Assigning virtue: Uncovering the personal, bureaucratic, and disciplinary virtues in the writing assignment guidelines used by Graduate Teaching Assistants at East Carolina University

By

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## ABSTRACT

Writing assignment guidelines are an important but often overlooked marker of teacherly identity. While they are deployed by individual instructors, they sit at an important juncture of individual, bureaucratic, and disciplinary virtues. Using this virtue ethics lens, I examine writing assignment guidelines produced between 2014 and 2023 by graduate teaching assistants at East Carolina University. I

identify a virtue of rhetorical awareness as well as moral habits of conversation, grammar, and process and demonstrates the way GTAs communicate virtues through their major writing assignment guidelines.

# Assigning virtue: Uncovering the personal, bureaucratic, and disciplinary virtues in the writing assignment guidelines used by Graduate Teaching Assistants at East Carolina University

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By

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# Dedication

To the grad students hoping for the future.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jenn, Jack, Mads, and Stevie Anne Christensen for following me on this journey and giving me a life outside of grad school. Thanks to Becky Christensen for her good humor and aid. Thank you to my committee members and director, Dr. Erin Clark, for their feedback and patience. I am grateful for the professors, teachers, family, and friends that have guided me into this PhD. None of this would be possible without the aid of the Coca-Cola Corporation and their fine line of zero sugar cola beverages.

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# Chapter 1

## Front matters

I started grad school living in a tent with my two boys and trying to wrap my head around Writing Studies in drips and drabs using the Starbucks Wi-Fi. I had stumbled on rhetoric and composition on my second run through undergraduate education. My first time through I had studiously avoided English because I didn't want to be one of *those* people. I applied to a Master's in Rhetoric and Composition at Boise State University and, unsurprisingly, they accepted me but passed on giving me an assistantship; I'd have to pay my own way for a little while and hope to perform well enough to get an assistantship the second year.

In August that year I loaded up the car and started the 300 mountain miles to Boise. Around Riggins I got a phone call. One of the incoming GTAs had dropped out at the last minute and they needed someone to replace them. The week-long GTA seminar started Monday.

A remarkably short time later I found myself walking into an English 101 classroom, a course I had bypassed 10 years before with AP credits and a course for which I had almost no preparation nor expertise to teach (other than being, maybe, an above-average writer).

I was incredibly fortunate to have Dr. Heidi Estrem as my first WPA. She was not only incredibly kind and thoughtful but also, somewhat to my surprise, kind of a big deal in WPA and Writing Studies circles. Academic fame is weird. Patched up and flailing (we only spent about a week in the tent before we found a very nice little house to rent), I muddled through that semester, then the next, and on up through.

So we come to the central question of this dissertation. What was I supposed to teach these students?

My answer was, of course, helpfully located in the little document that was central to the backward planning Dr. Estrem taught us: break down the writing assignment into the little chunks students needed to know, spread that out over the four or so weeks spent on that assignment, and make the daily and weekly checkpoints to make sure they could do what we were asking them to do. I learned so much about what we value in Writing Studies through those assignment guides.

Here we are, then, at this dissertation. In a way, I am writing this to try to understand what I learned and what I taught through my GTA journey. One of the ghosts I carry is the (to me) nameless potential GTA that fled at the last minute, changing my life in a way neither they nor I will ever fully know.

## A guiding question

Writing assignment guidelines are an important but often overlooked marker of teacherly identity. While they are deployed by individual instructors, they sit at an important juncture of individual, bureaucratic, and disciplinary virtues. This dissertation examines writing assignment guidelines produced between 2014 and 2023 by graduate teaching assistants at East Carolina University using a virtue ethics lens. I identify a virtue of rhetorical awareness as well as moral habits of conversation, grammar, and process and demonstrates the way GTAs communicate virtues through their major writing assignment guidelines.

## Introduction

Boise State in 2018 was personally and pedagogically connected to the movement toward threshold concepts led by Linda Adler-Kassner, Elizabeth Wardle, and others. Dr. Estrem contributed a number of concepts to Naming What We Know (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015) and the textbook we used, Writing About Writing (Downs and Wardle, 2013) devotes significant space in the early chapters to discussions of threshold concepts directed at first year students. I think about the impulse behind threshold concepts a lot: setting down what we as a discipline, as scholars of writing, know about writing and putting it in a

handy little volume filled with some of the biggest names in writing studies. We used the volume in our weekly GTA meetings. It's worth pointing out that, unlike ECU, Boise State did not require a pedagogy seminar before GTAs entered the classroom, rather the weekly seminar ran concurrently with our first semester teaching. There are benefits and drawbacks to this approach; I appreciated the opportunity for daily practice of what we were learning and also the ability to ask questions in real time. I came very close to using Naming What We Know as a map for the virtues described in chapters 3 and 4. I decided to opt for a virtue ethics language for a number of reasons.

The first is that virtue ethics answers a key tension acknowledged in the text: virtue ethics is, by definition, more localized to the community the virtues arise from. Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015) write "At first glance, [threshold concepts] may seem like a kind of canon…and the implication of dogma. At a second glance…they seem much more contingent—presented here not as a canonical statement, but rather as an articulation of shared beliefs providing multiple ways of helping us name what we know and how we can use what we know in the service of writing" (p. xix). They further acknowledge that their goal is to "allow us to toggle between the beliefs of the discipline and those of individual institutions," which aligns with my understanding of disciplinary and bureaucratic

virtues as distinct yet interrelated. This dissertation adds in the individual instructor's role in selecting and presenting these concepts to their courses. Though they acknowledge the problem and provide some counterpoints, the label of "threshold concepts" still, to me, leans too far toward obligations that must be met in order to participate in writing studies. Further, even if what we know were universally understood among writing studies broadly, our working contexts often do not include solely writing studies faculty and, indeed, many of the folks who teach our classes don't have writing studies backgrounds or futures. As we will discuss in chapter 3, the actual people who create the learning outcomes for writing courses at ECU (and this is true at many institutions) have a variety of disciplinary commitments that may include writing studies but often other areas of literature, linguistics, and other fields. And that isn't even mentioning the other committees and faculty senates these outcomes go through before they are formally adopted by the university. The goal of this dissertation, then, is not to proscribe what *should* be in the documents I analyze; *should* is an excellent space for conferences, faculty meetings, maybe dissertations, but the goal here is to describe what *is* in these documents, taken as a whole.

Related to the threshold concepts movement, in 2011, CWPA, NCTE, &

NWP created a document called "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing" that, in part, outlined the "habits of mind" that should guide writing programs: curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition. Like the threshold concepts outlined in Naming What We Know, I think these and the other principles in the Framework (2011) are all good, particularly as statements of field virtue for those steering programs and arguing for best practices from a field standpoint. One of the motivations for this dissertation was wanting to understand how statements like these are taken up in the classroom. I settled on the writing assignment guidelines we offer to students, particularly used by graduate teaching assistants. My initial and maybe the correct impulse was to use the keywords from Framework (2011) or Naming What We Know (2015) to see if and how they appear in those documents. However, I resisted this impulse perhaps out of my own propensity to do the weird and hard thing. Mapping the writing assignment guidelines onto these core(?) statements of disciplinary virtues is the most straightforward and obvious path, but these statements are purely disciplinary statements as much as there can be purely disciplinary statements. That is, they are written for a disciplinary audience by discipline-trained writers describing what the discipline believes. Once again—the individuals within these disciplines have their own history, ideas,

and agendas, but at the end of the day they are published as defining ideas in the broad discipline of *postsecondary writing*. If this dissertation were focused on assessment or field history or even GTA training (GTA training is a component), that kind of mapping would make more sense. This is not that dissertation. Indeed, the audience of this dissertation is at least as much if not more people who don't teach first year writing as people who do teach and direct first year writing programs.

Here I would like to offer a distinction between *habits of mind* and *moral habits* (*hexeis* in Greek) as a brief way to introduce virtue ethics. They are both reaching toward the same goals: giving students practices that they can use to "succeed in a variety of fields and disciplines" (Framework, 4). A minute criticism I have is that habits of mind is concerned a little more with school and work success whereas *moral habits* are concerned with students as whole humans, but I don't know that the distinction is really that different in functionality. Another distinction that makes me lean toward moral habit language is that virtue ethics, by definition, has tensions built into the framework; Confucius tells the story of "village worthies" who exhibit all of the publicly acceptable moral habits but are not virtuous people. As Sung (2020) recounts, "The village worthies pose a special sort of risk to moral community: they stand in the way in morally complex and

urgent cases because they merely propagate the public's confused moral judgements and potentially undermine certain moral judgements that are essential to moral community" (p. 3). That is, there are situations in which the publicly accepted thing to do and the moral thing to do are separate, in which cases the "village worthies" will do the publicly acceptable thing and, because they are paragons of virtue, the community will view as moral. Sung uses the particularly current example of accepting bribes: the community may see this as acceptable, and the worthy "might in turn criticize the morally upright for being too stringent and impractical in practice" (p.3). Ultimately, we know taking bribes is not a moral action regardless of what the public thinks is moral. I do not think people who use habits of mind language are these village worthies, I merely mean to point out that while action can be an indicator of inner morality, modern virtue ethics does a better job of explicitly acknowledging the tension between mere action and true virtue. This parable and its implications for our university classes feels particularly important in world where what is legal or publicly acceptable and what is right are not always aligned.

Ultimately, though, the language doesn't really matter. I am laying out reasons why I personally find virtue ethics satisfying, but I don't pretend that this is ultimate truth or the One True Way for writing studies. I have neither the status

nor power to make that pronouncement. However, I do write in the hopes that this will resonate with others both in the field and beyond. I also wonder if making these explicit connections between the work we are currently doing and the ancient-and-current project of virtue ethics can help us in the ever-urgent need to explain what we are doing to those outside our discipline and, indeed, those who are outside the academy. Couching our policies and goals as virtues may help students, parents, and administrators understand that our goal is not only to produce good students and good workers, but that we engage in a larger project of producing good humans.

Another reason I choose virtue ethics is that by using a lens that is not common in our field(s), I hope we can look with fresh eyes at documents that are often routine and overlooked (see the later section on occluded genres). My committee is made up in part by the director of writing foundations and the director of the university writing program at ECU. These are both incredibly smart and talented individuals who work closely with what is being taught at ECU and how it is being taught. The director of writing foundations, in particular, has read every one of these assignment guidelines already and the director of the university writing program often teaches the pedagogy seminar for soon-to-be GTAs. I hope they can learn something from this dissertation and I hope they can

reflect on the results discussed in chapter 4. While I greatly value their contribution and input into this dissertation (and they have done so much to shape my thinking), they are not necessarily the audience for this dissertation. They already know what is in this dissertation and they are doing great work. My hope is that this dissertation can reach beyond WPAs and similar positions. I want it to be read by people who do not have a direct hand in first year writing, broadly required writing courses, or in training GTAs. I want them to consider both the actual work that is being done in these courses—many of them know from their own days as GTAs—but also the opportunities we have as a discipline, as departments, and as individuals to shape these documents. I also want to have a conversation about how we construct writing assignment guidelines at large. Chapter 5 initially was written as a reflection and suggestion on constructing writing assignment guidelines from a standpoint of virtue; I have since expanded chapter 5 to include more discussion on the limitations of this current study and suggestions for how I will go from here and where I think departments and fields can go from here.

### Graduate teaching assistants at East Carolina University

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, through which ECU has accreditation, requires instructors of record to have at least 18 credit hours of

graduate coursework in the discipline they are assigned to teach. Potential graduate teaching assistants are also required to take a course in teaching composition. This means that even the GTAs in other English concentrations (including creative writing and literature) at ECU have a baseline knowledge of the theory and practice of teaching composition before they step into the classroom. Graduate students who have not yet met the requirements do something else—other research assistantships, for instance. Once potential instructors have met the requirements, they are assigned to teach either English 1100: Foundations of College Writing (a typical first year writing course) or 2201: Writing about the Disciplines (a sophomore course designed to introduce students to the writing within their discipline). These two courses comprise Writing Foundations at ECU. PhD students in their third and fourth year may go on to teach other upper division writing intensive courses including business writing and scientific writing courses.

GTAs are given a *fairly* free hand on the writing assignment guidelines they use. There are sample guidelines hosted in a common working space that new instructors are encouraged to adapt as meets their needs. One of the findings of this dissertation is that, while they are encouraged to use the sample guidelines and most of them do use the assignments described in the samples, the majority

of guidelines are changed at least in some way. GTAs take bits and pieces from many places (classes, discussions in GTA meetings, field literature, etc.). Often they borrow not only the ideas but also the words of other people, copying and pasting sentences, phrases, and paragraphs from the guidelines of other instructors into their own. The provenance of the finished document doesn't really matter to students (they'll interact with it for a couple of weeks and move on), but it reflects a series of choices that are made: choices based on virtues of the many voices that influenced the document but, ultimately, they are responsibility of the instructor. That is, the instructor is filtering the virtues of the discipline and of the university through their own virtue system. The goal of this dissertation is to examine these overlapping virtues through the lens of virtue ethics to approach what we are "really teaching" when we teach writing.

This dissertation examines a corpus of writing assignment guidelines produced and deployed by GTAs for use in English 1100 between 2014 and 2023. This is a useful population because, as both student and teacher, they exhibit a particular type of virtuous becoming. At the same time, I don't engage much with the literature on GTA training in part because their inexperienced state merely highlights the process of becoming virtuous we are all engaging in; it is a difference of degree and not of type.

I acknowledge GTAs likely do not believe all of the things they put in to these guidelines due to time and other pressures. At semester's start, however, they still put their name on the document and put it out as a statement to students that *this is writing*. One of the reasons I don't try to delineate between personal, disciplinary, and bureaucratic virtues is because without extensive interviews and archival data it's impossible to separate them. Central to understanding this dissertation is the notion that these documents (the writing assignment guidelines as well as the university's outcome statements) are, within this realm, *an* embodiment of virtuous writing at ECU between 2014 and 2023. They obviously cannot contain everything instructors, administrators, or committee members believe, nor can they contain everything that happens in the classroom, but they are still deployed as statements of virtue. These are snapshots of a particular moment in time. *Everything else* is just a ghost image haunting these documents.

