# This Way for Vampires: Teaching First-Year Composition in "Challenging Times"

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## Abstract

In this essay, I respond to composition scholar Linda Adler-Kassner's (2012) "no vampires" dictum: her stand against content (other than writing studies) in first-year composition courses. I argue that in "challenging times," when students are pressured to take a pragmatic, career-oriented approach to college, it is important for them to choose content, especially in a required course. It may be one of the few times in the course of a goal-focused, pre-professional college career when students can explore topics that interest them, while still learning writing skills. Further, I draw from Harris (2004) and Moskovitz and Petit (2007) to argue that first-year writing programs are more vital when they can bring together instructors from various disciplinary backgrounds for the common goal of teaching first-year writing. Finally, I contend that in "challenging times," we are in special need of vampires or other subject matter that enables students to engage in intellectual play.



## Keywords

first-year composition, student engagement, popular culture, writing pedagogy, vampires


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> *It is in playing and only in playing that the individual…is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.*
>
> –D.W. Winnicott, Playing and Reality.

### Introduction: Defining "Challenging Times"

In her 2012 address at the annual conference of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), keynote speaker Linda Adler-Kassner analyzes the reasons why these are "challenging times" for educators and how, as writing teachers and writing program administrators, we might respond. Adler-Kassner's story begins with the 2006 Spelling Report, which criticized educators for failing to prepare students for college and careers. She goes on to reveal how a far-reaching network of organizations has developed to respond

to these claims: organizations that seek to determine what "preparation" means, and how we should define "adequate" preparation. She exposes a covert educational-industrial complex, with conservative think tanks in league with educational testing companies, working together in an effort to control the kinds of learning available in high schools and colleges. That is one dimension of what Adler-Kassner means by "challenging times."

Times are also challenging for educators, she contends, because current discourses surrounding education constrain students' approach to learning. Adler-Kassner (2012) opens her talk with a graduation speech delivered by President Obama in which he encouraged students to regard their education as the best tool they have for achieving the American dream. President Obama drew on a widespread discourse about education, also expressed in the Spellings Report, that college is a means of social mobility and essentially provides preparation for becoming productive members of the 21st century economy. In a period of economic crisis, when students are especially anxious about finding jobs after college, the "social mobility" narrative takes on greater force.

To respond productively to challenging times, Adler-Kassner (2012) argues, we must act from a clear set of principles about what Writing Studies is, and what it should do. One key principle is: "no vampires" (p. 132) "Vampires" is shorthand for content other than writing itself in first-year writing courses. Later in the talk, she went on to make explicit her opposition to content other than Writing Studies in writing courses:

> Writing classes, especially first-year classes, must absolutely and always be grounded in Writing Studies, must always be about the study of writing. They should not…engage students in writing about vampires—nor about political issues, nor about recent controversies, nor about other things that are not about *writing*. (p. 132)

The reasoning behind the "no vampires" dictum is complex: when college is assumed to be about acquiring a credential for work, then what matters are the skills you build—content no longer matters. In writing classes, for instance, students can acquire the skills of critical thinking, effective written communication, and reading. However, Adler-Kassner points out, when our courses are conceived in terms of skills, and content is sidelined, the discipline of writing studies disappears. If we teach any content—vampires, zombies, politics, the environment—we are sidelining the discipline.

In recent years, we have seen a proliferation of approaches to first-year composition (FYC) and, as Beaufort (2012) has observed, no widespread agreement among writing studies scholars about the best way to structure a FYC course:

> Views in writing studies regarding subject matter for first-year composition courses are controversial. There is no consensus on what is appropriate subject matter in academic writing courses, nor is there any overarching heuristic to guide writing teachers in their choice of subject matter or course themes (i.e. readings and writing topics) for writing courses. (p. 4)

Adler-Kassner's talk at CWPA reflected, I believe, some anxiety about this lack of consensus in our field. This anxiety is reflected, too, in the slightly mocking air of the "no vampires" dictum—in fact, the phrase evoked appreciative laughter in the banquet room when I heard the talk delivered. Adler-Kassner openly acknowledged that one of her goals was to consolidate the identity of writing studies as a field, even as practice and theory within it becomes increasingly diverse.

