini
Humanities and Social Sciences	Greg Campbell
Arts (Performing, Visual, Media)	Brooke Bognanni
General	All Staff



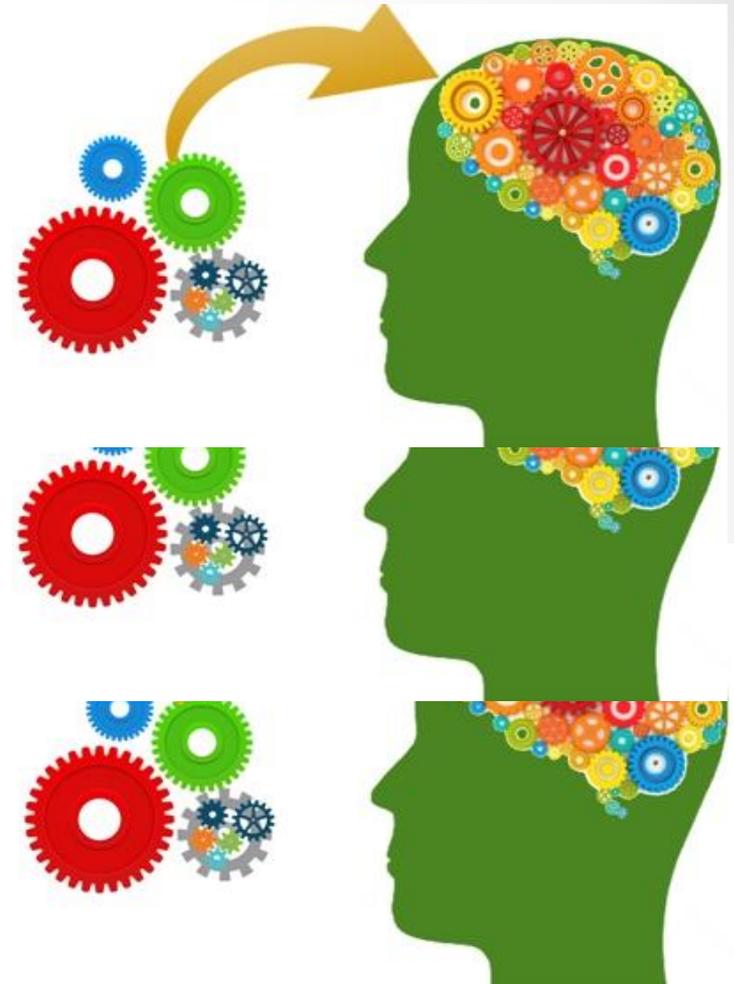
These courses:

- Provide subject-matter content more germane to student interests;
- Do not sacrifice the cognitive strategies indigenous to thinking in the humanities;
- Emphasize the critical importance of humanities-based thinking strategies for non-humanities disciplines and the future economy;
- Reinforce conventional rhetorical principles/strategies, mechanics, grammar, usage, audience analysis, and thesis development usually found in the traditional English composition canon; and
- Reinforce the importance of both research-based and creative projects.



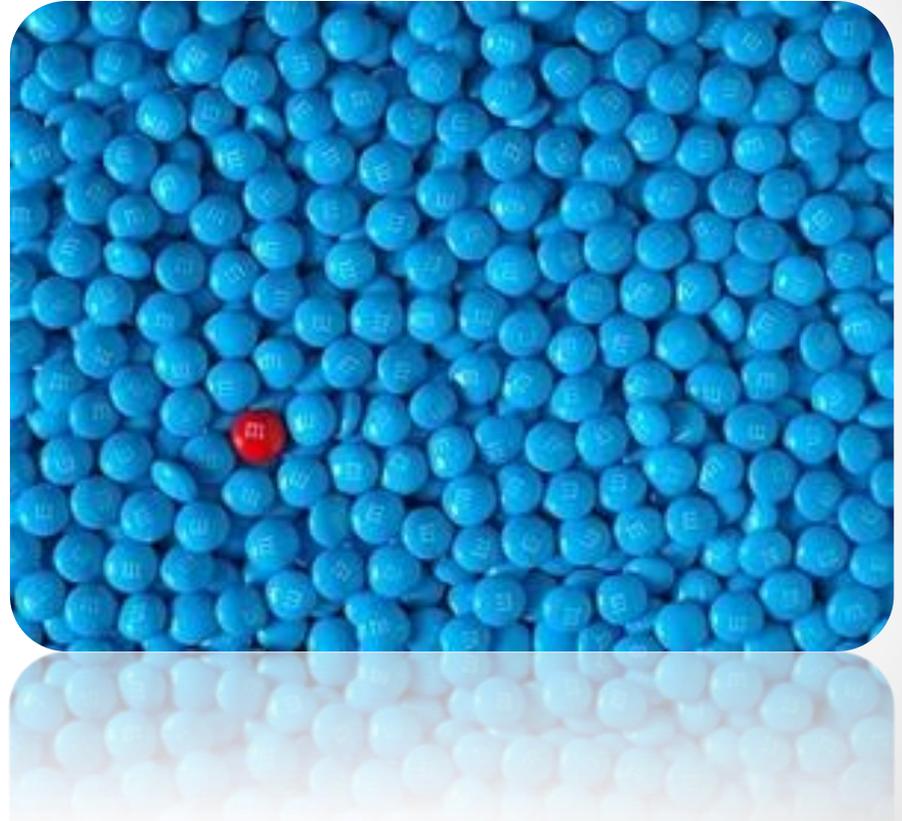
Differences between traditional comp classes and “Contextualized” courses. In contextualized courses:

- Content reflects students’ home disciplines or declared majors, while offering new and expanded perspectives on those subjects;
- Reading and writing assignments become not only pathways to knowledge that reinforce subject-matter-development, but challenges to cognitive strategies, new perspectives opened up by techniques in questioning and creative thinking common to the humanities;
- Peer workshops (for some classes) offer students opportunities to learn organizational and collaborative skills;



Differences between traditional comp classes and “contextualized” courses. In contextualized courses:

- Higher rates of student engagement and success;
- A realization of the relationships between the disciplines is generated; and
- The need to synthesize or integrate thinking and avoid the debilitating limits of overspecialization is realized.



Current contextualization efforts:

(Beyond Pathways)

- Criminal Justice
- STEM
- Creative Writing
- Forensics
- Pre-Allied Health



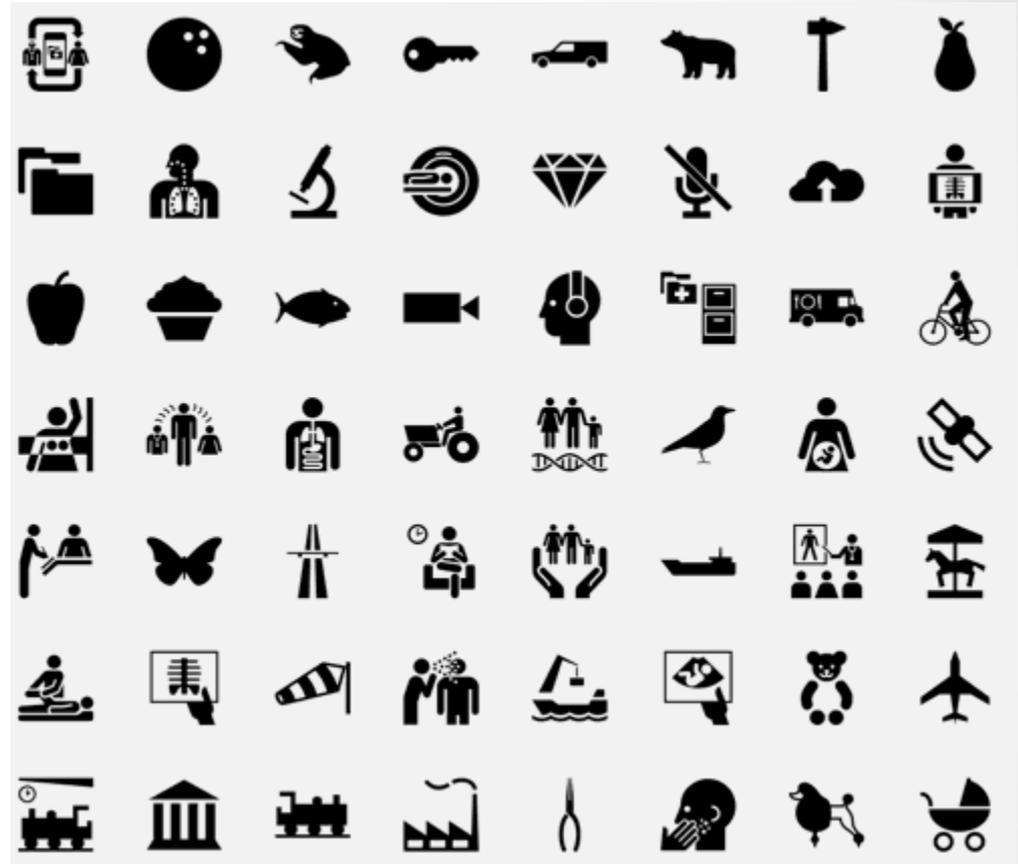
Why Contextualization Is Important?