## Ghosts of the university

To state that our courses are haunted is to acknowledge that academia is a system that benefits and harms both employees and students not because it is inherently designed that way but because the people who make up the system make decisions that benefit and harm people, sometimes on purpose and often

not on purpose. Time moves on and the people and exigencies behind those decisions disappear but we are still left with evidence of their passing. This is particularly poignant at this moment when policies and university documents are being heaved up at the whims of politicians. We cannot know the future or how everything will shake up, but this moment will leave indelible fingerprints on the future of academia.

Gordon (2008) outlines a principle of "complex personhood" at the heart of hauntology:

> "[E]ven those who live in the most dire circumstances possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents…Complex personhood means that all people (albeit in specific forms whose specificity is sometimes everything) remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others. Complex personhood means that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves…Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society's problems are entangled and weave

> between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward. Complex personhood means that people get tired and some are just plain lazy. Complex personhood means that groups of people will act together, that they will vehemently disagree with and harm each other, and that they will do both at the same time and expect the rest of us to figure it out for ourselves…Complex personhood means that even those who haunt our dominant institutions and their systems of value are haunted too by things they sometimes have names for and sometimes do not. At the very least, complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning" (p. 5).

Systems—and the people that form them—are complicated and act sometimes both in their best interests and sometimes not in their best interests and often both at once. This makes the task of untangling how those actions go on to affect our students and colleagues enormously difficult. The language of haunting and ghosts that Avery and others use allows us to acknowledge that the system's benefits and harm can show up in many different unexamined ways. Acknowledging this benefit/harm as ghostly allows us to temporarily set aside

the specific *reasons* for the benefit/harm while acknowledging the *impact* of the benefit/harm on the day-to-day work of the course. That is, my goal is not necessarily to absolve the individual or the system of guilt or give it undue praise but to place the emphasis on where we are today and what we can change going forward through even small actions like adjusting our expectations in writing assignment guidelines.

Specifically in the case of this dissertation, it is vital to understand that writing assignment guidelines come from somewhere and are informed by many different and often competing sets of virtues imperfectly described as disciplinary, bureaucratic, and personal, but that while we can trace fingerprints—hauntings—of these actions, they are fleeting and ultimately cannot be grasped for us in the present. Somebody deeply believed something once and brought it up in a faculty meeting, and it became a course outcome (indeed, the very idea that courses needed outcomes was somebody's pet project that gained a lot of momentum). That course outcome, in turn, had to be dealt with in a writing assignment that somebody, probably someone(s) different than the outcome writer, put together. Neither the lawgiver nor the law enforcer is here any longer—whether due to them physically moving on or because we are all of us always in the process of becoming something else—but their presence is felt in

the thing they left behind. We can look at the writing assignment guideline, the tangible document, and try to understand the impulses behind them. One of the major things I struggled with in this dissertation is to figure out just how far to go. How much do I describe the disciplinary virtues that impact our guidelines? How much do I probe the faculty meetings and emails and GTA trainings and discussions in the shared office for MA students for hints of why the writing assignment guidelines between 2014 and 2023 are the way they are? Tracing just these causes feels like an entire dissertation just on its own. I settled for a deeply flawed system—trying to acknowledge that while these actions matter deeply, for our purposes here we are setting them aside and trying to understand what the documents have to say for and about themselves.

My initial plan was write a very different chapter 3 but as I moved into analysis, I felt that the university documents that describe writing at ECU and inform course content were an adequate stand-in for all of the pesky ghosts that haunt writing assignment guidelines. They are a concise and approved layout of what the university as a bureaucratic body has said about writing, a representation of all the negotiations that created them. This is also a test of how to read documents for virtuous statements. In its early stages, I expected the virtues I pulled out from the university documents and the virtues I pulled out of

the writing assignment guidelines to have significant variation. I thought there would be more personality and resistance in them. However, on reading the guidelines, I found that they more or less followed the university documents. Chapter 3 probes how ECU as a bureaucratic body describe good writing (with input from the discipline) and chapter 4 became more about how the guidelines present those same virtues to students.

I will close this section note on individual virtues. One thing that would aid this dissertation would be to examine guidelines from more experienced grad students (even the same population further in their careers), which would provide a clearer picture of how those individual virtues persist and evolve over time. However, even if the guidelines tend to be patch-written more than concocted wholly, the process of selection from available options is significant. That is, GTAs coming in to teach writing are given templates and examples, and they are given peers both experienced and unexperienced to talk to. They then make selections from these templates and put them up as what they believe about writing, even if that belief only exists for one semester and will later be swept away with experience. Most writing assignment guidelines changed in some way from the original before they are deployed, even if the change was just copying and pasting a policy or procedure from another guideline. Once again, it is not my

goal to divide what is personal from what is disciplinary from what is bureaucratic. My goal in describing them as personal, disciplinary, and bureaucratic is a way to acknowledge that these documents and the virtues they contain are complicated and negotiated.

The rest of this chapter lays some of the theoretical foundation for writing assignment guidelines and how they function in the classroom and negotiate the relationship between teachers and students. Chapter 2 moves onto the methodology of this specific study, and then chapters 3 and 4 offer analysis of the university documents and writing assignment guidelines themselves. Chapter 5 is a short conclusion chapter offering suggestions for further research and work.

## Writing assignments are where teachers show up

We (teachers) spend a significant amount of time on student-facing documents. The cycle will be familiar to anyone who has taught: sometime in late July or August we pull open our computer folders and open up the syllabus, trying to remember all the things we told ourselves we would change last time we taught the course. We muddle through all the things we think we might want to do with students this semester: what are they going to turn in? What do we want to read 25 times? What are the goals of the course? What are our personal

goals? All the while pulling on the things we learned last time: what worked and didn't work. What will get us closer to the results we want? What aligns with current best practices and outcomes as defined by the department? Then it's into the fray. Mid-semester comes, we start seeing the fruits of our August labors, and we start thinking about next semester. Is it time to retire that old assignment? Is it really measuring what we want to measure? Then suddenly it's December and it's time to close out those documents and get ready for Spring.

This reflective practice is how we get what Stephen North (1987) refers to as "lore," which he compares to "painting or parenting…these bodies of knowledge are not 'scientifically' rigorous, either. And while they can, like lore, be informed by other kinds of inquiry, including the various sciences, they cannot be supplanted by them" (p. 23). He continues that "lore" has its own logic, but that this logic is "concerned with what has worked, is working, or might work in teaching, doing, or learning writing…its structure is essentially experiential" (p. 23). That is, while journal articles and advice from peers is invaluable, there is nothing quite like being in the classroom. Gallagher (2011) remarks that "for all the effort neoliberal reformers put into conducing end runs around faculty and students, *being there* matters" (p. 463, emphasis in original). Further, he claims "This alternative order inverts the neoliberal order, positing a *positive* correlation

between primacy and proximity to, and direct involvement in, the core work of education—teaching and learning. Here, we recognize that agency derives not from institutional position but from *location* within the central activity of the enterprise and *relation* to others undertaking that activity" (p. 464, emphasis in original). This dissertation presents one way to examine how *being there* matters by observing how teachers express the goals of the course (their own as well as the institution's) through an occluded and overlooked genre: the writing assignment guideline.

## Writing assignments are an occluded genre

As much time as we spend with student-facing documents, their ubiquity means they are often overlooked and elided as sites of study. Neaderhiser (2022) writes "For graduate students, their ability to enter and engage the academic community can either be endorsed or undermined by how the documents showcasing their ability to teach…are understood as representing not only their current experience but also their capability to build their teacherly identity further, with implications for their success at getting a job within academia" (p. 4). It would be myopic to suggest that writing assignment guidelines make or break careers. The reality is they are rarely looked at *that closely*, though when they are

looked at the stakes are often high—job applications, promotion files, and so forth; with that said, this dissertation suggests that they are a snapshot of teacherly identity, one place where that identity can be examined. They are a site whose audience includes both the students that are taught as well as the folks who get to evaluate the instructor's performance. Most of the documents I am asked to include in job materials to prove my ability to teach are objects like the teaching statement, which is a reflection written by me for my evaluators; teaching evaluations, which are written by my supervisor to some outside audience judging my effectiveness; or course evaluations, which are written from the students to my evaluators. Unlike these reflective documents, assignment guidelines are directly produced by me for consumption and interpretation by students and also at the same time as proof that my instruction is valid to the university (directly approved by my supervisor, tacitly approved by the people who approve of courses, tacitly approved by the accreditors that say a degree from East Carolina University has validity).

Neaderhiser (2022) and others refer to these kinds of documents as occluded genres. Swales (1996) offers the following definition of occluded genres: "On the one hand, they are typically formal documents which remain on file; on the other they are rarely part of the public record. They are written for specific

individual or small-group audiences, and yet may also be seriously invested with demonstrated scholarship and seriously concerned with representing their authors in a favorable professional light. More importantly, however, exemplars of these genres are typically hidden, 'out of sight' or 'occluded' from the public gaze by a veil of confidentiality" (p. 46). While writing assignment guidelines are written for a specific audience in a particular place and time and, for the most part, rarely move beyond that, they still perform an important function. At East Carolina University, all new GTAs teaching 1100 and 2201 for the first time submit all of their writing assignment guidelines to the director of Writing Foundations. The director offers feedback and suggestions, but they also indicate whether the submitted guidelines fit within the realm of acceptable activities at ECU in this particular time. This process has the dual function of checking that GTAs are doing what they are supposed to be doing, but it also demonstrates to GTAs what is acceptable. They mark an important juncture of a new teacher's identity: what have/are they taking up from their nascent expertise in writing studies? While it can feel restricting, there are many ways to fit within the realm of acceptable. Topics, genres assigned, and modes accepted are all *fairly* open, but the director of Writing Foundations still has the power to set those boundaries. At ECU, at this time, for instance, assigning poetry would fall beyond the purview

of English 1100. GTAs cannot accept short fiction. Neaderhiser (2022) writes, "when faculty write pedagogical documents, they are not only writing for the classroom—for students—but also *about* the classroom for other academic scenarios and audiences. They are composing the realities of that classroom, complete with the subjectivities associated with student learning and teacherly identity while also being influenced by external factors ranging from disciplinary values to administrative mandates" (p. 4). Neaderhiser (2022) points out that ignoring the critical study of classroom genres makes us "less capable of ensuring that the best practices of pedagogy are endorsed and perpetuated when new instructors or administrators are faced with the need to compose those genres for the first time" (p. 8). At this present moment I am thinking of the career trajectory of an early academic: from the fairly constrained nature of teaching first year writing as a new MA student to the slightly more open options of a later PhD, and then into the significantly more open field of courses that are (mostly) owned by assistant professors and beyond, particularly new courses conceived and proposed by the new faculty member. How do you ensure that courses that are either new or new to you conform to your own virtues and the virtues you hope for your students while maintaining consistency across the department? One way to approach that goal, I believe, is to examine those virtues already

present in the corpus of guidelines produced by apprentice teachers across a whole program.

### Writing assignments display personal, disciplinary, and bureaucratic virtues

When it comes to writing, Colton and Holmes (2018) suggest, "rhetorical meaning in digital texts is seen not as neutral or self evident but instead as a reflection of contingent or particular ideological backgrounds and positions" (loc. 609). Not only can we construct texts ethically, but we can read them with an eye toward the ideologies that created them. This dissertation applies that method of inquiry to the writing assignment guidelines themselves: what are the ethical commitments that guideline writers are working under and, at the same time, are they signaling that students should adopt? I am also complicating this notion by suggesting that we can read not only the commitments of the instructor who offers the assignment but, by extension, the commitments of the departments (bureaucracies) and discipline these instructors are beholden to.

Writing assignment guidelines are one space where the sometimes harmonious and sometimes contentious virtues or beliefs of the university (or the bureaucracy that is the university), the discipline that may or may not own writing (Hesse, 2005), and the individual instructor are negotiated. The bureaucratic

machinery that is the university decides (or endorses) what the outcomes and focus of the course should be, people trained in the discipline inform those outcomes and sometimes staff the bureaucracy and develop curricular goals, and individual instructors are tasked with communicating those ideas to students. These roles are often but not always overlapping. Many instructors are trained in writing studies, many of them get a say in departmental meetings where outcomes are set, a few of them even get to participate in the approval process of the university at large. But these courses, and by extension the writing assignment guidelines that fill them, sit a complex nexus of the ideologies of the university, the discipline, and individuals.

### Writing assignments exhibit virtues

Navickas (2022) describes the role writing assignments play in the writing classroom: "the writing assignment is a classroom genre with the power to influence students' thinking, writing, and understanding of what is possible" (p. 39). She also remarks that "teachers embed pedagogical values, hopes, and desires in their courses—even larger epistemological, ideological, and perhaps political objectives" but asks, "how can we assess such aspirations in practice?" (p. 39). The effort of this dissertation is to look at writing assignment guidelines to

try to see what virtues we prime our students to engage with in these guidelines. Who do we want our students to be and, by reflection, who are *we* when we make these guidelines?

To that end, I am examining these virtues through the lens of virtue ethics as described by Vallor (2016), Colton and Holmes (2018), and Duffy (2017, 2019). Vallor points out that while much of the language of modern virtue ethicists is found in the Western canon defined by Aristotle and others, there are significant conceptual overlaps with Confucian and Buddhist virtue ethics (Vallor, 2016, p. 22). While my own educational tradition has rested largely on Aristotelian theory, one small thing I have done throughout this dissertation I use the more universal term "moral habit" rather than the Greek "hexis."