In addressing the problems raised above, it might be helpful to introduce the notion of what I call "theme-based" programs. Rather than selecting readings from a shared textbook (which really means that students encounter multiple themes), theme-based programs enable students to begin to develop expertise

in a particular field or topic.[1] In first-year writing programs such as ours at George Washington University, instructors from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds teach seminars with topics of interest to first-year students. The course themes range from: a seminar on the Holocaust, in which students do research at the national Holocaust Memorial Museum; to service learning courses, in which students volunteer for local non-profits and write for these organizations; to a course on video games; to my own on classic Hollywood films. In their syllabi, instructors must justify their choice of topic as appropriate for a writing course, and they must follow the guidelines in a course template: http://www.gwu.edu/~uwp/new/1020template.html.[2]

Aside from these guidelines, instructors have considerable freedom to choose topics, as one goal of the program administrators is to appeal to a broad spectrum of student tastes. Like many faculty members in our program, I share Harris's (2006) conception of the work of FYC as introducing students to intellectual writing: the kind of writing about texts and ideas that might appear in *The New Yorker, Harper's,* or *The Atlantic* (p. 10). We don't have a course specifically on vampires right now, but we have had courses on horror movies. An outstanding student in one of my courses wrote a paper on the history of zombie films—it's probably only a matter of time before vampires make an appearance.

Should we banish vampires from FYC classes? What should be our response, as writing teachers and program administrators, to "challenging times?" It's clear that the current economic crisis is shaping our students' experience of college in a negative way, and Adler-Kassner has offered a compelling analysis of how current discourses about education constrain us as teachers. However, I would like to question Adler-Kassner's contention that we should respond to "challenging times" by focusing our classes exclusively on writing studies.

I want to reply to Adler-Kassner's "no vampires" dictum from the perspective of someone who has taught in theme-based writing programs for more than ten years and who feels strongly about their value. I would argue that especially in challenging times, when students are pressured to take a pragmatic, career-oriented approach to college, it's important for them to be able to choose content, especially in a required course. It may be one of the few times in the course of a goal-focused, pre-professional college career when students can explore something that interests them for its own sake—for reasons of intellectual curiosity, rather than because it is a step towards acquiring a necessary skill or credential.

## Teaching in Response to "Challenging Times"

If writing teachers are to have a clearly defined position, Adler-Kassner (2012) argues, we must "develop *and act from* principles about the meaning of what writing studies and composition is *as a discipline*." (p. 130. Italics in the original). Her primary principle, as I noted earlier, is that our classes "must absolutely and always be grounded in the Writing Studies, must always be about the study of writing. They should not…engage students in writing about vampires—nor about political issues, nor about recent controversies, nor about other things that are not about writing" (p.132). This certainly makes sense if our aim is to consolidate ourselves as a discipline, to develop a unified collective response to the erosion of liberal education. But *should* this be our goal?

First, I'd like to take up the question from the perspective of teachers. In "Thinking Like a Program," Joseph Harris (2004) observes that we think of professors in the disciplines—our allies/rivals in English for example—as enjoying status and privileges such as tenure track lines, institutional support for research, and reasonable course loads. Composition programs, by contrast, are often staffed by graduate students or

underprepared adjuncts; these lower-status faculty members are swamped by student work and have no time to do the research that might enable them to advance up the academic ladder. It makes sense, then, for those of us who work in writing programs to desire the status of a discipline, since that seems to bring better working conditions and better lives. However, Harris also points out that the disciplinary apparatus we have developed (journals, conferences, graduate programs) has not actually improved working conditions for most composition instructors.

