



# UNDERSTANDING STUDENT EXPERIENCES TRANSITIONING TO COLLEGE-LEVEL WRITING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

## Introduction

Students come from many different backgrounds, cultures, experiences, and languages; their writing and literacy skills differ from one another, thus creating a diverse classroom. Additionally, many students, especially first-generation college, multilingual, low-income, and international students are “unfamiliar [with the] universe of academic language, mak[ing] achieving subject matter proficiency a long and hard struggle, one they may especially resist if it causes identity and cultural conflicts” (Walqui & van Lier 48). Thus, it is imperative for educators and writing tutors to understand the student perspective and experiences when transitioning from high school-level writing to college-level writing. This research article discusses the meaningful findings of a qualitative study to better understand the student experience from high school-level writing to college-level writing at a small, liberal arts college in Southern California. By understanding the students’ prior knowledge and educational background with writing, educators are better equipped to support students in their transition to college-level writing in their first semester



students, faculty, and staff in academia understand the academic writing process (Leahy 35-37; Melzer 2-3; Rankins-Robertson, Cahill, Roen, and Glau 65-73; Tailor 42). Although most of these works urge readers to apply specific methodologies to teach writing, many of the works do not focus on understanding the student's perception of writing and whether or not they feel equipped to write an academic paper, especially during their first year in college. Very few scholars have begun to study the student's perception and attitudes with writing in higher education.

For example, a study conducted by Goldschmidt, applied a qualitative survey with open-ended responses and distributed it to sophomores and seniors to understand what students have learned about writing throughout their academic career (26). The findings in this study show the importance of the accessibility of faculty and students' ability to develop relationships with them in order to understand their writing process and enhance their writing (Goldschmidt 36). Further, the article mainly focused on strengthening student writing by building a strong support system between faculty and students, but not necessarily the student perception about their transition into college-level writing (Goldschmidt 36-37).

Hutton and Gibson also conducted a similar study to Goldschmidt, but instead of distributing surveys, Hutton and Gibson interviewed students to better understand their development as writers in academia (90). Though the results of this study concluded that students have a very binary perception about writing, and the purpose of writing is to communicate ideas, this study does not focus on student experiences when transitioning to college writing (Hutton and Gibson 90-91).

On the other hand, Petric conducted interviews with multilingual students at the Writing Center at Central European University, understanding students' attitudes with writing. He found that the student's experiences within writing courses and writing center

appointments could greatly affect their attitudes towards writing, which



English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, but does not provide insight for the students who do not identify as ELL or EFL.

This article seeks to study the student perspective at a small, liberal arts college in Southern California in order to comprehend student experiences towards writing when transitioning from high school writing to college writing. Therefore, the three researchers involved in this assessment aim to understand students' prior knowledge and educational experiences with writing, and their first-year experiences transitioning into college-level writing.

### **Study Design**

Since the goal of this study is to understand the student perspectives with their transition to writing academic papers, it is imperative to first understand their educational background with writing. Therefore, focus groups with the class of 2024 were conducted, which also includes non-traditional college students (students who did not enroll in a 4-year college immediately after high school) and transfer students. The class of 2024 are current sophomores who recently completed their first year of college, allowing them to comment on their transition to college writing while still retaining a relatively recent memory of their high school experience.

To garner interest in students to participate, a flyer was emailed to the Sophomore class, and general students' ListServes, and posted on the Writing Center's social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Additionally, Writing Fellows were encouraged to spread the word and re-post the flyer on their social media accounts to expand the outreach. Moreover, the flyers indicated that student participants would automatically be entered into a raffle to win a \$100 gift card to Amazon, providing additional incentive.

### *Methods and Instruments*

Two focus groups were conducted, one online and the other in person.



incorporate audio recordings, reducing any feelings of intimidation or shyness students may feel with the presence of a video camera. In both focus groups, Zoom was used to audio record the sessions, allowing for automatically generated transcriptions. Additionally, by having the two student researchers lead the focus group sessions, participants would not feel the need to filter their responses if the director of this assessment was present. Therefore, the team decided it was best for the student researchers to co-facilitate the focus groups.