The first and most important advantage of virtue ethics is that virtue ethics resists fixed normative evaluation. Virtues carry their own sort of norming but are concerned with norming in the most ethical way possible. As Colton and Holmes (2018) explain, "In general, virtue ethics avoids rational principles, universal maxims, or means-ends thinking. Instead, virtue ethics is grounded in the dispositions individuals develop through their daily living practices" (loc. 112). That description fits virtue ethics as a lens within North's (1987) notion of lore, as well as Gallagher's (2016) call to take control of the narrative about writing

instruction: "I propose a rewriting of the assessment scene that abandons the stakeholder theory and asserts faculty and student agency in the form of leadership for writing assessment" (p. 425). While this dissertation is not about writing assessment, the methods and methodology it outlines are one tool we can use to describe what we do both within our discipline and to those without our discipline that have a stake in it. The goal of this dissertation is not to determine virtues *should* exist and how they are offered but rather is descriptive of what does exist in these guidelines at this time.

The second advantage offered by a virtue ethics framework is the focus on process over product. We know that performance and knowledge are two different things; that is, the product that is turned into us does not always reflect the abilities and knowledge that students have. Writing is deeply situated and being a "good writer" is a moving target. The best we get is snapshots that are highly influenced by the attention and time students have to give, which in turn is highly influenced by other outside influences. I often say that writing is done in the margins because, in my personal life and observations of students, writing is often the thing that gets squeezed into the corners. You write in the few minutes you have while the kids are watching TV, or you stay up late the night before it is due. As a student I sometimes finished assignments on campus computers

outside the classroom, printing them off we filtered into the classroom. None of these are particularly conducive to producing the best pieces of writing, yet somehow the writing gets done. I am racing to finish this very dissertation among applying for jobs and being the primary caregiver to three children while my wife works full time. This isn't about complaining, rather this illustrates monumental task of writing and teaching writing. I have hope, though, that I can help my students think about what it means to be a "good writer." My belief is that it comes from helping them practice the virtues of a "good writer." Duffy (2017) puts it this way: "Every time we write…we propose a relationship with others, our readers. In proposing such relationships, we raise those questions moral philosophers attach to the ethical: what kind of person do I want to be? How should I live my life? What does it mean to be a good person?" (Pp. 329-330). He continues that the argument is not that we *should teach ethics* but that we *already are teaching ethics* when we teach writing because writing is an ethically fraught endeavor. He goes on to point out that "ethics" in the Western frame is a contested topic, typically dominated by consequentialism or deontology. These dominant frames of ethics have been challenged by postmodern critics in an increasingly global world where consequences are troubling and a universal maxim for good doesn't necessarily hold. In describing postmodern ethical

frames, Colton and Holmes (2018) paraphrase James E. Porter: "rather than describing an intact or standardized system of ethical values, postmodern rhetorical ethics is 'a *process of inquiry* by which we determine what is right, just, or desirable in any given case'" (loc. 593, emphasis in original). This process of inquiry should be at the heart of teaching writing: we write in the midst of many things we cannot control. We pay attention to what we can control and adjust accordingly. Writing *is* thinking and while product cannot be ignored (we have a university to run, with its attendant deadlines and demands for products, grades, and proof of learning), ultimately I care that students learn to be thoughtful and reflective writers and good humans in the larger world.

Finally, virtue ethics is based on the values of a community. Colton and Holmes (2018) write, "In other words, these normative values are not determined through reason outside our engagement with others and the material world. Rather, these values emerge and will continue to emerge and change, within and alongside our local and global interactions with our families, our neighborhoods, social media, and so forth" (loc. 754). Using a virtue ethics framework allows us to understand writerly virtues in terms of the communities in which they are developed and deployed. As teachers of writing, we prime our students to engage with certain behaviors or beliefs about writing that we hope will aid them

in future interactions with the world. As a framework for examining texts such as writing assignment guidelines, virtue ethics allows us to acknowledge that the virtues we include in writing assignment guidelines are not simply the result of our personal commitments; they don't exist in a vacuum, but are instead influenced by the networks that we belong to.

Colton and Holmes (2018) and Duffy (2017) primarily reflect on their own experiences basing course materials on virtue ethics and how that worked with students in different classes. This dissertation adds to that conversation by starting with a set of materials that do not reference virtue ethics but uses virtue ethics as a lens to describe these materials. It supposes that virtues are kind of hidden messages in the work we are already doing even when we don't use that language prior to writing them or in our discussions of these materials. As noted above, part of the reason for using virtue ethics in this way is that it is different than how we usually talk about writing assignment guidelines, which can help us to explore writing assignment guidelines in a new light. It also allows for virtue ethics to reach a wider audience. While it can be a place to create assignments from (I will discuss strategies for this in chapter 5), it can also simply be used as a discussion topic for work we are already doing and have been doing all along both in our departments and discipline but also connecting with those outside

our discipline in the larger project of the university.

### Writing assignments possess both manifest and latent virtues

One of the challenges of uncovering virtues from writing assignment guidelines is the impulse we have to direct student activity but not too directly. Of course we want students to write virtuously, whatever that means in the context of our courses. Navickas (2022) studied explicitly feminist writing assignments to show how feminism showed up (or didn't) in those assignments. She argues that "regardless of pedagogical orientation (feminist or otherwise), the values and theory underlying an instructor's pedagogy should be visible in assignment texts and that an attention to how assignments position students and their arguments can provide one set of textual cues that make that pedagogy visible. I argue that such attention is a form of self-reflection that guards against unknowingly upholding hegemonic oppressive discoursed ideologies—work that is especially essential for teachers invested in pedagogies aiming for social justice" (pp. 40-41). This dissertation takes a somewhat more neutral approach to examining values. That is, I am not looking at specifically feminist assignments and, in some ways, I am doing the opposite by highlighting the bureaucratic (and some might argue hegemonic-by-nature) virtues that exist in writing assignment

guidelines.

While I think it is good and right to be explicit about our ideological pedagogy commitments, I am also curious about the ways that we intentionally keep our commitments latent. One of the major ethical dilemmas teachers of writing have is how to walk the line between letting students figure out for themselves who they are in their writing and sometimes telling them who they should be in their writing. Writing is at once an intensely personal endeavor where we reveal the deepest parts of ourselves but also incredibly public in that we have an audience we must answer to and thus we temper our deepest beliefs. I think this ethical dilemma is especially fraught in first year writing; that is, I wonder if upper division writing courses are a little bit self-selected where students are choosing the classes that align with their individual goals and values.

At ECU, English 1100 and  2201 is required of all students, and so we are charged with teaching everyone regardless of commitment or background. This is not an accusation, but Navickas's (2022) study began from constructing an upper-division research writing course, and she selected explicitly feminist assignments. At that level, there is some point where students who are opposed to feminism for whatever reason may drop the course in favor of a different course. Upper-division courses have perhaps a little more room to require more

socially just interpretations where the challenge in first year or other required writing courses is often just to have students write *something* and we do, occasionally, have to grade assignments that we find personally odious. GTAs, too, are often filtered into the program from a variety of backgrounds and ideologies. The vast majority of these GTAs both at ECU and across the country will engage with the course for a semester or two and that will be the end of their tenure within writing studies. They often don't have the time or incentive to make their ideologies explicit. With that said, one of my hypotheses is that the assignments from these GTAs will reveal some uptake of the virtues of writing studies as a field. Part of growth as a teacher is mimicking the virtues you have seen while you try to figure out what your own virtues are. This is why Navickas's call to be explicit about our virtues as teachers is important: when you make your virtues explicit and have students experiment with them, they start to see how they fit or do not fit in with their own experiences.

As Frost (2016) reminds us, apparent feminism is a tool that can allow allies or potential allies to understand where feminist goals align with non-feminist goals. Still, sometimes teachers have to use some subtlety. This section, then, is not arguing that we *should* or *shouldn't* be explicit in our virtues, but rather acknowledges that the tension exists in teachers. Keeping our virtues latent can

be either a tactical strategy to recruit allies or a survival strategy—in today's social and political climate there may be reasons for LGBTQ+ instructors to not be explicit about their commitments, or to choose other issues to highlight other than the ones that are most important to them. This is to say, it's not up to me, a straight white man, to say that a queer instructor will, should, or can teach from an explicitly queer standpoint. One thing I believe I can do as a straight white man is to use my position to introduce students to socially just communication.

Virtues for writing teachers are somewhat related to the notion of "stance". Mary Soliday (2011) writes,

> "From a rhetorical perspective, no content is free floating but must be governed by someone's angle of vision, or *stance.* Researchers assert that finding a stance poses a problem for writers in new situations because, to become proficient, they are acquiring ways of seeing and believing typical of a field…Stance requires writers do more than present information: they perceive and judge it in some way. To a certain extent, genres constrain writers unique viewpoints since the generic stance reflects how others typically perceive content in similar circumstances. In the academy, readers highly value evidence, and so how writers relate to content plays perhaps a more distinct role for us than it does for readers of other genres" (p. 36,

emphasis in original).

Writing assignment guidelines are one place where these stances, are negotiated for student writers, either manifestly or latently. In my AI writing assignment for English 3880, I tell students: You are young and hip, your boss is old and out of touch. We establish the fiction that they are working for a company and that their boss has asked them to write a report on generative AI's potential for their business. I am priming them to take a stance of subordinate but expert. This is manifest to the students.

Other assignments are less direct but still contain some coding for the stance students should take. One English 2201 guideline simply tells students: "First, you will find two current scholarly or trade journals related to your discipline, major, or field. Then from each journal, you will select one article **published in the last five years** (articles published between 2018-2023 and each article is from a *different* journal). For this project, you will then complete a rhetorical analysis of the two articles. I would advise choosing articles that are exploring a similar topic for easier analysis and comparison. Both journals/articles must be accessible through ECU libraries."Here, the instructor is not explicitly stating what stance the student should take or have. Students are left to take whatever stance they would normally have as students. Still, there are some indications of the stance the

instructor is looking for: that they have picked their "discipline, major, or field." Second, that they are at least emerging rhetorical scholars capable of "rhetorical analysis" of the two articles. Third, that students are writing for a current audience (published in the last five years).

Again, I have to reiterate that my goal is not to divide out what virtues are manifest and which one are latent, but rather to acknowledge that explicitness exists on a spectrum. Further, the lack of certain virtues in a writing assignment guideline does not necessarily mean the instructor doesn't have or value that virtue in themselves. This is not an evaluative dissertation but a descriptive one. Virtue ethics is the emphasis on (relatively) (stable) (dispositions): not universal truths or maxims, but an understanding that ethical decisions are contextual and flexible.

### The writing assignment genre

Writing assignments as a genre have a long history in scholarship. We think almost endlessly about what students should write. However, most of it collapses what we have students write (the topics and issues they wrestle with) with how they ask students to write it (see Glenn and Goldthwaite, 2014, Reiff and Middleton (1983), Bartholomae (1983), Navickas (2022)). Manning and Hanewell

(2007), for instance, use Authentic Intellectual Engagement to evaluate the writing assignments from a particular high school and offer suggestions that help students "construct knowledge…engage in a process of disciplined inquiry; and…have value beyond school" (p. 36).

Bawarshi (2003) gives us perhaps the most in-depth theorizing of the relationship between student/writer/reader and teacher/writer/reader that the writing assignment guideline genre mediates. He writes, "The writing prompt not only *moves* the student writer to action; it also *cues* the student writer to enact a certain kind of action" (p. 127). Bawarshi (2003) goes on to situate the student as both a reader and a writer, receiving instruction from the assignment guideline: "the prompt is a precondition for the existence of student writing, a means of habituating the students into the subject as well as the subjectivity they are being asked to explore so that they can then 'invent' themselves and their subject matter within it" (p. 128).

Helpfully for this dissertation, Bawarshi (2003) starts to point out the way that the language and directions used within the guidelines cue student action and suggest what is important to the teacher. He writes "it is the prompt that tacitly invokes the position that student writers are asked to assume when they write, so that students read their way into the position of writer via our prompts (p. 130).

One of the challenges Bawarshi (2003) mentions is that teachers are "double subjects" who have to write the guideline in such a way that students will recognize them as the reader of the thing the prompt is asking them to compose. They are, in effect, performing a kind of magic trick, redirecting student attention to the aspects of writing we have determined it is important for students to perform. Bawarshi mentions the rhetorical moves teacher/writers use to direct this attention, calling them "loaded phrases, because they not only offer suggestions the teacher-writer is giving to the student-readers; they also offer hints about what the teacher-writer will be expecting as a teacher-reader" (p. 131). He uses the example of prompting students to use quotes within the writing they produce. This dissertation extends Bawarshi's reading of assignment guidelines to situate the teacher/writer not as the ultimate owner of the writing prompt but rather within the constellation of factors that produce the writing assignment guideline. That is, writing teachers are not created ex nihilo and neither are their assignments. Everybody answers to someone. Guideline writers are enacting their teacher-readerly identities through the guidelines they produce. Where Bawarshi's (2003) analysis of a teacher requiring quotes as saying "'Look, I care about using quotes to support evaluation'" stops within the body of the teacher, this dissertation suggests that this is part of a much larger teacherly

identity, one that is driven not by what the teacher (particularly in the case of GTAs) thinks/believes, but rather what the department and discipline thinks/believes and what the GTA has taken up from these thoughts/beliefs. It is important that these thoughts/beliefs go beyond simple statements like "Using quotes is important" to be more stable moral habits like "Good writers quote other authors to show engagement with the conversation" as well as "Appropriately citing sources shows consideration to the community you are engaging with."

I am using writing assignment guidelines used by GTAs because, as markers of personal and professional identities, they illustrate what people new to the field are learning about the field and the university. GTAs, as much as they are older and more experienced than first year students, are still performing Bartholomae's (1983) observation: "The struggle of the student writer is not the struggle to bring out that which is within; it is the struggle to carry out those ritual activities that grant one entrance into a closed society" (p. 300). Freadman (2001) reflects this action in their definition of uptake: "Each discursive act in the process marks its place in the sequence by recording the previous stage in a narrative report or description, and only then does it perform an act: it turns back, then turns forward" (p. 42). GTAs take up their personal, bureaucratic, and disciplinary

virtues by looking at both the example guidelines provided but also other genres like syllabi and student learning outcomes that those assignments are supposed to represent. As mentioned before, however, the gap between GTAs and their more permanently employed counterparts is a difference of degree, not a difference of type. This act of becoming virtuous course designers is ever present and ongoing.