Harris (2004) proposes, and I agree, that we should not focus our efforts on solidifying composition's status as a discipline, but instead we should conceive of writing programs as sites of multi-disciplinary collaboration. He makes the radical claim that "scholars trained in English or composition studies have no unique skill in teaching students the moves and strategies of academic writing; rather, I have come to believe that close, generous, and assertive work with texts is a defining characteristic of intellectual work across a wide range of disciplines"(p. 360). Harris argues that faculty members from across the disciplines may be equally qualified to teach writing, provided they can instruct students in rigorous work with texts and in the "moves and strategies of academic writing." Moskowitz and Petit (2007) have made a powerful argument for the "diverse disciplines" model, and for the idea that writing programs/pedagogy benefit when writing "insiders" and "outsiders" from other fields work together. This is important for the vitality of individual programs and for the field as a whole.

Adler-Kassner's "no vampires" dictum stipulates that writing courses should present only writing studies content: this model of first-year writing would mean that composition scholars certainly would have an advantage over "outsiders" from other fields. It might even mean that *only* those trained in composition studies could teach first-year writing. The reality is that most programs are not staffed exclusively by scholars in composition and rhetoric—most programs are already multi-disciplinary to some extent, some more deliberately than others. And that reality is good: a multidisciplinary writing program, which brings together faculty with expertise in different types of reading and writing, can become a rich site of exchange. Drawing from Harris, then, I would argue that "no vampires" is not the best approach for composition teachers, in spite of its promise to unify and strengthen the discipline.

From the perspective of students, it's even clearer that vampires are good—vampires, along with any other subject matter that offers students a field for inquiry. Ann Beaufort (2012) seeks to correct the mistaken impression that she advocated only one theme, "Writing as Social Practice," for first-year composition. She praises writing-about-writing curricula as effectively encouraging transfer of writing knowledge to new contexts, but insists that it is not necessarily the only appropriate choice of theme. Rather, she asserts that "there are numerous appropriate areas of intellectual inquiry for writing courses. No course theme for an academic writing course deserves priority as 'the best' or the only one that will facilitate transfer of learning"(p. 5). She doesn't exclude vampires.

Instead of setting out strict guidelines for choosing course themes, Beaufort (2012) suggests that we consider whether we might pose what Grant Wiggins calls "essential questions" about the subject, questions that "frame the intellectual inquiry about the course" (p. 6). As long as the subject matter has "breadth and relevance to the age range of the students in the course," the theme can work. Beaufort proposes loose guidelines for choosing course themes. Essentially, she suggests we ask two fundamental questions about a theme:

1. Does the theme have "both breadth and relevance to the age range of students in the course"?

2. Can we derive from the theme "essential questions" that serve to "frame the intellectual inquiry of the course"? (Beaufort, 2012, p. 6)

As a topic, vampires are "broad enough" because they have a long history of capturing readers' (and movie viewers') imaginations. Of course, students in our courses are most likely to have encountered them in one of their recent incarnations, as part of the *Twilight* series, or on the TV show *True Blood*, or maybe in the old cult favorite TV series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

As a choice of course theme, pop culture is double-edged. On one hand, students are drawn to courses that feature vampires, *Harry Potter*, *Mad Men*, and video games. On the other hand, such courses may seem less than serious, to both colleagues and students. Our program directors have occasionally wondered whether pop culture themes lead students to give courses low ratings for "intellectual challenge" on course evaluations. But I believe that teaching writing through pop culture can have the same intellectual rigor as courses that "sound serious," courses with themes grounded in philosophy, science, or for that matter, writing studies. It depends on the pedagogical goals and how we approach those goals. I would argue that vampires can offer just as much material for intellectual inquiry as, for instance, Beaufort's (2012) proposed course, "Locating Self in Landscape" (p. 5).