The researchers split the list of questions and protocols (see Appendix A), so when one student researcher asked the pre-scripted questions and follow-up questions, the other researcher would take notes on the responses, facial expressions, body language, and other non-verbal cues. A few days after the focus group discussions, the researchers viewed the recordings and transcriptions to code for themes.

### *Findings and Analysis*

Through the data coding process, two main themes were found regarding the transition from high school writing to college writing: Higher Standard of Writing and Adaptive Strategies. Students perceived that higher standards were associated with college academic writing, identifying specific challenges including imposter syndrome and other anxieties. This research adopts Clance and Imes' definition of imposter syndrome as feelings of undeservedness and perceived lack of skill students may feel when compared to their peers (241). Additionally, students identified the need to develop adaptive strategies to the higher standard of writing, including planning their writing process and better managing their time. During the focus groups, students were asked to discuss their experiences attending their First-Year Seminar (FYS) in an online setting during the COVID-19 pandemic in Fall 2020. Questions were posed such as, "What did you find easiest/most challenging about your first college assignments?" and "How do you feel about the level of writing experience in your FYS?" A detailed list of focus group questions is available in Appendix A.



that there was a greater expectation with participation and engagement and struggled with complex written assignments. Participant One (P1) described the differing expectations they encountered: "I feel like at [this College] it's more analytical, it's reviewing all of the arguments and making an assessment about it. And from my high school experience, it was more standard—you just address the prompt, you have your simple format."

### *Imposter Syndrome*

Since some of the student experiences in FYS included in-class peer review workshops, students were able to get a sense of how other students approached college writing. During these peer reviews, some students compared their writing with other students' writing and concluded that their peers were more prepared and advanced in the writing process.

Participant Two (P2) described their experience during the peer review process, "Compared to high school, suddenly everyone was so good at writing...I really started to feel that they were better than me...I guess that's the caliber of students who were accepted at [our College], I'm not sure that has anything to do with our class ourselves."

Participant Three (P3) agreed with P2's sentiment about imposter syndrome adding, "Writing's not really my thing."

### **Adapting to the Higher Standard of College Writing**

Another theme found when conducting the focus groups were adaptive strategies that students felt the need to develop to aid their writing transition. In fact, P1 described how the scaffolding implemented by their FYS professor was helpful, "Instead of just like a huge final project and, ...she'll be like, the proposal is due Tuesday and then the intro... she kind of, like, built it up. Which I really liked as it kind of gave us, like, a structure for how we can approach, like, a research paper. But still,

like it definitely provided some ground for how to approach it.”



*Time management and organizational skills.*

In order to meet the perceived higher standards of writing required by professors, students had to reassess their methods of organization and take deliberate steps to become better at managing their time, including pacing themselves throughout the writing process. P2 explained:

*One of the hardest things, like, especially in, like, the first assignment, cause it was the first, so we had never done this before, was, like, time management. So, I found very early on, at least in my class, that my classmates don't procrastinate. I mean, okay, I'm sure, yeah, they do, of course, everyone does—was sort of an issue for me. And so I had to take, unlike my other classmates, I had to take steps to really, you know, try to curb that. But yeah, time management, like figuring out how much time it would take things—take me to do things, how much, you know, when a good time would be to turn it in. That was kind of challenging at first.*

Participant Four (P4) found that they needed to take a step back in their writing to make it coherent and addressed their experiences when needing to re-organize their writing process:

*And like, college application stuff, and so that was so ingrained in me it just, like, about writing, about, like, you know, my story or whatever. And I had to, like, kind of switch from that to, like, analytical essays about, you know, these concepts, and tying in different sources and all that, and so that was a bit of a shift for me.*



*then some other person that's like, 'Okay, like, I don't know where the hell you came from and where the hell you're going.' So I really had to, like, I guess, take a step back and try to read my own writing from, like, a perspective that isn't myself, because I think a lot about these things, like, that's kind of in my process, as well as, like, I think a lot about the topic.*