## Rhetorical genre studies

The role of what Bawarshi (2000) describes as the "genre function," has been described across literature, linguistics, and rhetoric and writing since the 1980s (see Bazerman, 1997, 2002, Swales, 1990, Devitt, 1993, 2015). Miller (1984) defines genre as "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (p. 159). In our case, the recurrent situation is the need to give students something to do in our course. Devitt (1993) points out that "once we recognize a recurring situation, a situation that we or others have responded to in the past, our response to that situation can be guided by past responses. Genre, thus, depends heavily on the intertextuality of discourse "(p. 576). Again, for our purposes, when GTAs arrive in the classroom they typically look to what has been done before in order to understand how to respond now: they look at the example of other writing

assignment guidelines. However, as Devitt (1993) helpfully points out, "Language and genre constrain but do not eliminate the individual writer…Working within existing genres as well, individuals choose and create: even the most rigid genre requires some choices, and the more common genres contain substantial flexibility within their bound" (p. 580). The genre of the writing assignment guideline is massive and varied. By narrowing it down to its specific manifestation of the guideline assigned by GTAs teaching English 1100 at ECU, we can examine the effects of the choices Devitt mentions. These choices are based on the virtues GTAs have, as contained within themselves but also as reflective of what they are learning from the department and the discipline.

While GTAs are encouraged to write their own assignments or adapt the ones provided as models, many GTAs choose, especially early in their tenure, to give out one of the assignments from the shared files. What is noteworthy, however, is that remarkably few of GTAs adopt the guidelines *unchanged*. GTAs are engaged in a complicated drafting procedure where they read the available examples and synthesize them into a final-for-now guideline that reflects what they believe they want students to do. Chapter 4 will provide some significant examples of this drafting process, but one example is this phrase: "but you will want to identify and try to explain things such as persona/ethos, tone and style, types of evidence

used, writing conventions followed, visual elements used, and other ways in which the writers attempt to achieve their purposes with their audience." The earliest use of this phrase is 2015P, but it appears in 10 other writing guidelines across the years. Notably, the assignments for most of these are different; they are asking students to analyze different genres and produce different products, but they deploy this same phrase in explaining what students are analyzing in these projects.

## Study impact

Regarding the social function of genres like writing assignment guidelines, Bawarshi (2000) writes,

> "Central to this genre-based inquiry are such questions as how and why texts as cultural artifacts are produced; how they in turn reflect and help enact social actions; and how, finally, they can serve as sites for cultural critique and exchange. Genres, I argue, can and should serve as the sites for such inquiry because genres, ultimately, are the rhetorical environments within which we recognize, enact, and consequently reproduce various situations, practices, relations, and identities" (p. 336).

In narrowing down the study of genre to its one specific manifestation in one

course at one university, I am hoping to do a deep dive into the specific "situation, practices, relations, and identities" exhibited by GTAs at East Carolina University. That is, as Bawarshi (2000) indicates, what can we tell about the department, the field, and individuals by reading into these guidelines?

My goal in doing this work is to provide another tool we can use to identify the impact our bureaucratic and disciplinary cultures have on the teachers we are producing, the teachers who (in theory) will go on to perpetuate the virtues we are inspiring within them. I imagine the impact of this dissertation as a check-in for ourselves: What do we value, do we really value it, and how do we show those values to the people we teach? I believe there is value in checking in with our values and, as Gallagher's (2011) suggests, to recognize the way that *being there* matters without giving in to the demands of the neoliberal university; I don't know that this method of reading GTA writing assignment guidelines and extrapolating bureaucratic, disciplinary, and personal values is going to change the university, get our department more money, more GTA funding, and more tenure lines, but I do hope that we can reflect together on what we are passing on to GTAs, our future colleagues, and what kind of future we are building for the students we will contact for generations to come. This illustrates Bartholomae's (1983) point, "There is, then, no natural or pure language because the language

we use always precedes us, belongs to others, and it, and not the writer, determines what is written." (p. 307). I wonder about is how this understanding of writing assignment guidelines can help us empathize with the process students go through as they struggle to produce their own words.

### What makes a virtue?

At this point it is worth doing a brief section on moral philosophy so that we can have a framework for how I am organizing all the stuff I have found through the writing assignment guidelines I have analyzed. Much like Hursthouse (2000) jettisons some of the particulars of Aristotle's virtue ethics, namely his thoughts on slaves and women, I am taking from virtue ethics what is useful to this project and our discussion and not worrying so much about exactness. Duffy (2017) suggests that modern virtue ethics rejects Aristotle's lists of normative virtues for "a theory of applied ethics, or how one should live and act in response to specific situations." He continues,

> "the common conceptions of contemporary virtue ethics is the idea that virtues are the traits, attitudes, and dispositions of character that we associate with a good person. We may say, too, that virtues are context-dependent, responsive to the *kairotic* moment, and social in nature,

> expressing the values, traditions, and narratives of specific communities and cultures (Velasquez et al.) Finally, we can observe that virtues are not thought by moral philosophers to be innate, but developed through instruction, practice, and habit" (p. 235).

Further, he writes, "Just as *eudaimonia* does not refer to a single episode of happiness but rather to a life well-lived, good writing is not typically realized in a single text but achieved through the writing and revision of many essays, arguments, narratives, and other forms of writing" (p. 242). This is the writing process we certainly encourage in undergraduate students and, at the same time, in the graduate students who teach them. A good writing teacher is not realized in a single semester, but in their ongoing revision of assignments, lessons, and grading practices.

Hursthouse (2000) writes that virtue ethics concerns itself with "motives and moral character…moral education, moral wisdom or discernment, friendship and family relationships, a deep concept of happiness, the role of emotions in our moral life, and the question of what sort of person I should be, and of how I should live" (p. 3). To this end, she elaborates on Aristotle's concepts of *eudaemonia* and *phronesis*. *Eudaimonia* is related to flourishing, happiness, and well-being but in a sense that goes beyond temporary good vibes and into deep

well-being. We want our students (first year students and GTAs together) to flourish in ways that are not just getting good evaluations: we want them to be "good writers/thinkers/teachers/actors" who will do succeed in the world beyond the college classroom. *Phronesis* is particularly useful for teachers of writing in that it is concerned with practical wisdom. I could go on at length about the histories and theories of teaching first year writing, but in this moment at East Carolina University we focus on rhetoric because rhetoric concerns itself with making choices based on practical wisdom: saying the right thing at the right time for the right audience. As Hursthouse (2000) puts it, "The concept of a virtue is the concept of something that makes its possessor good" (p.13). Duffy (2017), porting this notion of good people into writing studies particularly, elaborates on Aristotle's notion of *telos*, or purpose: "human beings who perform their distinctively human function well—those who are, in essence, good at being human beings (van Hooft 51)—are those who exercise the "virtues of reasoning well." Good people "find the mean, the middle path, between extremes of excess and deficiency" (p. 234). It is important to note here that virtue ethicists focus on how virtues are situational and relational (right actions for the right people at the right time), but that ultimately they are personally cultivated. We can lead our students (be they first year writers or grad students) to virtue but we can't make

them drink.

A virtue ethics framework suggests several important factors when we try to uncover the virtues already present in what we do. Ultimately, as Valor (2016), Duffy (2017), Hursthouse (2000), and Colton and Holmes (2018) all remind us, virtue is less something you achieve and more something to strive for: much as the neoliberal university would like us to, we cannot stamp a student as a "good writer" any more than we can stamp a GTA as a "good teacher." We (speaking of departments and disciplines) can encourage certain virtues and certify that *within our sphere* these virtues have been demonstrated to some satisfactory level, but the area *within our sphere* is seen through a glass darkly. One of Vallor's (2016) requirements for a moral habit is "one typically motivated and guided by moral *exemplars* in the community" (p. 74). Indeed, one of the main benefits of virtue ethics is its reliance on relational understanding, or "The habitual pursuit of an increasingly nuanced and accurate yet holistic understanding of how one is bound to other members of one's moral community by friendship, kinship, political, metaphysical, or other morally salient ties" and "The use of this understanding in increasingly prudent judgments that respond ably to the particular moral claims that these relationships make upon us in actual circumstances" (p. 83). Again, one of the primary benefits of relying on modern

notions of virtue ethics is the disregard for moral imperatives for situational and relational practical wisdom.

I want to say one final word about the virtues we are identifying in this dissertation. My primary goal is to uncover what virtues the English department at East Carolina university shows off to first year student writers and not to point out how we fit a predetermined set of virtues. It's an important distinction to me because one tangible effect I hope comes from this dissertation and the work that will come after it is reflection on our values and how they show up for students. What are we really teaching our students and its corollary, is what we are teaching our students really what we want to be teaching our students? I, in my position of the author of this dissertation, don't want to be the arbiter of what virtues should exist and I am resistant to the idea that we should have a list of virtues that should exist—or, rather, that such a list could exist outside the specific circumstances of the personalities, histories, and material affordances of particular locations. The virtues at ECU are not the same as those on my current tiny, rural campus at Eastern Oregon University because the histories, needs, and current truths of the two universities are vastly different. Still, the language and framework described in this dissertation helps me to conceptualize the way virtues circulate in programs large and small and across the related disciplines.

## Looking ahead

Chapter 2 is a short chapter about data collection and some of the background specific information of how teaching at ECU works. Chapter 3 turns to documentation provided by University Writing Program and Writing Foundations (two distinct but related bodies) at East Carolina University to provide a foundation for the disciplinary and bureaucratic virtues that exist at ECU. Again, I think it can be difficult to differentiate between disciplinary, bureaucratic, and personal virtues because they all inform and overlap each other. However, one boon we do have is a fairly robust set of goals and learning outcomes for writing courses at ECU explicitly laid out. To test the validity of this virtue ethics framework, then, we will look at what the bureaucracy says about itself and try to understand the virtues they proclaim. Then, in chapter 4, we can turn to the writing assignment guidelines to further describe how those virtues are articulated to students. Finally, chapter 5 will conclude with some suggestions for further research and practical applications of these principles.

# Chapter 2

## Data collection and organization.

The English 1100 documents I analyzed were drawn from university files. Notably for our purposes, we know for a fact that each of these documents was read and approved by the director or writing foundations. So, again, each of the topics, requirements, and activities are at least tacitly approved by the powers that be at ECU.

As I said in chapter 1, because of accreditation guidelines and department policy, GTAs must have 18 graduate credit hours in the discipline as well as a composition pedagogy course before they can teach undergraduate English courses. When they are able, they first teach English 1100 (Foundations of College Writing) or English 2201 (Writing in the Disciplines). Typically, this means that most of the GTAs are second year MA students. PhD students who enter the program with an MA and a pedagogy course are allowed to teach English 1100/2201 their first year; if not, they teach their second year. After they have taught English 1100 and 2201 at least once, and depending on performance and need, they then are assigned to teach English 3820 (Scientific Writing) or English 3880 (Writing for Business and Industry). This means that most of the graduate teaching assistants teaching English 1100 will teach it only once. Only 6 of the 94

GTAs I collected data from appeared in more than two years and they were somewhat exceptional cases—for instance, one received their MA in 2016 and then returned in 2021 for the PhD program.

Overall, I collected 347 writing assignment guidelines produced by 94 instructors between 2014 and 2023. The course is organized into three projects and a final portfolio:

-Project 1: Writing to Reflect

-Project 2: Writing to Analyze

-Project 3: Writing to Persuade

Not every instructor provided guidelines for every project. Project 3, in particular, was missing in many folders. From 2014 through 2022 that project was based on the "Pirate Read," a campus wide initiative to have all first year students read the same book (usually rooted in social justice, ethics, or citizenship) and discuss it as part of their first-year writing course. The example assignment guideline asked students to create an argument coming from the Pirate Read, using outside sources and sources from the book itself to make their argument. GTAs were told that if they were using the sample template, they did not have to submit it for approval, and so many of them did not include it in their folders. Still, plenty did make it into the folders. There are a few places of variation but

almost all of the project 3s were identical for the semester they were provided.

I did not collect the guidelines for the final portfolios because most folders did not contain those guidelines and it is the practice to use the standard assignment sheet for that project. The virtues of that project, too, are contained in the Student Learning Outcomes and Writing Intensive requirements set by the University Writing Program—these portfolios serve of final project for English 1100, and they are also submitted to Portfolium, a portfolio holding software, to be used as assessment materials. The self-reflective letter that accompanies the portfolio is supposed to be addressed to portfolio reviewers and detail how the projects in the portfolio meet the goals and requirements of the course. In practice that doesn't always play out, but this dissertation is not about practice. In lieu of the portfolio guidelines, see the discussion in chapter 3 of the bureaucratic/disciplinary virtue statements.

When collecting the data, for ease of use as well as anonymization, I renamed the documents by the year they were used and a letter corresponding to the instructor: 2014A, 2014B, etc. Because of the structure of how GTAs get assigned classes, the majority (73%) of GTAs only provided one semester of guidelines. Where GTAs stayed and provided documents from multiple years, I maintained the letter but changed the year. I have a spreadsheet of the names with the

anonymized letters so I know which ones are connected to each other and I note those relationships when they are pertinent. It's also worth noting that many of those who submitted multiple years of guidelines only submitted project 1, reflecting the level of trust from the department in not checking *every* guideline after the GTA has achieved some level of trust.

