Guest Editor's Note

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Painting a portrait of the New York University (NYU) Expository Writing Program (EWP) runs into the old cartographic conundrum: the only way to produce a perfectly precise map of the world is for the map itself to be the size of the world; when we make complexity more useful, we run the risk of reducing it.

Still, there are major intellectual landmarks which might help sketch out a shape of the EWP terrain: *idea* as an inductively crafted and animating force of a text; *form* as a crucial set of writing discoveries and decisions in conversation with idea; the *essay* as a tradition and form capacious enough to encourage all those discoveries and decisions and conversations; all of this fostered by drafting processes, influenced by creative writing, so scaffolded they can themselves become evidence for students' writing. At NYU, these principles are developed and revised within a faculty community that values pedagogical inquiry by colleagues as much as it values essayistic inquiry by students. My hope is that this introduction will make those landmarks – idea, form and essay, process, and pedagogical inquiry – more legible within this special issue, and that the special issue in turn will help EWP contribute to the national composition landscape. My hope is also that this first of many(!) *Prompt* special issues about individual institutions will open up new ways of conceptualizing the conversations and innovations *within* writing faculties.

About that institution. Though NYU is a private research university, the undergraduate population is markedly diverse: 22% of undergraduates are first-generation college students, 24% are Pell Grant eligible, 22% are international students, only 22% identify as white (New York University, n.d.); this year, NYU accepted just 7.7% of applicants (Saadah, 2025). EWP, housed in the College of Arts and Science, comprises the largest full-time composition faculty in the country: over 100 faculty (plus another 30 in Shanghai and Abu Dhabi[1]) teach over 4,000 students a year in small seminars, across six different schools ranging from performing arts to engineering. The faculty are on continuing contract lines; by my count, over 80 faculty have been teaching at EWP for more than a decade, and over 30 have been on the faculty for more than two decades. Mapping this world is, also, mapping years-long relationships, friendships (I had a table of EWP colleagues at my wedding), and marriages (there are currently five married EWP faculty couples). If it seems like I'm belaboring the personal, it's because at EWP it's part of the intellectual.

And so (with caveats that this whole is missing parts) these eight assignments written by nine colleagues – reviewed by another eight EWP faculty and eight scholars from outside EWP – have to stand in for the full majestic coastline of the EWP landscape; they don't so much represent this land as lead you into it (which is, of course, the etymological root of "introduce").

Within these eight assignments lie many of EWP's central tenets and preoccupations, including the concept of idea. Historically, many EWP faculty value a process of inquiry and induction which ultimately leads a student, in their mind and on the page, to an idea. An idea, in EWP pedagogy, shifts and grows; it may "only [be] revealed by the end of the essay" (NYU Expository Writing Program, n.d.). An idea, in my synthesized understanding of these EWP

prompts, is the record of a writer and essay figuring something out; when an essay provides pieces of evidence which help articulate an argument, the idea is a more generalized set of discoveries that evaporate from each piece of evidence, drop by drop, almost unseen, until the essay is so saturated with thinking that a legible, numinous nimbus of meaning finally forms. Many of these prompts explicitly push students toward such a sense of significance in their writing. Teaching students how to grow and move an idea is, I'd argue, one of the distinctive contributions NYU writing faculty make to the landscape of teaching composition.[2]

Inextricably linked to idea is form. While several of the assignments here culminate in a convention-bound, generically defined form (e.g. an abstract, an encyclopedia entry), the more crucial emphasis here is on formal invention, on structure as both a path to and record of exploration. Many of these assignments offer up the essay as the necessarily versatile formal vehicle for such exploration; in particular, Courtney Chatellier and, separately, Zach Udko, give eloquent voice to the searching, ever-shifting quality of essays. Certainly there is a rich history, on display here, of EWP faculty engaging with the tradition of the "personal essay" (see Hoy, 2012); the personal is part of the intellectual. But even in assignments with no interest in personal evidence, EWP conceives of essay as the personal expression of the writer, a form that only they could shape.

