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# *The Evolution of Educational Writing*<sup>1</sup>

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*Produced in Scott Launier's ENC 1102*

## **Introduction**<sup>2</sup>

For many years I struggled to find my niche as an academic writer and continuously failed to meet expectations when it came to writing. I was always considered an average writer at best and always wondered why that was. What criteria was I evaluated on that categorized my writing skills as just average? This led me to frame my research question around my struggles as a writer in high school compared to my success in college. What is the difference between high school and college writing? And what effect do the differences have on the development of us students as writers? I also focus on the role the FCAT Writes<sup>3</sup> plays in the development of a student's writing ability and whether or not it truly measures the level of one's writing aptitude. Interestingly enough, my development of this research project began in my freshman summer (May 2012-July 2012) when I was taking ENC 1101<sup>4</sup>. We were asked to write a paper on our writing process and how it has been influenced throughout the years. While I was writing this paper, many questions arose, such as the ones previously listed, but it was not the appropriate place to discuss them. When we were told that we would have the opportunity to choose our own research projects, I instantly chose this subject matter and began doing primary and secondary research. I found that there is a very large conversation going on about the topics I desire to discuss and I feel I can add quality input into this discussion. I will be adding specific personal experiences that relate to my research question and then discussing the effects that each experience has had on my development as a writer.

Deborah Brandt<sup>5</sup> brings up the point of "literary sponsors" and the role they play in the development of a student's writing and what type of learning they are exposed to<sup>4</sup>. This is a very

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps one of the most difficult tasks of writing this research paper was finding an appropriate title that not only fit the description of my primary research, but also reflected my research question as well.

<sup>2</sup> By breaking my paper up into three different sections, it allows for the reader to easily access specific components of the research paper. This method also allows me, the writer, to maintain a sense of organization.

<sup>3</sup> The FCAT Writes is a standardized test, which gives you fifty minute to write about a prompt. You then receive a numerical grade from one to five denoting how good your essay was.

<sup>4</sup> During my ENC 1101 class, which I took with Professor Launier as well, we were asked to write an essay on our writing process. It was then when a few questions arose that are now the basis of my research project. I did not feel it was the right time to address those questions in my writing process essay. Luckily ENC 1102 offered me the opportunity to spend the entire semester researching and finding the answers to the questions I have had for a little over a year now.

<sup>5</sup> As a student of Professor Launier's ENC 1101 class, we were asked to read "Sponsors of Literacy" by Deborah Brandt. As a freshmen, that level of reading was quite daunting to me, but when it was reintroduced to me over a year later, it was interesting to see how much more of an understanding I was able to gain.

interesting point when it comes to academic writing because the sponsor has all the power to dictate the way we write. I see the FCAT as a “sponsor” of writing in that it dictates a certain format in which one has to write in order to achieve a passing score. Brandt<sup>4</sup> also brings up the point that “the interests of the sponsor and the sponsored do not have to converge sponsors nevertheless set the terms for access to literacy” (166-167)<sup>6</sup>.

In a study conducted by Cheryl Beil and Melinda Knight<sup>2</sup>, the researchers handed out what is called a “beginning-of-course survey” to students taking their first college-level writing course<sup>7</sup>. The purpose of this survey was to record the types of assignments that were assigned to these students while they were in high school in order to see if they were effectively prepared for college-level writing assignments. The results from this survey showed that roughly six percent of the students surveyed were assigned college-level writing assignments with a high frequency. This study shows the lack of college-level writing students are subjected to throughout their high school careers, which hinders their ability to perform at a high level upon entering college. Addison and McGee<sup>1</sup> also conducted a research study that compared and analyzed different research done by different schools and explains what this means for current high school students as well as future college students. Addison and McGee<sup>1</sup> found that twelve percent of students reported that they discuss their writing with their teachers, compared to 58 percent of college students who reported that they discuss their papers with their professors<sup>8</sup>. Office hours are a huge benefit offered by the professors that allow students to discuss one’s writing and get new ideas to improve upon. Sharlene Kihara<sup>7</sup> conducted a national survey that examines how high school teachers in the United States teach writing. In the survey, she asked three questions: “What types of writing do high school teachers assign?”; “Do high school teachers apply evidence-based writing practices?”; and “What adaptations do high school teachers make for struggling writers?” The results from this study show that the most common writing activities assigned were short responses to homework, responses to material read, and summary of materials read<sup>9</sup>.