### Organizing virtues

Vallor (2016) defines virtue as "any stable trait that allows its possessor to excel at fulfilling its distinctive function: for example, a primary virtue of a knife would be the sharpness that enables it to cut well" (p. 17). One of the reasons Vallor finds value in virtue ethics in the 20th century, and what I think is useful for us in writing studies, is that

> "genuine virtues of character are not gifts of birth or passive circumstance, nor can they be taught in any simple sense. They are states that the person must cultivate in herself, and that once cultivated, lead to deliberate, effective, and reasoned choices for the good. Thus one builds the virtue of courage only by repeatedly performing courageous acts…Virtue implies an alignment of the agent's feelings, beliefs, desires, and perceptions in ways that are

> appropriate to the varied practical arenas and circumstances in which the person is called to act" (p. 18).

For our purposes here, "virtues" are the big box that describes the stable trait a person embodies and "moral habits" are the little actions that fit inside to demonstrate that virtue. For chapters 3 and 4 I had initially wanted to name each category a virtue. On further reflection, only one of the categories really reaches the heights of a virtue (rhetorical awareness), while the others are better described as moral habits, or the specific actions/habits/beliefs that demonstrate that a person has or is working toward rhetorical awareness and other virtues. Consistently throughout the university documents that I analyzed and then the individual writing assignments, rhetorical awareness is the guiding light that motivates almost every action within those documents. Underneath that guiding star, there are many different actions and choices a person can use to illustrate that they are rhetorically aware. Indeed, virtue itself, as defined by Vallor, matches much of the language of rhetorical awareness: "an alignment of the agent's feelings, beliefs, desires, and perceptions in ways that are appropriate to the varied practical arenas and circumstances in which the person is called to act" (p. 18).

The other categories described by this dissertation, in contrast, fit better

with the conception of moral habits as being the actions that a person uses to demonstrate that they have virtues. The moral habit of conversation, for instance, can be evaluated by the performance of tasks like citation of sources, reasonable use of arguments, and so forth. Performing the actions of the moral habit of conversation can illustrate that you have the virtue of rhetorical awareness as well as other virtues, like honesty and flexibility. These relationships between moral habits and virtue are reciprocal and overlapping. Moral habits can demonstrate multiple virtues, and multiple virtues can inspire many different moral habits.

To do the work of this dissertation, I read the documents and tried to connect frequently used phrases to try to understand the larger virtuous goals these phrases were serving. I expected some larger variations especially between the university documents and the writing assignment guidelines, but one surprising outcome of this analysis was that there is a remarkable consistency of purpose in these statements; that is, the virtues are illustrated throughout the entire program, though they are often signaled and highlighted in different ways depending on the instructor. The goal of chapter 3 and 4 is for my readers to understand how these virtues are signaled through the use of specific repeated and related words or phrases.

It's important here to note that I am not assuming these virtues are

predetermined nor ordained by any body higher than the creators of these documents and the instructors who put their names on them. As noted in chapter 1, one of the reasons that I specifically did not use established frameworks like Naming What We Know or other disciplinary publications is that my goal for this dissertation is to describe what is happening in these writing assignment guidelines, not to evaluate whether they meet a metric prescribed by the university, the discipline, or god (or whatever). The virtue and moral habits I describe arise from my evaluation of the documents, not because I began with the notion of rhetorical awareness or anything else as a virtue. I put together the virtue of rhetorical awareness and the moral habits of conversation, grammar, and process by noting repeated actions across all the documents that seemed to illustrate this virtue and the moral habits I describe.

### University documents

For chapter 3, I used ECU's general education Written Communication Competency goals, the University Writing Program's Writing Outcomes, and the English 1100 Course Specific Outcomes.

I coded the data in excel. I identified words or phrases (units) that pointed toward a broader moral habit or virtue and then marked each time that unit

appeared across the documents. For instance, GE 2 says: "Engage rhetorically and integrate a variety of appropriate sources to support a central claim." This was marked as both rhetoric and citation. I marked for recurring words and, as appropriate, broad ideas. For instance, "appropriate sources" was marked as "citation," as well as specific mentions of "citations." I did this because the language was somewhat inconsistent across the documents and occasionally within the documents, even though the rhetorical goals of the documents were similar. For instance, each of them uses some version of "appropriate audience," but because sentence structure and syntax the specific ways those words were deployed was different. Individual mentions of ideas only counted if they appeared in separate goals (i.e. "rhetoric" if mentioned twice in the same goal is only given one mark, but if mentioned in two separate goals is given two marks). I am not going to go into each individual decision here; this section is merely used to give you an idea of how I organized the units.

Once I had the units marked in Excel, I reviewed the data for ways they could fit together into categories of moral habits and virtues that we want our students to exhibit when they exit our courses. Chapter 3 will give you each of the moral habits and virtues identified together with how I got to these from the data. Chapter 3 also discusses my effort to name the moral habits and virtue and, more

importantly, to explain why I named and organized them as I did.

I want to reiterate that these are not universally correct nor are they a reflection of what *should* be there, they are simply a record of what I have observed and what I believe is borne out through the data.

Performing this task with these university documents had two main benefits: the first is that because of its limited scope (the documents aren't that long) and ostensibly unified purpose (laying out the goals of the courses), I was able to test my methods before I got to the much larger corpus of writing assignment guidelines. The second benefit is that it gives us an idea of what the university (comprised of individual folks but speaking with an official voice) sees as the virtues of a good writer. I could then compare and contrast these virtues with the ones that show up in the writing assignment guidelines.

### GTA writing assignment guidelines

I changed methods in analyzing the writing assignment guidelines because of the number of the guidelines and variance in language between them. Many guidelines suggested remarkably similar ideas, but in many different ways. Instead of coding them in a excel sheet as I did with the university documents, I read every guideline in project 1 and 2 and took notes on the virtuous language

they used—particular words or phrases that stood out to me, as well as commonly used methods of referring to the moral habits and virtues. I also took notes of individual writing guidelines that were unique in topics or emphases. In the end, some of these made it into the discussion in chapter 4 and some did not. When I started, I thought that I would find a lot of variation in the virtues of the individual instructors. What I found is that, for them most part, GTAs stayed on topic and addressed the same virtues as in the university documents.

The overall picture that I got from reading the guidelines is that the writing foundations program at ECU is generally unified in purpose and vision for students—that is, the virtues identified in the university documents are by and large reflected in the documents at least for English 1100. My initial goal for this dissertation was to look at more courses, which I still suspect would bring out different virtues, but due to time and other constraints I had to focus on English 1100.

I did not take notes on how many guidelines were identical to other guidelines nor how many used similar topics but differed in description, but with the exception of project 3, there were variety of activities, topics, and products suggested. The focus of this analysis was not on topics used, though sometimes topics come up in the discussion of "significance," but was instead focused on

themes and processes students were being asked to perform. Most of the final projects were text-based with very few nods to multimodality throughout the guidelines.

To get the data discussed in chapter 4, I reviewed my notes on keywords and searched the documents in Adobe Acrobat for instances of those keywords. I also searched similar keywords and related phrases to get the number of instances these words appeared across all the documents. I spot checked these search results to make sure that the numbers returned were accurate and to make sure that the keywords were being used in the way that I was expecting. I likely could have used a more robust software for this kind of searching, but this method was accessible to me both on and offline and also allowed me to be flexible in my search terms as I tried to capture all instances of the keywords and related phrases, including varying grammatical phrases.

The other finding that I would like to spend more time with in the future is that GTAs perform complicated and engaged composition practices as they put their guidelines together. They are, in general, thoughtfully selecting significant both topics students will write on as well as products students will produce. In doing this, they borrow from each other, copying ideas as well as literally copying and pasting phrases, sentences, and paragraphs to suit their needs, frequently

with nods to attribution but not really citing in the way academics are taught to cite.

I wanted to add a final caveat to this section on methodology. Ede (2004) goes through a similar process but with documents from her own teaching career, namely course descriptions and syllabi. While her focus is somewhat different and more personal than mine, I was struck by her consistent prodding of her own motivations and thoughts but her admission that those proddings are impossible: some of the decisions were made 20 years prior, a different person in a different place. My own endeavor is in some ways more ambitious and more foolish—these guidelines are taken over 10 years with many significant outside factors that influenced these guidelines in ways that can never be fully explored. Consider, for instance, that this 10 year period contains both the 2016 election as well as the COVID-19 pandemic; though only two instructor's guidelines explicitly mention of current events by name, the impression of current events is left on guidelines that ask students to consider, for example "the myriad situations of the summer" (project 2, 2021J). We cannot know what other personal, global, and political events leave impression on these guidelines but we can read through the words on the page to understand what is important to the people who composed during those events. Ede (2004) says, "Despite these and other

limitations, course descriptions can be revealing documents. What instructors choose to say, or not to say, can expose underlying assumptions they bring to their courses…When I write course descriptions, I have at least two audiences in mind: the students for whom the descriptions are intended and the colleagues who might also read my descriptions and form judgements about my teaching on that basis" (p. 88). My analysis reads through these documents on a personal, institutional, and disciplinary level. Though by no means common or universal, there are mentions of Black Lives Matter, the COVID-19 pandemic, the passing of Queen Elizabeth II, and other current events. Other guidelines are clearly wanting students to engage in significant topics without directly mentioning them. Occasionally, you start to see the personal bugaboos of the instructors. Project 2 2015L and 2016L (same instructor a year apart) opens with the somewhat ominous line: "Written words seem – to some people, at least – to be less important every year, with images and sound often being viewed as the central forms of contemporary discourse." I suspect "some people, at least" includes this instructor, and I'm fascinated to know how they came to the conclusion that the written word is being threatened. 2015L continues, "Yet both writing and speaking are still powerful forms of communication that can inform and enrich any format we use to get our ideas across to others. It is a tool whose mastery is

critical for an educated and successful person in this time and place." It then asks students to analyze a speech by then-First Lady Michelle Obama. In 2016, the language changes, instructing students:

> "Yet both writing and speaking remain powerful forms of communication that can inform and enrich any format we use to get our ideas across to others. Spoken (or sung) words and text (in design and in open captions) are often imbedded in visual communication; public speaking (speeches, presentations, rap, sermons) "texts" are frequently written in advance. Therefore, writing is a tool whose mastery is still critical for an educated and successful person in this time and place."

It then gives students the choice of articles, tweets, and poems to analyze. This is, to me, a fascinating example of a GTA wrestling with…something. I think they are wrestling a little bit with the idea of significance, wanting students to do something that *really matters* and to the this instructor, in 2015, the written word really mattered. At the same time, they are wrestling with notions of multimodality. As mentioned in chapter 1, GTAs are often using these guidelines to figure out their own virtues and the way those virtues manifest or function in the real world. The changing language between 2015 and 2016 suggests that some learning has happened, likely (based on my own experience) from the

classes they are taking but also from reflecting on the submissions they received the year before. These guidelines, then, are not static or complete, but rather are always in the process of becoming.

# Chapter 3

## Assumptions and Negotiations

I am going to bring up the notion of ghosts from chapter 1 here as an explanation to the following section. The goal of this chapter is to examine the documents that the university has produced to describe writing within itself: the Written Communication Competency outcomes, ECU Writing Outcomes, and finally the specific Student Learning Outcomes for English 1100. I want to acknowledge that there is a lot of stuff that could be examined to explain these documents. This chapter will ignore most of the ghosts haunting these documents—that is, many of the processes, people, and goals that went into making, approving, and housing them. These processes, people, and goals (all of the stuff outside the documents themselves) are important to understanding these documents, but I am resting the analysis on the documents themselves as complete statements. The following discussion will talk briefly about the creation of these documents as a way to think about the relationship between bureaucratic and disciplinary commitments, but it is not a complete definition of either. This dissertation could focus on tracing all the lines on how these documents were created and approved and the theoretical and political background on each element. Instead, it makes a few assumptions. The first is

that the fact that they have been published in a particular place or by a particular group means that they have been approved through the appropriate bureaucratic channels. Second, that they are the current version—acknowledging that they get updated over time, but that their findability means that they are up to date. Third and finally, the assumption is that the people who made these documents have the requisite knowledge and experience to make these decisions in line with their personal and disciplinary commitments. One of the weaknesses of this dissertation is that I did not spend enough time tracing the disciplinary lines that create both these university documents and the writing assignment guidelines examined in chapter 4. An expanded version of this dissertation would look at the disciplinary trends that give rise to both the broad theory behind these courses (i.e. their use of the writing to reflect, analyze, and persuade model) and the specific guidelines and words within the guidelines. Time and other factors have prevented that examination here, so I write with the assumption that all of the documents in this dissertation are within the realm of current disciplinary scholarship. The idea is to highlight the fact these documents are a site of negotiation between bureaucratic, disciplinary, and personal virtues but not to necessarily fully describe those negotiations. The fingerprints of these virtues is enough to suggest that the negotiation has already happened in

accordance with best (for now) practices.

One brief example of this negotiation is suggested below in the moral habit of grammar. One of the major tensions I feel as a teacher of English is what we mean when we use phrases like "a minimum of grammar…errors" or "effective syntax and punctuation,"(Written Communication Competency 5, Student Learning Outcomes). One of the ghosts we deal with is that "proper grammar" has, historically, almost always relates to some euphemism for white, educated, wealthy English: "Standard Academic English," "Revised English," etc. For over 50 years now, however, the official position of the Conference on College Composition and Communication has been that students have a right to their own language. In practice we often must accept some form of "Express their ideas clearly using grammar, punctuation, and word choice appropriate to the audience and context." This statement is from the 2024 revision of the English 1100 SLOs which were not used in the corpus of writing assignment guidelines in this dissertation but does reflect the most current way our department has settled the tension between students' rights to their own language and the neoliberal urge for measurable correctness.

The extremely condensed argument is that because we are in the English department with its attendant histories, we are often compelled to say something

about grammar that will please both the bureaucratic virtue of, say, correctness and the disciplinary virtues of flexibility and agency, so we come up with something like "appropriate grammar" and "effective syntax" to signal to those outside the discipline that we care about grammar but signal to those within the discipline that "grammar" is rhetorical.

