Revising FYC Outcomes for a Multimodal, Digitally Composed World: The WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (Version 3.0)

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For the WPA Outcomes Statement Revision Task Force

Abstract

The Executive Board of the Council of Writing Program Administrators first approved the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition in April 2000. Since then, it has exerted a considerable impact on first-year writing programs throughout the U.S. and beyond, serving as a guide to the establishment of programmatic outcomes in a wide range of secondary and postsecondary institutions (Selfe and Ericsson; Harrington et al.; Behm et al.). In 2008, the Statement was formally amended with a new section, “Composing in Electronic Environments,” intended to speak specifically to recommendations for composing and researching using electronic technology. In December 2011, then-CWPA President Duane Roen charged a Task Force to revisit the Outcomes Statement and determine how it could be updated to reflect changes in the field and current practices in first-year writing. Here we present the latest revision of the Outcomes Statement, approved by the Executive Board of the CWPA in July 2014. In addition, we share our processes of and timeline for revision, examine what has changed from the 2000 version (version 1.0) and the 2008 version (version 2.0), and offer commentary on what this document is and how it can be used.

In 1997, in response to a conversation begun on the listserv WPA-L, a group of faculty started brainstorming to see whether it was possible to create common outcomes—not standards, but common outcomes—for
the multiple versions of first-year writing courses at the wealth of institutions constituting postsecondary education, especially in the US. The group, which came to be known as the Outcomes Collective, had a loose steering committee and encouraged the participation of any interested writing teacher. Unaffiliated with any professional organization, the Collective spent “thousands of hours of discussion and drafting” (Harrington xv) both online and at professional conferences, producing and testing several drafts of what became the WPA Outcomes Statement. Eventually, the group approached the CWPA Executive Board, requesting an endorsement of the document. The CWPA adopted the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition in 2000¹ and in so doing, encouraged writing programs to adapt the document to reflect their own programs’ priorities and values. Those involved in the original Outcomes Statement assumed that they were creating a living document, one that in the present could and should be adapted to local needs and one that in the future should be revisited and revised. The Statement’s language was designed to encourage local adaptability in order to combine guidance and freedom while also striving to be applicable to the widest possible range of postsecondary institutions. For this reason, the Statement deliberately avoided an explicit position on computer literacy issues, largely confining this topic to a sub-goal advising that students should “use a variety of technologies to address a range of audiences” (Harrington et al., “WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition” 325). Not only did the Outcomes Collective wish to avoid exacerbating digital divide issues by recommending specific technologies that might be unavailable to many writing programs, but it also recognized that any specified technology would soon be obsolete. The original wording was thus strategically ambiguous; after all, such technologies need not be electronic for students to make important conceptual gains about the uses and limitations of different composing and presenting affordances.

In 2006, given the increasing ubiquity of digital composing, CWPA President Shirley Rose asked Kathleen Blake Yancey to lead a process focusing on a possible revision of the Statement; Yancey invited Irv Peckham to co-lead this effort, and in 2008, the Statement (which we might now think of as version 2.0) was amended to include “Composing in Electronic Environments,” which was based on the “Technology Plank” addendum. In the fall of 2011, motivated by the sense that the field had a broader view of composing than it did a decade ago, Duane Roen, President of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, with the approval of the CWPA Executive Board, recruited ten faculty members (see appendix) from various institutions to form a Task Force to explore whether the Statement needed a more systemic overhaul. The Task Force completed its work, and
a revision of the Outcomes Statement was approved by the CWPA Executive Board in July 2014.

In addition to the revised Statement, below we provide context for the development of the WPA Outcomes Statement 3.0 keyed to three goals. First, we share our processes and timeline; second, we examine what has changed from the 2000 version (version 1.0) and the 2008 version (version 2.0); and third, we offer some commentary on what this document is and how it can be used.

Collecting Input

As the Task Force began work in March 2012, our first and most pressing goal was to understand the current context of the Outcomes Statement: who was using it in their programs and/or courses, how it was being used, whether faculty and WPAs using it believed it needed revision, and if so, what revisions they would recommend. To begin this inquiry, each Task Force committee member informally contacted colleagues within their local networks and asked them to respond to these questions:

- Does your writing program have an outcomes statement?
- Are you familiar with the WPA Outcomes Statement (WPA OS)? If so, do you use it? If not, would you use it? Why or why not?
- In what ways does the WPA OS serve your interests?
- Are there specific areas of the WPA OS that you would like to see revised? If so, what and how?

Collectively, we heard from twenty-seven WPAs and faculty at colleges and universities of different institutional types—large and small, public and private, two- and four-year. Only four of the institutions surveyed did not have learning outcomes for their writing program. The remainder either used the Outcomes Statement as-is or had adapted it to serve local interests. Moreover, as we heard repeatedly throughout our research, the Statement plays several important roles: it legitimizes and justifies writing pedagogies and the work of the local WPA; it facilitates conversations about writing instruction and values; and it guides curriculum design, teacher development, and assessment practices.

Although several respondents suggested that the Statement was fine as it was, most suggested specific revisions. These included defining composing as a multimodal activity; expanding the document to encompass topics such as information literacy, reading and research, and plagiarism; and explicitly connecting the document to other statements that dealt with the desired outcomes of writing instruction, such as the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, written by CWPA, National Council of Teach-
ers of English, and National Writing Project. Based on these responses, we realized that if the document were to be revised, the new version would have to remain expansive enough to be useful for the greatest number of people and institutions but not be so broad as to be meaningless.

Just three months after our initial meeting as a Task Force, several members facilitated a workshop session at the 2012 CWPA conference in Albuquerque. The purpose of the session was twofold: to report on the results from the informal survey data and, more importantly, to engage in an extended conversation about possible revisions to the WPA OS, particularly in the area of writing in a digital world.

About forty attendees were posed a series of questions that we developed from our informal, local surveys:

- What constitutes multimodality?
- Does multimodality (in any form) have a place in the first-year writing classroom?
- What are the liabilities of incorporating multimodal writing into our pedagogy?
- What are the advantages of incorporating multimodal writing into our pedagogy?
- What kinds of texts do students need to be able to read and produce at the university? In work and life beyond the university?
- What skills and knowledge should students acquire in first-year writing?

Attendees made notes on large pads posted on the walls, talked with one another about what they’d written, and then participated in a large group discussion. There was strong (and often enthusiastic) approval of incorporating digital literacies into the Statement. As many in attendance reminded us, students are already avid and active participants in a range of new technologies, thus pointing to a need to focus more attention on our students’ needs and knowledge. Further, participants were concerned that students were becoming consumers and producers of digital media without having much opportunity to reflect critically and capitalize on “affordances” that digital media provide (version 2.0).

Members of the workshop also explored potential problems, drawbacks, and challenges, in the process raising many questions. What are the places of digital media in writing classes? When does the study of digital media cross over into aesthetics? Where will the time come from to teach this? How can we prepare faculty and students who aren’t ready for this or who don’t have access to advanced technologies? What about the fact that a considerable amount of writing instruction is done by contingent faculty?
How much can reasonably be asked of teachers and students working in technologically impoverished institutions? How do we assess students’ multimodal projects?

**Formal Survey**

Based on the input from our convenience sample and the notes generated by the Albuquerque focus groups, the Task Force designed an online survey and distributed it through a number of listservs, including WPA-L, WCENTER, WAC-L, ATTW-L, and Techrhet. Of the 223 people who responded, about 86% were faculty and/or administrators who self-affiliated with four-year colleges; 48% identified themselves as writing program administrators; 67% as full-time faculty; 10% as part-time faculty; and 15% as graduate students. The questions asked respondents if they were familiar with the WPA OS and, if so, how they used it. In this survey, we took a more focused approach to digital literacies, interrogating possible terminology (digital literacy, new media, visual rhetoric) and if or how both terms and practices should be incorporated into the WPA OS.

Two-thirds of the respondents said the Statement should address digital literacies, and 65% preferred the option of weaving new language about digital literacies into the existing areas of the Statement rather than adding a new plank. When asked how incorporating digital literacies into the Outcomes Statement would help their program, as well as what concerns they had, participants’ responses were very similar to the responses in the previous survey and the discussion at the WPA workshop.

**Drafting**

After a full year of collecting input, we presented our findings in a featured session at CCCC 2013 in Las Vegas and again invited response from roughly two hundred attendees. Task Force members presented issues to consider and possible directions for revisions; after distributing copies of the Outcomes Statement 2.0, we invited participants to work in small groups, making notes and revisions on the copies. We collected these notes at the end of the session and took notes while listening to colleagues in the plenary discussion that followed.

As expected, participants provided valuable comments, questioning terms and assumptions (about outcomes, writing, composition, digital, multimodal) as well as questioning the target audience for the document. Others sought an expansion of the document to include important and neglected areas (e.g., reading, basic writing, translingualism). Participants also looked carefully at the structure of the document, with most suggesting that an integra-
tion of the outcomes from the standalone “Composing in Electronic Environments” plank would be the preferred approach. After the CCCC session in Las Vegas, we reopened the survey with the intention of securing more feedback from community college writing program directors and faculty, whose responses had been underrepresented. The final survey result had 345 respondents; demographics were more diversified and with a stronger two-year college representation than before (31%). Responses were consistent with earlier patterns regarding current uses of and suggested revisions to the Statement.

Drawing on the suggestions for revision collected from the surveys and from attendees’ notes on the existing Statement collected at the 2013 CCCC, the Task Force put together a working draft to share with approximately sixty attendees at the session at the 2013 CWPA conference in Savannah. In this session, participants provided a wealth of feedback to the draft—both substantive and editorial; in particular, participants were concerned about perceived binaries between written texts and digital compositions. We also discussed the implications of word choice in a document that incorporates digital literacy, especially what word choices mean for terms such as reader, writer, audience, and compose.

In response to the feedback received at CWPA in Savannah, the Task Force revised again, this time crafting what we hoped would be a penultimate draft, which was presented at CCCC 2014 in Indianapolis. Again, the roughly seventy-five participants were asked to respond to the draft and, this time, also to consider how they would incorporate the new WPA Outcomes Statement into their writing programs. In addition to discussions about terminology (e.g., multimodal composing) and ways this document could be used more broadly than in only FYC (e.g., in WAC and WID courses and first-year seminars), participants brainstormed ways to make more people aware that this document exists. Suggestions are included in the categories listed below.

In April 2014, we submitted a final draft of the WPA Outcomes Statement 3.0 to the CWPA Executive Board for feedback, in anticipation of its final submission at the CWPA conference in July 2014. At the July meeting of the CWPA Executive Board, three members of the Task Force also met with the CWPA Executive Board and responded to Board members’ questions and concerns and then adjusted several sentences of the introduction in response. The new WPA OS was then approved at the Executive Board meeting. At the CWPA conference session shortly after, members of the Task Force shared the approved WPA OS with about forty participants and asked them how we might extend the reach and the value of the WPA OS. Their preliminary recommendations, in addition to those from CCCC
2014, are included below in five categories; these recommendations suggest that participants believe follow-up is critical for the WPA OS.

**Faculty Development**

- Use the Statement 3.0 as an exigence to begin conversations
- Use the Statement 3.0 as an exigence to restart conversations begun in 2000 and 2008

**Curriculum**

- Use Statement 3.0 as a framework for first-year seminars (not just first-year composition)
- Explore the role of Statement 3.0 in prompts for writing and ways Statement 3.0 might support portfolio reflections
- Bring Statement 3.0 to general education meetings, asking “Are these writing and thinking objectives being incorporated in your general education classes, too?”

**Curriculum/Research**

- Explore productive ways to incorporate Statement 3.0 into first-year writing courses, especially approaches keyed to important questions in the field (e.g., how much terminology from our discipline do first-year students need?)
- Research the impact of Statement 3.0 on student learning in writing classrooms as well as throughout the university

**Documentation**

- Provide a website where WPAs can upload local versions of Statement 3.0—both to help others see how local institutions have adopted and adapted it and to provide a record of the kinds of uses we have collectively made of the WPA OS

**Outreach**

- Share the Statement 3.0 with other educational organizations and initiatives, for example, The National Council of Teachers of English and its college section; the Conference on College Composition and Communication; the Two Year College Association; the Association of American Colleges and Universities; the Modern Language Association; and the American Council of Research Libraries.
Key Features of the 2014 Revision

Statement 3.0 remains the realization of a set of beliefs about what writing is and can be and how it should and shouldn’t be taught in the first year(s) of US postsecondary education. Its aims have always also been manifold: 1) to articulate and disseminate these beliefs, and, in so doing, to affirm certain practices and, by omission, to discourage others; 2) to model certain ways of thinking and talking about writing and reading in the hope that those ways would eventually permeate textbook selection, curricular design, job descriptions, assessment priorities, course titles, hiring practices, faculty development, and—of course—college students’ writing abilities; and 3) to invoke by a kind of disciplinary speech-act the existence of writing studies and to claim its knowledge on behalf of local WPAs.

The charge to examine and potentially update the Statement was less a critique of the 2000 or 2008 versions’ performance of any of these aims and more an acknowledgement that, given both time and the experience of working with an outcomes statement, the field had learned more about composition, enough to warrant revisiting the construct of “writing” assumed in both the earlier Statements. Critiques of the tacit print-based construct of writing in the 2000 Statement, which began almost upon its publication (Selfe and Ericsson; Oddo and Parmalee), developed concurrently with field-wide questions about the proper scope of “composing” in “writing classes” (Walker et al.; Cope et al.; Dobrin). Our survey respondents broadly affirmed that what were once speculations staked out by theorists in many areas had, as we neared the midpoint of this decade, become operating assumptions. In fact, analogous documents composed more recently—the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, the NCTE Definition of 21st Century Literacies, and even parts of the Common Core State Standards—suggested that academic, workplace, civic, and private constructs of writing had already been refashioned by distributed composing practices, new genres, and unprecedented access to and ability to manipulate images (Yancey). The consensus was that the construct of writing assumed by the Statement was becoming underrepresented.

To be sure, the 2014 version affirms many of the foundational concepts of the original WPA OS: for example, the idea that writing has epistemic purposes beyond recording, that writing processes should be flexible, and that one of the most important goals of FYC curricula should be to develop students’ abilities to “integrate their ideas with those of others” (version 2.0). Relative to the zeitgeist of the late 1990s, however, stage-process models had continued their retreat, the research paper had lost some status as the main or even the only goal of first-year composition, and most
researchers had conceded that neither they nor students were likely ever to fully “understand the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes” or entirely “understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power” (version 2.0). Meanwhile, other important concepts deepened in specificity (e.g., what’s meant by critical thinking) while still others moved out of theory and into mainstream operating assumptions (concepts such as distributed cognition, rhetorical genre studies, and linguistic heterogeneity).

Although the 2014 revision preserves the original architecture of the first Statement—a framing introduction and four outcomes, followed by descriptive sub-goals and suggestions for coursework in both general education and in the major—it’s optics differ in some important respects from the original. It’s longer (by about 25% over the 2008 amendment) and admittedly denser, about which more below. Much of the additional length accrues from the new descriptions, repurposed from the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, of what each of the four Outcomes means in the context of writing instruction. This precedent was set by the 2008 “Composing in Electronic Environments” (CIEE) plank, and many respondents wanted to see it extended to the other four Outcomes. Likewise, wherever possible, the Task Force aimed to preserve the earlier language. For example, while we responded to the consensus of our survey participants that the CIEE plank be integrated into the original four Outcomes, those familiar with the language of that amendment will recognize much of it in new locations throughout the 2014 document. (An only slightly modified version of the second CIEE sub-goal, for example, can be found in its new home in “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Composing.”)

If the original charge to the Task Force was to reconsider what kinds of writing the Statement should assume are routine in FYC, then questions about how and what students compose were not separable from other beliefs realized in the original language of the document, which naturally remained static while the field grew and shifted its priorities. Original questions that the Outcomes Collective faced in the late 1990s needed re-asking: What do we mean by writing ability? What do we mean by writing, for that matter? In fact, the earlier versions of the WPA OS offered no definition of writing. The new version introduces its fundamental understanding of composing:

In this Statement, composing refers broadly to complex writing processes that are increasingly reliant on the use of digital technologies. Writers also attend to elements of design, incorporating images and graphical elements into texts intended for screens as well as printed
Writers’ composing activities have always been shaped by the technologies available to them, and digital technologies are changing writers’ relationships to their texts and audiences in evolving ways.

