
Getting Started with Equity

A Discipline Brief for
Equity in English Composition:
Rachel E. Johnson, Ed.D.



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About the Contributor

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About the Supporting Organizations



Every Learner Everywhere is a network of twelve partner organizations with expertise in evaluating, implementing, scaling, and measuring the efficacy of education technologies, curriculum and course design strategies, teaching practices, and support services that personalize instruction for students in blended and online learning environments. Our mission is to help institutions use new technology to innovate teaching and learning, with the ultimate goal of improving learning outcomes for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, poverty-affected students, and first-generation students. Our collaborative work aims to advance equity in higher education centers on the transformation of postsecondary teaching and learning. We build capacity in colleges and universities to improve student outcomes with digital learning through direct technical assistance, timely resources and toolkits, and ongoing analysis of institution practices and market trends. For more information about Every Learner Everywhere and its collaborative approach to equitize higher education through digital learning, visit www.everylearnereverywhere.org.



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Discipline Brief: Equity in English Composition

Rachel E. Johnson, Ed.D., the Director of the Writing Center and an Lecturer of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Mississippi, recommends resources to inform teaching to account for linguistic diversity and ability and promote a more equitable academic environment for students in English composition courses.

Summary of equity-related areas of concern

Efforts to promote equity in composition generally start with the understanding that writing and communication are forms of power: “The power of language can give people voice, but it can also silence people. Language can be inclusive, but it can also exclude. It can break or sustain traditional stereotypes, biases, and hostilities.” (CCCC, 2021) Colleges and universities operate within larger sociopolitical systems and inevitably reflect histories (and enduring realities) of marginalization and exclusion. The teaching and learning of writing is also informed and influenced by these histories.

Composition scholars have acknowledged that some student challenges in writing can be attributed to the way that writing and writing instruction has been problematically theorized and/or practiced. Researchers have incorporated knowledge from disability studies, queer theory, critical race theory, education, and linguistics to critically examine “standard” assumptions of the field, particularly around identity and ability. For instance, monolingual (English-only) approaches to teaching writing have historically silenced and devalued the contributions of multilingual learners in composition classrooms. Monolingualism is also closely related to exclusionary emphasis on Western rhetorical traditions and genres of writing unique to American university settings. Other practices, while originating with social justice in mind, have had unintended consequences. For instance, the basic writing movement grew out of a desire to provide resources and support to students who were capable but perhaps underprepared by their high school for college level writing. Critiques of basic writing courses and placement procedures point out that deficit pedagogies and emphasis on remediation can create additional barriers for students already experiencing difficulty accessing higher education.

There is a rich body of composition research related to diversity, equity, and inclusion that researchers and educators can draw on to develop priorities for creating more equitable and just learning environments for students and faculty. Research on equity in composition generally focuses on the following key issues: (a) promoting linguistic and cultural diversity, (b) reconceptualizing ability/disability, (c) questioning traditional notions of academic literacy, and (d) negotiating identity and social differences in writing programs and classrooms.

Suggestions for change

Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

- Recognize that colleges and universities are inherently multilingual spaces.
- Critique and complicate notions of “standard” or “academic” written English as inherently more desirable than other dialects or linguistic styles and configurations.
- Support multilingual students by developing practices, services, and programs informed by cultural and linguistic diversity.
- Prepare and train writing instructors to anticipate and respond effectively to the presence of multilingual students in their classrooms.

Ability/Disability

- Recognize that some higher education practices have been and continue to be exclusionary to persons with disabilities.
- Deconstruct assumptions of the (dis)abled writer/learner/instructor and affirm the valuable contributions of persons with disabilities in the writing classroom.
- Work to remove barriers and create accessible, inclusive educational environments at multiple levels.

Academic Literacies

- Recognize that writing assessment procedures can reflect problematic social and cultural ideologies surrounding language and disproportionately disadvantage students from minoritized groups.
- Develop and implement locally sensitive, responsive writing assessment procedures that reflect the best of what we know from composition research.
- Evaluate writing in ways that allow students to showcase their strengths as well as their needs.

Identity and Social Difference

- Acknowledge that some conventions and expectations of academic writing and communication are the result of histories of oppression and exclusion, particularly with regard to race, ethnicity, class, gender, gender expression, sexuality, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, and other significant aspects of identity.
- Recognize that differences in writing reflect different experiences and forms of expertise, not necessarily deficiencies or problems.
- Provide professional development on a variety of alternative writing pedagogies that promote student agency and value the contributions of diverse writers.

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- Support, recognize, and reward innovative scholarship and practice in composition focusing on equity and social justice.

Resources

Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). (2021). [Position statements.](#)

The Conference on College Composition and Communication releases and regularly updates formal position statements on many of the issues discussed above related to equity and social justice in composition teaching and research. Each statement makes concrete recommendations for practice at multiple levels (e.g., classroom, writing program administration, policy) and is heavily researched. These statements also offer a great resource for accessing further scholarship or connecting to related conversations in other fields.

Statements of particular interest for readers of this brief:

[Scholarship in Rhetoric, Writing, and Composition: Guidelines for Faculty, Deans, and Chairs](#)

[Writing Assessment Principles](#)

[Students' Right to their Own Language](#)

[Statement on Second Language Writing and Multilingual Writers](#)

[This Ain't Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!](#)

[Disability Studies in Composition: Position Statement on Policy and Best Practices](#)

[Preparing Teachers of College Writing](#)

[Student Veterans in the College Composition Classroom: Realizing Their Strengths and Assessing Their Needs](#)

[Statement on Globalization in Writing Studies Pedagogy and Research](#)

Adler-Kassner, L., & Wardle, E. (Eds.). (2015). *Naming what we know: Threshold concepts of writing studies*. University Press of Colorado.

