

12-2025

Bringing Mindfulness into First-Year Composition

Matt Lemas

Chapman University, mlemas@chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Educational Psychology Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Instructional Media Design Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lemas, Matt (2025) "Bringing Mindfulness into First-Year Composition," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 30 , Article 8.

<https://doi.org/10.7920/jaepl304cFd>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol30/iss1/8>

This article is brought to you freely and openly by Volunteer, Open-access, Library-hosted Journals (VOL Journals), published in partnership with The University of Tennessee (UT) University Libraries. This article has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning by an authorized editor. For more information, please visit <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>.

CONNECTING

Bringing Mindfulness into First-Year Composition

Matthew Lemas

I first stumbled upon the relationship between mindfulness and writing sometime after college. I had been meditating for a few years—not perfectly, but enough to notice the way it softened the inner critic and procrastinator that usually accompanied me to the page.

Eventually, with a daily practice, I no longer obsessed (as much) over whether my sentences were “good enough,” and wrote with far fewer conditions—less concerned with the time of day, for instance, or whether I was in a “writerly” mood. The practice didn’t make writing easy, necessarily, but more possible, a habit I was willing to return to, day after day.

When I entered graduate school, and was given the opportunity to design a thematic first-year composition course as a student instructor during the fall of 2023, the choice felt obvious to me. Dubbing the class “Mindfulness Rhetorics,” I wanted my students to encounter mindfulness not merely as a buzzword, but something they could integrate into their writing lives, a practice of embodied awareness, patience, and non-judgment. In effect, I wanted them to see what I had come to see—that the mind which so often derails us in writing might also be the tool that steadies us, if we learn to meet it differently.

The course unfolded in two parts. In the first five weeks, we focused on mindfulness as a lived practice: short meditations at the beginning of class led by me, reflections on the relevance of mindfulness concepts in writing, such as trust and “letting go,” and a major assignment that ultimately asked them to define mindfulness for themselves, considering its relevance to their future writing life. In the second half of the semester, we turned outward, treating mindfulness as a discourse to be analyzed, exploring topics such as cultural appropriation and corporatization. But it was that opening unit—this intersection of practice and reflection—that most interested me. Could mindfulness, I wondered, potentially help students transfer what they learned in first-year composition to other writing situations?

This question was motivated by broader research on transfer I had explored at the time, which revealed how often students struggle to carry what they learn in the composition classroom into new contexts (Wardle; Yancey et al.). Concurrently, more recent work on mindfulness in higher education had suggested that contemplative practice could strengthen metacognition—the same skill that so often underlies transfer (Featherstone; Jankowski & Holas). I considered my class, then, the ideal environment to further explore this hypothesis.

To begin, I created what I called the “metacognitive essay” as their first major assignment. The prompt was simple enough: *From our readings, what does mindfulness mean to you, and how might you see mindfulness as a relevant component of your future writing life?* Students drew on *Wherever You Go, There You Are* by John Kabat-Zinn, an introductory mindfulness text, as well as *Naming What We Know*, a collection of threshold concepts edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, weaving together ideas from mindfulness and writing studies, respectively, to narrate their own developing practice.

To then see what students might have carried from that initial essay, I asked them to revisit these ideas in their later rhetorical reflections throughout the semester, which were written after each subsequent major assignment (an argumentative research paper and a multimodal project of their choice). After analyzing seventeen students’ essays and reflections, I discovered four themes that, to me, captured students’ eagerness to transform their relationship to writing entirely, viewing mindfulness as the tool in which to do so.

In the theme of *Accepting Hardship*, for instance, students described writing struggles as part of the process, rather than as evidence of their failure. One student wrote, “A good writer is able to allow themselves room to get upset and mess up as long as they can practice and learn from experience.” She linked this shift to mindfulness, which she said taught her that her headspace directly shapes her confidence on the page.

