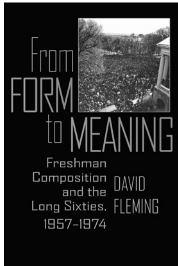
From Form to Meaning: Freshman Composition and the Long Sixties, 1957–1974
by David Fleming. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2011. 273 pp.



From Form to Meaning, a history of the abolition (and rebirth) of freshman composition at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, brings much needed historical perspective to recent conversations concerning the sustainability or abolition of first-year composition. By offering a carefully researched case study of what happens when a first-year writing requirement is ended, Fleming provides teachers and program administrators with ideas that can help them respond to calls for reducing or eliminating general education writing requirements. Specifically, Fleming's book identifies the factors that make first-year composition a frequent target for general education reform, presents a previous case where abolishing first-year writing set back an established campus writing culture for well over two decades, and offers a clear message for why general education writing requirements are central to the mission of American higher education.

The introduction focuses on what Fleming calls "the idea of freshman composition," the enduring features of the course, both at the UW and elsewhere, that make it intellectually rich and, at the same time, exposed to attacks from critics. Specifically, Fleming examines freshman composition's *generality* (its perceived lack of content and focus on practical skills), its *universality* (the idea that it can address writing issues faced by all students), and its *liminality* (the course's location both in and outside the academy; its identification with first-year students) (3–4). Chapters 2 and 3 outline curricular and cultural developments that shaped the UW's program between 1848 and 1968. Fleming finds that during this period the curriculum became less progressive, with the period between 1948 and 1968 being "almost frighteningly stable" (51) despite significant changes on the UW campus and nationwide.

The next three chapters chronicle the dilution and eventual dismantling of freshman composition at the UW. Chapter 4 analyzes the department's decision in 1968 to reduce the writing requirement from two semesters to one, with English 102 becoming the required course and English 101 being remedialized. Examining departmental reports and proposals alongside findings from SAT scores and early composition research, most notably Janet Emig's *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*, Fleming contests the department's claim that incoming students were better prepared and contends that the real reason department faculty decided to

cut the requirement is "because they no longer saw it as an important part of the department's mission" (82), turning their attention instead to graduate studies. In chapter 5, Fleming draws on interviews with former TAs, including Ira Shor and Susan McLeod, to examine more closely graduate students' increasing interest in freshman composition and their contributions to the development of the curriculum between 1966 and 1969. Of particular interest in this chapter is Fleming's analysis of how TAs sought to make English 101 resemble what we would today call a writing studio (113–16). Chapter 6 describes the growing tension between TAs and faculty that eventually led to the department's proposal to stop offering English 102. Although the official reasons for canceling the program were that students' writing had improved and that writing instruction was best done in students' majors, Fleming finds from interviews that "perhaps the main reason . . . for the elimination of English 102 at UW in 1969 . . . was the English faculty's lack of confidence in their own teaching assistants" (153), who they viewed as increasingly radicalized, a claim Fleming rebuts.

The final two chapters examine both the local and broader implications of the abolition of freshman composition at the UW. Chapter 7 examines how stakeholders across campus, in various committee reports, contested the department's conclusion that incoming students' literacy skills had improved and outlines the events that led to the creation of a new two-course communication requirement in 1996. In chapter 8, Fleming returns to the "idea of freshman composition" that he discusses in the opening chapter, this time examining how these values that put the course at risk also made it intellectually and politically valuable. Fleming suggests that because freshman composition is "a space that resists the fragmentation, segregation, and privatism of our society and imagines that we can learn from each other, no matter how different we are" (205), it is uniquely positioned to help institutions of higher learning achieve their civic missions.

Fleming's history of the UW is important to read now because of the current budgetary and political pressures on first-year composition, with many programs, including my own, reducing their writing requirements. If Fleming's book had been available when my institution reduced its writing requirement from two semesters to one, I could have used it to argue more persuasively for the value of first-year writing and how our reduction of the writing requirement was shortsighted and put the one remaining course at risk. However, I am glad Fleming's book will be there when our program takes on the curricular struggles we will inevitably face in the years to come.

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Agency in the Age of Peer Production
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Agency in the Age of Peer Production is part of the CCCC Studies in Writing and Rhetoric Series, which aims in part "to influence . . . how writing gets

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