For years, I have been carrying with me an elegant and still timely essay from the 1996-1997 issue of the Harvard Writing Program's student magazine, *Exposé*, "Modern Gothic Fiction and the Changing Face of Fear," by a student named Chad Hill. I offer it as a model when my students write essays using theoretical frameworks. Hill's essay happens to be about vampires. Drawing on work by the literary critic Terry Castle, the student analyzes a series of Gothic stories, culminating with Angela Carter's "The Lady of the House of Love." While we no longer believe in ghosts, he argues, we certainly are not beyond irrational terror. Here is his thesis: "Whereas the first two authors take diametrically opposed positions on this issue—Mayor questions our incredulity, Russell our remaining superstitiousness—the third [Carter] juxtaposes the supernatural against the rational to arrive at a more subtle and significant conclusion: that we have replaced the superstitious fears of the past with the more horrendous, more legitimate terrors of the present, including the fear of full-scale world war" (Hill, 1996-1997, p. 44). In this essay, vampire stories become the occasion for serious reflection—as well an opportunity to practice the skills involved in using a theoretical lens to read a cultural object. The student, an introduction notes, planned to concentrate in "Applied Math or Social Studies," but a First-Year Writing Course, "Gothic Fiction," gave him the chance to think through the "changing face of fear," with the help of vampires (Hill, 1996-1997, p. 44).

To put it bluntly, not all students will be interested in researching writing itself, and engagement is essential to learning; if students are not interested, even the soundest pedagogy is of no use. Sommers and Saltz (2004) discovered in their longitudinal study of Harvard undergraduates that the reason why some students develop and sustain an interest in academic writing is because they see a purpose greater than fulfilling an assignment: they are able to pursue questions and problems that genuinely interest them. Moreover, they can learn the intellectual moves and practices of scholarly writing with any subject matter that enables them to ask significant questions. To banish vampires is not only to exclude instructors not trained in writing studies, but also to limit students' choices—and thus, to reduce the possibility of engagement.

It's also worth noting that there is more than one way to invite vampires into your classroom—that is, there are multiple strategies for integrating content while remaining focused on writing instruction. I acknowledge that vampires or other subject matter could certainly displace the work of learning to write.

But it is the job of program administrators to provide guidelines and strategies to ensure that doesn't happen—that the focus of the class remains on writing. As teachers become more skilled, the relationship between writing and content will shift. Beginning instructors may simply divide the time they spend in the classroom, focusing on content one day and writing the next. However, more experienced instructors in theme-based programs develop ways of synthesizing writing instruction and work with content. In my classroom, we discuss the content of essays or films exclusively through the medium of student writing. My focus, for example, will be on teaching students to ask analytical questions—so I can ask them to formulate questions about *The Godfather*. We are certainly talking about *The Godfather*, but the real purpose of the discussion is to consider what makes an effective analytical question.

At an even higher level of instruction, the thematic content may resonate with the work of writing in unique ways. Consider this reflection from my colleague Christy Zink's syllabus for a course centered on documentary film:

> This course takes as its central texts film documentaries on the American experience that rest with no easy answers. Because these texts themselves wrestle with essential questions about fair and ethical representation, of substantial research and handling of facts and argument, and of what, in the end, it means to even try to document the truth, they provide an important catalyst for exploring how writers come to research and write on advanced subject matter and, in turn, to change the accepted discourse, offering new possibilities and new potential truths.

In Zink's course, students' engagement with documentary film serves a dual purpose: it gives them compelling material to write *about*; more importantly, Zink's pedagogy also enables students to see significant parallels between the construction of documentaries and of academic writing. In documentaries, as well as in analytical articles, writers are striving to handle "facts and argument" fairly. Zink's course is certainly a special case; not every themed writing course can achieve this admirable unity of theme with writing instruction. But it does show, as Beaufort has suggested, that first-year composition does not have to focus exclusively on writing itself to function coherently as a writing course.

## FYC and Subversive Play

Whether we view the question from the point of view of teachers or students, banishing vampires is not the best policy, even though as Adler-Kassner warns, the focus of our classes might not always be on writing studies. If we are not primarily concerned with consolidating our status as a field, we can consider other possible responses to "challenging times." In this era of economic anxiety, students crave a sense of safety: the promise of a job at the end of four years of extraordinary expenditure, a way to pay back the monstrous loans accrued in the pursuit of a college degree. But what if there is no security—no guarantee that on the other end of college, there will be a job that provides adequate support? And if the dream of security is impossible, then we have to consider some other alternative—perhaps even a shift from working within the social mobility model to resisting it.