## The university's bureaucratic and disciplinary documents

The primary claim of this dissertation is that writing assignment guidelines reflect the virtues of the discipline, university, and individuals who teach the courses. One of the troubling things about this claim is that these virtues are often obscured by various motivations. In some places, however, these virtues have been explicitly laid out for us. This chapter examines three different but overlapping sets of learning outcomes. One goal is to lay out what the university says about its own virtues before we delve into the writing assignment guidelines. The other goal is to demonstrate how moral habits and virtues can be gleaned from documents that do not use virtue ethics language and to show how virtue ethics language can be incorporated into the work we are already doing.

It is impossible to clearly divide disciplinary and university virtues because the documents that exhibit these virtues are made by many of the same people but not only by the same people—that is, they are created and approved by a

network of folks both within and outside the discipline working in different capacities at the university. I focus on three primary locations where the ECU's writing virtues are laid out. The first, I would argue, is a bureaucratic document in that it accomplishes the bureaucracy aims of the university, that is, its purpose is to keep the machine running. This is the Written Communication Competency learning outcomes published on the Institutional Planning, Assessment and Research (IPAR) website and the faculty senate website. This is one official university stance on what "[s]tudents who have completed the general education written communication requirements can [do]." The complete document can be found in Appendix A and a full discussion will follow. The competencies are placed in front of students in the syllabus but I suspect most students will never meaningfully engage with them—the thing exists primarily for accreditation purposes.

I want to acknowledge here that bureaucratic doesn't necessarily mean bad. I think accreditation is probably a good thing. It's probably good that the university can point to a document/webpage and say "this is what we believe/do." I understand why it is authorless: the university must be faceless if it is to remain eternal. Indeed, as Barthes remarked, "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing"

(p. 147). As Frost and Sharp-Hoskins (2016) remark, this leaves "interpretation open to the reader," or, for our purposes, it leaves interpretation up to those charged with implementing the outcomes in the classroom (p. 74).

Though it was adopted by the university, the Written Communication Competency document was drafted by the writing foundations committee (or what is currently the writing foundations committee) composted of writing studies folks in the English department. The precise drafting, editing, and approval process is real but past (many people are still here, some are not, the minutes probably exist somewhere, the university is haunted), and it now resides the university as an entity. Therefore, though it is a bureaucratic document and reflects the official bureaucratic virtues of the university, it is infused with the disciplinary and individual virtues of the people who wrote it and approved it acting, as they are, within their sphere as experts in the field of writing.

The other documents are the ECU Writing Outcomes used in Writing Intensive (WI, an official course designation) courses and the Student Learning Outcomes for English 1100 created with input, as noted above, by individuals acting in their sphere as experts in the field of writing studies for use in structuring writing (and writing intensive) courses. The ECU Writing Outcomes note that "These outcomes were developed by a committee of 35+ faculty, staff, students, and community

members in 2013 as part of our campus's first Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) for institutional re-accreditation. The Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Committee and the Faculty Senate then adopted them for all WI courses across the disciplines." I want to highlight the acknowledgement here that real people made these outcomes; it's also worth noting that the Faculty Senate gave the official university stamp of approval on them, again revealing the bureaucratic process that produces these virtue statements. Though as mentioned above, erasing the author promotes openness on the part of interpreters, Frost and Sharp-Hoskins (2016) remark that "authorial ethos derived from a textual—rather than human—body retains no hint or haunt of human fallibility; it merits the trust of users by eliminating human error" (p. 77). Though there is room for interpretation in the implementation of these bureaucratic virtues, there is no room for arguing about the virtues themselves.

Where appropriate, I also discuss the rubrics for each project. These are a useful manifestation of the other student learning outcomes because they give direction on how instructors are supposed to evaluate the outcomes of each project, including point values based on how well students achieve the goals of the project.

Through reading these documents and trying to find commonality between

them, I have identified a virtue of rhetorical awareness and moral habits of conversation, grammar, and process.

## A virtue of rhetorical awareness

One common theme in each of the documents, and repeated multiple times throughout the documents, is a virtue of rhetorical awareness. The word "rhetoric" is deployed at least once in each document, but related words and concepts are also used frequently: "audience," "purpose," and "context," appear several times. For instance, in the English 1100 Student Learning Outcomes, it says students will "explore the many purposes of writing" and "become attentive to how audience and purpose affect content, tone, and style." Outcome 2 of the Writing Intensive Outcomes says students will "Produce writing that reflects an awareness of context, purpose, and audience, particularly within the written genres (including genres that integrate writing with visuals, audio or other multimodal components) of their major disciplines and/or career fields." One of the Written Communication Competencies says students will "Demonstrate methods of inquiry and rhetorical strategies, including form, media and style relevant to the discipline."

Another consistent idea that supports this virtue of rhetorical awareness is a

notion of choice. Again from the Written Communication Competency, students should be able to "Identify and explain writing strategies used in their writing." Writing Intensive Outcome 5 suggests they will "Assess and explain the major choices that they make in their writing." Thus, the university consistently asks students to consider the available means of persuasion and choose the one most fitting to their audience, purpose and context.

Another notion that pops up frequently across the documents is the idea of "appropriate" and "credible." These are related the virtue of rhetorical awareness—appropriate and credible are dependent on rhetorical situation, but also other related virtues like flexibility and civility.

The stated goal of writing classes is to give students the opportunity to practice a virtue of rhetorical awareness, or to show that they are rhetorically aware through the writing they produce. Ideally, it would follow that the course activities and writing assignments invite students to demonstrate the possession of this virtue. Chapter 4 will examine some of the key words and phrases that prompt a demonstration of this virtue.

### A moral habit of conversation

In naming this moral habit "conversation," I wanted to use "citation" or

"attribution" but I think "conversation" is more usefully broad. "Citation" implies a formality that is more appropriate for a different course that emphasizes disciplinary practices more than the current iteration of English 1100 does while "conversation" contains citation within it but goes beyond. In the documents, "citation" shows up frequently, usually in connection with words like "research," "engage," "investigate," and "inquiry," all of which suggest students are entering a conversation that goes beyond simply citing their sources according to the required guidelines.

Along these same lines, the project rubrics add in the idea of "critical engagement with evidence." I don't know that the rubrics or goals of the course do a very good job of explaining what we mean by "critical" in the context of first year writing. I typically use it to mean that students will make a "so what" statement in their writing. Going beyond simply quoting or stating a fact, they will state the fact and tell me what it means in the context of the argument. This fits into the moral habit of conversation because we want students to not only know how to find and integrate sources, but to do so in a way that indicates they are conversant and not, for instance, simply fulfilling the requirement that they use three sources for their paper because it is the requirement. The exact instance where engagement with a source becomes "critical" is, of course, up to the

practical knowledge of the one doing the grading.

Similar to the above discussion of "critical," a recurring notion in the documents is "significant questions." I am going to admit my own confusion with this phrase. It clearly gained traction in the department at some point in the past because of how the same phrase is worked into different sentence structures across the university documents and the writing guidelines themselves. What is not elaborated is what makes a question significant, to whom it should be significant, or who gets to evaluate whether the question reaches an appropriate level of significance. I very nearly broke it out into its own virtue but in the end my negotiation of "significance" is that it emerges from the conversations instructors ask students to engage with.

### A moral habit of grammar

I struggle naming this one. I want to name it "correctness" or "conformity," but for now I'm going to stick with grammar, again in the broad sense of Miriam Webster's definition 2a: "A system of rules that defines the grammatical structure of a language." Grammar is brought up frequently: Written Communication Competency 5 says students will "Organize sentences and paragraphs to communicate central points with logical connections and a minimum of grammar

and punctuation errors." The Student Learning Outcomes acknowledge the push for grammar thus: "Express your ideas with clarity and with effective syntax and punctuation."

Another way this virtue of grammar manifests is suggestions that students "Organize sentences and paragraphs to communicate central points with logical connections" (Written Communication Competency 4). Each of the rubrics, similarly, places an emphasis on "Formatting and Citation" and most to them have some category for "Form/Genre" or "Expression and Organization." I place these under the virtue of grammar because they point toward external forces that decide what good writing looks like; for example, that MLA has decided good citation and document formatting is performed a certain way, or that organization and logical connections are categories that exist apart from the document that is produced.

The overarching theory and drive behind this virtue of grammar, I contend, is that there is a measuring stick outside the student-produced document. Adherence to this standard results in a document that is "organized," "logical" "appropriate," "effective," etc., as determined by the person grading the writing. In practice (grading, class discussions, etc.) we may be more forgiving of mistakes and faux pas, but according to our documentation of what we believe, good

writing exhibits a moral habit of grammar.

## A moral habit of process

The notion of process appears in both the ECU writing outcomes and English 1100 specific outcomes. Writing Communication Competency Outcome 3 states says students will "[d]emonstrate that they understand writing as a process that can be made more effective through drafting and revision." Student Learning Outcome bullet 3 says students will "[p]ractice drafting and revising." The discussion in chapter 4 will go into more detail about how process is described and negotiated in the guidelines themselves.

# Chapter 4

In Situating Composition, Lisa Ede (2004) reflects on her own course descriptions and syllabi with the caveat that these documents don't reflect the reality of the course and are, at best, a prediction and one written under time and institutional pressures. She reflects, "Writing a description of a class that I am teaching in (what feels like) a far distant future seems like a frustrating exercise in prognostication" (p. 88). Ede, reflecting on a course description that doesn't quite fit her style, considers that "given the pressures of a new position…I simply use the description written by the previous director of composition" (p. 89). This feeling is familiar to any GTA teaching unfamiliar courses in unfamiliar ways. They can and often do rely on the example writing assignment guidelines posted on the Writing Foundations blog. I think it's easy to characterize GTAs as unlearned, unexperienced, unconfident, or a host of other things. However, in my examination of the writing assignment guidelines I was surprised by several things that give lie to this characterization. The first is that there is remarkable difference in the assignments GTAs choose to use. The second, and perhaps most important to this dissertation's central claims, is that there is remarkable variance between even GTAs who use the same assignments. Few of them copy and paste straight from the blog. Or, rather, remarkably few copy and paste *without*

*changing* guidelines from the blog. A third and corollary observation is that, even while guidelines are often changed according to individual decisions, many of these changes include pieces and references from other writing assignment guidelines. This suggests that rather than simply grasping at straws and struggling through, GTAs are often mixing and matching straws to create a document they are satisfied with, or that they hope students will respond to. One of the common phrases that gets deployed across the writing guidelines is that the goal of the project is: "To give you practice constructing an academic essay—one that contains a cohesive analysis that makes a point, is developed and well-supported." This phrase appears 25 times across the  project 1 guidelines and only 3 times in the project 2 guidelines (and not at all in the project 3 guidelines) but what is interesting about it is that it appears in three separate iterations: most of the time as one as part of a bulleted list of items or as a numbered dyad of course goals, and in one instance inserted into a paragraph, very slightly edited to make grammatical sense. The phrase was deployed by different people and connected to different topics and products. This suggests that at some point the individual authors found it in an example text, thought it sounded like a good phrase, and then chose to include it in some form on their own. This process is extraordinarily common throughout the assignment guidelines—phrases and

sections appear over and over in different configurations and places.

Taken as a whole, the corpus paints the portrait of a group of people building guidelines together over nearly a decade, swapping out pieces that don't resonate and swapping in pieces that feel important in the moment. Each assignment only had a variation of five or six topics and products students were asked to produce; the way students were asked to engage in these topics and products varied from instructor to instructor.

The rest of this chapter will discuss the moral habits and virtues outlined in chapter 3 using the key words and phrases deployed in the writing assignment guidelines themselves. Where it felt appropriate, I include full quotes from sections. A large part of this analysis, however, relies on the number of times these key words and phrases appear throughout the document. I analyzed a total of 347 writing assignment guidelines from 94 individual instructors. There are 114 Project 1 Writing to Reflect guidelines, 123 Project 2 Writing to Analyze guidelines, and 111 Project 3 Writing to Persuade guidelines. Where I am directly quoting from an individual guideline, I provide the year and letter code that ties to a specific document. For instance, 2016I was assigned in the year 2016 by the 8$^{th}$ alphabetical instructor who provided guidelines from that year.

I begin each section with a brief paragraph defining the virtue and moral

habits based on my reading of the guidelines and the course outcomes discussed in chapter 3.

## The virtue of rhetorical awareness

A virtuous writer will be rhetorically aware. They will understand the situation in which they write and they will engage honestly in conversation with their research and with their audience. A rhetorically aware writer will understand key concepts of rhetorical theory. They will be able to strategically deploy grammar and formatting conventions to achieve their rhetorical goals. They will be open to writing as a process.

Unsurprisingly, the concept of rhetorical awareness appears everywhere in these guidelines. Just the word "rhetoric" or "rhetorical" or "rhetorically" appears 626 times across all the assignments; the majority of these instances (492) are from the set of project 2 guidelines, which is a rhetorical analysis of some text.

Project 2 guidelines are rich in rhetorical terms but few specific definitions in the text. Project 2 2016I, for instance, lays out the following definition of rhetoric: "Rhetoric is the knack of address, a skill that aspires to develop the abilities of authors or orators to enlighten, most likely to sway, or encourage, certain audiences in particular situations. It is an integral part of any writing assignment

you will be set at university, or in the workplace." Most of the other assignments likely assume that "rhetoric" and other terms will be defined in class or other activities.

In addition to occasional definitions of rhetoric, two common ways to talk about rhetoric for first year students also appear: "context, purpose, and audience" appear in combination 31 times. "Ethos, logos, and pathos" appear together 58 times. Somewhat curiously, ethos appears an additional 8 times in connection with "persona" but also "tone" and "style". The ur-sentence that gets deployed in a few different permutations says, "but you will want to identify and try to explain things such as persona/ethos, tone and style, types of evidence used, writing conventions followed, visual elements used, and other ways in which the writers attempt to achieve their purposes with their audience" (2015P). "Tone" and "style" appear 24 times together, with "style" showing up an additional 26 times while "tone" appears by itself 5 times. The phrase "rhetorical strategies" appears 200 times in project 2, "rhetorical situation" 43 times. This is not an exhaustive list, but these are the major rhetorical terms that appeared most often in the guidelines.

In addition to including rhetorical terms and strategies students should analyze, the guidelines instruct students in how to make their own rhetorical

choices. The word "audience" appears 1335 times across all three assignments. As mentioned above, some of those times are referring to the audience of the piece students are analyzing, but the vast majority are asking students to consider or engage their own audience. In project 1 and 2, students are given audiences to consider, typically their instructor or their peers in the class. Then, in project 3, students are typically told to choose a specific audience to direct their argument to. There are a few instances of audience instruction that broke out of the classmates or choice mold. In Project 2, 2016R, 2017E, and a few others suggest the audience is "the target audience of the film you choose." 2016O instructs students to choose a historical advertisement "to inform and persuade professionals at the Smithsonian Institute to consider placing the advertisement in their upcoming exhibition." Students are further instructed that their document will persuade the professionals but also pieces will be used in the exhibit to explain the advertisement to visitors so the students should consider both the professionals and the general public in their work. It finishes the audience section:

> "Although you will be writing to professionals grounded in historical work, you will have to explain and clarify certain keywords or terms in the advertisement and explain and clarify the social, cultural, political, and

historical contexts that shaped the advertisement. In short, even though your audience are professionals in historical or archival research, they are not necessarily experts in advertisements, the companies of these advertisements, or the contexts surrounding these advertisements."

In addition to the instructions to students, I read in this section one tension of ECU's writing curriculum: In projects like project 2, we are both teaching *about* the subject (doing rhetorical analysis) as well as asking students to perform the things we are teaching; that is, they should be analyzing the audience of a piece but also performing for an audience that may or may not match the audience of the piece—in Project 2 2016O, for instance, they are asked to analyze the original audience of the advertisement and present that material to an entirely different audience. In other assignments (like Project 2 2016R noted above) students are analyzing the audience of a film and then writing to that same audience.

## The moral habit of conversation

Students who develop a moral habit of conversation will be able to make reasonable claims about the world that are backed up by research. They will be aware of how their own experiences are related to events and trends beyond themselves. This also means that they will engage honestly with the sources they

engage with, even viewpoints different than their own. It also means that they will present their own ideas honestly and with respect for the rhetorical situation in which they write. They will, in short, be good conversationalists.

The most straightforward manifestation of the moral habit of conversation in these guidelines is, of course, the requirement to use and cite sources. Only a handful of project 1 guidelines ask for sources, but all project 2 guidelines require some engagement with an outside source—most of the activities ask students to find some text to analyze, but they also typically ask students to engage in 3-5 outside sources. Project 3, likewise, asks students to find sources to back up the argument they are making. In addition, up until 2022, project 3 asked students to directly engage with the Pirate Read, a common book given to all first-year students that was usually on a social topic like racism, poverty, or empathy. There were only 11 project 3 guidelines that didn't use the pirate read. The word "source" or "sources" appears 469 times just in the 111 project 3 guidelines and appeared at least once on every project 2 guideline. One of the critical services English 1100 provides is allowing students to practice using sources and citing those sources using either MLA or APA citation standards.

The writing guidelines in all projects ask students to engage with some concept of the wider world. The grading rubric for project 1 specifically asks

students to make "a point (or points) about the importance of event(s) from the writer's personal life and proposes a critical analysis about the event(s)." This suggests that the point of these assignments is not simply to reflect for reflection's sake, but that these events should highlight why these events might be important to the readers of these texts. This is an important step in building a habit of conversation: telling a story with a lesson or broader point. In discussions about the project in orientation and other meetings, GTAs are instructed to highlight the "critical reflection" portion of the rubric; that is, students should make a claim beyond simply describing an event in their life. To that end, the writing guidelines attempt to portray this idea that engaging with conversations should be done critically: across the guidelines, the word "critical" or "critically" appears 275 times, 180 of those in just the project 1 guidelines. Rubrics for each of the projects asks for "critical engagement with evidence" (or something equal) but the instructions to be "critical" in the guidelines themselves tapers off after the first project. As the projects move from self -reflection to argument rooted in a text, I wonder if guideline writers need to be less explicit about the need to be critical; that is, as students are instructed to engage with other texts, the instruction to be critical is already built into the work they have to do with those texts outside themselves. I wonder, too, about the word "critical" and how we

define and deploy it in our classrooms.

Similar to the notion of "critical," "significance" appears in many ways. I leave "significance" underneath the moral habit of conversation because as a concept, "significance" is always couched in its relationship to the community at large. "Significance" is sometimes indicated as "explain the significance of an event" or "explain the "[reflect] on the significance of…" Occasionally it shows up under the evaluation tab: "address a significant point/purpose." Elaborating, one guideline tells students, "it must be a *significant* change in the way you think—the sort of change that your audience (your classmates) could learn something from for themselves" (project 1, 2020H). It may be worth noticing that project 1 guidelines use "significant" 80 times, while project 2 and 3 used it 17 times each. Like "critical," I wonder if once students are engaging with a text beyond their own experience, they don't need to be told that their subject is significant.

The manifestations of "significance" that I noticed most often in my reading is a set of phrases: "not merely," "not just," and "not simply." These three phrases occur 123 times across the guidelines. Each time they are instructions to the students that, for instance, they are "not simply describing" or "not merely summarizing." The phrase "not just" is often combined with things like "[Rhetoric] is used in all media, not just political speeches" (Project 2 2016I). In the

assignment that asks students to analyze a scar, they are instructed to think "not just physically" but "how did it change your perception of yourself" (Project 1 2014I). Ten assignments used the scar prompt, only one used the phrase "not just physically." This phrasing indicates to students that they are engaging in work beyond—beyond high school, beyond normal. "Not mere."

Project 2, 2016K tells students

> "For this project, you will select a music video that you believe has a clear/relevant/important/challenging meaning. This means you may want to avoid a music video that appears to be shallow and/or lack substance. We will be considering how these music videos can present arguments, even if it is not readily apparent. Additionally, we will be considering how these music videos, multimedia presentations, can be a text as ripe for analysis as a poem or classic novel."

I would be fascinated to find out the type of music videos that are "shallow and/or lack substance," but I empathize with the struggle to communicate this concept of "significance" to students.

*Social justice*

A concept of "social justice" or maybe more precisely "world awareness" is present in the guidelines as a kind of subsection of this moral habit of

conversation. The term "social justice" only appears in 8 guidelines, two of those times as part of the title of a book and in every instance the assignment is related to the Pirate Read. *Just Mercy* and *The War for Kindness* were the two books that prompted specific mention of social justice.

There is a strain in some of the assignments encouraging students to become better citizens, for instance the assignment purpose in Project 2 2019A says, "Knowing when a text is attempting to achieve a goal directed at you (for good, bad, or otherwise) allows you to be a more critical and informed citizen, student, and consumer." Eight project 1 assignments specifically ask students to reflect on "what does it mean to be a literate citizen and/or voter." (2020L, for example).

Though the words don't appear, there are glimpses of GTAs wrestling with social justice issues on occasion. Project 1 2018H, for instance, asks students to "reflect on your personal experiences and observations related to working conditions that affect the working class in America." Sometimes the instruction is more subtle: Project 1, 2017C prompts:

> "In America, we have many freedoms that are not always provided to others outside of our country. Sometimes, these freedoms are abused. Reflect on a time when you abused a freedom with a friend, family member, or acquaintance. In a well-developed essay, describe the specific

situation. What was the freedom? How did you handle the situation? What was the person's reaction? What lessons did you learn from this experience, and how did they help you to understand the feelings of underprivileged communities (based on race, socioeconomic status, etc.) who often feel abused?"

This assignment makes a rhetorical move that I saw scattered throughout the guidelines of connecting students individual experience with larger social justice issues in a way that feels a little like leading the student to the conclusion we believe they should come to. This is a tension that I wish I had more time to investigate—We want our students to think critically for themselves, but we also want them to learn the right things for our classes, particularly those of us with commitments to social justice. In short, we want to give students the freedom to learn but not, like, too much freedom.

The tension also appears in the few assignments that dealt with current events. Project 2 2014N asks students to rhetorically analyze a specific set of documentaries dealing with social justice issues including *Kony 2012*, *Darwin's Nightmare*, and *Food, Inc.* 2015L gives students a specific speech by Michelle Obama. 2016Q is on a local-to-Greenville political campaign (and also asks for 6 sources, which just feels bonkers to me). 2018A uses presidential inaugural

speeches "preferably one from the first 18 years of your lifetime and one from the first 18 years of your parents' or grandparents' lifetime." 2019D introduces students to the Stonewall National Monument and asks them to pick their own personal national monument to analyze. 2020C connects *The War for Kindness* with Black Lives Matter as well as the COVID-19 pandemic (Project 1, 2020N by another GTA is the only other project to mention the COVID 19 pandemic). For the most part, though, the guidelines try to maintain a kind of generalized timelessness. Project 2 2016J, 2021J, and 2022J show one GTA's guidelines that try to straddle the line between general and specific social justice cases. The assignment is for students to analyze an image. In 2016, they told students, "Considering Just Mercy, visual representation of the myriad of social justice instances from the summer would be a consideration. If you are of a more political mind, campaign signs or photographs from the candidates are readily available. If, however, you're looking for a more colorful approach, the Summer Olympics in Rio has a vast amount of material to choose from." In 2021, when they returned to a PhD program after an absence, they updated the assignment to read "Considering The Person You Mean to Be, visual representation of the myriad of situations from the summer would be a consideration. If you are of a more political mind, campaign signs or photographs from candidates are readily

available. If, however, you're looking for a more colorful approach, the Summer Olympics has a vast amount of material to choose from." Finally, in 2022, they write "With the recent passing of Queen Elizabeth II, you may want to consider how this will alter the world view as you know it as a young person. You may want to find a political cartoon and analyze the satire in it. You may want to pick up a copy of a magazine on campus and analyze the cover, not the content, considering you are the audience it hopes to reach." These three examples illustrate a fascinating struggle: specific but not *too* specific, freedom but not *too* much freedom. The phrase "myriad of social justice instances" and then "myriad of situations" from 2016 and 2021 are clearly trying to point at things *like* BLM protests without naming the BLM protests, but then in 2022 they jettison the social justice project entirely and ask American 18-year-olds to consider the British monarchy.

Another assignment that makes a similar move asks students to "use an autobiographical narrative reflection (their individual experience) as a lens to discuss and critique the influence of a distinctly 'American' value (such as competition, individualism, or social mobility)" (Project 1, 2015P). While all these texts sit at the intersection of bureaucratic, disciplinary, and personal virtues, this is a particularly outstanding example of a personal interest, if not exactly virtue;

the GTA was not indicating that students should embody these American values but rather was indicating that, in their mind, there is virtue in "discuss[ing] and critique[ing]" American values, even going so far as to name some of them (competition, individualism, or social mobility). These examples also indicate the tenor of the discussion of American values—2015P did not include charity, justice, equality, or a number of other values that may or may not be American. This also reveals another struggle with reading only the assignment guidelines: we cannot know what class discussions or further clarifications from the instructor took place, nor do we get to read the responses students gave.

### The moral habit of grammar

Students who are practiced in the moral habit of grammar will understand that language is both political and rhetorical. They understand genre conventions and the rhetorical role of formatting, editing, and document design.

The word "grammar" appears only 6 times in projects 1 and 2, but 81 times in project 3, almost exclusively in the phrase that essays should, among bulleted items, "demonstrate appropriate writing skills including grammar, mechanics, organization, clarity, and integration of quotes" (2014N). As mentioned before, project 3 is an interesting case because, by and large, it is taken un-or-lightly-

edited from the blog. It may or may not be worth noting that the phrase doesn't appear after 2021, though there are only 11 guidelines after 2021 in this study.

Generally, our commitment to a moral habit of grammar is shown by using ancillary words and phrases. For instance, "polished" appears 346 times across all three projects. Typically it is connected to turning in a "polished draft" and the due date. Sometimes this is clarified, for example project 1 2017L and others advise: "This polished draft is a comprehensive revision reflecting comments and decisions made during your workshops."

Relatedly, "format" and "formatting" appear 740 times. Every assignment makes mention of MLA or APA formatting. Instructors are asked to expose students to both formats, and most choose to use MLA for the first one and then APA for the second assignment. Typically, students are given the choice depending on context for their third project. Additionally, each of these uses of "format" is connected to specific requirements for word count, fonts, margins, spacing, etc. "Times New Roman" is requested 156 times across the documents, suggesting that it is common but not universal. The only other font specifically mentioned is Arial, and it is in the aside: "This means typed, double-spaced, with one-inch margins on all sides in Times New Roman or equivalent font in 12 pt. size (Arial, for example, is not equivalent in 12 pt.)" (Project 1, 2015D). About half

of the projects mention double-spacing.

The surrounding paragraph in Project 1 2015D is an interesting study in how we talk around grammar. It says:

> "All work except that done in class must be word-processed. (When applicable, use MLA conventions.) A final paper should be treated as a professional work and should look that way. This means typed, double-spaced, with one-inch margins on all sides in Times New Roman or equivalent font in 12 pt. size (Arial, for example, is not equivalent in 12 pt.) unless discussed with and approved by me. All work should always be proofread by hand. As Brenda Hills warns, "Dew knot trussed yore spell chequer two fined awl yore mistakes." I reserve the right to not evaluate and assign a grade to any written assignments that do not follow these guidelines."

This paragraph appears in whole or in part 9 times by at least three different instructors (twice they just kept the "A final paper should be treated as a professional work and should look that way. This means typed, double-spaced, with one-inch margins on all sides in Times New Roman or equivalent font in 12 pt. Size" part). "Proofread by hand" is such an interesting turn of phrase because I don't really know what it means, but I kind of love it anyway. "Proofread", for

what its worth, appears 21 times across all three pages. I also think the caveat that "I reserve the right to not evaluate…any written assignments that do not follow these guidelines" seems a little harsh. I am also hesitant to include these kinds of statements; at the same time, I recognize that many instructors put these kinds of statements in their guidelines to protect themselves. People are complicated.