Susan Fanetti et al. <sup>6</sup> conducted an interview of both college and high school instructors pertaining to standardized testing, specifically the FCAT, and what effect it has on the way high school teachers teach and the effects it has on student writing. Two main points that Fanetti et al. <sup>6</sup> focused on throughout the article are that many of the teachers “felt compelled to teach to the test” while college professors “wish students hadn’t learned so well in high school that an essay is five paragraphs and that a thesis statement can appear only in the first paragraph of the five”<sup>6</sup>. Fanetti et al. <sup>6</sup> goes on to explain how the pressure on the teachers to have high scores on these exams has influenced them to mainly focus on getting students ready for the standardized tests rather than preparing them for college<sup>10</sup>. In another article written by Carlsmith, Collins, and Helmreich<sup>5</sup>, the researchers conduct a study that shows how having an incentive or a pressure to write about a

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<sup>6</sup> Many of these points made by Brandt will be revisited later on in my discussion section.

<sup>7</sup> While I was conducting primary research I was surprised to see that there was such an overwhelming amount of articles pertaining to my topic. I did not expect to be entering such a large academic conversation, but it was quite gratifying to know that I was not the only one interested in this topic.

<sup>8</sup> Upon reading the results from this survey, I was really surprised to see that such a small amount of high school students actually talk to their teachers about their writing. Office hours have been so beneficial to me in both ENC 1101 and 1102. Being able to sit down one on one with your teacher and discuss your topic is a great asset that has allowed me to take my papers to the next level.

<sup>9</sup> This survey really offered great insight into the differences between high school and college level writing. One thing that I have learned being in Professor Launier’s class two years in a row now is that summary and simple responses are not valued whatsoever. Being analytical and adding something to the question is what is truly valued.

<sup>10</sup> I was a bit nervous to add too much discussion about this specific point in my introduction section, but this really sparked a lot of reaction from me. I find it crazy that teachers are being forced to teach to a test simply because if their students do not perform well, their job is on the line.

certain topic can hinder or better one's performance when writing. The study showed that when having the freedom to write about a topic of one's choice, the level of writing tends to be higher than when one is pressured to write about a certain topic<sup>5</sup>.

My goal by the end of this paper is to have the answers to why high school students are not properly prepared for college-level writing. Now that I have entered the academic conversation and seen what people are finding in their studies, I want to compare them to my findings and figure out what can be done to help improve high school students' writing experiences and better prepare them for college level writing.

## **Methods<sup>11</sup>**

For this research paper, I have conducted a self case study, in which I will be analyzing my past experiences as a high school writer compared to my college writing experience, as well as the role the FCAT has played in my development as a writer. With that being said, I will be keeping in mind a few questions while I conduct the self case study, such as what role the FCAT has played in my development as a writer, and whether or not it has hindered my abilities as a writer. How have my literacy sponsors played a role in developing me into the writer I am today, and has it been a negative or positive impact? I also want to discover if my identity as a writer is more informed as a cognitive experience with writing, or my affective experience with writing. Throughout the year, I have attempted to relate every writing assignment to my research topic in order to use it as primary research for my project. With that being said, for my case study, I have specifically chosen three examples that I plan on analyzing and referring to while trying to answer the questions above. First, I have chosen to reflect upon my writing experiences during the years of school in which the FCAT Writes was the main focus in my writing classes. Next, I will be focusing on the transition from the FCAT Writes being the centerpiece of writing classes to literary criticism and more analytical writing papers. Finally, I plan on focusing on the effects of emotion and how that plays a role in the type of writing produced by students. For this section I specifically chose three writing experiences to analyze both my emotions and the environment that I was in. The three specific examples I chose were actually taking the FCAT Writes, writing a literary criticism in high school, and writing my first paper in college<sup>12</sup>.

## **Results and Discussion<sup>13</sup>**

The first area of focus I decided to reflect on during my self case study was my experiences as a writer during the years of school in which the FCAT was the main focus of my writing classes. As I was reflecting upon my experiences, I found some very interesting results. I found that from the fourth grade all the way up until my sophomore year in high school, the FCAT Writes was the main area of concern during that time period. Every day in class consisted of a practice FCAT writing simulation as well as a homework assignment that involved writing to a prompt. I remember being taught how to write for this type of a standardized test and looking back at it is almost as if the

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<sup>11</sup> Conducting a self case study on my previous writing experiences was a great opportunity to see how far I have come as a writer and a student. It was really interesting to see how my overall quality of writing has improved and how much my overall outlook on writing has changed. Perhaps the most interesting part was analyzing the reasons behind why I struggled so much as a kid.

