



# The First-Year Writing Conference: A Celebration of Inquiry, Discovery, and Communication

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On the Friday before the last week of each semester, students in the First-Year Writing Program gather excitedly in Bessey Hall classrooms and hallways, anticipating an opportunity to share their posters, videos, costumes, games, slideshow presentations, zines, and more in gallery, poster, and panel form.

**The core values of First-Year Writing at MSU—*inquiry, discovery, and communication*—are illustrated and illuminated twice a year at our First-Year Writing Conference, now in its 14th year.** Student work showcases our program's value of framing students' home communities, cultures, and languages as literacies and forms of knowledge that are assets for learning. The conference is designed to emphasize our program commitment to inclusivity and belonging; we design the event so that students know that they and their stories matter. Student presentations demonstrate, as well, our program commitment to creating conditions for students to explore their academic and professional aspirations.

**Every spring, more than 700 students present their work; more than 20 volunteer faculty moderate the conference; and more than 50 high school teachers and students attend.** The conference is scheduled just before finals week so that students can prepare and practice in class beforehand, and can reflect and debrief in their classes afterwards. The conference provides students a chance to think strategically about the relationships between their own rhetorical purposes and potential conference audiences, which includes peers, faculty, librarians, academic advisors, administrators, and students and teachers from area high schools. Presentations include moderated time for reflective questions and discussion—activities that deepen student reflections on their learning.

**The conference provides teachers an occasion for ongoing inquiry, learning, and revision—with the opportunity to witness other opportunities for expressing our program values and curriculum, and to expand their pedagogical own insights.** The ongoing success of the conference can be attributed to the collaborative inventiveness of its participating teachers—mostly dedicated teaching faculty and graduate students—who continue to strategize, invent, revise, and learn from the student participants.

**The conference is an intentional space of cross-cultural, rhetorical listening.** An original goal of the conference was to help “professionalize” students with experience in public speaking—a move we hoped might also anticipate similar presentations in their futures (for instance, at UURAF, the MSU Diversity Showcase, the Learning Abroad Conference). We have learned, over the past 14 years, that what students appreciate even more than a professional speaking opportunity is the chance to learn from their peers. Post-conference surveys of students clearly indicate that the conference provides space for cross-cultural listening (see [Meier, Gannon, Caesar, & Medei, 2017](#)). Students at the conference learn from each other across cultural difference, with many students providing comments like: “I never knew it was so hard to be an international student here” and “I really appreciated the opportunity to learn about a culture other than my own.”

**For the spring conference specifically, we have crafted the conference to welcome high school visitors,** as an opportunity to learn more about FYW at MSU. These students and teachers begin their visit with an activity that engages them in the type of inquiry we value in the FYWP: We lead them through an interactive exercise that demonstrates how objects have deep cultural resonance and engage them in thinking about how research begins with asking questions. High school students then have the opportunity to see how MSU students have researched such questions. The high school visitors also enjoy a lunch session that provides for further conversation with MSU teachers and students. Finally, high school visitors write a short essay on what they have learned and then conduct an online peer review of each other's responses. This final exercise provides visitors with an example of typical FYW processes (drafting, peer reviewing, and reflecting on one's learning). We hope they may soon be Spartans presenting their own work at the First-Year Writing Conference!

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**The Spring 2024 First-Year Writing Conference will be held on Friday, April 12 from 9:00am to 3:00pm on the third floor of Bessey Hall. Visitors are welcome to attend!**

For more information, please contact Professor Julie Lindquist, Director of First-Year Writing ([lindquill@msu.edu](mailto:lindquill@msu.edu)).