With that idiosyncratic goal in mind, many of the series of assignments here attempt to create writing experiences which could themselves become evidence, giving fuel to students for their essay writing. The insistence on students writing an essay only after several smaller assignments (typically called a *progression*) is a marker of EWP's focus on writing process as experiential learning; Amanda Kotch's prompt takes this to a brilliant, logical extreme by creating a finished product (an abstract) which is also part of the process toward another finished product (the student essay it is written for). To highlight this focus on process, we have published many of the prompts in this issue along with the progression's preceding mini-prompts. Amira Pierce and Justin Warner are both invested not only in the student writing process, but also in understanding the student experience of and attitude toward writing. Along with that comes an investment in student well-being, which helps to motivate Jono Mischkot and William Morgan's piece; Zach, too, speaks of the student writer holistically. Megan Murtha's progression, grounded in each student conducting an experiment on their own behavior, fuses all of these interests; her work foregrounds process, highlights student affect, and teaches students that only they can write their essay by curating experiences that only they will have on the way to the writing. Experience becomes evidence, process contributes to form, all of which shapes and is shaped by idea.

Nor are these experiences strictly confined to the writing process as such. In these pages are glimpses of the EWP classroom, particularly the classroom practice of sustained observation: beyond just a penchant for visual evidence, many EWP faculty (including Justin, Amira, and Zach) evince a belief that if you train students to notice the small it will more firmly ground their thinking in evidence. This noticing is fact-based, and yet what emerges out of it is ultimately deeply personal; factual and human are deeply intertwined. In fact, you could argue that this twinning is elemental to the form and history of the essay.

Though several colleagues here position the human, exploratory, evidence-driven work of writing as a means of combatting AI (Courtney, Zach, Amanda), these principles long pre-date this latest challenge to the expository curriculum. Large language models (like ChatGPT) could lead to a loss of learning by removing the student's experience of writing, but EWP has always elevated the experience of getting lost in writing as a form of learning.

In addition to pedagogical principles, these prompts shed light on pieces of the EWP curriculum. Some of these assignments are innovations on typical EWP progressions – like jazz

improv on a songbook standard, the melding of the new and the traditional is itself, in EWP, the *ur*-tradition. So, Jono and William's progression reveals the crucial skill of making surprising connections, in this case between a text and a larger positionality story, that is at the heart of what EWP long called a "deepening progression"; and Amira's prompt suggests the recursive power at the heart of a "reckoning progression" which asks students to return again and again to a central, confounding text – only this time transposed to a class-wide shared source. Justin's work is an inventive tweak on a familiar progression, which goes by many names and typically teaches students the skills of organizing/ordering a large amount of evidence (the oeuvre of an artist) alongside researching skills (necessary to contextualize the oeuvre); what better way to get to the heart of a creator's work than by trying to recreate it with humor? (Though it could be woven into any progression, Amanda explains how her work also emerges from this "reviewing" tradition.) Though every professor crafts their own syllabus, most EWP syllabi, I suspect, contain at least one improvisation on these particular standards and so these are crucial landmarks for any curricular map of EWP.

Other assignments here are innovations that seem to stand on their own. Megan's focus on behavior-changing is not a widespread practice within the program; Zach was an early adopter in EWP of video as a means of essayistic composition. Chen Lin and Courtney each push for genres/forms (encyclopedia entries and think papers, respectively) which are not widely focused on in EWP (or, to my knowledge, at NYU Shanghai's writing program); the common academic task (the abstract) which Amanda reinvigorates is not commonplace to many EWP courses. I trust that the creativity across this issue portrays the program I know: one that is endlessly innovating, tinkering, playing (on that, see a *Prompt* article by former EWP-er Natalia Andrievskikh, 2024) with the endlessly exciting challenge of teaching first-year writing.

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Less explicit in this issue but no less crucial, are the interpersonal bonds that form amidst a longstanding faculty. These may emerge in part because NYU writing faculty are so often working *together* through a large pedagogical smorgasbord of workshops, assessment projects, working groups, scholarship of teaching and learning studies (e.g., DasBender et al., 2023). Additionally, new faculty in EWP are placed in small learning communities led by more senior faculty. When I started teaching there, in 2001, new faculty participated in six semesters of these mini-cohorts (it's since been reduced to four); the make-up of each group changes semester to semester. Beyond the pedagogical training, the result is a tightly woven intellectual community made up of faculty who have thought about teaching in structured ways alongside other newer and older colleagues, who shared previous mentors with a yet wider circle of professors, each educator acting as an intellectual link on a chain but also a node in a network.