<sup>12</sup> I felt that a self case study was enough primary research to effectively complete this project. I have so many personal experiences with the FCAT Writes as well as writing in general that I felt my own experiences would suffice.

<sup>13</sup> I chose to combine both the methods and results section because I believe it allowed my paper to flow a lot better. Also, by combining the two, it allowed me to keep any analysis out of my results section, which seemed to be a problem for many students in my class during the peer review.

teacher had a magic formula for success. I was taught that the first sentence had to be a hook in order to draw the reader in, and then the final sentence of the introduction had to be my thesis statement. From there I had to have three paragraphs of support for my thesis statement, all of which provided a different reason for backing my stance. To wrap things up the conclusion should have a clincher as the last sentence to close out my argument. Another part to this “magical formula for success”<sup>14</sup> was to sprinkle in a few facts regardless if they were true or not. Even after the years of preparation, I was only able to achieve a three on the FCAT Writes, which really baffles me. What does a three mean? Am I a bad writer because of it?<sup>15</sup> I also found that every teacher I had would teach to the test regardless if they thought it was benefiting me as a writer or not. After analyzing my writing career during this time period, I find that the FCAT has definitely hindered my abilities as a writer. I was trained to write a specific way for a test that supposedly gauges my ability to write, when, in reality, the second I walked into my junior English class in high school, everything that had been previously engraved into my brain was thrown out the window. Reflecting back on my literacy sponsors during this time period as well, I found that ultimately they played a negative role in my development simply because they taught me that writing for the FCAT is the only way to write and this was the way it had to be done.

After finding these results, I realized that almost seven years of my educational career was dictated by one standardized test, and once it was done, so was that style of writing. I was left with a sense of no direction. How was it that, all of a sudden, someone is supposed to drop what has been so influential in his or her writing experience and suddenly pick up a new form of writing? I realized the FCAT Writes was not put in place to benefit me as a writer whatsoever. It was really put in place to benefit the teachers, school district, and state; also known as my literacy sponsors. It all comes back to what Brandt<sup>4</sup> says about literary sponsors and how they are not doing it to benefit you—there is always a driving force called money that motivates the sponsors<sup>16</sup>. All of these literacy sponsors that are supposedly there to better my academic career reap the benefits of every passing grade on the FCAT. As a result of every passing grade, the teachers earn more money in bonuses, the school receives more money from the school district, and the school district receives more money from the state. We students are left with a numerical grade from one through five denoting how good of a writer we are. But what does that numerical value mean? How does it benefit me? The truth is it means nothing; the same student who received a five has the same benefits of the student who receives a one. The number that everyone worked so hard to achieve vanishes the second they move to the next grade. Since I received a three on every FCAT Writes I ever took, does that make me just an average writer? I disagree; I don’t think one’s writing ability can be judged based off of a timed test in a very pressure-filled environment with a prompt that I have very little interest in.

The second part of my research consisted of reflecting upon the transition from the FCAT Writes being the focal point of my writing classes, to a more analytical style of writing. I found that during this phase of my writing career was where I really began to struggle as a writer and develop a strong disliking for writing. I asked myself, “Why was this time period so difficult for me”? Then I realized, transitioning from the five-paragraph essay that was required for the FCAT Writes to

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<sup>14</sup> I refer to this as the “magical formula of success” because all through out elementary school, my teachers would hand out worksheets with a step-by-step process to writing an essay for the FCAT Writes. They made it seem like if you follow these steps you are well on your way to scoring a five on the essay, which clearly was not the case for me and many other students based on the results I found in my secondary research.

<sup>15</sup> These questions will be discussed later on during my discussion section.