The recognition of an explicit working definition of composing points to what may be the largest revision apparent in the new WPA OS: where the former versions approached writing as more a stable act—even among emerging technologies—the new version embraces emerging forms of composing in a world of fluid forms of communication. Consequently, the new version stresses terms and expressions such as “addressing a range of audiences,” “adapting,” and “evolving” and calls for instruction that helps students to “explore,” to “discover,” and to make “purposeful shifts in voice, tone, level of formality, design, medium, and/or structure” when reading and writing across “a range of texts” and “a variety of technologies.” Even the term critical thinking demonstrates a conceptual shift in the new WPA OS in its explicit recognition of “the kinds of critical thinking important in their [faculty’s] disciplines.” Such revisions openly embrace the plurality of situations writers face today and remain open to the inevitability of continuing changes in media, genres, and writing acts to come. Thus, the Statement 3.0 moves primarily from descriptions of learning and controlling known rhetorical situations and stable forms of writing to examining and questioning rhetorical situations and making informed decisions about how to interpret and contribute. Overall, where the former versions of the WPA OS used verbs such as “learning,” “understanding,” “using,” “controlling,” and “writing,” the new version employs verbs such as “practicing,” “experiencing,” “choosing/adapting,” “reflecting,” “questioning,” “reasoning/deciding,” and “composing.” These changes stress the importance of developing critical and rhetorical listening skills in order to prepare students for emerging rhetorical situations—even ones that we may not be able to imagine at present.

If we no longer believe that composing processes and composing media are productively distinguished, then other beliefs related to the central construct of writing needed to be re-thought as well; for instance, the construct of genre and the modeling of productive use of linguistic heterogeneity also required refurbishing. Statement 3.0 revises its construct of genre by consolidating it with the purposes and foci we now understand to be shaped by genre (Liu “Genre”; “More”). This draft also adjusts the assumption that FYC is primarily focused on a research paper while preserving the original goals of synthesis of sources and integration of ideas. In addition, this version reframes the imagined student writer by shifting the pedagogical focus of Rhetorical Knowledge from monodirectional “appropriateness” toward rhetorical “dexterity” and “awareness” with a substantially post-
process framing of composing and revising cycles (Haller). This point in particular is reinforced by a pronounced shift in the Conventions section away from a “tacit native-speaker” standard or “control of surface features” and toward an explicit suggestion that all language users can profitably develop declarative knowledge of language practices (Matsuda 145; Matsuda and Skinnell 232). In that spirit, “develop knowledge of conventions” has shifted to understanding as well why conventions vary; “practice documentation” has become “explore what motivates documentation concerns;” and “control surface features” has become “develop knowledge of linguistic structures through practice.” Following the advice of Mutnick and of the CCCC Reading SIG, the revised Statement also acknowledges in several new places that improved reading practices is a desirable outcome for FYC. Finally, the Task Force was guided by the original drafters’ shrewd chariness about naming specific technologies or practices; accordingly, wherever possible, the new language can be read for both analogue and emergent composing technologies, but it more consistently emphasizes the interrelatedness of composing technologies and processes than versions 1.0 and 2.0 (Callaway 275-76).

Finally, as to the density of the revision, the language of the revision itself signals a different stance to our stakeholders, most explicitly by its increased assertiveness about the need to base programmatic decisions on disciplinary knowledge. More generally, Statement 3.0 signals this sense of a discipline in nearly every line (Dew). The introduction of version 1.0 struck an exceptionally difficult rhetorical balance between terminology that “the general public can understand” and “communicating effectively with expert writing teachers and writing program administrators.” Yet as the substantial scholarly literature on the WPA OS points out, most of those encountering the document are neither the general public nor expert writing teachers (see especially Jacobsen et al.); rather, they range from faculty with expertise in other disciplines to a significant number of contingent and/or novice instructors with disparate beliefs and instructional priorities, too many of whom are still without much formal professional development in writing studies or teaching. Statement 3.0 thus offers writing programs considerably more descriptive language in many of its sub-goals, as well as composition-specific definitions of the Outcomes themselves. While some may find that this has come at some cost to the user-friendliness of the original wording, the Task Force believes it is a necessary compromise that also will benefit many composition instructors who need more explicit unpacking of the assumptions operating in the Statement.
Summing Up

Nearly three years ago, work on a new version of the WPA Outcomes Statement began with brainstorming, revising, horse trading, wordsmithing, sharing, teleconferencing, Google Doc-ing, note-taking, consulting, Skyping, and composing. After considerable consultation, collaboration, and collective composing, we have developed a statement that, like its cousins, is imperfect, but that also offers several improvements on the 2.0 version: providing a more robust construct of composing, for example, and a more variegated definition of research. At least as important, the Statement 3.0 explicitly positions students as knowledge-makers as well as practitioners. In earlier versions of the document, students were positioned as practitioners; in the current document, however, they are positioned as practitioners who understand why we engage in specific composing practices. Consequently, students need to understand something about the theory explaining the logic of a given practice, a move congruent with other pedagogical reform efforts such as signature pedagogies. Likewise, research is much more capaciously defined as a more sustained and complex exercise, and students are positioned as agents who can conduct such research.

WPA Outcomes Statement 3.0 continues to function as a boundary object: a statement speaking to common outcomes that can be adapted to local conditions. Its function is thus twofold. On the one hand, the Statement articulates what students should know and be able to do by the conclusion of first-year composition, regardless of the form it takes; in this way, a local program using the outcomes is in dialogue with a common definition of expectations. On the other hand, the Statement is at the same time a public draft, one that ensures individual programs need never undergo in isolation “several years and thousands of hours of discussion and drafting” to articulate what they think writing is and how it should be taught (Harrington xv). Because WPA Outcomes 3.0 may not include terms and concepts considered to be foundational by certain programs, it also provides an exigence, a point of invitation, for local adaptation of the Outcomes Statement. Writing program decisions about adaptations—what to keep, reword, reorder, or delete when it comes to “the writing knowledge, practices, and attitudes that undergraduate students develop”—can thus always be intentional and in dialogue. Not least, the Statement, by focusing on outcomes, has maintained a firewall between outcomes and standards. An anxiety characterizing all three iterations of the Statement is that someone—a student, a colleague, an administrator—will mistake outcomes for standards. As the document continues to say prominently, this is an outcomes statement; it’s up to each local campus to decide 1) if it wants stan-
dards; and if it does, 2) how to establish them. This distinction has been both maintained and strengthened.³

The Council of Writing Program Administrators didn’t initiate what has become the WPA Outcomes Statement, but once the Council adopted it, support for the Statement never wavered. Just as importantly, the Council deserves credit for ensuring that this Statement has always been what Bill Condon promised it could be: a living document—one that can be reformed in both senses of the word—through practice. In sum, WPA Outcomes Statement 3.0 is both a document that can guide our programs and a text that will be remixed in the future as we work and learn with it.

Notes


2. A *construct* is a model that must stand in for problem or a subject of study that is too complex or at too different a scale to examine directly: a syndrome, an economy, an ecology, an attribute such as personality, intelligence, or writing ability. A valid construct has to account as thoroughly as possible for the complexities involved in the phenomenon we’re defining; when it doesn’t, the construct is said to be underrepresented. If an underrepresented construct is the basis for decision-making (a course of treatment, a fiscal intervention, a curriculum, an assessment plan), the outcomes of those decisions will have—at best—a peripheral relationship to the issues actually at stake.

3. We are expecting that in future iterations—the assumption being that there will be future iterations, sometimes addressing continuing issues, other times addressing issues newly surfacing—the methods we have used in creating and revising this iteration might provide a model for newer conceptions of composing—ones that include collaboration, modified crowdsourcing, and the remixing of earlier documents, practices central to our iterative process but that we did not specifically endorse in the document. It may be that these practices represent where the full field is going, but it’s pretty clear that it’s not there yet. That’s a question we all need to consider. Another: we’d like to see a more systematic and sustained effort to collect information about how the WPA OS 3.0 has been adapted locally, a practice we pursued more energetically with WPA Outcomes Statement 1.0 than we have more recently. Perhaps most important, especially given the field’s interest in transfer, we’d very much like to see how this version of the WPA OS is viewed by our colleagues in WAC, that is, we’d like to see this FYW-WAC connection taken up in some systematic way.
Appendix—Task Force Members

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Works Cited