A typical essay in *Prompt* will use citations, in part, as a way to claim and communicate an intellectual lineage. Many of the essays in this special issue reference an internal EWP lineage, fueled by new teacher cohorts, faculty convenings (twice-semesterly full-program workshops collaboratively run by the program's Director of Faculty Development), and years of collegial sharing and building of assignments, syllabi, courses. There has been remarkable (and remarkably stable) leadership within the program. The current Director, Jenni Quilter, was herself a longtime member of the faculty; she was preceded by Dara Regaignon, who in turn took over from Pat C. Hoy II; Pat began directing the program in 1993 and retired in 2013. Denice Martone is currently the Associate Director of the program . . . and was when Pat was hired. Nate Mickelson, the current Director of Faculty Development, replaced Ben Stewart, who started teaching in EWP in 1997; Ben took over the role from Darlene Forrest, who led faculty

development for approximately two decades. William, one of the authors in this issue, stepped down from directing the program's Writing Center in 2025 after over twenty years of leadership. Nor is claiming the EWP lineage confined to current faculty. The old offices of the program had a series of cubicles arrayed around a long table; colleagues would eat, respond to student work, meet with students, and share tips and tricks of the trade there. Many alumni of this era, long-since teaching elsewhere, are still members of a Facebook group called The Center Table.[3]

Alongside these communal interpersonal aspects, the program is characterized by an intense and persistent exchange with creative writing as a field. For at least the last 25 years, the program's faculty has had a near split between MFAs and PhDs (with multiple colleagues holding both). The academic traditions faculty were trained in run across the disciplines, though there is a core of English and/or writing studies scholars. As for the MFAs: former EWP faculty of the last two decades include three Pulitzer Prize finalists in drama, another Tony-nominated dramatist, a National Book Award finalist in poetry, and a novelist short-listed for the Booker Prize; their own creative works are, in my opinion, shot through with an EWP-ish emphasis on idea. But a belief in the *academic* usefulness of creative writing practices has also long been a hallmark of EWP pedagogy, with a focus on process, on formal invention and belletristic attention to language, to sentences, to rhythms.

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Maybe, then, there's no way to map a program, at least not one this big, with this many people and disciplines and traditions. Maybe eight prompts can be evidence for nothing more than those eight prompts. Or maybe precise mapping is a precisely wrong(headed) metaphor, a fool's errand to prove a shape that's always shifting anyway. Maybe, instead, these pages don't trace a terrain so much as explain an ecosystem – a moving, swirling set of people, practices, principles, parasitic and symbiotic, paradoxically ever-evolving and yet equilibrious. Maybe each prompt here is just a drop of water which, under the proper introductory microscope, reveals evidence of so many more organisms. You're invited to remember that any piece of an ecosystem may behave differently in a new environment, though I confess a hope that many readers will import something from these pages to their own institutional ecosystems only to discover a beneficially invasive species.

Prompt has always had, as its mission, this kind of importing, the circulation of teaching. The journal takes seriously the ephemera of exercises with the hope that, by publishing them, these pedagogies won't perish. This new era that editors Kelly Kinney and Rick Fisher have established, one in which special issues are devoted to one school, expands this act of cultivation; the performance of teaching and prompting can be fleeting, and the intellectual communities that grow up around them are no easier to preserve. It's deeply influential ephemera all the way down. But I hope this special issue, at least in part, helps to preserve this special program at NYU. How lucky I was to map my intellectual home in this essayistic ecosystem for over two decades. How grateful I am to these nine colleagues for these assignments, and to all the colleagues whose thinking influenced these nine. How happy I am to introduce this ecosystem to you; read on in, the water's fine.

Notes

[1]NYU Shanghai and NYU Abu Dhabi are degree-granting institutions. Both schools had their writing programs founded in the last 15 years by EWP faculty who left the New York campus to teach in and establish these sibling programs; some of these faculty returned to EWP after a year while others stayed much longer. There continues to be circulation amongst the three campuses, not just through visits and projects (e.g., a collaboratively run symposium) but also through faculty taking term-long teaching assignments at non-home campuses; Amira Pierce's prompt in this

issue, for instance, emerged while she was teaching in Shanghai, although she is a faculty member at the New York campus. In short, all three NYU campuses' writing programs are part of the intellectual community that this special issue is devoted to.

[2]Such idea-based significance is not fully at odds with the more typical composition term "thesis" and the disciplinary traditions which require it (Chen Lin's essay explicitly references this in terms of genre), but I note that you'll barely find the word thesis in these pages; the assignments in this issue suggest a view that "writing a thesis statement" is a static enunciation that limits student exploration. If idea emerges and gracefully twists across the page, thesis is its boring cousin who doesn't even know how to dance. Courtney Chatellier's essay in these pages espouses this belief; Amira Pierce's goes a step further and exemplifies it – her work is formally complicated and animated by idea.

[3]People construe this history in different ways, of course; indeed, having such a visible program history at all allows for interpretation. Sometimes I think all this meaning making, albeit divergent, also binds colleagues together.

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