<sup>16</sup> While doing some analysis on my results from my primary research, I was able to make a strong connection to what Brandt says about sponsors being sponsors for ulterior motives such as money.

writing five- to ten-page literary criticisms<sup>17</sup> was a huge shock to me. Never before had I been exposed to such expectations and I think this is what ultimately led to my struggles as a writer. Once again, throughout my analysis of this time period, the FCAT Writes seemed to play an influential role in developing me into the writer I am today. Clearly the FCAT had a negative impact on my transition into a more analytical style of writing due to the fact that I only knew of a five-paragraph essay that mostly consisted of bogus opinions and facts. I found that, in many cases, in order to get through a literary critique I had to have my mom by my side aiding me through the writing process in order to produce a quality product. After finding this specific result, it really started to stir up multiple questions. Why was it that my mom was able to help me through the writing process? Do other struggling students do this? Perhaps one of the most interesting results that I found was as I entered my first semester as a college student, things began to take a turn for the better<sup>18</sup>. All of a sudden I began to produce quality writing that was really valued in the discourse community that I had become a part of. On my very first college essay, I received an A. I remember thinking to myself, "This cannot be true." I went through an entire four years of high school without receiving an A on a single one of my papers and now that I was in college I received an A on the first one. As the semester continued on, we had two more essays, both of which I received A's on. Not only did I receive an A on all three of my first college essays, one of them was submitted to an academic writing journal called *Stylus* for a chance to be published. Although I was not chosen to be published, being nominated was an achievement of its own.

After finding these results and comparing them to my results I found during my high school career, many questions arose. In fact, these findings really sparked the idea for my research question: "What is the difference between high school and college writing?" Why all of a sudden was my writing valued much more in the college setting than it was in high school? Did my literacy sponsor play a large role in the transformation of my writing ability? Based on my findings, I have come to the conclusion that high school writing really had no purpose behind it. Every literary criticism that was assigned was based off of a book that the entire class was forced to read. As a student who really struggled with the reading of Shakespeare, for example, it's no wonder my literary criticism was not as good compared to other students who might have enjoyed reading Shakespeare. What I am trying to get at is the literary criticism was not assigned to have students add valuable input into an academic conversation. In my opinion, it was assigned to make sure that students did the reading, and how well their paper turned out reflected how well they comprehended the reading. By comparison, in my first semester as a college student, we were given a topic to write about that we could run with in any direction we wanted to as long as it was analytical and added something to an academic conversation. The difference between high school and college writing is seen in what each institution values. High school values a finished product that can prove students understand a reading they were assigned, compared to college which values analytical writing that adds to an already existing academic conversation. My literacy sponsor allowed for me to develop an idea and run with it in a way that was not allowed in high school. Every single person in my ENC 1101 class had the same "prompt" but we were all able to attack it from a different angle<sup>19</sup>. That is what separates high school and college-level writing. In

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<sup>17</sup> A literary criticism is a type of paper that requires you to read a book assigned by the teacher and then write an essay based off of a prompt the teacher creates. A key component to a literary criticism is one's ability to go back in the reading and use specific quotes from the book to support the claims that you are making in the essay.

<sup>18</sup> Up until my freshmen year of college, I have never received an A on any type of essay regardless of what class it was for. Coming into college, I was really nervous about ENC 1101 because I heard it was all writing, which at the time was my worst enemy. After completing my ENC 1101 course with an A, I left with the confidence I needed to tackle many essays to come in the future.

<sup>19</sup> The freedom that we were able to have with these essays really allowed for students to hone in on a specific point that interested them which I believe allowed for better papers.

high school, everyone was forced to write about a topic that was so narrow and only focused on one aspect of the book we were performing the literary criticism on. Ultimately, that is what led to my mediocrity as a high school-level writer. Can I blame my literacy sponsors for my failure as a high school level writer? Yes and no. It depends what level of the hierarchy of literacy sponsors you decide to look at. Blaming my teachers would be wrong because they are given a curriculum at the beginning of the year and forced to follow it. However, I do believe the state, which sits on top of the hierarchy of literacy sponsors, can be blamed. They must reconsider the goals they want their

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students to achieve. If the goal is to have every student read a laundry list of books by the time they are finished with high school, then they are doing a great job. But if the goal is to allow the students to develop an analytical stance on a topic that truly means something to the student, then things must change.

For the final part of my self case study I took a look at the effects of emotions and the environment and how that plays a role in the quality of writing I

