My two criticisms of the text are minor, the first having to do with the formulaic structure of the guide as a whole: the authors develop a routine for the beginning, middle, and end of each chapter that is perhaps helpful for readers trying to navigate the text quickly, but monotonous for those digging in from cover to cover. Of course, this may be a knee-jerk criticism, because readers of reference guides turn to them for skimming ease, not reading pleasure. Given that the guide’s targeted audience includes those unfamiliar with the specialized nomenclature of genre studies, however, I believe my second criticism is sound: that is, the authors use acronyms excessively throughout the text—EMP, EOP, ESL, ESP, LSP, SIGNET IV, RGS, SFL, WAC, WID, etc. While Bawarshi and Reiff define each term in its early use, it was hard for me to recall what several abbreviations represented as I encountered them later in the text. It stands to reason that newcomers to genre studies would be even more inhibited by their (over)use.

Acronyms aside, *Genre* clearly succeeds in its aims. Analyzed rhetorically, the guide demonstrates that like composition studies at large, genre studies has distinguished its disciplinary aims, legitimated its research methods, and—to return again to Stephen North’s observation—placed administrators and especially practitioners “at the center of the field’s knowledge-making explosion” (371).

Rio and I had good reason to be excited about the mail.

*Binghamton, NY*

**Works Cited**


Reviewed by Megan M. McKnight, California State University

In *Before Shaughnessy: Basic Writing at Yale and Harvard, 1920-1960*, Kelly Ritter makes similar sets of identifications of Basic Writers as Shaughnessy did in *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. Ritter outlines four types of basic writers that she has encountered: Type I: limited or minimally competent; Type II: competent or highly competent; Type III: not competent or lacking control of language; Type IV: fundamentally deficient. Ritter’s experiences with these types of basic writers led her to investigate basic writers across institutional types and populations. In doing so, Ritter found that “basic” is a cross-institutional and cross-demographic construct that is shaped by the individual needs and the location of each
institution. This development, Ritter argues, has been around long before the
days of Shaughnessy. Ritter claims that “location” guides how Basic Writers
are understood as well as defined. She calls into question terms such as “re-
medial” and “basic” when she discovers that prestigious schools such as Yale
and Harvard offer courses for students who are not meeting expectations.
This led Ritter to investigate who basic writers are. More specifically, Ritter
wants to know how social history and the mission of a college or university
plays a part in shaping who basic writers are.

Ritter divides her book into 6 sections. First, she starts with a discussion
of “place,” chronicling the ideological shifts in basic writing historically. Sec-
ond, she attempts to define “Basic Writer” by examining the term and how
it is used by other composition theorists. In the third section, she examines
the growth of basic writing and considers the selectivity of colleges. Ritter
outlines three key concerns about remedial writing and its association with
Basic Writers: (1) universities have difficulty classifying and situating first
year writing within universities’ course plans and curricula, (2) universities
debate whether they should integrate or separate basic writers from main-
stream writers, and (3) universities struggle with how to merge basic writ-
ners back into the university at large (51). These concerns highlight debates
concerning the need for first year writing in the university course structure
and high schools’ abilities to serve large diverse student populations while
keeping up-to-date with the ever-changing demands of college courses. In
the fourth and fifth sections, she conducts in-depth analysis using documen-
tation of basic writing curricula from 1910 to the 1950’s to study Yale’s and
Harvard’s writing programs. She concludes her book with possible utopian
philosophies of First Year Writing without classifications of basic writers.

In the first chapter Ritter uses real estate terms such as “location,”
“place,” and “neighbor” to consider a university’s status, reputation, and
student population, discussing composition as both practical and theoretical.
Ritter claims that location is just as much about the particular needs of the
individual student as it is the geographical value of the university. She argues
that location attracts students with specific values and students bring these
values to the classroom. This in turn shapes what the teacher teaches as well
as how she teaches it. This then affects more wide-scale concerns such as
budgeting and staffing. In the second chapter, Ritter argues that because each
university’s rhetorical situation and location is different it attracts different
“buyers” or student populations. Thus, each university develops its unique
definition of “basic.” As a result, Ritter explains that the term “basic” has
been used historically by so many different institutions, scholars, and rheto-
ricians that its meaning can no longer be used as a universal classification.

