
Retrospective: “Shining a Spotlight”: A Decade of Stylus: A Journal of First-Year Writing

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Back in August 2009, I was fresh out of grad school and excited to start in a new position as a full-time composition instructor at my alma mater, the University of Central Florida. As a new faculty member, I'd be teaching four classes and getting a feel for working at a large university. While I didn't want to overcommit myself, when then-Director of First-Year Writing Dr. Elizabeth Wardle provided faculty with a handout that detailed some of the departmental committees we could join, I was immediately interested in the "First-Year Composition Journal Committee." Since I had a background in creative writing, I thought I knew a thing or two about writing, and so I figured I'd be pretty good at reviewing student submissions. If called upon, I could probably even offer some useful line edits. Most importantly, a "journal committee" was a service commitment that sounded entirely manageable.

A month later, at the first meeting of that committee, we accomplished what, in retrospect, seems like quite a lot. We figured out how we'd accept submissions, built our review process, developed a rubric, decided how to recruit student editors, started planning an in-person celebration for our authors (which would eventually grow into [Knights Write](#), an annual event recognizing UCF writers from both first-year composition and upper-division courses), and set a release window for our first issue, which would come out by the end of the academic year. Most surprising, by the end of that meeting, I'd somehow been selected to serve as the first editor of *Stylus: A Journal of First-Year Writing*. The reasons were practical more than anything else: I was the only faculty member on the committee who was on a contract that renewed year-to-year, and it was agreed that we would need to have some continuity in the position for the first two years as the journal got off the ground. So much for the easy committee.

That first year of *Stylus* continued as a flurry of activity. We built a website, created advertising materials, sent out calls for submissions, hired and trained student editors, finalized the details of an award sponsored by the president of the university, developed procedures for faculty reviewers, and designed the look and feel of the journal that has largely persisted to this day. We were lucky then as now to have the support of a gracious, talented, and hardworking first-year composition faculty committed to student success. We were lucky, too, to receive 34 submissions from students producing some really outstanding, exciting writing and research in their Composition I and II classes. Despite all of the initial logistics to sort out, UCF's first-year composition faculty and students have always made our jobs at *Stylus* easy: all we've ever had to do was try and reflect as much as possible the terrific work they're doing together in composition classes across the university. And so we managed to meet our self-imposed deadline and put our first issue online in the first week of April 2010.

A lot might have happened that first year, but clearly even more has happened in the ten years since. On the day we released our first issue of *Stylus*, the authors being published in our newest issue were in elementary school. A number of my colleagues in the First-Year Writing Program were in high school, and I believe some may have been in middle school. The Department of Writing and Rhetoric itself would not exist for several more months. Since that day in 2010, *Stylus* has published more than twenty issues with articles from over 100 UCF students. These authors have gone on to earn master's degrees, PhDs, and jobs all over the country in a wide variety of fields. They're engineers and lawyers, nurses and marketing managers, doctors and teachers and data analysts. *Stylus* authors have had their work read by thousands of UCF students, cited dozens of times in other scholarly journals, and republished in textbooks used across the country. Student editors who I worked with as undergraduates have gone on to complete graduate school, and I now consider myself lucky to call them my colleagues and fellow teachers; in fact, one of *their* students is published in this very issue.

A lot can happen in ten years. Yet when I think back to that day in 2010, it feels like yesterday. That day before we published our first issue, I remember sitting in my office and tinkering with the fonts for that initial set of articles—Californian FB or Times for the header? It seems impossible that a decade has passed since then. As anniversaries tend to do, this one has prompted me to think about time, our perception of how it moves, and, especially, how it changes us.

During a recent trip to the John C. Hitt Library, I stumbled upon a copy of the very first UCF course listing from way back in 1967-68—the year before the school actually opened to students—when the university was still known as Florida Technological University. Curious, I looked up the course descriptions for Composition I and II to see how much they'd changed in over fifty years. Here's how both courses were described:

Composition I

Expository writing, with emphasis on effective communication. Grammar and mechanics will not form a major part of this course; if the student is deficient, he will achieve proficiency through independent study. Writing topics to be based on selected readings.

Composition II

Writing practice involving the mechanics of research and evaluation of varied readings. A documented paper will demonstrate the student's grasp of writing principles studied.

And here's how they're described today in the current, 2019-20 catalog:

Composition I

Expository writing with emphasis on effective communication and critical thinking. Emphasizing the writing process, writing topics are based on selected readings and on student experiences.

Composition II

Focus on extensive research in analytical and argumentative writing based on a variety of readings from the humanities. Emphasis on developing critical thinking and diversity of perspective.

I can't help but feel that these really aren't all that different, are they? This, despite knowing how much our curriculum has actually evolved in just the ten years I've been here at UCF, let alone how much composition theory and pedagogy have developed in the broader field over the past fifty. I think

these similarities reflect less that our UCF composition curriculum has been static—it hasn’t—and more that these descriptions must by their nature omit so much. These descriptions cannot capture the activity of a classroom, that back-and-forth between the instructor and students, the comments on student papers, and the time a student spends building, developing, and revising a draft, word by word, paragraph by paragraph. They cannot capture the faculty meetings and debates about course outcomes, textbooks, and hiring decisions that ultimately shape a curriculum. They cannot capture the hallway conversations between colleagues trying to figure out how to make their classes just that much more of a better, more meaningful experience for their students. These descriptions cannot, in other words, capture the interactions between people that make a curriculum real and learning possible.

When I look back over all of our previous issues of *Stylus*, what I remember first isn’t the work or the time involved. Instead, I remember the editor meetings where students talked through what they were valuing in a particular submission and made arguments for what should be published. Then there were the deliberations with the faculty committee as we finalized an issue or tweaked an item on our evaluation rubric. I think about emailing acceptances to the selected authors, working with them to finalize a piece for publication, and then finally meeting them in-person along with their families at the Knights Write Showcase. I also remember talking with teachers new to our program and sharing work from *Stylus* with them to demonstrate what our curriculum can look like in action. And then I think of all the times I’ve used *Stylus* in my own classroom and heard students say they feel like maybe they can try and put their writing and research out there, too. What I see and remember, then, are all of the spaces for community and conversations around writing that *Stylus* has occasioned.

Ten years on, I’m grateful for those spaces and opportunities in ways that I could not have imagined when we first started the journal. When in fifty years someone looks back and wants to know the history of this program, they won’t have to rely on those course descriptions I quoted above. Instead, they can track how the thinking of this program and the conversations we’ve had around writing have evolved by looking at the writing of students from over the years. I think they’ll be impressed.

In that first issue of *Stylus* from 2010, I wrote the following in the note from the editor:

In my own experiences teaching, I’m consistently impressed by the insight and cleverness of our students, their capacity for surprising and original thought, their ability, when given the space and a receptive audience, to produce writing and ideas that truly advance knowledge or have the potential to effect real change. . . . It’s my great pleasure, then, to introduce this inaugural issue of *Stylus: A Journal of First-Year Writing* and to have the opportunity to shine a spotlight on the work of five superbly talented young writers.

After ten years, I am pleased to report that, while a lot has changed, every semester I am still wowed by our students here at UCF and their insights, perspectives, and determination to say something new and get their ideas out, and I can honestly say that we haven’t released a single issue of this journal that hasn’t surprised me in some way. To be surrounded by so many people—both students and faculty—who care so deeply about writing and supporting writing has been a very lucky thing indeed.

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