First Time Up

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I am a self-sufficient loner. I hike alone, I ski alone, I play music by myself. I change my own flat tires, I read maps rather than ask for directions, I’d rather drive by myself for days than play elbow hockey with boorish cell phoners in germ-drenched airplanes.

But I don’t teach alone. Yes, I’m usually the only “professor” in the room. I don’t team-teach or borrow lesson plans anymore. But I feel very lucky that at the formative time of my career, I got to work with the world’s most generous mentor, Don Murray, and a writing community that I still see as ideal. Because most comp teachers work at the bottom of the academic ladder, we tend to bond with each other, help each other, and share. And even if you’re more of an anti-social individualist than I am, you’re not going to survive in this business unless you can learn to find and use help.

PEOPLE

I hope you’re lucky enough to be working in a school that respects and values composition. Freshman English at my grad school was seen as the academic equivalent of taking out the garbage. The only idea exchange I saw was of the macho “I’m teaching in five minutes, what should I do?” variety. Almost no one, faculty or grad students, saw improving our writing pedagogy as an issue worthy of serious thought and research.

But that was thirty years ago, and now most universities at least pay lip service to the importance of composition and devote some resources to it, if only because the writing program, with its writing lab fees and summer courses, may be the only money-making arm of the English department. In any case, your institution almost certainly has the most important resource for your growth and development as a comp teacher—people willing to help.

Secretaries

This may seem an odd category to start with, since most secretaries never teach, but if you’re going to make one friend during your first few
days on campus, it should be the executive secretary of the department, the person who probably assigns offices, hands out keys, and knows everybody’s business. Unlike the front-desk person, who is paid to be pleasant and patient, the head secretary may well have a personality with an edge to it—an attitude—and may enjoy wielding her (they’ve always been women, in my experience) considerable power. Such people sometimes scare new instructors. But you need to remember that however much bluster and bravado she greets you with, she’s almost certainly poorly paid, underappreciated, overworked, and perhaps badly treated by some of the faculty. So you may be able to make a permanent friend by treating her with respect, showing an awareness that she’s overworked and probably doesn’t have time for your trivial problem, perhaps thanking her for mailing you something during the summer or making the moving-in process easy. Sympathetic humor melts a lot of walls.

Making friends with the secretaries will make your life substantially easier. They call the room coordinator when another class shows up for your room and time. They know how to get the overhead projector fixed, where the A/V cart is supposed to be, which professors will be sympathetic to your need for another thesis committee member, how to get a good parking sticker. And they’re often wonderful people. My wife and I named our daughter after the first executive secretary we worked with in New Hampshire, Larkin Warren, who taught me to do an undervalued job with dignity and class.

Administrators

One of the important favors a secretary can do for you is help you assess the department’s administrators and decide which to approach with your particular need. (Personal caveat: the first secretary I talked to at UNH told me to avoid that mean Don Murray—advice which, if I had followed it, would have blighted my career.) Know something about the background of administrators before you begin bringing problems and requests to them; you can easily find such information from published records, likely to be on the department’s website, and from your peers in the program.

Key questions:

Who handles what issues? In my current department, the Head assigns offices, the associate head assigns classes, and the executive secretary assigns phone and copy machine codes. The logic to such divisions of responsibilities escapes me, and you’re not likely to understand them in
your school either. But to save yourself time and embarrassment, know who does what before you start asking administrators questions.

**Do the administrators have degrees, teaching experience, and research interests in composition, or are their backgrounds strictly literary?** Someone with a composition background should take your questions seriously and have some useful answers, but that person may also have strong opinions about the ways things should be done in a composition classroom. You may need to be careful how much you reveal about yourself, your approach, and your weaknesses. Literary scholars may know little about what you do and may not want to learn; sometimes such people are forced to run writing programs and feel bitter about it, trapped in a composition backwater when they want to teach seminars on *Finnegan’s Wake* to five enthralled grad students. (Be wary of such generalizations, though; my current department head specializes in obscure eighteenth century Scottish texts, but he’s very supportive of the writing program.) Do your homework so you’ll know what kind of language you need to speak.

**How “busy” are they?** I put “busy” in quotation marks because I see it as a state of mind rather than an objective measure of activity. You’ll probably never run into an English professor who’ll say “I’m not busy” (except possibly one on sabbatical, and then you’re not likely to “run into” them at all). But some administrators will use “busy” as a cudgel to make you feel guilty and beat you out the door, while others will always make time for a question or a quick friendly chat.