produced. The first type of writing that I took a look at were my experiences taking the actual FCAT Writes. I found that leading up to the FCAT Writes, I was very nervous and tense. The test-taking environment was very intimidating. The proctor would read from a script while the entire class sat there anxious to take the test. A very interesting point that I found was emotions ran especially high when the proctor began to read off the various ways your test could be invalidated and the repercussion if in fact that did happen<sup>20</sup>. During the actual test, the time limit was a huge cause for concern and raised the stress level even higher. Finally, once the test was over, it felt as if a one ton boulder was lifted off of my shoulders and at that point the results did not matter to me; I was just happy to be done with the test. Next, I looked at my emotions and environment while I was writing my first literary criticism during high school. My emotions for this type of writing differed tremendously from that of the FCAT Writes. While writing the literary criticism, I was frustrated rather than nervous. I was frustrated that I could not seem to get a flow to my essay and was at a loss for words most of the time. I found that having my mom by my side during the writing process really helped because she would offer words of advice and encouragement to keep my spirits high. I remember an entire weekend would be dedicated to completing a literary criticism essay due to the fact that my frustration would overcome me. Although I was very frustrated throughout the entire writing process, I was in a very pleasant environment. I was in the comfort of my own home with access to snacks and a break whenever I felt it necessary. Another key component to my environment was my mother being by my side offering ideas to keep me going. Although the final product rarely ended with the grade I would have liked, my environment offered a much calmer and relaxing writing experience. The final writing experience I looked at during my self case study was my first college paper. I remember during this particular writing experience I had a sense of uncertainty as to whether or not I was on the right track. Being that it was my first college paper, I was nervous and wanted to make sure I performed well. One factor really stands out during my writing process for this paper and that is the availability of office hours. After going to my professor's office hours to discuss my paper, I gained confidence that I never thought I would have in my writing ability. After sitting down with my professor, he was really impressed with my writing which really boosted my moral. After talking to my professor and finding out that he really liked where I was heading with my paper, it really allowed me to open up as a writer and perform at a very high level. As for my environment, I first started writing in my dorm and found that it was

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<sup>20</sup> One's test could be invalidated during the FCAT Writes for eating, talking, using a cell phone or an electronic device, and much more.

not a good writing environment due to the plain white walls and the feeling that I was in a jail cell. I found that moving to the library offered me a much more focused writing environment.

This section of my self case study really made me think about the effects of emotions and one's environment when writing, and proves that a positive attitude and the right writing conditions can really make all the difference. Why is it that the FCAT is taken in such a strict environment, which allows for no breaks and has a time limit constantly breathing down your neck? If the FCAT is such an important test that gauges one's ability to write, shouldn't we be placed in an environment that benefits one's writing ability? For a kid sitting in a room full of students waiting anxiously to take a test with a scary proctor reading off the rules of the test in front of the class, it is very intimidating. I think the results on the FCAT would be much better if students were given the entire day to take the test with the option to get up and walk around and eat a snack in order to clear their minds. Writing is supposed to be an enjoyable experience. You should not have to feel rushed and pressured during the entire process because you know you only have fifty minutes to write an essay on a topic you couldn't care less about in the first place. Professional writers do not write because they have to; instead, they write because they want to add their opinion to a conversation that already exists. So why should I? Comparing my experience with the FCAT Writes to my experience with my first literary criticism, both the emotions and environment differ tremendously. Being able to sit down in a room of my choice, with the option to stop and take a break, and with the aid of my mother, it really made for a much better writing environment that ultimately led to a much better experience. I found that being in a comfortable environment with no time constraint really allows for a better quality of work. One main factor in my experience writing my first college essay that allowed me to achieve a high quality of work was the access to office hours. Why is it that in high school I am not allowed to take my paper to my teacher and have a one-on-one conversation about my paper? Implementing a system like this in high school would benefit the students tremendously and allow for a better product. After comparing all three writing experiences, I have realized that each one has had their positive and negative effects on me as a writer. Moving forward, both my writing environment and emotions will play a huge role in how and where I sit down and complete my essay.

After completing this semester-long project, I have learned not only a lot about myself as a writer, but also learned that a lot needs to be changed in the high school writing curriculum as well as the FCAT Writes. Conducting a self case study on my past writing experiences has been a great experience and has really allowed me to see how and why I have grown into the writer I am today. This project has truly meant a lot to me since I first discovered many of the questions I had during my first semester as a college student taking ENC 1101. Before conducting my primary research, I was really excited to see the results that I would find. Throughout the project, I truly tried to keep an open mind and not jump to conclusions before everything was ultimately done. I truly feel that I added quality input into an academic conversation that is over flowing with different opinions and studies.

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Nick Scala is currently 20 years old, studying finance at the University of Central Florida. After he graduates with his degree he plans on going to graduate school and hopefully landing a job as a financial planner. Sometime down the road he also wishes to start his own company since it has been a lifelong dream. As a student at UCF, he has been honored on the dean's list three of his five semesters and was an active member of the Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity.