First Time Up
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INTRODUCTION

This book is for people about to teach college composition for the first time ever . . . or for the first time at a particular school . . . or for the first time with the greater independence generally given to adjuncts. It doesn’t assume anything about readers or their knowledge of composition—except that they have an interest in teaching well and with enjoyment.

Based on thirty years of teaching composition and a decade of teaching and supervising composition instructors, this book responds both to concerns of my own that I had when I first began to teach and to those of teachers just entering graduate school now. It builds on ideas about improving students’ and teachers’ attitudes that I have been exploring throughout my career. It attempts to ease new teachers through their first year, providing advice, resources, and insights to help them overcome their fears and make painless and fun what can be a tense time.

This is not a career guide. My Composition Instructor’s Survival Guide, Wilhoit’s The Allyn & Bacon Teaching Assistant’s Handbook, Haswell & Lu’s Comp Tales, and anthologies like Corbett, Myers, and Tate’s The Writing Teacher’s Sourcebook or Roen’s Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition can provide readers with a more comprehensive sense of the concerns of experienced composition teachers. The issues I discuss do, however, have relevance to everyone in the composition community. Even someone who has taught twenty “first classes” will find something new and amusing to try in my “First Day” chapter, fresh ideas about resources in Chapter 3, and, in Chapter 11, a more positive way to view the skills that writing teachers practice.

The book reflects the limitations of my experience as well as its depths. I do not attempt to give advice about severe behavioral problems, “basic” writers, English Language Learners, learning disabilities, team teaching, online or high-tech courses, or working with ethnic, racial, or cultural minorities. I simply haven’t dealt with those issues enough to establish authority about them; you’d be better off consulting experts in those fields rather than reading something secondhand from me.

Having abandoned the idea of making this book a complete guide to teaching composition, I concentrated on making it a slim volume, a
companion, not a rule book, intended to fortify, not overwhelm. Because I assumed many busy readers would start with the index rather than the first chapter, you’ll find some repetition of ideas from chapter to chapter. I wanted, for instance, to have something about plagiarism both in the syllabus section of Chapter 2 and in “Nightmares,” Chapter 9.

The organization of the book imagines a new teacher thinking about a course a few weeks before the first class. I begin with some cheerleading about the job itself, an examination of the barriers that keep us from enjoying it as much as we should, and some suggestions for planning ahead to reduce the stress of the job. After chapters on preparation and on resources, I offer suggestions for making the first day an engaging introduction to the heart of the course.

Once we’re sailing through that first week, I slow down to consider the many difficulties of grading, the relevance of theory to our daily activities, the contradictory demands of teaching composition, and ways to protect against the nightmares of the profession. Finally, I look outside the classroom and beyond the end of the year, highlighting the career-building value of what we do, confronting some of the issues that will become more important as the first-year nerves calm.

Although much of this book focuses on the negative, on facing down the worries and nightmares that may bedevil a first-year composition teacher, I expect that most readers will soon be hooked on the positive aspects of the job, and that by the momentous first day, readers will develop enough self-assurance to fully enjoy the experience. I love walking down the halls when the first classes of the semester are letting out, teasing last week’s novices with the line, “First time up?” The new teachers are coming out of their classrooms surrounded by students, talking manicly, beaming, and as I pass, they whisper things like, “That was cool!” “They did what I asked!” and “They like me!”

My goal is to help readers enter the classroom well-prepared, confident, humble, and grinning.