In "Never Mind the Tagmemics, Where's the Sex Pistols?" a 1997 article in *CCC*[3], Geoffrey Sirc suggests such an alternative: he critiques the discipline of writing studies from the radical perspective of punk rock. In his experiment in "cultural parallelism," Sirc focuses on the cultural moment of the birth of punk rock in 1977, and the attitude of the composition establishment towards it. Looking at copies of *CCC* from the 60s and 70s, Sirc observes that the discipline acknowledged the importance of popular music to students, at times regarding it with disdain, at other times turning to it to engage students with something they cared about. With punk

rock, it was different; the establishment didn't even acknowledge its existence. I would argue that Adler-Kassner's talk (and perhaps the turn towards writing about writing in general) reflects a similar attitude in the field of composition right now: call it fear of fun. Or since "vampires" stand in for popular culture in general, call it "hostility towards popular culture."

Punk rock represents an anti-work, anti-responsibility, anti-adult point of view, embodied in the Clash's "Career Opportunities": "Career opportunities, the ones that never knock/Every job they offer you is to keep out the dock." Sirc (1997) asks: "Why train students for the future when there is no future? Why give them career-oriented writing lessons when career opportunities are the ones that never knock?" (p. 14). Sirc's question suggests that economic pressure might send us in another direction altogether: Why prepare students for jobs when there are no jobs? Why not prepare them to live in a group house or a teepee, raise chickens or co-own a bakery? Sirc (1997) urges us to consider what it might mean to teach composition in the spirit of punk rock—to value the junky freewriting over the finished product, as the punk rock aesthetic valued trash and shredded clothing. Against the pressure to be "accountable," we might teach in the spirit of punk rock: intellectual play just might get you outside the "social mobility" paradigm. In fact, vampires might get you out of this paradigm, if vampires help you learn to do cultural critique.

The climate of economic anxiety has pushed both students and teachers to become even more career-oriented. I am extending Sirc's argument by suggesting that in "challenging times," we are in special need of the subversive spirit of punk rock. In 1997, when Sirc wrote the article, some of the rebellious, no-teachers legacy of Peter Elbow still informed our pedagogy. Some instructors still teach rebellion, whether in the spirit of Elbow, Freire, or Giroux. Rather than teaching students exclusively writing studies, we can teach a mode of critique that might enable them to step outside of the narratives of "college and career readiness," or education as the key to social mobility. We can teach them, in the spirit of Henry Giroux, to read vampires and other forms of popular culture against the grain, to push them to think about the economic and ideological systems that shape their lives.

Finally, I want to argue that in an era when students feel bound to approach school pragmatically and to make choices that will bring them closer to a career, we should look for ways to enable them to have some fun—to do intellectual exploration for its own sake. Those of us who attended college in the 70s or 80s often carry memories—perhaps idealized—of college as a space for experimentation, protected from the demands of supporting ourselves. Not everyone had this luxury, of course, but many of us did. Our students don't feel that same sort of freedom -- but shouldn't we protect those places where they might have some experience of play and intellectual fun? Even though—or perhaps precisely because—FYC is a required course, it can be a place where students pursue intellectual projects out of curiosity and interest in a subject.

In fact, it makes more sense to teach vampires—that is, cultural critique—at a moment when students need to be able to read ideology. Teach students to do cultural critique, and they will become less subject to the prevailing narratives that pressure them into approaching college as a career-readiness program.

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**Endnotes**

1 Some of the most prominent theme-based programs include those at Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and Duke.

2 There is significant overlap between our program's template for University Writing and the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition: http://wpacouncil.org/positions/outcomes.html. Like the WPA Statement, our template addresses: rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking skills, writing process, and knowledge of conventions.

3 Sirc's article has also been anthologized in *The Norton Book of Composition Studies* (2009) Ed. Susan Miller, New York: Norton, 973-990.