



# **Before Shaughnessy: Basic Writing at Yale and Harvard, 1920-1960 (Cccc Studies in Writing and Rhetoric)**

*Kelly Ritter*

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In *Before Shaughnessy: Basic Writing at Yale and Harvard, 1920–1960*, Kelly Ritter uses materials from the archives at Harvard and Yale and contemporary theories of writing instruction to reconsider the definition of basic writing and basic writers within a socio-historical context. Ritter challenges the association of basic writing with only poorly funded institutions and poorly prepared students.

Using Yale and Harvard as two sample case studies, Ritter shows that basic writing courses were alive and well, even in the Ivy League, in the early twentieth century. She argues not only that basic writers exist across institutional types and diverse student populations, but that the prevalence of these writers has existed far more *historically* than we generally acknowledge.

Uncovering this forgotten history of basic writing at elite institutions, Ritter contends that the politics and problems of the identification and the definition of basic writers and basic writing began long before the work of Mina Shaughnessy in *Errors and Expectations* and the rise of open admissions. Indeed, she illustrates how the problems and politics have been with us since the advent of English A at Harvard and the heightened consumer-based policies that resulted in the new admissions criteria of the early twentieth-century American university. In order to recognize this long-standing reality of basic writing, we must now reconsider whether the nearly standardized, nationalized definition of “basic” is any longer a beneficial one for the positive growth and democratic development of our first-year writing programs and students.

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