*And then I go through, like, different trains of thoughts and I said, 'Oh, is this valid train of thought?' No, because it's countered by this, and you know, so how can I address that etc., etc. And so I get in my head a lot and things that I take for granted, you know, and that are just a given rather, like, are completely unfamiliar concepts to, like, the reader. And so I just go from one topic to another, to another, you know, and I'd have, like, five topics within four sentences.*

From the two major themes found in the focus groups, it is clear that students struggled with writing during the transition from high school to college writing. Although there were faculty members and other resources to support students in their transition, students still felt emotions of anxiety, stress, and imposter syndrome which can impede on the student when completing written assignments.

### *Limitations*

Despite the best outreach efforts, ten students responded showing interest in participating in this qualitative study, and only six students were able to attend the focus group sessions.

Although the original intention was to also understand the transitional experience among non-traditional and transfer students, these students did not respond to our call for focus groups, and thus we did not receive any participation from these particular groups of students.

However, it is important to note that their experiences with writing are



education and experiences with writing such as taking AP/IB English, honors English, and college-level writing courses, participating in their high school's newspaper and/or attending journalism classes, enrolling in other writing courses such as creative writing, and attending a non-public high school such as a Magnet or Charter school that may provide a more critical writing curriculum.

Lastly, even though the sophomores who participated have the most recent memory of their FYS experiences, many participants could not recall their written assignments or explicitly state what they learned in their FYS. As we asked questions about their FYS to garner additional information about what they learned, the discussions fell silent.

## Conclusion

Though the limitation of the study's sample size requires improvement for recruitment strategies for future focus groups, the findings are still invaluable to address. As students faced the complexities of transitioning from high school to college-level writing, an emerging variable was briefly mentioned by one of the participants: transitioning from online learning to in-person learning and engaging with campus life for the first time during their second year. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began during these students' first year in college, not only were they learning how to engage with writing academic assignments, but now they are learning how to navigate campus life. The effects of navigating these two, yet separate transitional phases forces students to confront feelings of anxiety and imposter syndrome while also requiring them to adapt their time management, organizational skills, and writing processes.

The implications of this study demonstrate the emotional and mental challenges students face when transitioning to college-level writing and college life during a pandemic. P1 noted that their FYS reduced their anxieties with writing by practicing ungrading such as contract and labor-based grading (Blum 2; Inoue 95-127). By removing the grading



aspect of their papers, P1 felt that they could take more risks and



Moreover, P1 mentioned that their FYS also focused on building community and adjusting the curriculum for mental health and wellness for their students. This is important in supporting students during their transition to college-level writing and on-campus learning during a pandemic, but especially important for new students and students with specific learning and emotional support needs. By reducing feelings of stress, fear, and anxiety during a student's transition to college, students can better engage with college-level writing.

As this particular FYS professor adjusted the lesson plans for their students, it was illustrated by P1 that this professor also engaged the students on how the curriculum can be adapted in the classroom at any point during the semester. This launched a discussion about what works and what does not work for the students to ensure academic success. Providing the space and time to allow students to contribute open, honest, and reflective feedback about their learning styles to further support the transition into college-level writing is crucial for the learning process (Petric 21).

The evidence of these claims confirms the importance of scaffolding written assignments in the classroom, but also adapting the curriculum to address the stress and anxiety induced through the transition of high school writing to college writing, especially during a pandemic.

Further studies on student experiences and perceptions are necessary to collect in order to enhance our understanding, as writing educators and tutors, in adapting writing pedagogies to support students' learning needs not just in the classroom, but also in the Writing Center. The authors of this article urge readers to consider taking steps in identifying student perspectives, experiences, and attitudes about writing in order to better accommodate the learning needs of their students to achieve academic success.

### **Acknowledgements**

The researchers of this article would like to express their gratitude to



accomplished without the support of Professor Guan Saw, and the peers of the course, EDUC580: Research Practicum at the Claremont Graduate University. Thank you all for all of your guidance, review, feedback, and for keeping us accountable during the research and writing process.

