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## The more things change, the more they . . . well, you know the rest

There's an opinion piece over at the [Inside Higher Ed](#) website today (July 22) by William Major. Major claims to be arguing for a "reconsideration" of the teaching of composition. He offers a few refreshing and honest insights about the dynamics of English departments. His solution to the "problem" of composition teaching is to get more full-time English professors into the composition classroom rather than farming out so much of composition's labor to graduate students and contingent faculty.

Sounds like a great idea, right? The problem is, though, that such English departments--where all faculty, including the full professors, teach at least a couple of composition courses each semester--already exist. I happen to teach in one of those departments. And that's why I think Major is completely off target. The problem (if indeed we can call it a *single* problem; I would argue that we can't) of teaching composition lies less in the rank of the faculty member teaching the class than in the assumptions about writing held by so many people both inside and outside the university. Those assumptions are many, so I'll list only a couple here: first, that grammatical and mechanical correctness are "the basics" of writing that must be mastered before moving on to allegedly more complex cognitive matters; second, that the success of a college composition course should be measured according to whether (and to what degree) students have "acquired" these basics, along with what we might call second-level basics such as the ability to write effective introductions and conclusions to papers.

My argument is nothing new. How much composition scholarship is already out there, after all, that meticulously challenges and undermines most of the assumptions that have guided the teaching of college composition since the course was first instituted at Harvard in the last quarter of the nineteenth century? Very few people outside the field of rhetoric and composition seem to know or care about this, however. To paraphrase Sharon Crowley: The teaching of writing is one of the few things about which otherwise educated and intelligent people exercise the license to be completely stupid.

That's the *real* crisis.