**Do they have a political axe to grind?** Some administrators with roots in composition may believe that allowing narratives into academic papers has led to the decline of western civilization. Others may feel that you should take your kind of question to your peer mentor and not bother them with it. Or they may immediately try to recruit you to be on the “right” side of an ongoing political rift. In some departments, a meeting of a hiring or promotion committee may turn into a debate between long-standing foes.

**Is there bad blood in the department?** You probably won’t get a good answer to this kind of question until you search out the department’s best gossips and earn their trust. Affairs and professional insults most commonly set faculty at each other’s throats, and finding out about them can help you avoid sticky situations.

**Do you need to be a squeaky wheel to get a tolerable office or a functioning computer?** As an administrator, I know how difficult it is not to give unfair attention to the squeaky wheel, the person who comes to you with a
problem to fix and a sad, urgent story. Most administrators try to avoid the squeaky wheel influence by having a system for distributing all the department perks—a ladder for the next office opening, a merit pay rating rubric, a “next computer upgrade” list. But the person in charge of such things in your department may think only of the needs of the person in the doorway at the moment. If so, you may have to darken that door.

But don’t worry that your request will seem outlandish or unreasonable. Any seasoned administrator knows that new people fret about keys, phones, paychecks, respect. Whether that understanding and potential guilt makes the administrator generous or rudely defensive, only the administrator’s therapist knows for sure.

Do some administrators have odd hours and other quirky habits? One nationally famous scholar where I went to grad school told his classes that they couldn’t get in touch with him in the morning because he didn’t have an office, and they shouldn’t get in touch with him after noon because he’d be drunk. That’s an extreme example, but it’s fairly common for some people to get to work at seven a.m. and others to be hitting their stride at seven p.m. The best administrator for you to work with may not be the person whose work most closely resembles yours but the one whose schedule most nearly matches yours.

Mentors

You probably don’t have to be told that mentors are the best thing since in-text citations. You need to find one. Or, more commonly, have one find you. Mentors may be the single most important factor for keeping a teacher’s spirits up, especially in the first few years. You can’t calculate the value of having someone at least slightly more powerful and successful believe in you and help you succeed. Most of us aren’t brash enough to walk up to a strange and relatively famous professor and ask, “Will you mentor me?” A mentoring relationship usually develops naturally while the mentor and the mentee work together. So accept any offer to work with a more experienced person and nurture all your relationships with potential mentors.

If that sounds like a creepy dating game, remember this: most successful people have mentors, at least during one important part of their lives. Not long ago, today’s mentors couldn’t get the time of day from anyone . . . except their mentors. Most people will pass on the favor. My wife, Melody Graulich, is a superb mentor, in part, I think, because her mentor, David Levin, was so generous, himself. Most academics have a soft spot for the older person who gave them a boost, and if you’re careful, you can tap into that good feeling.
Beyond the obvious ones related to sexual harassment, no rules govern mentoring, and the relationship can develop from a wide variety of activities. Melody and I used to do minimum-wage odd jobs for David Levin and his wife Pat. I never worked a lick for my mentor, Don Murray, but we’ve eaten a lot of lunches together, something I seldom do with the people I mentor. Go figure.

William Broz reminds us that not all of our mentors need to have lunch with us or even meet us. If you read a good deal of a writer’s work and think about how it applies to you, you may find that what Broz calls a “distant mentor” can affect your thinking, perhaps give you a form or approach that you can imitate, maybe even make you feel validated. We’re lucky to be working in a field whose best practitioners tend to be terrific writers and can mentor us through words on the page.

Colleagues

Colleagues are your most important resource and a primary source of the fun you should be having. In this category, I include everyone who teaches “with” you. I don’t differentiate by rank, because I think the only two defining factors are experience—veteran or novice—and attitude. You may find someone who’s famous and on the verge of retirement easier to talk with than your same-year office mates.

Peers

You can find great relief in sharing the sense of bewilderment, of being overwhelmed and run ragged, with someone who knows exactly what you’re talking about. Peers are your support group. Use them. Help them move into new offices, go to their bratwurst parties, read their bad poetry. When you come back, ashen-faced, from your first confrontation with an angry student, only a peer can say “that asshole!” with the proper outrage.

You probably don’t need encouragement to rely on peers because you don’t have much choice—they will usually be the closest people when you start sinking and grab for a hand. I’m going to spend much more time talking about veterans, because your links with them will not be as automatic but may be even more important, at least for your professional development.

Veterans

To a novice, someone with three or four years of experience may appear infinitely wise, and the naive novice may imagine that the veteran commands a robust salary and cross-campus respect. Because you don’t see them suffer and doubt, as you probably do your peers, you may think
that veterans don’t share your worries and frustrations and therefore have no interest in talking to you. Some veterans may feel they’ve conquered your demons, but consider: who but a novice like you can really appreciate a veteran’s brilliant solution to a first-year composition teaching dilemma? Many veterans delight in having an appreciative audience, talking to somebody who thinks what they do is interesting.

This is not a minor issue, so I’m going to take some time to try to convince you that you should overcome your shyness, your sense of being an ignorant pain in the butt, your feeling that a huge, unbridgeable gap separates you from people with only a few more years of experience. (Maybe you don’t feel that way. Maybe you think you’ve got it all figured out and don’t need any help; in which case, get real and listen up!) So why should those busy, overworked, underappreciated compositions veterans want to work with a greenhorn?

You make them feel successful and important. Because most students can’t judge knowledge and expertise and wouldn’t articulate their judgments if they could, they seldom keep healthy the egos of even the best teachers. And while you may be awed by their knowledge and abilities, administrators and tenure-line faculty don’t pay much attention to composition instructors of any rank.

So the veteran’s most likely source of the admiration and appreciation we all treasure is a novice colleague—a person who has enough experience to know what a difficult, complex job teaching comp is, and who is eager to snatch up any pearls of wisdom that veterans drop. I well remember when I started to make the transition from greenhorn to old hand: the writing director began asking me to lead staff meetings and other instructors started inviting me to their classes to be “guest writer” or “blues expert.” I was tremendously flattered and felt that I had in some sense arrived. At UNH, we had a voluntary mentoring program (a great idea, if you can get your program interested in it), and though it involved giving up a few hours at a time of the semester when no one had any to spare, we never had any trouble finding experienced teachers willing to work with new ones. Don’t underestimate the desire to be appreciated.

Veterans remember and have sympathy. For twenty-five years, I’ve struggled with having too much to do in my classes, rather than too little, but I still recall the awful feeling of needing to fill time and being hesitant to turn to others for fear I would be exposed as an unimaginative slacker. I still get a big kick out of running into new teachers after their first few days in
class and hearing the surprise in their voices when they say, “They listen to me! They don’t think I’m a fraud!”

They like to help. The previous point is just a particular case of the general: we teach because we enjoy helping. You may find some exceptions—particularly among graduate students who see teaching comp as just a way to stay fed while they earn their degree and become Famous Professors. But as you already well know, the job comes with few extrinsic rewards; nobody does it for long unless they can survive on gratitude and hope.

They like to share. You may not believe it at first, but comp teachers share. Novelists love to satirize English departments because of their nasty battles over nothing, not because of their spirit of cooperation. Yet it is the norm in the composition programs I know to be unselfish with your brilliance.

Why? Part of it is trench camaraderie. Some may be a result of the models set by composition leaders like the late Wendy Bishop, who edited enough books to employ and inform thousands of comp teachers. Some of it may be the nature of our work. There aren’t many scoops in composition, no patents or literary breakthroughs, like finding a lost Mary Austin novel in the Huntington Library. We may come up with brilliant classroom strategies, but they gain us recognition only if we share them. Only peers really appreciate them, and who has the time to turn them into those articles we’re always saying we’re going to write?

Sharing may also result from our recognition that each of us has a limited imagination, and teaching comp requires as many great ideas as we can amass. Some people come up with stimulating writing prompts, others with clever ways to help students know each other, others with ways of engaging students in discussions about literature. We become a kind of collective imagination and memory bank, learning from each other and passing the benefits on to our students.

This atmosphere means that novices can often contribute as well as veterans. You may not know much about comp teaching yet, but if you’ve just served a stint at a summer camp, you’re probably up on the best ice-breakers and team-makers. Or your undergraduate thesis on Calvin and Hobbes—as well as your xeroxable collection of scenes suitable for office doors and overheads—may make you popular. And who wouldn’t be impressed by your clever use of your languages background to show that we all do know something about Latin? There’s room for a million different expertises in composition. You almost certainly have some; you just need to make them visible to others.
You may not be aware of the sharing already going on in your building. Is there a lesson plan repository somewhere? A website? An informal library of journals and texts? Collections of past syllabi? A bibliophile on the staff who owns everything and loves to lend?

Are there reading, writing, teaching, or debriefing groups that would welcome new members? Start one of your own if you need to. Since people are the most important resource in this business, you need to figure out how you can regularly interact with at least a few people who can listen to your ideas, read your work, and check on your sanity. The best writing groups include members from outside the writing program and the English department. People from art or education or history or even phys ed may take their own writing seriously and work to improve their students’ writing, even if such work doesn’t appear in their job descriptions or their syllabi. Such people can give you valuable new perspectives on writing and can help you avoid the serious mistake of assuming that the writing program has a monopoly on teaching writing expertise.

Your Students

Yes, students are a terrific resource. “If we keep our antennae tuned to their frequency, we can learn much from them that could convert us from being merely competent teachers to being great teachers” (Corbett 9). Collectively, they provide an institutional memory that no one person can equal. Someone in class will know all the computer clusters on campus, the library hours, who uses the classroom before you do.

More importantly, students can help you monitor and improve your class. Don’t wait until the semester-end evaluations to find out what they think. A quick mid-semester survey can allow you to change aspects of your class while you can still make a difference. I sometimes ask students to write me a weekly or bi-weekly letter, noting what’s going well and not-so-well, what they’re confused and worried about. Reading them and responding in any fashion takes considerable time, but students will tell you things in such notes that they won’t say in class or face to face, enabling you, magically it seems, to tailor the class to students’ needs.

Students can also provide a tremendous amount of help for their peers. I’m wary of having students correct each other’s grammar, but in small groups or as a whole class, they can bounce ideas off each other, read and respond to drafts, help each other understand the day’s reading, direct each other to useful library resources.

Using students as a resource is not a cop-out, and I doubt very much if any of your students will see it as such. Helping a classmate organize a paper
teaches the helper invaluable lessons applicable to the helper’s own papers. It’s a sophisticated teaching technique that makes students feel important and empowered and, coincidentally, gets you off the hook a good bit of the time. (See Rebecca Moore Howard, “Collaborative Pedagogy.”)

OFFICES

You may never need to talk to people at the Affirmative Action office or the Disability Resource Center or Veterans’ Affairs, but you need to know that such places exist and that contacting them may make your life easier.

A student asks for more time on all assignments because, he says, he’s ADHD, and they always get more time. Do you take him at his word and give him the break? Do you make your own evaluation of him? Do you send him off for testing somewhere? No. On my campus and many others, students with special needs get special accommodations from faculty only if they register with the Disability Resource Center, whose people are trained to deal with special needs.

Similarly, the counseling center exists to handle the personal problems that appear in student papers and make us say, “I can’t cope with this.” Most schools have special rape hotlines or sexual assault counselors. And the Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Office takes on issues of discrimination too tricky for us to feel confident about.

If you have athletes in your classes, you may want to contact advisors from the athletic program—or they may contact you, since their job is to make sure that athletes pass courses like yours. Athletes often have access to tutors, so you may be able to get help for an athlete who writes poorly without having to invest all the time yourself.

The power, scope, politics, and funding of such offices varies widely across the country, but don’t assume that they’re too busy and don’t want to be bothered by one more new teacher with a student she’s trying to help. The funding of such offices often depends to some degree on the number of students they help, so they may be eager to add your student to the day’s tally. One phone call or email to one of these offices can save you a lot of time and stress.

THE WRITING CENTER

This is an office that deserves special attention. You may be asked or required to work in the writing center; if so, you’ll soon know what resources it offers besides a staff dedicated to helping student writers. Does the writing center office, or some other back room in the building, house a collection of *College Composition and Communication* and other journals?
Does it have model papers, grammar handouts, a library of writing texts, an administrator who’s glad to come talk to your class about the center?

Writing center people can probably point you to plagiarism web sites, help you with arcane questions of grammar, suggest approaches to working with particular students. (Our writing center saved my sanity a few years ago simply by letting me know that their tutors were having as much trouble with a particular student as I was.) Though this may be changing as the number and size of writing centers grow, in the past, writing centers have often struggled for a sense of legitimacy, and their personnel have been glad to be treated with respect by other professional writing teachers (that means you).

Best of all, writing centers can help you reduce the amount of time you spend working with students on their writing, without lowering the quality of students’ papers or their learning. Writing center tutors can be your stand-in for almost any one-on-one work you’d like to do with students except grade discussions: tutors can listen as students brainstorm ideas for a paper, help students build the paper a spine, read the rough draft and suggest ways to improve it. If you ask them nicely, most tutors will even help cure students of semicolon phobias or annoying addictions to passive verbs.

Students generally won’t go to writing centers on their own, even if they’re convinced a visit to the center is a good idea. That’s why many writing teachers require a visit or two to the center, giving points just for showing up and working with a tutor. Experience will have to teach you whether the combination of writing center reputation, student motivation, and your own persuasive skills will lead students to the center more than once without further arm-twisting. If students see their work at the center as the direct outgrowth of their work with you—if, for instance, you help the student untangle some key sentences and send the student to the center for further untangling—they may be less likely to resent your suggestion that they pay the center a visit.

If you have doubts about the effects of writing centers, read something like Muriel Harris’s “Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors.”

WEBSITES ABOUT STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

In terms of your interactions with a particular class, national trends don’t really matter: you need to deal with the students you face when you walk into your classroom, whether they’re part of a demographic tide or furiously swimming against it. On the other hand, especially as you get older and gaps develop between you and your students, you may want to remind yourself how different today’s students are from you and your
peers. Our unexamined assumptions can derail our teaching, and we base many such assumptions on the tacit belief that today’s students resemble us at college age, only geekier. Knowing how wrong that assumption is can help us start to see who our students really are.

If you’re interested in what current nineteen-year-olds think and believe, start with your own school’s website. It may list recent survey results under “assessment” or “demographics” or “students.”

Next, try the Higher Education Research Institute: www.gseis.ucla.edu/ieri/findings.html. HERI conducts assessment surveys for many schools across the country.

The National Center for Educational Statistics at www.nces.ed.gov/publishes a “Digest of Educational Statistics” that includes general trends in college enrollment over the past thirty to forty years and more specific recent information. At the same site, check out the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, a widely read and well-respected journal, offers advice to adjuncts as well as national data on college enrollment trends, faculty salaries, test scores, degrees awarded, tuition and fees, spending on research and development, and student aid. www.chronicle.com.

**BOOKS AND ARTICLES**

Rather than outline an ideal composition library for you here, I have indicated throughout the book where you can turn for further reading on particular subjects. If you’re going to read anything but student papers during the school year, you’re going to have to be efficient about it. That may mean reading the article instead of the book; the summary of the great theorist rather than hundreds of pages of the theorist’s impenetrable prose; the conclusions but not the discussion. And it will almost certainly mean getting over the English major’s hangup about reading everything the “right” way—cover to cover. Use indexes, in this book and others. You need context in order to understand the passage that the index directs you to, but you don’t need to read the whole book. Always know why you’re reading, what you’re looking for, and when you find it, stop. Remember, I’m not talking about reading novels, or even the composition reading you might do on vacations; I’m talking about the reading you do during your harried semester to make your courses run more smoothly.

A word about *handbooks*. You need one, an up-to-date one with lots of information about analyzing and citing websites and preferably with
detailed examples of two or three citation formats. Whether or not you require your students to get a handbook, they will be asking you things like “How do I cite an email interview?” and for your own peace of mind, you need a place to find an answer. If you’re buying a new handbook, look for features that may help you on special areas that you’re not comfortable with. Is there a chapter on graphics and images? Are there good discussions or activities helping students understand concepts like plagiarism and website credibility? Are there CD ROMS or websites associated with the handbook? These ancillaries don’t necessarily increase the value of the handbook, but if they’re good, they can save you time on some of the more mundane and less interesting aspects of composition.

Besides the journals and books published by the NCTE (discussed in Chapter 10) and other composition journals like *Composition Studies* that your library probably carries, you might want to pay attention to publications that target your status. *The Adjunct Advocate* lives up to its name. Visit www.adjunctnation.com. Gappa and Leslie’s *The Invisible Faculty* is the best scholarly look at adjunct status, while new graduate instructors can consult books like Good & Warshauer’s *In Our Own Voice: Graduate Students Teach Writing*.

Composition is no longer a fledgling discipline whose important works could barely fill a single bookshelf. What you want to know is out there, somewhere, in print.

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The wealth of resources now available for new composition teachers and the general awareness that new teachers need mentors won’t necessarily make life easy for you right away. All those books and ideas can be overwhelming and lead to the feeling that you *must* read everything right now and incorporate all of those wonderful ideas into your next class.

Forget it. The field is so large now that it’s virtually impossible for anyone to stay on top of it. Sure, you need to keep learning, but do it incrementally and start locally, with the people in your department. Find out what books and articles the people around you are reading and using, and if a number of people mention the same text, read it when you have a chance. Determine who the resident writing gurus are and introduce yourself. Go to the resources listed in this chapter when you need answers or suggestions, not because you *ought* to be reading more or changing your approach. Trust your instincts.