Then, under *Experiencing and Recognizing Benefits*, many students described more practical effects: improved concentration, longer writing sessions, less distraction. Nearly half explicitly said mindfulness helped them focus, often connecting that focus to better outcomes in their drafts. Others reported authenticity as a surprising benefit, claiming that mindfulness allowed their writing to sound “more like me” instead of a performance for the teacher.

Cultivating Tools was where students became more explicit about what they would take with them. “Non-judgment” and “non-doing” appeared most frequently. As one student put it, “Non-doing allows me to stop worrying about whether I’m productive enough and just be present.” Another wrote, “By integrating non-judgment ... in our writing, it can enable us to be more flexible with our ideas and even promote the introspection of counterarguments.” Here, students were discovering tools flexible enough for a diverse range of future writing assignments.

But it was in *Applying Practices* that students most overtly showed evidence of transferring mindfulness beyond the initial assignment. A majority said they meditated or practiced breathing before later writing tasks. One reflected: “Before starting to write I participated in breathing exercises to get myself in a stable place to write well. Writing [the metacognitive] essay made me realize how helpful it really can be.” Another, who created a podcast for her multimodal proj-

ect, described planning sessions around moments of mindfulness: “My brainstorming and writing turned out better if I did a mindfulness practice each time before I worked on the podcast.” Indeed, her podcast was a strong one.

These weren’t always dramatic breakthroughs, of course, and neither was this a perfect experiment—these students did sign up for a mindfulness-themed course, after all, which likely made them more willing to integrate these practices in the first place. However, I still felt I was onto something, that mindfulness could, even in small ways, transfer the lessons from first-year composition beyond any one assignment, or any one course.

Now—no longer a graduate student, but a part-time lecturer at Chapman—I am in my third year of teaching Mindfulness Rhetorics, and with it, my third year of assigning this essay. Has anything changed? Yes—AI, for one thing. When I first taught the course, ChatGPT had been out for less than a year, and only a handful of students had really engaged with it. Now, nearly all of them use GenAI to some degree.

That worries me, of course, for the myriad ways that are discussed near-daily in popular media—an outsourcing of process and critical thinking, for example, or an inability to handle difficult reading. However, when I teach this particular assignment today, I don’t feel the despair I might were it to be, say, a rhetorical analysis, or research paper—genres I believe to have great merit, but genres that students are now more than eager to outsource to GenAI.

Rather, I find students still willing to examine the concepts and practices that embody them, that transform writing from an academic chore into an extension of their life—a life that, more and more, they are so desperate to live with awareness. That hasn’t changed either when I’ve brought this assignment outside the confines of Chapman to more standard “English 101” courses at nearby community colleges; to quote Ram Dass, most students seem eager to “Be Here Now.”

Ultimately, when I read students’ metacognitive essays and subsequent reflections today, I discover something reassuring: there are certain practices that don’t lose their relevance with the forward march of technological progress. If anything, they become all the more important, for—if practiced often enough, and with an openness to their effects—they can show us who we are, and why we write in the first place.

Works Cited

- Adler-Kassner, L., and E. Wardle. *Naming What We Know, Classroom Edition: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*. Utah State University Press, 2016.
- Featherstone, Jared. ‘Contemplative WAC: Testing a Mindfulness-Based Reflective Writing Assignment across Courses.’ *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning: JAEPL*, vol. 25, 2019, pp. 19–34.

- Jankowski, Tomasz, and Pawel Holas. 'Metacognitive Model of Mindfulness.' *Consciousness and Cognition*, vol. 28, 2014, pp. 64–80, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2014.06.005>.
- Kabat-Zinn, Jon. *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. Hyperion, 2005.
- Wardle, Elizabeth. 'Understanding "Transfer" from FYC: Preliminary Results of a Longitudinal Study.' *WPA Writing Program Administration: Journal of the Council of Writing Program Administrators*, vol. 31, no. 1–2, 2007, pp. 65–85.
- Yancey, K. B., et al. *Writing across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*. Utah University Press, 2014.