From Incomes to Outcomes: FYW Students' Prior Genre Knowledge, Meta-Cognition, and the Question of Transfer

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Attempts to demonstrate the "value" of writing instruction, particularly of first-year writing programs and courses, often lead to questions of transfer: To what extent do skills, habits, strategies, and knowledge learned in first-year writing (FYW) courses transfer to and enable students to succeed in other disciplinary and workplace contexts? Research on writing transfer has begun to shed some light on the challenges students face as they negotiate disciplinary and professional writing contexts (see, for example, Bazerman, 1981; Beaufort, 1999 and 2007; Berkenkotter et al., 1988; Carroll, 2002; Dias et al., 1999; Dias and Paré, 2000; McCarthy, 1987; McDonald, 2006; Sommers and Saltz, 2004; Sternglass, 1997; Walvoord and McCarthy, 1990; and Wardle, 2007). While such studies have raised doubts about the transfer value of what has been called "general writing skills instruction" in FYW courses and have led some scholars to question the value of FYW courses (see Russell, 1995; Smit, 2004), for many Writing Program Administrators, insights gleaned from such studies have allowed for productively reshaping and rethinking the purposes and possibilities of teaching writing at the college level. As a result, WPAs are more and more often able to describe their programs as responsive to research, theory, and local needs. Both nationally produced documents, such as "The WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition," as well as locally-reconfigured versions of the document, reflect years of scholarly research and pedagogical practice that have more effectively positioned WPAs to articulate and justify their curricula to students, teachers, and administrators.

Such studies have also pointed to areas that demand more attention from researchers. Increasingly, studies of writing development as well as research in Education and Psychology identify meta-cognition as crucial to knowl-

edge transfer, especially across dissimilar contexts of the sort students will encounter between FYW courses, courses in different academic disciplines, and workplace settings. In their research on knowledge transfer, D.N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon distinguish between what they call "low road" and "high road" transfer. Low road transfer "reflects the automatic triggering of well-practiced routines in circumstances where there is considerable perceptual similarity to the original learning context," for example, how learning to drive a car prepares one to drive a truck (25). High road transfer, on the other hand, "depends on deliberate, mindful abstraction of skill or knowledge from one context for application to another" (25). Because knowledge and skills do not automatically transfer across dissimilar contexts, high road transfer requires "reflective thought in abstracting from one context and seeking connections with others" (26). The ability to seek and reflect on connections between contexts, to abstract from skills and knowledge, to know what prior resources to draw on and what new resources to seek, and to be rhetorically astute and agile are all hallmark strategies that effective writers bring with them to any new writing context.

Accessing these meta-cognitive dimensions of knowledge transfer creates challenges for researchers interested in studying the transfer value of FYW courses, at a time when the stakes for articulating what transfers from FYW courses are increasing. As Elizabeth Wardle recently put it, we "would be irresponsible not to engage issues of transfer" (66), a charge that follows David Smit's identification of "transferability" as a primary consideration for writing instruction, in his book *The End of Composition Studies.* Yet at the same time, Wardle also acknowledges the challenges of studying transfer. Methodologically, this challenge is augmented by the fact that students are often not conscious of how they use prior resources, except when explicitly prompted. As Anne Beaufort has recently put it, "Assessing change or development in writing is . . . compounded . . . by the fact that written products do not tell the whole story of what transpired for the writer. Robust research methods are required to assess writing development" (*College Writing and Beyond* 24).

In this article, we hope to contribute to such efforts by suggesting an area of research that has seen much less attention from composition scholars: The prior discursive resources students bring to FYW courses from outside the university setting. Understanding the types *and* uses of students' prior discursive resources—as they range from writing new media, to clinging to formulaic models of paragraph development, for instilled attitudes regarding the appropriateness of public and creative writing to school domains—can provide important insights into the diverse meta-cognitive habits and assumptions students bring with them into FYW courses, and

how these meta-cognitive habits and assumptions inform how students make use of their prior resources. If successful high-road transfer depends in part on the writer's ability to abstract elements from a known situation and refigure those abstractions into a less familiar situation, then part of studying transfer (especially what transfers *out from* FYW courses) involves gaining a better understanding of the meta-cognitive skills students bring with them *into* FYW courses—a better understanding, that is, of how outcomes are related to incomes. Such insights can help to further our thinking about how to shape curricula and institute programmatic changes that will help students take advantage of the resources they bring.

During the 2006-2007 academic year, research teams at the University of Tennessee and University of Washington conducted a cross-institutional study of FYW students' use of prior genre knowledge.[1] The University of Washington part of the study from which we report, supported by a 2007 WPA research grant, focused on students enrolled in sections of English 131 (a required first-year writing course) at the University of Washington. The overall cross-institutional study's goals, broader than we will be reporting on here, were to determine what types of discursive resources, especially prior genre knowledge, student writers bring to college and how students draw on these resources in the process of negotiating between and participating in new academic writing contexts. Using genre as our point of departure, we asked students, through both surveys and face-to-face discourse-based interviews, about the types of writing and writing experiences encountered before coming to the University of Washington. Specifically, the phase of the study we will report here addressed the following research questions: What genres (written, oral, digital) do students already know when they arrive in FYW courses? How do students use their prior genre knowledge when writing new genres for FYW courses? As we hope to demonstrate, answers to such questions allow us to make a case for how FYW can function as an important bridge course, in which students can develop the meta-cognitive processes that enable them more effectively to transition from context to context by accessing and building on their antecedent knowledge.

Our findings can benefit curriculum and assignment design at the level of local context and population. Of course, such insights cannot universally explain students' antecedent knowledge, and nor should they. On one level, knowledge about individual student histories and literacies gleaned from our study, and like studies in the future, must stay close to home, informed by program needs, student demographics, and institutional structures. Yet, on a larger disciplinary and national scale, the work of reorienting our attention to the spaces between FYW courses and students' previous writ-

ing experiences not only suggests ways to further situate and make purpose-ful writing program curricula, but may also offer new avenues and spur new questions for longitudinal research being conducted in university settings.

The Study

As mentioned, the University of Washington part of the study focused on students enrolled in sections of English 131 (a required first-year writing course) during the 2006–2007 academic year. With the goals of asking what types of discursive resources, especially prior genre knowledge, student writers bring to college and how students draw on these resources in the process of negotiating between and participating in new academic writing contexts, our team followed the cross-insitutional study's three phase research design, combining surveys, interviews, and text analysis. Tiered through these phases, the study addressed the following research questions: What genres (written, oral, digital) do students already know when they arrive in FYW courses? How do students use their prior genre knowledge when writing new genres for FYW courses? To what extent does this prior knowledge help or hinder students' ability to gain access to academic discourse? What factors contribute to how and why students transform prior genre knowledge into new genre knowledge?

In **phase one**, we invited students from 33 sections of English 131 to complete a WebQ survey describing prior genre experiences, both in school and out of school. In order to focus on multiple variables influencing students' writing, in **phase two** of the study we randomly selected 33 of the survey respondents and invited them to submit their preliminary essay writing sample and first major paper produced for their FYW course, and to participate in 30 minute discourse-based interviews. The discourse-based interviews posed questions based on early texts students produced in FYW (the preliminary writing sample and first major paper), with the purpose of inquiring into how students called on previous resources in order to write their first papers. We also invited students to submit their final FYW course writing portfolios (portfolios are required in all sections of FYW) at the end of the quarter, which we will analyze in order to deepen our understanding of the evolution of students' genre knowledge over time. In **phase three,** which we have not yet completed, we plan to recruit five students to participate in follow-up 30 minute interviews in order to explore the multiple variables influencing writing skills over time, and to develop a picture of how students' individual genre repertoires have been extended, altered, or redefined through their encounter with the academic genres required in their courses. At that time, analysis of the data will include transcription and

analysis of audio-recorded interviews, further quantitative and qualitative analysis of survey responses, and discourse and genre analysis of student texts, looking for evidence of intertextuality between students' prior genre knowledge as reported in their surveys and interviews, and as taken up in their writing in FYW courses and beyond. In what follows, we will report findings from phases one and two, based in survey data and interviews, that provide insight into the meta-cognitive processes our study students bring with them into FYW courses. Such insight allows us to examine how meta-cognitive processes inform students' use of prior genre knowledge as they negotiate high road transfer between high school and FYW courses.

Findings

We received 64 student survey responses and conducted eighteen interviews. So as to qualify our findings within our local context, we will first briefly provide some demographic information about the student respondents. In terms of gender, the 64 students who responded to the survey were evenly distributed, 50% female, 50% male. Sixty-five percent identified themselves as Caucasian, 19% Asian, and 2% each American Indian/Alaska Native, Indian, Mexican, Middle Eastern, and Northern European. Seventy-two percent reported being fluent in one language, 25% in two languages, with 77% claiming English as their first language. In terms of economic class, 44% of students reported family/guardian income over $100,000 (of that, 17% over $150,000), 24% between $60,000 and $100,000, 11% between $40,000 and $60,000, and 12% under $40,000. In terms of parent/guardian education background, 46% reported coming from households with advanced/professional degrees and 31% from households with Bachelor's degrees. As for the students' own educational backgrounds, 78% attended public schools and 20% attended private schools. Fifty-seven percent of the students reported graduating in the top ten percent of their class, 19% in the top twenty-five percent, and 19% in the top twenty-five to fifty percent. As far as intended major, 31% intended to study in the natural sciences or engineering, 11% in business, 11% in the humanities, 11% intended to go into medical or dental school, 8% in the social sciences, 6% in architecture and urban planning, and 2% each in aquatic and fishery science, arts, and information science. Fourteen percent were undecided.

In order to find out to what extent students bring meta-cognitive strategies associated with high-road transfer with them from high school into university writing courses, we turn to select parts of our survey and interview responses. The data that follows give us a glimpse into the types of antecedent genre knowledge that students bring with them to FYW, and

how students draw on these resources when presented with a new writing task. First, we look to our survey and report findings from the section designed to learn about students' writing experience in three different domains: in school, at work, and outside of both school and work. Second, we will turn to our discourse-based interviews and discuss how students applied their antecedent genre knowledge to a new writing situation.

In our WebQ survey, we supplied students with a list of forty genres, each grouped into seven general categories: *correspondence, creative writing, essays/papers, informal writing, oral composition, professional writing, and public writing.* Students were prompted to select all the types of writing they had done *before* coming to the University of Washington, and to indicate if they had done them for school, for work, and/or outside of school and work. By casting such a wide net, we were hoping to learn as much as possible about the diverse kinds of genres students wrote and the places where students most often used these genres. Two sets of data are featured in Table 1 below. The second column in Table 1 indicates the percentage of student respondents who wrote a particular genre in any domain while the third column represents the domain in which each genre was most commonly written. Taken together, these findings indicate that this student demographic possesses a rich and diverse bank of genre knowledge that crosses multiple domains.

Table 1. Genre Frequency and Domain

Genre	% of Respondents who wrote genre in any context	Dominant Domain
five-paragraph essay	95	School
email	94	Other
lab write-up/report	92	School
lecture notes	92	School
compare/contrast paper	91	School
argumentative essay	89	School
informal presentation	89	School
formal presentation	89	School
literary analysis	84	School
instant messaging	84	Other
research paper	83	School

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Genre	% of Respondents who wrote genre in any context	Dominant Domain
book report	81	School
opinion/position paper	81	School
PowerPoint	80	School
analysis of academic essay(s)	77	School
reading notes	77	School
social networking profile	77	Other
personal letter	75	Other
fiction	73	School
creative nonfiction	72	School
poetry	72	School
freewriting	72	School
resume	72	Work/School
text messaging	69	Other
summary	69	School
journal writing	69	School/other
description	66	School
evaluation paper	64	School
speech	64	School
personal narrative	59	School
blog or online journal commenting	52	Other
storytelling	50	Other
business letter	50	School
online discussion board	42	Other
newspaper article	41	School
blog or online journal	38	Other
song lyrics	34	Other/ School
letter to the editor	27	School

Of all sixty-four students who participated in the survey, more than half of our respondents reported writing in at least thirty-four of the forty

genres provided. Even genres written by the least number of students—on-line discussion board (27 students), newspaper article (26 students), blog or on-line journal (24 students), song lyrics (22 students), letter to the editor (17 students), web page text (17 students), and web page design (17 students)—represent between a quarter to nearly one-half of our respondents. Although most often students reported having written genres in school-based contexts, we do see a good number of students who wrote select genres in contexts outside of both school and work. Table 1 indicates that students have an expansive field of antecedent genre knowledge and that the writing of these genres takes place in multiple domains. From here, we can begin telling the story of what discursive resources students are working from and the meta-cognitive processes they use to access and apply them when writing for new situations.

Figure 1 has refigured the information shown above in order to highlight how often genres overlap in either two or three domains (school, work, other), thereby shedding further light on student meta-cognitive processes.
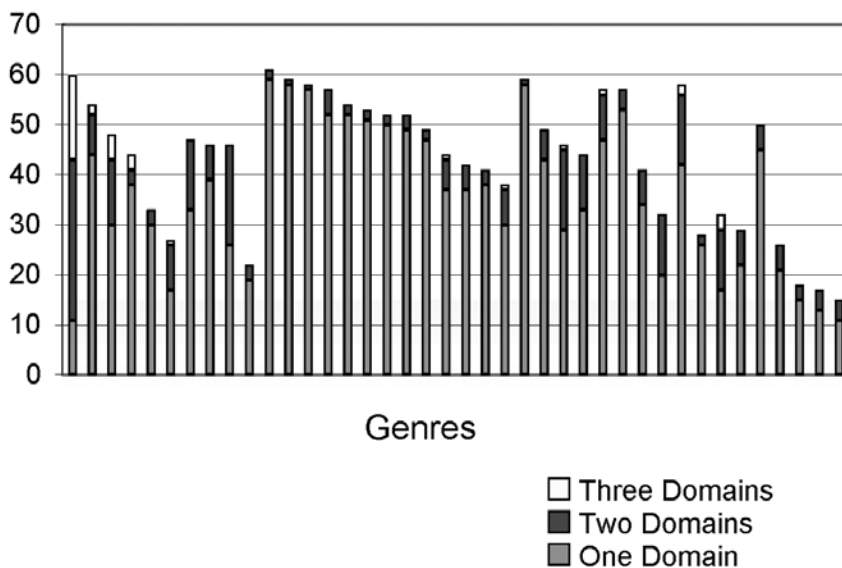

Figure 1. Domain Overlap

Although most students did not typically write genres in more than one domain (school, work, or other), some students did write the same genre in at least two domains (school and work, for example), with a smaller percentage writing the same genre in three separate domains (school, work, and other). Genres did not generally traverse domains, but for a few exceptions: e-mail, personal letter, text messaging, business letter, personal narrative,

power point presentation, instant messaging, freewriting, and on-line discussion board contributions. Even in these cases, however, domain overlap was limited. From this data, we have identified three traits common to our student population:

- They have a wealth of genre knowledge;
- They wrote extensively in all three of the domains we supplied—school, work, and outside of school and work—although they wrote most extensively in school and outside of school and work;
- Their writing did not tend to cross domains, except for a select few genres, most of which represent correspondence-type writing.[2]

Results from the discourse-based interviews with our study participants reveal that students, despite the fact that they have a wealth of genre knowledge and have written in a number of different domains, tended not to draw on the full range of their discursive resources when confronted with a new writing task in college. In an effort to assess students' meta-cognitive relation to their own writing habits, our interview questions were designed to learn about how students described using their discursive resources, and whether students indicated awareness of when and why they deployed their prior knowledge. In our interviews, we asked students about an ungraded preliminary essay they wrote at the beginning of their FYW course on the topic of Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains,* the Common Book that all incoming students were asked to read before arriving at University of Washington. During their first week in English 131, students from almost every section were given an assignment that asked them to write a 2–3 page essay that addressed their choice of one of three prompts (see Appendix).

Fourteen of the eighteen students we interviewed completed the preliminary essay and were asked what genres the prompt reminded them of and what types of writing they had done in the past that helped them write this essay. All fourteen students reported that the assignment prompt reminded them of writing that occurs in a school-based domain. Given the context in which the essay prompt was provided, the library space in which the interviews were conducted, and the academic trigger words contained in the prompt such as "essay," "analyze," and "research," it is not at all surprising that these types of constraints and conditions led students to name only school-based genres when asked what the prompt *reminded them of;* clearly the prompt *looks like* other academic prompts they have encountered. But how do we understand students' overwhelming tendency to also report academic-only genres when asked what they *drew on* to answer the

essay prompt? When assessing students' ability to perform high road transfer, to practice "deliberate, mindful abstraction of skill or knowledge from one context for application to another" (Perkins and Salomon 25), we must look carefully at how students transitioned from genre recognition to genre deployment. In all cases, students again reported only utilizing genres they associated with school despite their wide genre repertoire, when a number of non-school related genres would have been equally if not more useful in completing the assignment.