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## Appendix A

### Focus Group Protocols and Script

#### *Introduction*

- Ensure that everyone has signed the consent form, take a few minutes to sign up any walk-in participants, start building



understand the students' writing experience at the College and to produce an article for writing center scholarly journals.

- Remind participants that their participation is on a volunteer basis, they do not have to answer any questions they do not feel comfortable responding to, they can ask questions throughout the discussion, and they can remove themselves from the focus group or withdraw from the focus group at any point of time.
- Remind students that the meeting will be transcribed and recorded using the Zoom recording and transcribing features. Recordings and transcriptions will only be viewed by the researchers, however a synthesis of this anonymized data may be published or shared with other parties.
- Remind students that any self-identifying information will be redacted in our published version, with the exception of their graduating year, major, FYS class, and FYS professor.
- "Does anyone have questions about the research and the discussion topics of the focus groups before we begin?"
- Feel free to respond in the chat

### *Opening questions*

Begin recording the session

- What was your online classroom experience like?
- What was your online FYS experience like?
- What type of papers did you write in your FYS?
- What papers did you enjoy writing the most and why?
- What type of feedback did you receive on your writing either from professors or peers? o Did you seek any support from the professor, classmates, peers, or elsewhere when completing your written assignments?
- Tell us more about your experiences seeking support and the support that you received.
- If you did not seek any support for your writing, tell us about your writing process.

- What do you find most easiest/challenging about your first



- Did your FYS (or any other class) conduct peer reviews in class?
- Tell us about your experiences.
- What did you learn from the peer reviews?
- What did you learn about your writing process and style?
- PROBES:

What did you have to do for writing op-eds, do you like writing it would you consider it to be an academic paper?

### *10 Minute Break*

### *Activity and Reflection – 10 minutes*

- What is academic writing? Free write [couple minutes]
- Write or draw your approach to the writing process. Like a bullet step by step, stick figures, or something more interpretive?
- Offer to share, if not, focus group facilitators will share!

### *Research Paper Questions*

- Let's define a research paper: In your opinion and experiences, what do you consider to be a research paper? You can refer back to your drawing
- Based on our definition of a research paper, did your FYS professor assign research papers?
- If so, tell us about the assignments?
- How did you tackle the assignment?
- How did you feel about the assignment before the writing process?
- How did you feel about the assignment during the writing process?
- How did you feel about the assignment after the writing process?
- What other types of assignments did you work on and for what classes?

- What was that process like?



### *Closing*

- Thank the participants for their time
- If you would feel comfortable you can share your initial reflection with us.
- If you have any other comments, questions, stories or something that you would really like to share, please email us afterwards: put emails in chat.
- Let them know when we will email them by with regards to the raffle winnings, and let them know when we will send them a draft of the completed research.

### About the Authors



#### **Stephanie Liu-Rojas**

With an MAT in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) from USC, Stephanie Liu-Rojas works with international and multilingual students in writing and speaking, while also coordinating the Writing Center at Pitzer College. Currently, she is pursuing her PhD in Educational Studies at the Claremont Graduate University with an emphasis on inclusive pedagogies and transformative justice. When she isn't studying or researching ways to be more inclusive, diverse, and equitable in her teachings, Stephanie indulges in vegan chocolate, nature, children's adventure book series, and action movies.



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involved in the Asian Pacific American Coalition, Jumpstart, and the Center for Asian Pacific American Students.

Regardless of genre, Josh is always striving to bring out other writers' unique voices.

He has the most experience in analytical writing, but he hopes to learn a lot more from all the people he will work with. Outside of school, Josh enjoys reading, finding new music, and playing video games.



## Emily Kuhn

Emily Kuhn is currently finishing an Environmental Analysis and Sociology combined major with a double major in Spanish at Pitzer College. As a Head Writing Fellow and the founder and editor-in-chief of [The Outback News](#), Em assists in the storytelling process through a variety

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