Occasionally, instructors make nods to rhetorically situated grammar. As one instructor put it, "Your paper will also need to meet the general criteria of good academic writing: a clear focus, logical and purposeful organization, strong use of supporting evidence, and thoughtful development of the ideas you are presenting. In addition, your stylistic and grammatical choices will need to be appropriate to your rhetorical purpose. We will be discussing specific evaluation criteria based on the assignment rubric in class." (Project 1 2015P). A similar instruction tells students: "Although this is an academic assignment intended for an audience of your classmates, it is somewhat less formal than other assignments in this course. You have some latitude in adopting a style and approach that feels appropriate for your subject matter, your audience, and the intended purpose of the assignment (as explained above). In short, adopt a style that fits the needs of this specific rhetorical situation, but of course be mindful of

the conventions of written English and the expectations of your audience (your classmates as well as the course instructors)" (project 1, 2017G).

References to page count appear some 400 times and almost every guideline makes some mention of page or word count (page count is the more common). One thousand to 1200 words or 4-6 pages is the most common instruction.

Only one instructor used the phrase "correct grammar and punctuation" (Projects 1 and 2 2015 and 2016K). All of the above discussion suggests that, as a discipline and department, ECU has moved away from grammar exercises, standardizing academic English, and failing projects for spelling and punctuation mistakes. At the same time, we still use notions of proofreading, formatting, font choice, and even length suggest that there is still a normal and expected way to produce writing in the classroom, that is, something approaching a 5 page written text that uses MLA or APA standards for citations and formatting.

## The moral habit of process

Students who cultivate the moral habit of process will understand that writing is a slow and iterative process. They will understand that drafting and editing are important steps along this process, along with providing and receiving feedback with peers.

In my first pass through chapter 3, I left off the virtue of process as something that could be subsumed maybe under grammar or conversation. Upon examining the guidelines, however, I found enough references to various parts of the writing process that breaking it into its own section seemed worthwhile. Every assignment made at least one reference to rough drafts and peer editing or review. It varied whether peer editing drafts needed to meet a certain threshold of finish before peer review, and many guidelines performed multiple peer reviews. The word "draft" appears 1535 times in the guidelines, reflecting a disciplinary commitment that writing is a process. "Final" draft is still the preferred language but, as noted above, "polished" is another widely used descriptor of the versions students turn in for grading.

Editing and revision are the most-referred-to specific parts of the writing process (see the above about proofreading), though, for example, Project 1 2015P says, "To develop a successful essay, please observe the steps of the writing process as prescribed through homework and classwork assignments in your course calendar." Project 12021M asks students to write a cover letter that "addresses your purposes and process for the project." Project 1 2018P included a table with dates and parts of the process including choosing a topic, peer review, revision, and final copies with an additional threat that "Neglecting this

step in the writing process will lower your final project grade, in addition to impacting your class citizenship grade."

This enforcement of the writing process through grading was fairly frequent and somewhat surprising to me. The warning "I will not grade your project if you do not turn in drafts and a cover letter. Failure to submit peer review feedback will negatively affect your grade" appeared 103 times across all three assignments, 61 times just in project 3, which again overwhelmingly were copied from the example on the writing foundations blog. An additional 13 guidelines included a softer but still severe warning that failure to participate in peer review would lower grades.

## Negotiating virtue

We are in a particularly tense moment currently when it comes to education in the humanities. When I began this dissertation, I was thinking about the political and social forces that have acted in the past to create the course materials we currently work with. I was thinking about how, often, these forces are indirect and strategic. However, these political forces are becoming more direct with each passing day. In some states, political bodies are directing universities on curriculum both to highlight and to forbid. The Utah state legislature, for instance, recently passed a bill to require a general education

course focused on the Western tradition, which will likely be incorporated in or related to first year writing (Tanner, 2025). These kinds of direct actions from political bodies toward traditionally independent universities will likely become more prevalent in the near future.

One thing that I hope this dissertation has highlighted is that we as departments, as a discipline, and as individuals, have always negotiated these kinds of tensions even when they haven't been quite so direct or existentially dire. Presidents, legislators, and other bodies can put pressure on universities to perform, but none of these political actors are in the classroom. As Gallagher (2011) remarks, *being there* matters. A state legislature can sign a law but they will not be the ones writing the assignment guidelines that students will write. The university can acquiesce to these laws through their mechanisms of approving curriculum. Departments can work these requirements into their student learning outcomes and other university documents. But it will be up to individuals to implement them in the classroom.

This leaves us with the opportunity, fraught as it is, to use all our powers of strategy, negotiation, and rhetoric to teach the courses in accordance with our practice and our lore. The introduction of a virtue ethics framework, with its built-in notion of negotiating competing values, can be an important tool in moving

forward. It's not lost on me that, as I mentioned earlier, it can be a useful tool because it is so rooted in Western civilization with its ties to Aristotle's ethics, even while modern virtue ethics brings in elements of Confucian and Buddhist principles. There is opportunity to be strategic in how we present the work of our classroom as being virtuous, highlighting the connection between, for instance, the moral habit of conversation with the larger virtue not only of rhetorical awareness but also of more widely recognized virtues of honesty, civic-mindedness, flexibility, and others.

The way that we have renegotiated the discipline's relationship to grammar may provide some insights into how this strategic work is done. It is a generally if not universally acknowledged truth in our field that grammar is not a useful framework for teaching or grading in first year writing. However, due to our history and bureaucratic affiliations, we are often required to use notions of grammar in our classrooms through our learning outcomes and rubrics. So we negotiate. We can include hedging language that meets the threshold of inclusion but leaves room for discussion, such as "In addition, your stylistic and grammatical choices will need to be appropriate to your rhetorical purpose" (Project 1, 2015P). This clause "appropriate to your rhetorical purpose" allows room for grammar conventions that are not recognized as academic or standard.

The following example is somewhat more explicit in allowing multiple means of expression: "Although this is an academic assignment intended for an audience of your classmates, it is somewhat less formal than other assignments in this course. You have some latitude in adopting a style and approach that feels appropriate for your subject matter, your audience, and the intended purpose of the assignment (as explained above). In short, adopt a style that fits the needs of this specific rhetorical situation, but of course be mindful of the conventions of written English and the expectations of your audience (your classmates as well as the course instructors)" (Project 1, 2017G). An even more explicit writing assignment might tie grammar to the virtue of rhetorical awareness: "For this assignment, consider your audience and the rhetorical effect your grammar choices will have." Ultimately the method is up to the instructor to make according to their own situation.

As experienced teachers and those with institutional power and authority, we should make these negotiations clear to the next generation of instructors. GTAs should understand that they are engaging in the same process we are asking our students to perform; that is, we are asking them to practice something they may not clearly understand, but that the glass will become less dark the more they practice it. When I was a new GTA with no experience, I borrowed the

experience of those who had come before me, including the virtues from the example assignments we were asked to give. As I learned from disciplinary theory and my own experiences as a teacher, my own virtues became more apparent and I started to understand how I could encourage those virtues on my students. Often, these are through small changes like in the above grammar example. There is a way to talk about maintaining curricular consistency in places where that is important while still staying true to our own individual principles. Virtue ethics gives us that framework.

# Chapter 5

## Limitations

I worry about the "so what" factor in this dissertation. Chapters 3 and 4, the meat of the dissertation, simply describe what language is used in these university documents and writing assignment guidelines to talk about what good writing is. It doesn't feel earthshattering, particularly to people who engage with these kinds of documents regularly. My initial impulse in creating this dissertation was to try to trace these trends back to their point of origin. I quickly realized that that kind of analysis is a much larger project than I had the time or resources to complete.

It has also come up in discussions while working on this dissertation that by and large, corpus analyses of these kinds of documents are rare. We write a lot around writing assignment guidelines (see Bartholomae, 1983, Bawarshi, 2003, Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2014, Ede, 2004, Neaderhiser, 2022, Navickas, 2022) but almost always from the standpoint that we, as teachers, already know about the content of writing assignment guidelines. There is not a lot of scholarship on what is in these guidelines nor on the larger project of producing good writers and good humans that these guidelines are in service of. It is the connection between the language we use to prompt our students and the people we hope

they become that I hope this dissertation has highlighted.

In continuing the work of this dissertation, I hope to be able to make more connections between the content of writing assignment guidelines and the disciplinary and bureaucratic trends that influence these guidelines. One project I am particularly eager to start on is tracing the work of teachers over time to try to understand how they develop their own ideas of virtuous writers and how they navigate and negotiate the disciplinary and bureaucratic oceans that they find themselves in. Particularly useful would be documents drawn over the course of a career teaching at multiple institutions. This work, again, is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

## Conclusion

In fall 2024, Eastern Oregon University brought me on as a visiting assistant professor. I was given three courses to teach for the 10 week fall term. One was an online professional writing course, which I have taught several times in a different format. One was a non-required first year course on argumentative writing. The third was an introduction to rhetoric, focusing on ancient Greek and Roman rhetorical traditions. EOU is a very small rural school with a little under 3,000 total students. Twenty students enrolled in professional writing, twelve in argumentative writing, and just five students in the major-focused rhetoric class.

EOU has no English grad students and no need for a large, correlated first year writing program. The university places a great deal of trust in its instructors, all of whom have PhDs in the field(s) (myself excepted up until now).

Helpfully, I was at the tail end of writing this dissertation on how writing assignment guidelines come into being and what they exhibit to the students. Reading through the course learning outcomes, speaking with more experienced teachers, and drawing on my own experiences, I put together some predictions for what I wanted my students to do—what would help them understand, for instance, what good argumentative writers do? What are the key attributes of an effective professional writer? Now, today, most of the way through the term, some of those predictions came true, some did not, many things need adjustment for the next term. Life goes on.

Below I offer some final words of advice on creating writing assignment guidelines. They are intended for those new to the task, but I hope that even those readers who are experienced with constructing guidelines will consider the advice that is useful to them.

## Assigning Virtue

What does it look like to design assignments from a virtue ethics framework? It starts with understanding what virtues we want our students to

practice through the assignment we are giving them. It's a subtle shift in the way we view the requirements for these assignments. I am using examples from the virtues examined in this dissertation at ECU, but these principles can be applied across circumstances. I want to highlight that this idea of virtue ethics in our classes and in our assignment guidelines does not have to be a replacement of any of our current work; I don't think the future of our discipline is to replace student learning outcomes with virtue statements. Virtue ethics is, instead, a tool to help us think about what virtues we want our students to demonstrate and they can also be a tool to help us communicate the work we are doing in our courses to colleagues beyond our discipline and departments.

First, consider what is good (or virtuous) about what you are asking them to do. For instance, if you want students engaging with sources, consider why you want them to engage with those sources. What is virtuous about them engaging with these sources, beyond simply being a requirement of the class or to even help them in their future academic or career success?

It can be helpful to reframe this in terms of the virtues and moral habits you are trying to instill in them. Practicing the moral habit of conversation requires students to understand different viewpoints, engage generously with arguments different than their own, and be honest about where their information

is coming from. These are inherently good traits we want to encourage because these traits make good humans. The actions that demonstrate this moral habit include actions like using quotations properly and including citations not because they will fail the assignment or have administrative penalties from plagiarism, but because these are virtuous actions: they demonstrate the moral habit of conversation that supports rhetorical awareness, honesty, and civic engagement, among other things.

Second, be aware that there is inherent tension in ethical endeavors. One reason I describe bureaucratic, disciplinary, and individual virtues in this dissertation is that these are real pressures that shape our thinking. Being the person in the classroom making these assignments is, to me, the most important part of the process. This position has incredible potential for good, but it is also not the only thing that is important. As noted, there are political and social forces that you do have to answer to. Sometimes the curriculum requires you to teach modes that you don't always like. Sometimes you have to put grammar on the assignment sheet even when you don't love putting grammar on the assignment sheet. As I noted at the end of chapter 4, however, there are opportunities to be both strategic in how exactly you word these requirements. There is also an opportunity to consider the virtues that created those requirements. What is

good in this requirement that we don't like? I think about my own distaste at requiring grammar performance. At times in my career I have taken a hardline stance that grammar requirements are useless and wrong. However, there are times that grammar can be deployed rhetorically. There are times that require my students to make careful and considered grammar choices to accomplish rhetorical goals in a way consistent with virtues like rhetorical awareness, honesty, and flexibility. Virtue ethics is not about doing all the right thing at all time, it is about considering the best choices given a set of circumstances. The end decision matters less than the decision-making process.

Third and relatedly, understand that the guidelines you assign are ultimately yours, and you can be empowered to make decisions over those guidelines, most of the time. At ECU, at least, graduate students are in the process of becoming colleagues. They are given control over how the writing assignments are written and assigned. As noted in chapter 2, there are some constraints over what they can assign (there are compelling reasons for curricular consistency), but there is remarkable freedom in the language and methods for communicating the virtues and moral habits prescribed by the university and the discipline. Own that. Use it to its full advantage.

Fourth, finally, and ultimately, remember that we are in the process of

virtuously becoming. When I was working as graduate assistant director of writing foundations with new graduate students at the beginning of the school year, we spent a lot of time talking about how the first day sets up success for the rest of the school year, so it is vital to make that first day count. This is excellent advice. It is also wrong. That is, our work is never complete. The cyclical nature of academia means that there is usually another day to redirect our teaching, another week to try new methods, a new semester with a new crop of students to build relationships with. This gives us an incredible opportunity to reflect and adjust. In my career I have absolutely taught things that I later disagreed with. I have put requirements in my writing assignments that I did not understand and later regretted. It is absolutely okay to borrow virtue we don't have, but it is also okay to change when we know better. The only way to really fail is to not learn from those mistakes. Repentance is, after all, a virtue.

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