Table 2 lists the self-reported genres that students were reminded of and drew on. Together, students listed a wide range of genres that occur in school-based domains, as is clear from the following list of self-reported genres (those mentioned by more than one student are notated in parentheses):

Table 2. Genres Reminded of and Drawn on for Preliminary Essay

Genres Reminded of:	Genres Drawn on:
AP literature exam/essay (4)	AP literary analysis (2)
Book review (3)	Letter writing (2)
Opinion paper (2)	Book review
Personal essay/narrative (2)	Argumentative essay
School essays (2)	Opinion paper
Analysis paper	Five-paragraph essay
Evaluation paper	Analysis
Informal essays	Religion class essays
Religion class essays	"Pointless" essays
College admissions prompt	Creative writing
Scholarship essay	Fiction
Research paper	Scholarship essay
Five-paragraph essay	Essay format
Literary analysis	Non-fiction
Book report	AP test
Timed essays	AP History
"Diagnostic" writing	
AP History	
SAT test/prep	
Debate	

During the interviews, students were provided with a list of the forty diverse genres included on the survey, yet they all selected genres that gen-

erally collocate around scholastic domains, rather than select from their full stock of work and extracurricular genre knowledge. The diversity of school-based genres here may indicate that students are able to draw on a variety of useful genres based on their past writing experiences, but it also appears that students have assumed such a strong link between particular genres and specific domains that they may not call on potentially useful literacy experiences that they associate with other domains.

Initially, there appears to be three exceptions to this trend in our list above. Creative writing, fiction, and letters seem to be less correlated to a particular domain than, for example, an AP exam. Closer inspection, however, reveals that these are not exceptions: Katrina (student names are all self-selected pseudonyms), who said she drew on past creative writing experiences, noted on her survey that she wrote creatively only in school. Amy, who said that she incorporated her knowledge of correspondence, fiction writing, and varied speaking styles into her work, and Phil, who said that he drew on his knowledge of letter-writing when composing his essay, were both explicitly prompted by the interviewer, as is clear from the following excerpts:

Amy

> Interviewer: "Your tone is definitely not that of a standard English essay writer. So, I am wondering if . . . based on this list [of genres], if it helps you think of anything, do you journal or do you write letters a lot?"

> Amy: "I have been known to do more formal correspondence between people. Uhm, I have done some fiction writing on my own . . . I talk that way, and if I talk that way I just write down the way that the words would come out of my mouth. So . . . it is more or less my speaking style."

Phil

> Interviewer : "So you might feel like [you used] that that same voice you would use in your letters?"

> Phil: "Yeah, this is kind of like a letter."

Thus none of the students we interviewed recalled, on their own, that they drew from any prior extracurricular genre knowledge to help them write their first FYW essay. For both Amy and Phil, even the hints of high road transfer that we observed were not self-initiated. From these students, we

learn that the ability to seek and reflect on connections between contexts, to abstract from skills and knowledge, to know what prior resources to draw on and what new resources to deploy happened through a combination of conversation and prompting. As a meta-cognitive approach, this suggests that paying attention to the *conditions* that facilitate students in connecting the demands and productive responses of various writing situations to prior genre knowledge may blur domain boundaries, mobilizing students' writing repertoires across contexts.

Early results from our research study suggest an important role for FYW courses and programs in helping students develop not only writing skills, but also meta-cognitive knowledge that can enable them to reorient their relationship to what they already know, and learn how to use their incomes in order to more successfully meet the outcomes that faculty across the disciplines, administrators, and employers use to measure the value of writing programs. Findings reported here allow us to hypothesize that despite possessing a wide genre base, and despite having experience writing in multiple domains, students utilized only a fraction of these discursive resources when encountering new academic writing situations.

Positioned as it is at a transition point for students entering the university, the FYW course is uniquely suited to engage, develop, and intervene in students' meta-cognitive processes. For example, when FYW teachers assign a writing prompt, our findings indicate that it would be well worth the time for teachers to ask students to reflect on what they perceive the assignment is asking them to do, what the assignment is reminding them of, and what prior resources they might be able to draw on or need to adapt in order to complete the assignment. As importantly, teachers should encourage students to reflect on *how* and *why* students came to perceive the assignment the way they did. Since perception involves interpretation, and interpretations are learned, it seems an important meta-cognitive step for students to critically examine, as a starting point, why and how they recognized the assignment in certain ways and not others. From there, students can then be guided to examine why and how their processes of recognition inclined them to select certain prior resources and not others, and to what effect. The key is to invite students both to articulate and examine the meta-cognitive processes that guide their discursive choices. In so doing, teachers can help students intervene in meta-cognitive processes that may limit students' ability to utilize the wider range of recourses they possess—those that can enable high road transfer first between high school and FYW courses and then later between FYW courses and other academic and professional writing contexts.

These preliminary findings suggest that research into student incomes can help WPAs more effectively develop writing curricula that are attuned to how and why students deploy their prior genre knowledge. In order to develop methods for helping students traverse the multiple and complex domains they will encounter in the academy and beyond, which can signal the long-term value of writing programs, we must first more fully answer questions about the extent to which students already possess habits and strategies associated with successful high-road transfer. Future research into students' prior discursive resources might ask questions such as: To what extent, and in what diverse ways, do students bring these habits and strategies with them to FYW courses? What previous experiences and resources do they draw on? What are some of the meta-cognitive assumptions that guide how they use their prior experiences and resources? And how can we develop curricula that engage with and build on these assumptions? Our ability to answer these questions will leave us better positioned to develop in students the meta-cognitive strategies that will enable them to transfer what they learn in FYW courses to other contexts.

NOTES

1. At the University of Washington, the co-investigators are Anis Bawarshi, Cathryn Cabral, Sergio Casillas, Rachel Goldberg, Jennifer Halpin, Megan Kelly, Melanie Kill, Shannon Mondor, and Angela Rounsaville. We are particularly grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with Mary Jo Reiff, who initiated the study, and Bill Doyle at the University of Tennessee.

2. While we do not have the space here to fully investigate this point, early analysis of the rest of our interviews shows that students have had most success in the past with communicative genres. This suggests that perhaps there is a relationship between genres that can be seen as having an identifiable social function and domain-crossing genres, frequency of use, and student success.

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Appendix: English 131 Preliminary Essay

Beginning fall quarter 2006, the University of Washington instituted a "common book" program, in which all incoming first-year and transfer students are encouraged to read the same book. The goal is to create a shared intellectual context for incoming students, to stimulate discussion and interaction, and to cultivate the skills of critical thinking, reading, and engagement with ideas that students will employ throughout their academic life and beyond. The inaugural Common Book selection is Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains,* a nonfiction narrative of Paul Farmer, a doctor whose mission is to bring quality healthcare to the world's poorest communities. More information about the book and resources related to the Common Book experience are available at: http://www.washington.edu/oue/commonbook/int_about_commonbook.shtml

Your experience with the Common Book marks a starting point in your engagement with academic inquiry at the University of Washington. For this reason, you are being asked to write a Preliminary Essay on a topic related to the Common Book, which will offer you an opportunity to see where you are as a reader and writer, before you have begun to practice

the skills described in the English 131 course outcomes. This essay will be collected by your instructor but it will *not count toward your final grade* in English 131. Instead, the purpose of the preliminary essay is to give you a chance to complete an early piece of writing, which can function as a "time capsule" you can return to later in the quarter. By the time you are ready to compile your final English 131 portfolio and write your portfolio cover letter, your instructor will return your preliminary essay. This way, you will have an early example of your writing, which you can use to reflect on your development as a writer over the course of the quarter. This reflection should enable you to write a more effective cover letter.

Your preliminary essay should be 2–3 pages, and should address **one** of the following topic ideas:

- Suppose that another university in our region (and similar to UW in size and make-up of the student body) is debating whether or not to use Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains* for their own common book reading program. Write an essay to the faculty on the selection committee explaining, from your perspective as a student who was required to read the book, why this book would be a good or bad choice for their incoming students. In other words, evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the book. You might focus on the appeal of the book to first-year students, its readability, its relevant themes, or its appropriateness to a common book program. Be sure to use examples from the book to back up your argument(s).

- Suppose that another university in our region (and similar to UW in size and make-up of the student body) is debating whether or not to institute a common book program. Write an essay to the faculty on the development committee explaining why instituting a Common Book would be a good or bad choice for their incoming students. In other words, evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the Common Book as a program. You might focus on the value of the Common Book to first-year students: what the experience adds, what are its shortcomings, etc. Be sure to use examples from your own experience with the Common Book (whether you read the book or not) to back up your claims.

- In an interview, the author, Tracy Kidder, describes the process through which he conducted research for *Mountains Beyond Mountains.* He says of his research process, "I traveled with Farmer to Haiti

more times than I can now remember. I also went with him twice to Moscow, and to Siberia, to Peru, to Cuba, to Paris, to Chiapas in Mexico, to Montreal and New York City and, many times, to Boston. . . . I also visited his mother and some of his siblings, and the places of his childhood. I interviewed dozens of people. And I read a great deal, about medicine and public health, about the places where Farmer works, especially about Haiti." Recall one of your own successful or unsuccessful research and writing experiences (don't limit yourself to academic writing). What process did you go through or what factors made the experience successful/unsuccessful? Write a response that describes this experience and analyzes the reasons you consider the research experience successful or unsuccessful.