This book is an extremely accessible explanation of the major ideas that guide composition theory. Adler-Kassner and Wardle call these “threshold concepts,” explaining that they focus on ideas that are troublesome (conceptually difficult), liminal, integrative and transformative, and probably irreversible (once you know them, you can't unknow them). The book contains five sections (e.g., Concept 1: Writing Is a Social and Rhetorical Activity) with concise explanations of subconcepts written by

experts in the field, such as Andrea Lunsford, Neal Lerner, Kathleen Yancey, and Paul Kei Matsuda. Even though the entries are short, they can be easily supplemented by more in-depth articles or book chapters (recommended or referenced throughout the chapters). Of particular interest to readers of this brief would be the content in Concept 3: Writing Enacts and Creates Identities and Ideologies and Concept 4: All Writers Have More to Learn, which offer a variety of insights and calls to action regarding issues of equity and social justice in writing research, instruction, and practice.

Canagarajah, A.S. (2006). Toward a writing pedagogy of shuttling between languages. *College English*, 68(6), 589–604. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25472177>

In this essay, Canagarajah calls for a shift in the way teachers and scholars of writing see and interact with the work of multilingual writers. He proposes a “negotiation model” of analysis and assessment which implies:

“...rather than studying multilingual writing as static, locating the writer within a language, we would study the movement of the writer between languages; rather than studying the product for descriptions of writing competence, we would study the process of composing in multiple languages; rather than studying the writer’s stability in specific forms of linguistic or cultural competence, we would analyze his or her versatility (for example, life between multiple languages and cultures); rather than treating language or culture as the main variable, we would focus more on the changing contexts of communication, perhaps treating context as the main variable as writers switch their languages, discourses, and identities in response to this contextual change; rather than treating writers as passive, conditioned by their language and culture, we would treat them as agentive, shuttling creatively between discourses to achieve their communicative objectives. As a precondition for conducting this inquiry, we have to stop treating any textual difference as an unconscious error. We must consider it as a strategic and creative choice by the author to attain his or her rhetorical objectives.”

(pp. 590–591)

This highly influential article would be a great resource for offering professional development or training for new instructors and graduate students who may be teaching writing and composition for the first time. This article might also be helpful in thinking of ways to holistically reform or update program curriculum or assessment practices. The section at the close of the article, titled “Pedagogical Implications,” expands on Canagarajah’s above call for a moving away from automatically seeing linguistic difference as deficiency and offers a pedagogical framework for realizing that call (pp. 602–603). This piece would pair particularly well with the CCCC’s position statement on second language writing and multilingual writing, which contains less of an emphasis on articulating a multilingual pedagogy and more on offering guidelines for a variety of writing-related educational contexts.

Poe, M., Inoue, A. B., & Elliot, N. (Eds.). (2018). *Writing assessment, social justice, and the advancement of opportunity*. The WAC Clearinghouse. <https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/books/assessment/justice.pdf>

Official [abstract](#) provided by publisher:

“This edited collection provides the first principled examination of social justice and the advancement of opportunity as the aim and consequence of writing assessment. Contributors to the volume offer interventions in historiographic studies, justice-focused applications in admission and placement assessment, innovative frameworks for outcomes design, and new directions for teacher research and professional development. Drawing from contributors’ research, the collection constructs a social justice canvas—an innovative technique that suggests ways that principles of social justice can be integrated into teaching and assessing writing. The volume concludes with 18 assertions on writing assessment designed to guide future research in the field. Written with the intention of making a restorative milestone in the history of writing assessment, *Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity* generates new directions for the field of writing studies. This volume will be of interest to all stakeholders interested in the assessment of written communication and the role of literacy in society, including advisory boards, administrators, faculty, professional organizations, students, and the public.”

While a great many of the articles in this collection would be valuable in getting started with equity, of particular interest to the readers of this brief would be the 18 assertions on writing assessment offered by the contributors. These assertions can serve as both a call to action for researchers and suggestions for reforming and impacting current practices/policies.

Savini, C. (2021). 10 ways to tackle linguistic bias in our classrooms. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2021/01/27/how-professors-can-and-should-combat-linguistic-prejudice-their-classes-opinion>

While much has been written about the need to call out, resist, and educate against linguistic bias (see the CCC’s statement on [Students’ Right to their Own Language](#)), operationalizing and practicing inclusivity around language difference, especially around issues of race and ethnicity, is often tricky for educators. Catherine Savini notes that even those educators who are aware of linguistic bias and racism can still participate in perpetuating the problem by reinforcing notions of a standard academic English and buying into assimilationist rhetoric. She briefly outlines the problematic ways that some students’ linguistic identities are coded as incorrect or incongruent with academic writing and discourse along racial and ethnic lines. To address these issues, she offers ten concrete pedagogical strategies for faculty to combat linguistic prejudice. She also recommends several articles for

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further reading and research. Collective reading of this piece would make for a great departmental professional development session. Savini's background in writing centers would also make this great reading for peer and graduate writing tutors' training programs.

Helpful Links

[A Discipline Brief for Equity in English Composition: Catherine Savini, Ph.D.](#)