In chapter 3, Ritter explains that the common perception of basic writ-
ing is that it is a post-open admissions issue and that it did not exist in
social economic conditions of elite institutions. After World War I, a need
for surface-level correctness became a primary focus in the academy, in part
because universities struggled with the classification of first year writing as
a course students needed to complete. Universities did not know how to handle the underprepared. They debated on separate courses, mainstream courses, and how to integrate the underprepared back into the university at large. Examining arguments made by Robert C. Pooley and Theodore Gates, Ritter argues that a lot of these problems were attributed as failures of high school. She explains that the range of high school students’ abilities was too diverse, high school teachers were not aware of the demands of college courses, and the function of first year writing was too unclear. As a result, colleges adopted different means to handle the underprepared. A universal need for basic writing courses paired with varying courses from institution to institution, Ritter argues, only added to the problem of classifying students under the universal term of “basic writer.”

In chapters 4 and 5, Ritter examines Yale and Harvard’s means of handling the underprepared in an attempt to prove that the term “basic” lacks meaning as a universal classification. Yale pushed boundaries of access by refusing to officially acknowledge basic writing courses. They created courses that were “off the books,” dubbing them the “Awkward Squad” (75). These courses served as drill courses in spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Meanwhile, Ritter paints a very different picture of basic writing at Harvard. Harvard used committees to follow students around and determine who was and was not “basic.” Harvard had a tidy house policy that placed Basic Writers into courses designed to help students achieve mastery use of language (115). Openly accepting Basic Writers, Harvard published and promoted courses for students. These courses were designed for students in need of remedial writing, students whose second language was English, and students who were in need of special instruction in English. Through this section of her book, Ritter makes it very clear that the philosophy of basic writing and the basic writer were and are alive at elite institutions. But, how basic writing was identified, classified, and addressed varied drastically from institution to institution.

Ritter closes her book with a call for us to look at first year writing and determine if it is still serving its purpose. She asks us to reconsider standards locally, politically, and socially, arguing that we restructure high school writing courses so that they are more integrated with the work that is required of students in college. And most importantly, Ritter advocates the use of the term “introductory” rather than “basic” as she outlines a solution with her “Writing 1, 2, 3” system. Essentially, Ritter proposes that colleges adopt a Directed Self-Placement (DSP) Program in which the student chooses between three various composition course options to meet the university’s writing requirement. In this design, all courses would receive the same amount of credit. Students could move up or down within the system to fit those needs. The classes would be small, and all of the classes would be considered college level.

Overall, Ritter is able to prove that the politics of access and the function of “social sorting” (Fox 56 qtd. in Ritter 37) by the classification of
students are not post-Shaughnessy phenomena. Ritter challenges common perception and poses thought-provoking questions about basic writing. But ultimately, I find Ritter’s discussions of “basic” and basic writing frustrating. Ritter explains that basic writers can and do exist across institutional types and student populations. She makes valid points about location and its effects on the student, teacher, and curriculum development. She highlights many issues within high schools that may create problems with writers entering the academy. My concern with Ritter’s discussions is her remedy to the problems associated with basic writing. She advocates change for a universal classification mechanism with a desire for a universal course system. This system does take into account the principals of “location” that Ritter outlined in the beginning of her book, but it does not mention how high school teachers can scaffold writing to fit basic writers’ needs within this system. Admittedly, Ritter does state that this system is a model, not standard curriculum. But I feel like this system would be replacing the social sorting of “basic” with the social sorting of “introductory.” Classifications between Course 1, Course 2, and Course 3 would still have to be made. Decisions regarding needs of the student writer based on her deficiencies as a writer would still need to be identified. Granted, these decisions would be decided by the students rather than the university, but, judgments between superior writing and “basic” writing would still exist. The concept of “remedial” or “basic” is ingrained in our students through their previous experiences in their education. Students will struggle to see courses within this structure as equals. They will and do assume that some courses have more weight or are more remedial than others. Overall, Ritter’s proposed system is a move in the right direction. However, it will not alleviate the hierarchical system that Ritter is trying to replace. In order to achieve Ritter’s aim we have to go much further than the development of writing courses at the university level. Ritter’s brief insights into high-school curriculum development may shed some light on how we can begin to break down these classification systems. But, it will not be as simple as adopting a Directed Self-Placement System.

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Reviewed by Timothy Barnett, Northeastern Illinois University

While Tony Scott, in his important book Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition, does not state things so directly, one thrust of his argument is that Composition is complicit in what may be a large Ponzi scheme. As we know, students hand in papers to receive grades to pass classes to get degrees to . . . what? That’s what Scott pushes