It is important because it uses:



Current contextualization efforts:

- Behavioral and social sciences
- Business, law, criminal justice
- Humanities
- Arts



Contextualizing English composition for creative writing students, the creative writing transfer option

Specially designated sections of ENGL 101 and 102 combine creative writing genres with traditional college composition instruction.



Guess the writer?



Contextualizing English composition for creative writing students, the creative writing transfer option:

- Uses writing, reading and oral communication skills to organize, express, and synthesize ideas in workshop groups and presentational settings;
- Identifies various notable writers within genres of creative writing;
- Utilizes peer editing and revision workshops;
- Emphasizes critiquing within a workshop group, as well as students' own writing;
- Encourages participation in in-class writing exercises;



Contextualizing English composition for creative writing students, the creative writing transfer option:

- Leads to Associate of Arts in Humanities and Social Sciences;
- Requires 36-39 total General Education credits;
- Requires six credits in introductory courses in writing fiction and poetry;
- Requires three credits in philosophy, critical thinking, or ethics; and
- Requires nine credits in writing for various genres and a three-credit capstone portfolio project, an Independent Study project with their mentor.



Contextualizing English composition for creative writing students, the creative writing transfer option:

- Requires portfolio creation of student writing samples including multiple drafts;
- Emphasizes oral presentation of work to identify "writer's voice"; and
- Demonstrates a mastery of the fundamental skills, concepts, and principles of their selected genre for the baccalaureate degree.

http://www.ccbcmd.edu/catalog12/programs/engl_creativewtg.html



Creative Writing Transfer Pattern

Sample Assignment

Essay #1 — Personal Essay

Give your own personal definition of the term “exploration.” This may be internal (emotional / psychological), external (physical), or some combination of the two. Once you have defined exploration, write an essay that illustrates the term according to your specific sensibilities. Give at least one example of a person (alive or dead) who embodies this particular definition. In so doing, provide citations (using MLA format) to at least one text about this figure.



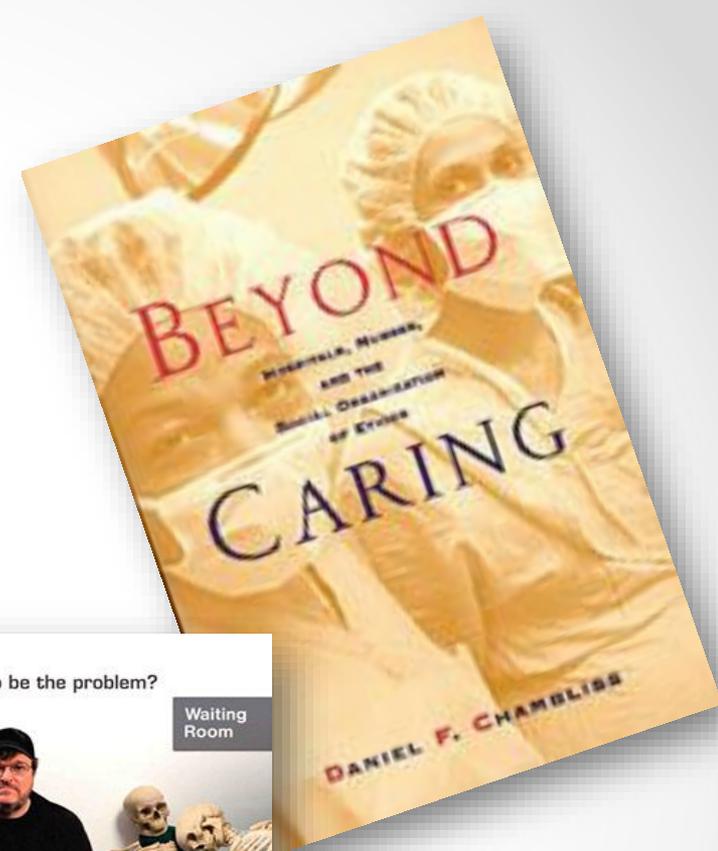
Pre-Allied Health-Focused Composition

- Source Material/Course Texts
- In-Class Discussion
- Contextualized assignments
- Importance



Pre-Allied Health-Focused Composition

- Course materials chosen focused on specific moral and ethical issues that might arise in the nursing and health field;
- The main text used for the course was *Beyond Caring: Hospitals, Nurses, and the Social Organization of Ethics* by Daniel Chambliss;
- The documentary film *Sicko* by Michael Moore; and
- Journal Articles dealing with moral and ethical issues in the medical and health field.



Pre-Allied Health-Focused Composition

Through course materials, students are able to think about such issues as:

- Cell phones and social media in the health field workplace;
- Moral and ethical issues involved with death and dying;
- Confronting workplace hierarchies;
- Moral questions surrounding personal relationships with patients; and
- Spirituality/Religion.



Pre-Allied Health-Focused Composition

- Along with contextualized course materials and class discussions, students also were expected to complete several writing assignments, dealing with issues in the medical field that applied skills from the Humanities in order to promote deeper critical thinking;
- Some of the writing assignments centered on the following:
 - Choose a depiction of a nurse in the media (think about TV shows, advertisements, and magazine spreads) and analyze what the image communicates about the role of the nurse or the medical professional;
 - Argue the three biggest issues facing the nursing and/or medical field and be able to defend your claim; and
 - Final research paper focusing on one aspect of the nursing/medical field.

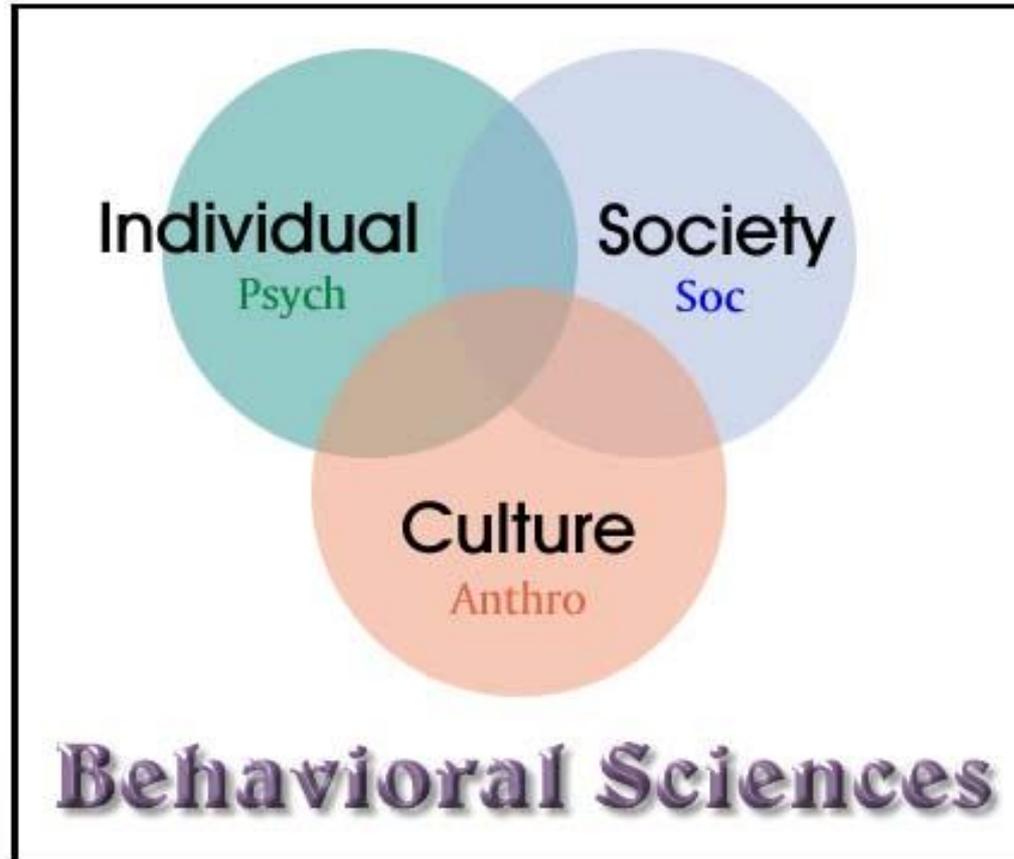


Pre-Allied Health-Focused Composition

- Students can confront and analyze difficult situations they may encounter in the health field;
- Collaborate with peers in order to form new insights and grapple, together, with difficult material;
- Discuss real-world issues through a different lens, highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary thinking; and
- Form new and interesting questions that can become the basis of important research.



Behavioral & Social Sciences



Behavioral & Social Sciences

- For students in history, psychology, sociology;
- These are traditional areas of study in terms of literary theory and criticism, so this is actually (and strangely) a very traditional English Literature class;
- Understanding the context is vital to understanding the text;
- We cannot separate author, text, time, place.



Behavioral & Social Sciences

Potential texts:

- Shakespeare's *The Tempest*
- Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"
- Cortazar's "A Letter to a Young Lady in Paris"
- Miner's "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema"



Behavioral & Social Sciences

Potential topics:

- Advertising and Body Image;
- Self-Esteem and Social Media;
- Film, Video Games, and Social Norms; and
- Food and American Culture.

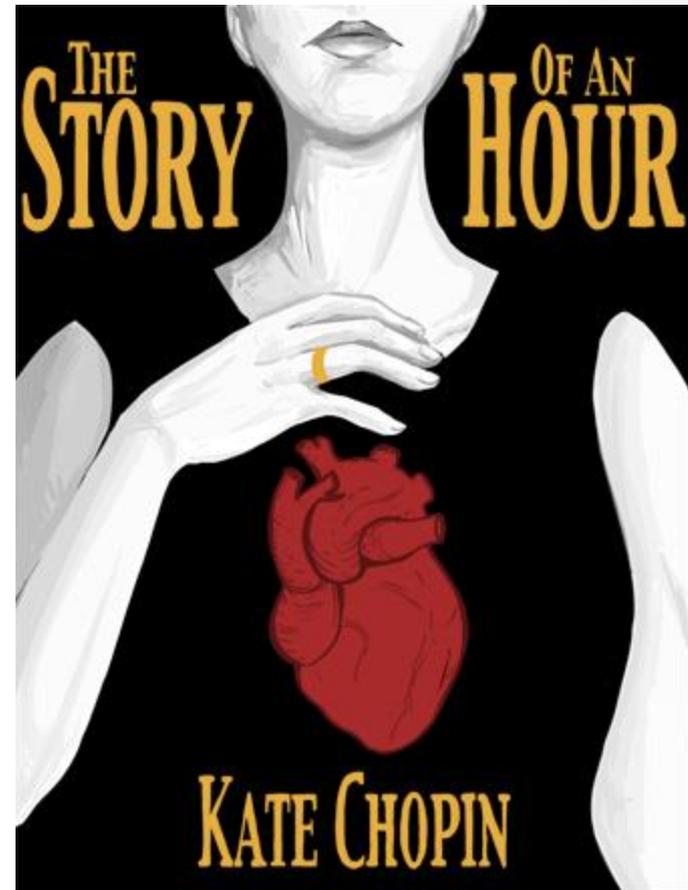


Behavioral & Social Sciences

An Example: “The Story of an Hour”
by Kate Chopin (1896)

- What is happening at this time historically?
- What is the sociological impact?
- What happens to the main character psychologically?

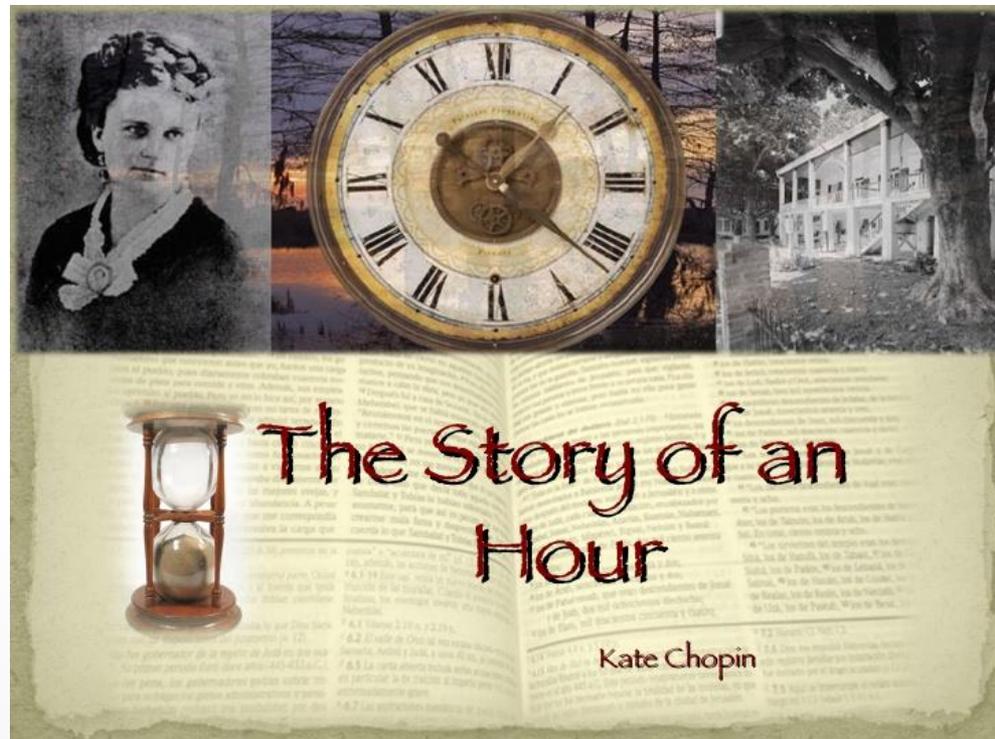
This all falls into the “hip,” “new”
realm of Literary Theory: New
Historicism



Behavioral & Social Sciences

An Example:

In Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," what historical reasons does she have for feeling the way she does? Was this acceptable in her era? Can these issues be separated? Is this socially acceptable now? Be sure to provide a researched analysis to support your reasoning.

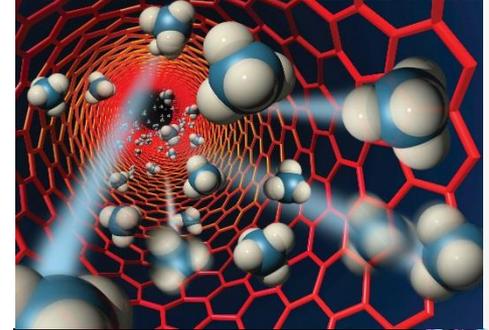
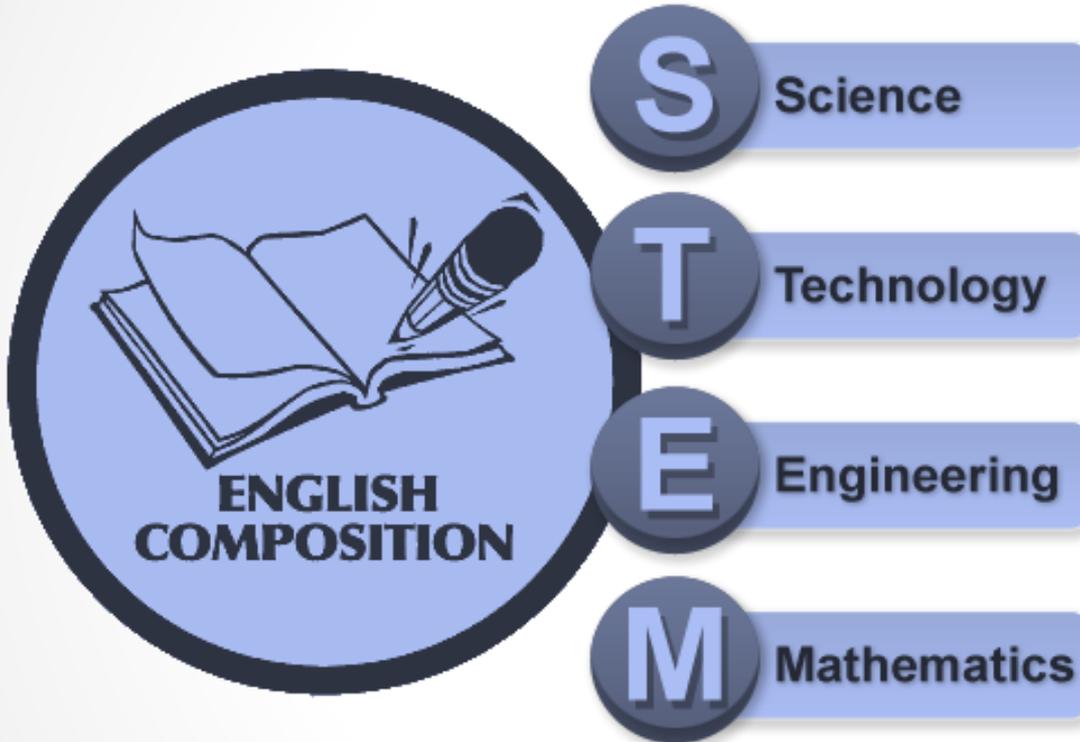


Behavioral & Social Sciences

- Writing topics are based on the preceding themes, but require students to make the connections between the various disciplines;
- The “focus” may be (should be!) related to their major, but the other aspects of the contextualized course should not be ignored; and
- A history major can't just make the historical connections; they must also see the sociological and psychological connections.



STEM-Focused English Composition



If:

- As Einstein said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge”;
- Nobel laureates in hard sciences are far more inclined to practice art, music, poetry, than “regular scientists”;
- Innovation is our greatest commodity;
- It is imperative that for employees of the future to be “value added” they need to bring their ideas to the table to increase efficiency, improve processes, and generate improvements; and
- It is the responsibility of higher ed. to prepare students for active citizenship in a culture dominated by technology and its ethical fallout;



Then what elements are critical to the methods and content, the pedagogy, of teaching STEM, health-field, business students to write?

The inescapable context of the “either/or” dichotomy-driven media culture of over specialization

Conventional/Popular View of Science

deductive reasoning, reductionism, abstractions, positivism/empirical evidence, overwhelming objectivity, abstractionism, either/or, black and white, finite, cause and effect, concrete, left brain, “all the answers,” consciousness is a byproduct of neural activity, a human being is no more than a highly sophisticated computer, the mind can be reverse engineered, science is not relativistic, the immediate end to the “animating principle,” Locke’s empiricism.

Materialist/Physicalist/Monist: Nothing exists outside the tangible, material world, Consciousness is a simple by-product of the brain/central nervous system. Consciousness cannot “cause” anything.



Science Curricula?



MY BAD

Terrible Slide!

Vs.

Creative “Humanistic” view of science

inductive reasoning, subjectivity, exploration, innovation, imagination, creativity, gray matter, infinite, entrepreneurial, art, “mystery embraced,” right brain, “answers are always and forever suspect and susceptible to reinterpretation,” consciousness is a synthesis of brain, body, and environment that is always in flux, science is not value free, Feyerabend’s *Against Method*, Kuhn’s *The [Real] Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Karl Popper’s “critical rationalism” and rejection of classical empiricism.

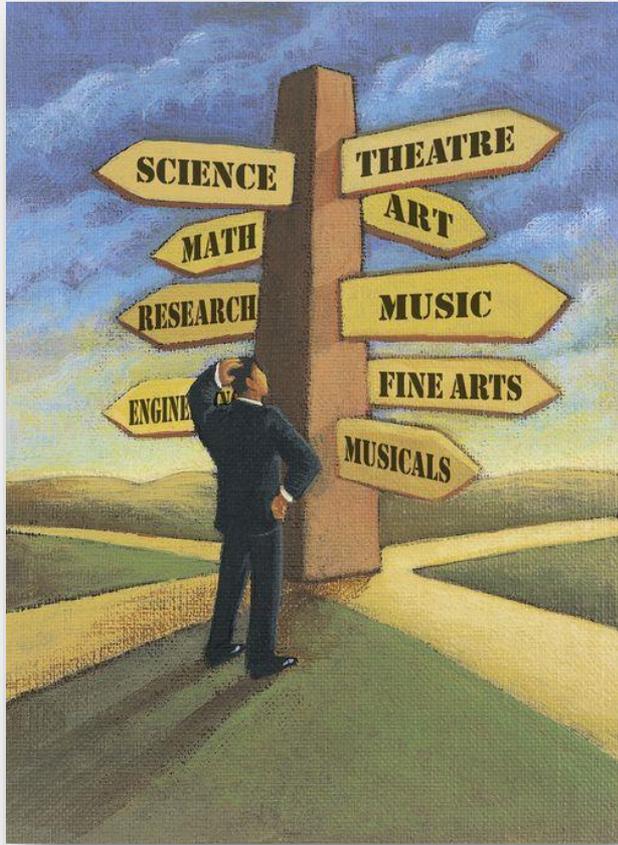
Dualism: Either the mind and body work, in some way, independently, or there is a two way interaction between the two. (Can’t have one without the other.)

Relativism: Claims that truth, goodness, or beauty is relative to a reference frame and no absolute, overarching standards to adjudicate between reference frames exists.



Humanities Curricula?

Science and Technology Content for English Composition Courses



How STEM students think when it comes to writing:

- Analytical organization
- Linear sequencing
- Reductionist rhetorical strategies

Science and Technology Content for English Composition Courses

Expand STEM students' thinking:

What does it mean to be human?

What will the future bring?

How does imagination work?

How important is creativity?

Mystery? Uncertainty?



There are other stories.

STEM-Focused English Composition 101 & 102

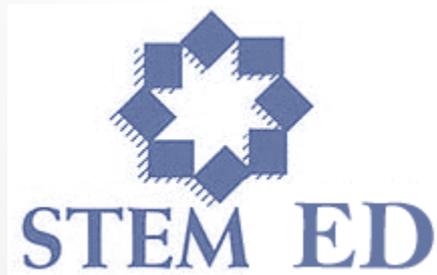
Objectives are to:

- Work to decrease this false dichotomy that works to separate and isolate right from left brain thinking, subjectivity from objectivity, imagination from analysis. Encourage students that “in order to be a good poet they must be a good engineer, and in order to be a good engineer, one must be a good poet;
- Become informed on science and technology issues, how it impacts culture, the economy, the future – genetics, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, environmental science, etc ...;
- Include content and assignments germane to students’ academic pursuits without sacrificing introspection, self reflection, or basic rhetorical strategies, assignments that include imaginative challenges, an appreciation of mystery, and inescapable reflection on the human condition;
- Use challenging readings that raise far more questions than they answer, questions that require creative implication **and** analytical dissection, what we’ve come to define as “critical thinking,” readings that encourage reductionist **and** imaginative thinking;

STEM-Focused English Composition 101 & 102

Objectives cont:

- Draw correlations between classroom skills acquired (like reading literature) and skill sets required to be a successful health professional, engineer, researcher; and
- Collaborate with science and technology faculty (writing intensive) to develop successful strategies that can be reinforced in all classes.

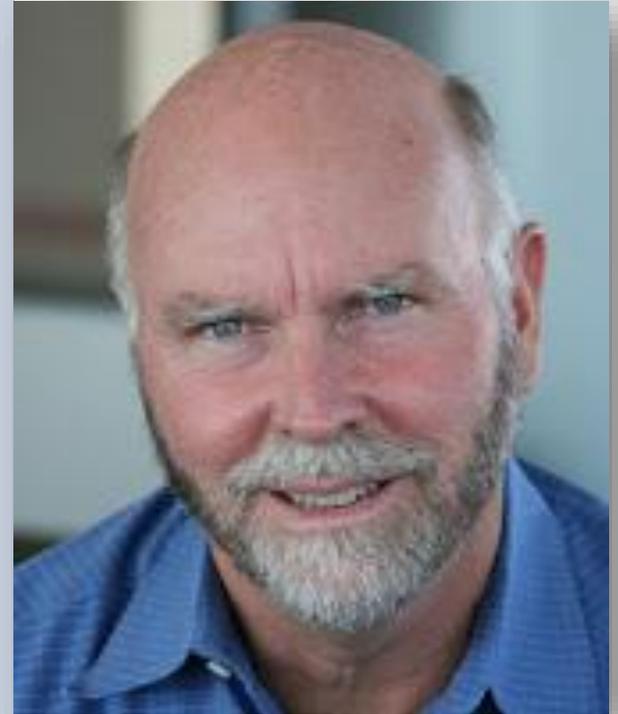


www.writingforstem.com



STEM-Focused English Composition 101 & 102, Sample Assignment

(p. 5) **DNA; Writing the Software of Life**, Craig Venter: Venter is one of science's leading, progressive thinkers and creative minds. He writes, **"Science is changing dramatically once again, as we use all our new tools to understand life and perhaps even to redesign it.** The genetic code [what we, through natural selection, have embodied and perpetuated and passed on] is the result of over 3.5 billion years of evolution and is common to all life on our planet. We have been reading the genetic code for a few decades and are gaining insight into how it programs for life. In a series of experiments to better understand the code, my colleagues and I have developed new ways to chemically synthesize DNA in the laboratory." In other words, Venter and his colleagues are using computers and chemicals to actually create life in the laboratory. His claim is that, "We can start with genetic information and four bottles of chemicals and write new software of life to direct organisms to processes that are desperately needed, like the creation of renewable biofuels and the recycling of carbon dioxide. **As we learn from 3.5 billion years of evolution, we will convert billions of years into decades and change not only how we view life, but life itself.**" Venter wants to use his research for positive, what seems like ethically sound causes. But, is there a possibility that others can use this research for unethical purposes? Or that the research inadvertently turns out to cause more damage than good? In 1,500 words, citing three legitimate outside sources to support your thesis, write an essay that looks at the negative impact of creating life in the lab. Be serious, don't write an essay on Frankenstein. Where and how could a negative scenario be possible? Focus on one implication and elaborate.



<http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7369820n> Venter on 60 Minutes – 14 min.

- http://blog.ted.com/2010/05/21/unveiling_synth/ Venter on creating Synthetic Life – 18 min.